# ‘The Silent Tragic of the Everyday’: European Women Writers in the Context of Naturalism




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# Short Abstract

This thesis examines an as yet under-explored aspect of the reception of naturalism in France, Germany, and Norway by analysing the hypertextual dialogue the five women writers, Georges de Peyrebrune, Rachilde, Hedwig Dohm, Gabriele Reuter, and Amalie Skram established with naturalist fiction. Through their literary interaction with the works of Émile Zola and Henrik Ibsen, these women writers challenge contemporary ideas around women's readership and authorship by reclaiming their right to participate in public debates and current literary trends. As naturalist fiction responds to and appropriates the various emerging scientific and anthropological discourses in a fictional realm, women writers' interactions with naturalist narratives allow them to engage with contemporary debates and to forge their own analysis of society.

Tensions arise however within this dialogue when considering naturalism's self-gendering as masculine – mirroring the gendering of the scientific discourses with which naturalist fiction engages – as well as how naturalist fiction sometimes perpetuates contemporary clichés, notably by using biological determinism as a narrative device. The exploration of this complex dialogue starts with an analysis of how women writers appropriate from naturalist fiction its political use of the tragic mode to denounce the man-made structures and social norms that shape women's experiences. The second chapter examines women writers' portrayal of female characters' experiences of sexual violence and motherhood, and how, while inspired by naturalist fiction, their own descriptions reject physiological explanations for women's victimisation. The final chapter explores how women writers are critical of the detached gaze deployed by naturalist narrators to depict experiences of madness and instead portray their female characters' suffering from a subjective point of view to challenge biological definitions of madness. Reading these women writers' works alongside canonical naturalist fiction enhances our understanding of

the spread of naturalism in Europe while also providing a deeper contextualisation of these authors' works.

## Long Abstract

This thesis examines an as yet under-explored aspect of the reception of naturalism in France, Germany, and Norway by analysing the dialogue the five women writers, Georges de Peyrebrune, Rachilde, Hedwig Dohm, Gabriele Reuter, and Amalie Skram established with naturalist fiction. It opens with an analysis of metaliterary scenes in texts by Émile Zola and Henrik Ibsen which ironically reflect on their contemporary critics by depicting female characters reacting to naturalist novels. In turn, the women writers analysed in this thesis appropriate this kind of metaliterary scene, portraying a female character accessing books related to naturalism, to present themselves as both readers and commentators of naturalist fiction. I explore how naturalism, despite (or maybe because of) its controversial reception across Europe, served as an inspiration for women's writing in the late nineteenth century. Through their dialogue with naturalist fiction, women writers challenge contemporary ideas around women's readership and authorship by reclaiming the right to participate in public debates and current literary trends.

This thesis explores how these women writers' readings of and reactions to the works of Ibsen and Zola – which have shaped the reception of naturalism across Europe and beyond – marked their entry into public discourse and a turn in their own literary production. These authors were selected to show the diversity of women writers' literary responses to naturalist poetics in France, Germany, and Norway, but also because they were all commercially successful in their respective countries. The two French writers discussed in this thesis offer an interesting contrast when it comes to their relationship with

naturalism: while Peyrebrune's novel *Victoire la Rouge* (1883) is probably the closest to naturalist poetics out of all the texts studied in this thesis, Rachilde parodies them in *La Marquise de Sade* (1887). The German writers, Dohm and Reuter, were both in contact with the naturalist circles in Germany and reflected on the influence of naturalist poetics on the German literary avant-garde and on their own works. Dohm is known for her feminist essays and her fiction which adopts a more pessimistic tone, as in her short story "Werde, die Du bist!" (1894) analysed in this thesis because of its themes and stylistic traits that mirror those found in naturalist fiction. Reuter claims to have been inspired by naturalism for her portrayal of 'the silent tragedy of the everyday' in her 1895 novel *Aus guter Familie. Leidensgeschichte eines Mädchens*. Skram's legacy is to this day that of a naturalist writer, but in this thesis, I focus on her works that are less evidently aligned with naturalist poetics and that are critical of the naturalist worldview, namely *Lucie* (1888) and her psychiatric duology *Professor Hieronimus* and *Paa St. Jørgen* (1895). Reading these women writers' works alongside canonical naturalist fiction enhances our understanding of the spread of naturalism in Europe while also providing a deeper contextualisation of these authors' works.

This dialogue between women writers and naturalist fiction can be described as 'hypertextual', as defined by Gérard Genette. The notion of hypertextuality enables me to compare women writers' works with texts by Ibsen and Zola without establishing any kind of hierarchy, but rather to look at which aspects of naturalist poetics these women authors reproduce and which ones they challenge in their own works. I also explore how their hypertextual dialogue with naturalism, which responds to and appropriates the various emerging scientific and anthropological discourses in a fictional realm, provides women writers with an opportunity to engage with contemporary debates and to forge their own analysis of society. Naturalist fiction appealed to women writers not only for its realistic

portrayals of women's conditions, but also for its counterdiscursive nature and its challenge of dominant narratives and values. I argue that their dialogue with naturalist fiction allows women writers to express their own social critique through literary means.

Tensions arise however within this dialogue if we consider naturalism's self-gendering as masculine – in keeping with the gendering of the scientific discourses with which naturalist fiction engages – as well as how naturalist fiction sometimes perpetuates contemporary sexist clichés. The female character in naturalist fiction appears as a subject defined by her vulnerability to biological and social determinism and as an object observed by a detached narrator, coded as male. While naturalist fiction oscillates between physiological and social explanations for the female protagonists' trajectory, I demonstrate how women writers call into question the notion of biological determinism. Women writers' resistance to the idea of biological determinism is intrinsically linked to the question of women's claims to authorship, as women's attempts at participating in the public sphere were disqualified through physiological arguments. Women writers appropriate naturalism's conception of literature as a political tool to denounce how it is man-made structures and social norms that shape women's experiences and thus challenge discourses that attempt to ground women's oppression in nature.

In the first chapter, I analyse how naturalism modernises and politicises the genre of tragedy to convey social critique, a literary innovation that is also employed by women writers. I first consider how in various paratexts, writers like Zola, Ibsen, and Reuter reflect on the tradition of tragedy and the tragic mode – as both a literary form and a metaphysical concept – and their attempts at adapting it to modern concerns. In close reading analyses, I then explore how women writers appropriate from naturalist fiction its use of the tragic mode to depict female characters as victims of their circumstances. Naturalism indeed renews the tragic mode by depicting determinism – be it biological, social, or

psychological – as a new form of fate weighing on the characters. Naturalist writers' use of the tragic mode reflects their conception of literature as a site of political intervention. By instilling their narratives with a tragic logic, naturalist writers experiment with ways of provoking the reader's outrage and leading to social change outside the fictional realm. Similarly, women writers aim to bring their readers to a form of political catharsis, that is, to the recognition that the female characters' tragedy could have been avoided as it was entirely caused by social – and therefore possibly mutable – structures. I also consider texts in my corpus that have a clear anti-tragic ending, but which ultimately show that both mainstream naturalism and women writers in dialogue with it use the tragic mode as an aesthetic tool to convey an anti-tragic message that aims to challenge the status quo. This chapter thus offers a positive reading of texts that have been interpreted as pessimistic and even fatalistic to unveil their political potential. This analysis of women writers' appropriation of the tragic mode from naturalist fiction however unveils the main tension I observe throughout this thesis, namely how naturalist fiction uses biological determinism as a narrative device and women writers' critical stance in relation to this determining role of biological and hereditary factors on women's destinies. Not only do women writers' narratives focus on the social dynamics influencing their female characters' tragic trajectories, but they also denounce how the idea that women are biologically determined has a tragic impact on women, thus unveiling biological determinism as a modern myth.

The domain of sexuality is particularly revelatory of this tension in the varying representations of femininity in naturalist texts and in women-authored narratives that are in dialogue with naturalism. While inspired by naturalists' bold portrayals of women's sexuality, women writers are critical of the naturalist use of physiological explanations when it comes to women's experiences of sexual violence and motherhood. The second chapter uses Michel Foucault's concept of the 'hysterization of the female body', the

process through which women have been represented in both scientific and literary discourses as victims of their own bodies, to analyse representations of female characters' experiences of sexuality and motherhood. I uncover how naturalist fiction responds to the emerging scientific and sociological interest in sexual violence by portraying how their characters' 'hysteria' partly originates from patriarchal brutality. Women writers also tackle sexual violence in their fiction but challenge the fatalistic logic deployed by naturalist fiction. By depicting how the victimisation of their female characters stems from social structures rather than physiological factors, they unveil how the concept of biological determinism is a form of discursive violence which naturalism participates in by naturalising their female characters' sexual 'fall'. In keeping with contemporary discourses, naturalist fiction oscillates in its portrayals of motherhood between ideal mother figures – the antithesis to the figure of the hysteric – and monstrous ones. In women writers' texts, however, motherhood appears as an alienating experience, imposed on female characters by patriarchal norms that thwarts their opportunities for self-fulfilment. Critical of the discourses constructing women as being bound by their sexuality and their reproductive duties, women writers find ways to disrupt those discourses within a fictional space, thereby challenging several naturalist tropes, including that of the 'nervous woman' whose sexual fall is inevitable, and clichés around the figure of the ideal mother. Through their hypertextual dialogue with naturalism, women writers portray sexuality as an individual experience shaped by social structures and norms, unveiling its violent sides.

The contemporary scrutiny of women's bodies is linked with the emerging field of psychiatry that attempts to classify, understand, and describe psychological phenomena. In the third chapter, I analyse how naturalist fiction interacts with psychiatric discourses, mainly through its appropriation of the 'clinical gaze' to describe fictional characters' mental struggles. By appropriating the psychiatric gaze and discourse in their fictional

representations of mad characters, naturalist narratives give readers only an indirect access to the experience of madness, mediating it through an external character's observations and comments on the mad character's delirium. Women writers' representations of madness reject this detached gaze to convey madness from 'within', from a subjective point of view, letting female characters express their own suffering. In this chapter, I argue that women writers, in order to counter contemporary visions of madness, reclaim what Foucault calls 'the autobiographical account' – a narrative, imposed by the psychiatric system, that forces patients to admit their own madness through a first-person narrative that embraces the hegemonic perspective. In keeping with their portrayal of the influence of social factors on women's destinies, women writers designate social circumstances as the root cause of their characters' fall into madness, challenging the physiological explanations for madness found in contemporary psychiatric theories and appropriated by naturalist fiction. By rejecting the concept of biological determinism, these women writers contribute to an anti-psychiatric discourse that aims to de-naturalise contemporary definitions of madness, mainly by uncovering the gendered underpinnings of the 'madness' diagnosis. As language is a central aspect of modern definitions of mental disability, control over one's own language and how other people qualify one's experience is also a central component of women writers' appropriation of madness narratives. Their representation of female characters' struggle to access creative expression is a fictional *mise en abyme* of women writers' struggle to assert themselves in a society that deems women's creative endeavours to be a form of madness.

This thesis contributes to the field of comparative literature by taking the reception of naturalism by European women writers as a case study to contextualise these authors' literary works, but also to unveil the extent of their social critique compared to contemporary and canonical male writers like Zola and Ibsen. Recontextualising these

women writers' literary texts within the discursive trends found in naturalist fiction highlights how these women authors understand the implications of contemporary debates around femininity and challenge discourses that attempt to naturalise women's place within society. Their narratives' tragic logic, appropriated from naturalist fiction, is meant to serve a political message that attempts to undermine the concept of biological determinism and its use by patriarchal discourses to naturalise women's oppression. They also respond to naturalist representations of sexuality and madness to call into question contemporary visions of women's lived experiences.

This thesis uncovers the wide range of women writers' responses to naturalist fiction, ranging from adherence to complete rejection. Georges de Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge* seems the most 'naturalist' novel of all the texts analysed in this thesis, mostly because of its style and representation of a working-class character in a violent milieu. A close reading analysis, however, highlights the critical strand in Peyrebrune's adoption of naturalist tropes as she questions the concept of biological determinism. In this thesis, I question the legacy of Amalie Skram as a naturalist writer by analysing how she represents in her fiction a society where theories of determinism are no longer a subject of debate, but have been internalised by individuals and are used against women. While Skram appropriates from naturalist poetics its ambition to describe a set milieu, she also distances herself from its use of biological determinism as a narrative device. In "Werde, die Du bist!", Hedwig Dohm adopts from naturalist fiction its description of unheroic characters and its dialogue with scientific discourses, albeit in a critical manner as her use of a first-person narrative unveils the patriarchal underpinnings of contemporary scientific theories and narratives. I also explore how Reuter's hypertextual dialogue with naturalism was a springboard for her own writing as her novel *Aus guter Familie* aims to uncover the 'typical' in an individual woman's trajectory and offer a study of a particular milieu, although her own literary

experiment is also critical of biological determinism. Finally, an analysis of Rachilde's hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction in *La Marquise de Sade* reveals her critical distance from contemporary social and scientific discourses but also how she appropriates naturalist narrative patterns to convey her own social critique.

This thesis deals with five women writers who built on naturalist poetics to develop their own voice and own literary path. While they mainly portray female characters unable to liberate themselves from externally imposed norms, Peyrebrune, Rachilde, Dohm, Reuter, and Skram, as writers, reclaim the voice and willpower lost by their protagonists to resist and develop a counter-narrative. Like earlier naturalists, they reject the idealist and romantic portrayals of female characters, rather opting for a mimetic mode of writing and a close-study of a set milieu – that of working-class and middle-class protagonists – to achieve a realistic portrayal of women's experiences. They are however also critical of new myths imposed on women, notably by emerging scientific discourses and naturalist narratives that use biological determinism as a narrative device. A feminist reading of these writers' hypertextual dialogue with naturalism uncovers how their literary representation of what Reuter designated as 'die stumme Tragik des Alltags' (*the silent tragic of the everyday*) is profoundly political.

# List of Abbreviations

References to these works are given in the abbreviated form as in-text references, followed by the page number.

A Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire II*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), ii

A2 Émile Zola, *The Assommoir*, trans. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2021)

DP Émile Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire V*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), v

DP2 Émile Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, trans. by Julie Rose and ed. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2020)

FH Henrik Ibsen, *Fruen fra havet*, ed. by The Henrik Ibsen Centre, University of Oslo <https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_FH%7CFHht.xhtml> [Accessed 03 March 2025]

FH2 Henrik Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea*, in *The Oxford Ibsen. Volume VII*, ed. by James Walter McFarlane and trans. by Jens Arup and James Walter McFarlane, 8 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), vii

G Henrik Ibsen, *Gengangere*, ed. by The Henrik Ibsen Centre, University of Oslo < https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_Ge%7CGeht.xhtml> [accessed 03 March 2025]

G2 Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, in *The Oxford Ibsen. Volume V*, trans. and ed. by James Walter McFarlane, 8 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), v

GF Gabriele Reuter, *Aus guter Familie. Leidensgeschichte eines Mädchens* (Berlin: Hofenberg Sonderausgabe, 2016)

L Amalie Skram, *Lucie*, in *Samlede Værker*, 9 vols (Copenhagen, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1907), viii

L2 Amalie Skram, *Lucie*, trans. by Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick (Norwich: Norvik Press, 2001)

MS Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014)

PH Amalie Skram, *Professor Hieronimus*, in *Samlede Værker*, 9 vols (Copenhagen, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1906), vi

PJ Amalie Skram, *Paa St. Jørgen*, in *Samlede Værker*, 9 vols (Copenhagen, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1906), vi

PP Michel Foucault, *Le Pouvoir psychiatrique. Cours au Collège de France. 1973-1974* (Paris: Seuil, Gallimard, 2003)

PP2 Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric power: Lectures at the College de France, 1973-74*, trans. by Graham Burchell, ed. by Jacques Lagrange (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

RE Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880)

UO Amalie Skram, *Under Observation*, trans. by Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick (Seattle: Women in Translation, 1992)

VR Georges de Peyrebrune, *Victoire la Rouge*, ed. by Sophie Ménard (Paris: Libraire Générale Française, 2024)

VS Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I. La Volonté de savoir*, in *Œuvres II*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), i

VS2 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978)

W Hedwig Dohm, “Werde, die Du bist!” (Berlin: Hofenberg Sonderausgabe, 2015)

Unless mentioned, translations are my own.

# Introduction

## I. Reading and Engaging with Naturalist Fiction

The reception of naturalism across Europe was fraught with scandal, provoked by the naturalist ambition of depicting '[l]ife stripped of its veils, its illusions, its pretensions, its poetry. Life in its monstruous, demystifying nakedness'.[1] Critics were particularly troubled by the idea that female readers could access this kind of transgressive literature and many exploited the myth of the 'scandalised female reader' to fuel their attacks on what they deemed to be immoral novels.[2] Reflecting on the controversial reception of naturalist fiction, Émile Zola presents in *Nana* (1880) his eponymous protagonist's perspective on the naturalist novel:

> Elle avait lu dans la journée un roman qui faisait grand bruit, l'histoire d'une fille ; et elle se révoltait, elle disait que tout cela était faux, témoignant d'ailleurs une répugnance indignée contre cette littérature immonde, dont la prétention était de rendre la nature ; comme si l'on pouvait tout montrer ! comme si un roman ne devait pas être écrit pour passer une heure agréable ! En matière de livres et de drames, Nana avait des opinions très arrêtées : elle voulait des œuvres tendres et nobles, des choses pour la faire rêver et lui grandir l'âme.[3] (*That day she had read a novel which was all the rage, the story of a prostitute. And she was indignant, she said it was quite untrue, and declared that she found such literature, which claimed to reflect life as it really was, disgusting, highly offensive. As if a writer could possibly describe everything! What were novels written for? To help you pass the time agreeably of course! On the subject of books and plays Nana had very fixed opinions. She wanted to read works that were romantic and noble, things that made her dream and would elevate the soul.*)[4]

The irony of this metaliterary passage lies mainly in the fact that Nana, the typical Parisian prostitute, adopts a bourgeois mindset and aligns herself with the very critics who condemn the representation of a character like herself as immoral. She also reproaches the naturalist

[1] David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction*: *The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 178.
[2] Nathalie Buchet Rogers, *Fictions du scandale. Corps féminin et réalisme romanesque au dix-neuvième siècle* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1998), pp. 62–64. Nathalie Buchet Rogers refers in her analysis of the trope to the trial of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), but the same dynamics can be observed with the reception of naturalist fiction. On how the trial of *Madame Bovary* shaped the trope of the 'naive' (and thus in danger of becoming hysterical) female reader, see Marie Baudry, *Lectrices romanesques. Représentations et théorie de la lecture aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014), p. 430. See also Baguley (1990), p. 170.
[3] Émile Zola, *Nana*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire II*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), ii, p. 1369.
[4] Émile Zola, *Nana*, trans. by Helen Constantine, ed. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford's World Classics, 2020), p. 265.

novel for not allowing for escapism through its detailed portrayal of 'life as it really was'. This passage symbolises a distinctive feature of naturalism: its propensity to self- and metaliterary reflection,[5] here serving as an ironic counterattack to critics of naturalism. Naturalism, in this thesis, is broadly defined as a mode of fictional writing emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century that engages in a dialogue with contemporary scientific theories and methods. Naturalist writers' experiments with aesthetic forms, mainly the novel and drama, are driven by their ambition to find new ways of representing reality, adapt literature to modern concerns, and respond to current social and political debates.[6]

In his defence of naturalist poetics, *Le Roman expérimental* (*The Experimental Novel*, 1880), Zola argues that critics must move beyond judging the morality of a fictional work based on its perceived suitability for female readers:

> Maintenant, entre ceux qui prennent la spécialité de ne pas faire rougir les femmes et ceux qui mettent leur gain à les faire rougir, il y a les véritables artistes, les écrivains de race qui ne se demandent pas une seconde si les femmes rougiront ou non. […] Les convenances, les sentiments produits par l'éducation, le salut des petites filles et des femmes chancelantes, les règlements de police et la morale patentée des bons esprits, disparaissent et ne comptent plus. Ils vont à la vérité, au chef-d'œuvre, malgré tout, par dessus tout, sans s'inquiéter du scandale de leurs audaces.[7] (*Now, between those who specialise in not making women blush and those who profit from making them blush, there are the true artists, the writers with pedigree who do not ask themselves for one second whether women will blush or not. […] The conventions, emotions produced by education, the salvation of little girls and faltering women, the police regulations and the patented morals of good spirits, disappear and do not count anymore. They aim for the truth, the masterpiece, despite everything, above everything, without worrying about the scandal of their audacities.*)

Rather than trying to spare female readers' sensibilities, Zola advocates for a masculine poetics focused on unveiling the truth without compromise. As Hendrik Schlieper highlights, Zola repeatedly employs the term 'viril' to qualify the works of the scientist Claude Bernard, whose experimental method he adopts as a model for naturalist poetics, promoting a 'virilité du vrai' (*virility of truth*) in contrast with idealist and romantic

[5] See Jennifer Yee, *The Colonial Comedy: Imperialism in the French Realist Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 10.
[6] On naturalism as a mode of writing, see Alain Pagès, 'Comment définir le naturalisme ?', in *Re-Reading Zola and Worldwide Naturalism: Miscellanies in Honour of Anna Gural-Migdal*, ed. by Carolyn Snipes-Hoyt and others (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 3–20.
[7] Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880), p. 368. My translation. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as RE in the main text.

literature which he classifies as feminine.[8] Zola's novel *Nana* appears as typical of the gendered dynamics within naturalist poetics: the female character, her mind and body, is the object of observation of the narrator who adopts the stance of a male scientist.[9] This unveiling of the female body and mind participates in the scandal of naturalist fiction, a scandal further fuelled by the naturalist subversion of the bourgeois conception of literature defended by Nana.

As David Baguley observes, naturalists 'appropriated that culture's favourite genre, the novel, the genre of moral, social, political and intellectual consolidation and distraction in order to shock with it, disturb with it and defy the bourgeois myths of order, decency and permanence'.[10] Naturalists' subversion of bourgeois expectations for the novel was represented as a danger for female readers, an idea dramatized in Henrik Ibsen's *Gengangere* (*Ghosts*, 1881). In Act I, Pastor Manders criticises the reading habits of the middle-class widow, Helene Alving: 'Læser De den slags skrifter? […] Føler De, at De blir bedre eller lykkeligere ved den slags læsning?'[11] (*You read that sort of thing? […] Do you think reading that sort of thing makes you feel any better, or any happier*?).[12] To his critical tone, Helene responds with:

> Jo, jeg får ligesom forklaring og bekræftelse på mangt og meget af det, jeg selv går og tænker mig. Ja for det er *det* underlige, pastor Manders, – der er egentlig sletikke noget nyt i disse bøger; der står ikke andet end det, som de fleste mennesker tænker og tror. Det er bare det, at de fleste mennesker ikke gør sig rede for det eller ikke vil være ved det. (G, HIS: 405; *Well, I find it seems to explain and confirm a lot of the things I had been thinking myself. That's the strange thing, Pastor Manders… there's really nothing new in these books; there's nothing there but what most people think and believe already. It's just that most people either haven't really considered these things, or won't admit them.* – G2, p. 359).

[8] Hendrik Schlieper, 'La Naissance du roman à partir de l'esprit de la virilité. Pour une approche genrée de la poétique du naturalisme', in *Pour une histoire genrée des littératures romanes*, ed. by Annette Keilhauer and Liselotte Steinbrügge (Tübingen: Narr Verlag, 2013), pp. 71–86 (pp. 77–78).
[9] Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge. French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), pp. 26–27.
[10] Baguley (1990), p. 173.
[11] Henrik Ibsen, *Gengangere*, ed. by The Henrik Ibsen Centre, University of Oslo < https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_Ge%7CGeht.xhtml> [accessed 03 March 2025], HIS: 405. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are indicated as G, HIS: page number.
[12] Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, in *The Oxford Ibsen. Volume V*, trans. and ed. by James Walter McFarlane, 8 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), v, p. 359. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as G2 in the main text.

Helene's remark that these books reveal nothing 'new' suggests she is referring to novels that strive for a faithful representation of reality, that is realist or naturalist fiction. Pastor Manders' condemnation of these works – despite not having read them, relying solely on their reputation – also implies that they convey atheist and anti-clerical ideas.[13] These novels serve as a testament to Helene's free-thinking and liberal views, and she is fully aware of the social and gender transgression her reading choices represent. This metaliterary scene symbolises the naturalists' defiance of the expectations of bourgeois readers, upholding a mode of writing that is anti-idealist and politically subversive.[14] Ibsen defends naturalist fiction through the medium of theatre, and, as in Zola's *Nana*, this metaliterary counterattack centres on a woman accessing such books and sparking scandal.

Notably, such use of metaliterary references to naturalist fiction can be found in the works of contemporary European women writers. Building on the self-reflexivity found in Zola's and Ibsen's texts, which ironically reflect on the controversial reception of naturalism by female readers, women writers' metaliterary mentions of naturalist fiction contribute to their self-portrayal as readers and commentators of naturalism. This thesis builds on the metaliterary references to naturalist fiction by French authors Georges de Peyrebrune and Rachilde, German writers Hedwig Dohm and Gabriele Reuter, and Norwegian author Amalie Skram to explore their reception of naturalism from a comparative perspective. Published between 1883 and 1895, after Zola's major works such as *L'Assommoir* (1877) and *Nana* and Ibsen's most influential plays, *Et Dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*, 1879) and *Ghosts*, women writers' responses to naturalism range from adherence to complete rejection which the second section of this introduction explores in more detail. In this thesis, I aim to uncover the diversity of women writers' responses to

[13] Theoharis Constantine Theoharis, *Ibsen's Drama. Right Action and Tragic Joy* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 77.
[14] On Ibsen and anti-idealism, see Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

naturalist fiction and its representations of female characters, without, however, reducing their overall literary production to their dialogue with naturalism. I argue that this exploration enhances our understanding of the spread of naturalism in Europe while also providing a deeper contextualisation of these writers' works.

In her short story "Werde, die Du bist!" (1894), the German author Hedwig Dohm depicts how her protagonist, Agnes Schmidt, comes across what can be identified as naturalist literature:

> Ich hatte in der Zeitung Bücher erwähnt gefunden, russische, französische, skandinavische, die einen geistigen und sittlichen Umschwung bedeuten und das Leben schildern sollten, wie es wirklich ist. Wie es wirklich ist? Wäre das der Mühe des Schilderns wert? Ich habe in diesen Büchern gelesen, tagelang. Stellenweise fesselten sie mich bis zu krankhafter Aufregung, bis zu schaudernder Ergriffenheit.[15] (*I found books mentioned in the newspaper, Russian, French, Scandinavian, that represent a drastic intellectual and moral change and were supposed to describe life as it really is. As it really is? Is it worth describing? I have read these books for days. At times they captivated me to the point of morbid excitement, to the point of shuddering emotion.*)

We can infer that Dohm is specifically referring to naturalist fiction here by considering how the enumeration of three cultural spheres – Russian, French, and Scandinavian – points to the complex transnational literary exchanges in the second half of the nineteenth century which led to the spread of naturalism across Europe. The allusion to a literary movement claiming to bring about a 'drastic intellectual and moral change' hints at naturalists' goal of breaking with literary traditions and social taboos, while Dohm's reference to the goal of describing life 'as it really is' evokes Zola's definition of naturalism, as a fiction born from scientific observation: the experimental novel is meant to be 'le procès-verbal de l'expérience' (RE, p. 8 – *exact report of experience*), a faithful account of the author's observation of reality.

The discovery of naturalist fiction is a key moment in Agnes' trajectory: having recently become a widow, she decides to keep a diary in which she describes her search for meaning after a life of sacrifice as a wife and mother. Agnes' reading of naturalist works leads her to question the possibility and value of describing life as faithfully as possible,

[15] Hedwig Dohm, "Werde, die Du bist!" (Berlin: Hofenberg Sonderausgabe, 2015), p. 23. My translation. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as W in the main text.

echoing her own doubts as to whether it is worthwhile to document her own life in her diary: 'Erzählenswertes in meinem Leben! Gibt es das? Und was wäre das?' (W, p. 9 – *Something worth telling in my life! Is there such a thing? And what would it be?*). Dohm reflects here on another central aspect of naturalism, namely its focus on common people and everyday life.[16] Naturalist texts also contribute to Agnes' journey towards self-discovery and initiate her reflection on women's place within society: 'Diese Schriftsteller verwerfen, was bisher für unumstößlich galt – Sitten, Anschauungen, Glauben, Moral! Es wäre auch nicht wahr, daß die Frau ein untergeordnetes Geschöpf ist, vorausbestimmt für niedere Lebensfunctionen!' (W, p. 23 – *These authors reject what has been until now considered as irrefutable – customs, opinions, beliefs, morals! It would also not be true that a woman is an inferior being, predetermined for life's lower functions!*). The innovation of naturalist fiction, in the eyes of Agnes, does not only reside in its new poetics but also in its political message that challenges former conceptions of women's societal status.

Another major part of Agnes' reading experience is her emotional and physical reaction to these novels, as she describes feeling a 'morbid excitement' and a 'shuddering emotion'. While this description seemingly aligns with the contemporary cliché of women's pathological reactions to fiction,[17] I interpret it as a playful subversion by Dohm who stages her protagonist as participating in the 'scandal' surrounding naturalism. This passage indeed reveals a dual scandal: not only does it serve as a metaliterary representation of a female reader engaging with naturalist fiction, but it is also the metaliterary reflection of a *woman* writer. As Roger Bellet highlights, the nineteenth century was wary of female readers but even more of women participating in the public

[16] See the Brothers Goncourt's preface for *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865) and its ambition to write about the working-classes and daily life. Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Préfaces et manifestes littéraires* (Paris: Charpentier, 1880), pp. 19–23.
[17] See Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction. Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 212.

sphere through *writing*.[18] In this scene, Dohm invites readers to reflect on the transformation of the female reader into a writer who actively interacts with naturalism.

The polemical reception of naturalist fiction, mainly because of its satirical portrayal of bourgeois values and its exploration of taboo topics, appears as one of the main aspects that drew women writers to engage with it. In 'Du roman' (*On the Novel*), Zola criticises the outraged reactions of bourgeois readers to his novels, claiming that it is their hypocrisy that drives them to censor naturalist novels as they are accustomed to the most sordid anecdotes drawn from life itself:

> [J]e dis qu'il y a un manque absolu de logique à parler de la dignité du journal, du respect dû aux familles, si après avoir fait la police du roman, on publie toutes les infamies des tribunaux. Pourquoi exiger là un mensonge couleur de rose et accepter ici les férocités de l'existence ? (RE, p. 280 – *I say that there is an absolute lack of logic in speaking of the newspaper's dignity, the respect due to families, if after policing the novel, we publish all the infamies of the courts. Why demand a rose-tinted lie on the one hand and accept all of life's ferocities on the other?*)

In the same ironic vein, Georges de Peyrebrune portrays in her novel *Victoire la Rouge* (1883) the bourgeois mistress of her working-class protagonist, Victoire, avidly reading a *feuilleton*:

> [E]lle s'y était abonnée pour le feuilleton, un drame horrible, où l'on racontait comment des gens très adroits volent, tuent, empoisonnent, violent et assassinent, le tout avec des ruses très intéressantes pour échapper à la loi. Cette lecture édifiante, Madame Maleyrac l'absorbait dès son lever, tandis qu'elle prenait son café, les pieds sur une chaufferette.[19] (*She subscribed to it for the feuilleton, a horrifying drama that told of how very skillful people steal, kill, poison, rape, and murder, all of it with very interesting tricks to escape the law. Madame Maleyrac absorbed this edifying reading as soon as she got up, while she drank her coffee, her feet on a heater.*)

In the comfort of her home, Madame Maleyrac is reading stories that confirm middle-class fears around the dangerous 'Other', the working-class criminal threatening the bourgeois order. This passage also mocks the double standards deployed by bourgeois readers and builds an interesting parallel with the discovery of Victoire's infanticide by her employer later in the novel. Unlike the newspaper anecdotes, the novel contextualises Victoire's

[18] Roger Bellet, 'Masculin et féminin dans les pseudonymes des femmes de lettres au XIXe siècle', in *Femmes de lettres au XIXe siècle. Autour de Louise Colet*, ed. by Roger Bellet (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1982), pp. 249–281 (p. 277).
[19] Georges de Peyrebrune, *Victoire la Rouge*, ed. by Sophie Ménard (Paris: Libraire Générale Française, 2024), p. 106. My translation. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as VR in the main text.

crime and explains it through her social vulnerability. By observing the mechanisms of determinism – which, in Peyrebrune's novel are exclusively social – and dealing with a controversial topic such as infanticide, Peyrebrune engages with naturalist poetics. In this metaliterary passage, Peyrebrune employs an irony characteristic of naturalist fiction aimed at bourgeois morals to assert her right to participate in the polemical debates of the time.[20]

Naturalism, as it responds to and appropriates the various emerging scientific and anthropological discourses in a fictional realm, indeed provides women writers with literary tools to engage with contemporary debates and to forge their own analysis of society.[21] Naturalist poetics are shaped by the new philosophies, scientific methods, emerging fields of anthropological inquiry, and the advances in natural history (from which literary naturalism derives its name[22]) that emerge during the second half of the nineteenth century. Naturalist fiction engages with evolution theory (Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel), physiology and experimental science (Claude Bernard), physiognomy, criminal anthropology (Cesare Lombroso), psychiatry – which is becoming a medical field in its own right (Pierre Janet, Jean-Martin Charcot), with sexuality as one of its fields of inquiry (Richard von Krafft-Ebing) –, sociology (Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Emil Durkheim, Gabriel Tarde), statistics, positivism (Auguste Comte, Hippolyte Taine), and the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche.[23] As we have seen with Peyrebrune's example, the women writers analysed in this thesis engage with these emerging discourses, especially in the debates surrounding femininity and women's experiences, through their dialogue with naturalist fiction.

[20] On the naturalist use of satire and irony against bourgeois morals, see Baguley (1990), p. 151.
[21] See Laura Colombo, '"Je n'écris pas de livre qui ne soit une pensée". André Léo, Amélie Bosquet et l'appropriation du roman réaliste et naturaliste de la part des femmes', in *La Littérature en bas-bleus. Tome II. Romancières en France de 1848 à 1870*, ed. by Andrea Del Lungo and Brigitte Louichon (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013), pp. 235–56 (p. 240).
[22] David Baguley, *Le Naturalisme et ses genres* (Paris: Nathan, 1995), p. 32.
[23] On these various figures and their influence on naturalist poetics, see Yves Chevrel, *Le Naturalisme. Étude d'un mouvement littéraire international* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993).

Women's engagement with the scientific discourses of their time is however complicated by the gendering of science and, by extension, of naturalist poetics.[24] Countering contemporary critics who accuse them of participating in the atmosphere of *fin-de-siècle* decadence, naturalist authors align themselves with scientific discourses, self-presenting as rational and secular, to enhance their own prestige.[25] This self-presentation of the naturalist author as an experimental scientist, as theorised by Zola, who scrutinises the characters' body and soul to better understand the deterministic underpinning of human behaviour, has gendered implications. As Schlieper notes, Zola identifies the figure of the experimental scientist as male whose favoured subject (or, one could even say, *object* of study) is often women whose body and mind are deemed most susceptible to deterministic laws.[26] The mysteries of femininity, both physiological and psychological, thus frequently constitute the focus of naturalist narratives.[27] This attention to women's bodies and minds, the symbolic vessels of *fin-de-siècle* anxieties, further explains why naturalist fiction was deemed to be improper for female readers. By being able to look at themselves, women were suspected of potentially wanting to expose themselves to the public gaze.[28] This gendering of naturalist poetics leads to an interesting dynamic: while naturalist authors align with discourses that position scientific knowledge as a male domain, they simultaneously grant female readers access to physiological and psychological insights about themselves. In response, women writers challenge this gatekeeping of discourses on femininity by creating realistic portraits of women that are in dialogue with the portrayal of female characters by naturalist writers. Thus, Norwegian writer Amalie Skram uses

[24] On the gendering of science as 'masculine', see Evelyn Fox Keller, 'Feminism as an Analytical Tool for the Study of Science', *Academe*, 69:5 (1983), pp. 15–21 (p. 17).
[25] Andrew Counter, 'Zola's Fin-de-Siècle Reproductive Politics', *French Studies*, 68:2 (2014), pp. 193–208 (p. 198).
[26] Schlieper, p. 73. See also Fleur Bastin, 'La Femme dans le roman zolien : idéologies du style', *Romantisme*, 161:3 (2013), pp. 101–114 (p. 106).
[27] Schlieper, p. 73.
[28] Jann Matlock, 'Censoring the Realist Gaze', in *Spectacles of Realism: Body, Gender,* Genre, ed. by Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 28–65 (p. 39).

metaliterary scenes in which female characters read naturalist novels to reflect on the taboo surrounding women's access to public debates.

Skram's novel *Lucie* (1888) describes the abusive marriage between the lawyer Theodor Gerner, and his wife Lucie. The marriage is strained by Gerner's attempts to mould Lucie into the ideal bourgeois wife, despite her working-class origins and past as a dancer. Clear evidence of this power dynamic is how Gerner forbids Lucie from reading Christian Krohg's *Albertine* (1886) as Lucie explains: 'Gerner siger desuden at han vil ikke se saa'nne Bøger i sit Hus'[29] (*Gerner says he won't have a book like that in his house*).[30] Krohg's novel deals with a working-class girl who falls into prostitution in contemporary Norway; the work was censored upon publication and publicly defended by Skram herself. [31] It is ironic that Gerner forbids Lucie from reading this particular novel, as it depicts a character whose background and trajectory closely mirrors her own, with the notable exception that Lucie is 'saved' from prostitution by Gerner. This passage points at the controversial reception of naturalism in Norway and serves as a symbol of emotional abuse in an unequal marriage where the woman is condemned because of her sexual past.

In the second volume of her psychiatric duology, *Paa St. Jørgen* (1895), Skram makes another reference to naturalism. The duology recounts the stay of Else Kant, a painter, at two psychiatric institutions where she is admitted after having attempted to commit suicide. In one scene, Else discusses the Goncourt Brothers' *Renée Mauperin* (1864) with a nurse.[32] As a patient in a psychiatric institution that she deems authoritarian and abusive, presenting herself as a reader of naturalist novels allows Else to differentiate herself from other patients. She refers to a literary movement that positions itself as aligned

[29] Amalie Skram, *Lucie*, in *Samlede Værker*, 9 vols. (Copenhagen, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1907), viii, p. 58. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as L in the main text.
[30] Amalie Skram, *Lucie*, trans. by Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick (Norwich: Norvik Press, 2001), p. 47. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as L2 in the main text.
[31] Amalie Skram, 'Om Albertine' (Oslo: Huseby & Co, 1887). See Christine Hamm, '"Sjælemalerier": Amalie Skram leser Albertine', *Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning*, 93:3 (2006), pp. 254–68.
[32] See Amalie Skram, *Paa St. Jørgen*, in *Samlede Værker*, 9 vols (Copenhagen, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1906), vi, p. 365. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as PJ in the main text.

with scientific discourses, thereby asserting her own rationality and challenging what she considers to be a misdiagnosis, as she indignantly tells her doctor: 'Jeg *er* ikke sindssyg, og har derfor ikke hjemme her. Hvad siger og foretar jeg mig, som ikke er normalt, maa jeg spørge?' (PJ, p. 363 – *I* am *not mad, and I don't belong here. What do I say and do that isn't normal, if I may ask?*).[33] For both Lucie and Else, reading naturalist novels symbolises accessing discourses that men have made inaccessible to them – Lucie, by her husband, and Else, by the psychiatrist Professor Hieronimus – and reflects their struggle to assert their voice. In these metaliterary scenes, Skram reclaims the right denied to her protagonists to participate in contemporary debates, echoing the dual scandal staged in Dohm's work – that of a woman reading and critically engaging with public discourses and naturalism through her own writing.

Skram's female characters also struggle against the limits put on their freedom by being labelled as 'promiscuous' – as in Lucie's case – or 'mad' – as exemplified by Else – by male characters who adhere to the concept of determinism. As I explore in this thesis, women writers' dialogue with naturalism involves a critical examination of the impact of determinism on female characters' trajectories. In Zola's conception of the naturalist method, the experimental novel is meant to be a study of the effects of determinism on fictional characters.[34] Notably, naturalist portrayals of sexuality and madness as determined by biological and social factors are what led some contemporary critics to describe naturalist fiction as pessimistic, even fatalistic. By observing the laws of determinism in a fictional setting, naturalist narratives indeed follow what might be considered a tragic logic, especially when portraying 'martyred women […] brought to ruin' because of their

[33] Amalie Skram, *Under Observation*, trans. by Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick (Seattle: Women in Translation, 1992), p. 292. Translation amended. This volume contains a translation of both *Professor Hieronimus* and *Paa St. Jørgen*. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as UO in the main text.
[34] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, p. 19.

vulnerability to biological and social determinism.[35] Zola's and Ibsen's texts often portray female characters as victims whose destinies embody the injustices they aim to denounce, such as capitalist exploitation and bourgeois sexual norms and are intended to stir the reader's indignation and inspire action, as I explore in the first chapter.

The German writer Gabriele Reuter was particularly inspired by the tragic and political vision conveyed in naturalist fiction. In her autobiography, she reflects on how her reception of naturalism inspired her 1895 novel, *Aus guter Familie. Leidensgeschichte eines Mädchens* (*From a Good Family. A Girl's Sufferings*): 'die stumme Tragik des Alltags wollte ich künden' (*I wanted to convey the silent tragic of the everyday*).[36] In *Aus guter Familie*, Reuter tries to attain the naturalist ideal of the typical, by depicting the tragedy of 'common people', as found in the Goncourt Brothers', Ibsen's, or Zola's works. But she also explains that while she was inspired by naturalist tragic characterisations, she aimed to depict a situation closer to her own reality:

> Diese Menschentragik verkörperte sich mir am reinsten und stärksten in dem Mädchen aus bürgerlichen Kreisen — in der Tochter aus guter Familie. Hier war ich zu Haus — hier kannte ich alle Gründe und Untergründe des Milieus und der Herzen. Hier konnte ich eigne Sehnsucht, eigne Bitterkeit strömen lassen — und wußte doch: ich gab nicht den Einzelfall, ich gab das Typische, an dem zahllose Mitschwestern sich erkennen.[37] (*This human tragedy was best embodied to me by the girl from middle-class circles – the daughter of a good family. This was my home – here I knew all the reasons and underpinnings of the environment and their hearts. Here I could let my own longing, my own bitterness flow – and yet I knew: I was not portraying an individual case, I was depicting a type in which countless fellow women would recognise themselves.*)

This representation of the 'silent tragic of the everyday' is common to all the texts analysed in this thesis as women writers aim to depict women's shared experiences at the end of the nineteenth century and convey their political message.

In a metaliterary passage akin to the ones already discussed, Reuter depicts how her protagonist, Agathe Heidling, discovers Ernst Haeckel's *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (*The History of Creation*, 1868), one of the key works that introduced Darwinian theory in

[35] David Baguley, 'The Nature of Naturalism', in *Naturalism in the European Novel*, ed. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1992), pp. 13–26 (p. 21).
[36] Gabriele Reuter, *Vom Kinde zum Menschen: Die Geschichte meiner Jugend* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1921), p. 432.
[37] Reuter (1921), p. 432.

Germany. Upon discovering this scientific work, Agathe feels as if her life's possibilities are expanding:

> Da hatte sie neulich ein wundervolles Buch in Papas Bibliothek aufgestöbert. […] Sie hätte geglaubt, es wäre für Frauen einfach unverständlich. Zu ihrem größten Erstaunen konnte sie dem Verfasser ganz gut folgen – sie brauchte nur aufzumerken und am Tage bei ihren Beschäftigungen das Gelesene in ihrem Kopfe sinnend zu bewegen.[38] (*She had recently found a wonderful book in Papa's library. […] She would have thought that it would simply be incomprehensible for women. To her great astonishment, she was able to follow the author quite well – all she had to do was to pay attention and to think about what she had read during the day as she went about her tasks.*)

Agathe is surprised by her ability to comprehend a book that had been withheld from her on the pretence that it was unsuitable for female readers. Her father, however, is quick to kill her enthusiasm by forbidding her to read such books and to further expand her intellectual horizons: 'Was willst Du Dir denn für unverständliches Zeug in Dein kleines Köpfchen packen? […] Ein andermal fragst Du mich, ehe Du Dir etwas aus meinem Bücherschrank holst. Verstanden? Junge Mädchen fassen dergleichen Werke oft ganz falsch auf' (GF, p. 169 – *What kind of incomprehensible stuff do you want to pack into your little head? […] Next time you ask me before you get something from my bookcase. Understood? Young girls often misunderstand such works*). Forbidding Agathe access to this knowledge because he subscribes to the belief that women are physiologically unable to understand science,[39] her father symbolically hinders her potential for growth, a dynamic that is further illuminated when considering Haeckel's theories. Following Darwin, Haeckel argues that social struggles – the 'competition for the means of subsistence' – mirror the struggles found in the natural world.[40] While Haeckel denies the possibility of free will amidst these struggles, he believes that knowledge of natural laws could lead to

[38] Gabriele Reuter, *Aus guter Familie. Leidensgeschichte eines Mädchens* (Berlin: Hofenberg Sonderausgabe, 2016), p. 167. My translation. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as GF in the main text.

[39] For instance, Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Vienna and Leipzig: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1903) comforted his readers' sexist clichés by pseudo-scientifically confirming that women were entirely physical, and thus unfit for intellectual pursuits, while men's sphere was intellectual. See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 219.

[40] Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945. Nature as Model and Nature as a Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1997), pp. 135–6.

harmony as humans strive to live in accordance with them.[41] Agathe could attain some degree of knowledge and freedom by accessing scientific works, but she is hindered from developing intellectually by her father who acts as the spokesman of contemporary social norms.

Reuter hints at the liberating potential of science, reflecting on how it largely remains inaccessible to women, yet acknowledges that these same scientific discourses are often used to justify women's limited opportunities in both the intellectual and public spheres. As naturalism sometimes appropriates contemporary discourses that cast women as limited to the physical realm, the dialogue between naturalist fiction and women writers can be fraught with tensions. A prime illustration of this tension is Rachilde's use of a parodic tone when referencing naturalism in her work. As Catherine Dousteyssier-Khoze observes, parodies and satirical texts of naturalist fiction have contributed to its success and opened it to criticism.[42] Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) describes the trajectory of Mary Barbe from a troubled child to a sadistic young woman, thus adopting a typically naturalist narrative pattern by explaining the protagonist's adulthood through her childhood and social origins.[43] However, echoing a tone often adopted by the detractors of naturalism, Rachilde humorously mentions naturalist fiction when portraying her female protagonist looking for morbid distractions everywhere she can by the end of the novel:

> [S]a vie s'épanouit en des exagérations à travers ce que les philosophes du siècle appellent la *décadence*, la fin de tout. […] Après la *Gazette des Tribunaux*, les comptes rendus des journalistes mouchards; la Morgue; les romans naturalistes; les musées de cire du boulevard; les exploits des empoisonneurs spirituels, il restait encore les brasseries de femmes dans lesquelles, par bonheur, une fois, on pouvait être témoin d'une sanglante scène de jalousie.[44] (*Her life blossomed into exaggerations through what the century's philosophers call decadence, the end of everything. […] After* The Tribunals' Gazette, *the reports of snitching journalists; the morgue; naturalist novels; the wax museums on the boulevard; the exploits of spiritual poisoners, there still remained women's brasseries in which, with luck, you could just once witness a bloody scene of jealousy.*)

[41] Hawkins, p. 137.
[42] See Catherine Dousteyssier-Khoze, *Zola et la littérature naturaliste en parodies* (Paris: Eurédit, 2004), p. 14.
[43] See Nelly Sanchez, 'Rachilde : détractrice et continuatrice du naturalisme', *Excavatio*, 15:3–4 (2001), pp. 284–300 (p. 297).
[44] Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), p. 301. My translation. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as MS in the main text.

By portraying her character breaking multiple taboos, including the act of reading naturalist novels, Rachilde presents Mary as ironically performing the role of the *femme fatale*, who is, in the minds of contemporaries, the woman who has access to sexual knowledge and uses it against men.[45] Although often labelled as a decadent writer, Rachilde here critically reflects on the concept of 'decadence' itself, a term often used to reflect anxieties about women's increasing access to the public sphere. In *La Marquise de Sade*, Rachilde employs the parodic mode to expose the sexism in scientific discourses and naturalist representations and appears as the most critical among all the writers in my corpus in her dialogue with naturalism.

As this section demonstrated, women writers use metaliterary scenes similar to the ones found in Zola's and Ibsen's texts to present themselves as readers of naturalist fiction. By portraying their female protagonists as reading naturalist narratives or books associated with its worldview, these five women writers highlight what they retain from the literary 'revolution' introduced by naturalism: namely a new poetics that offers a method to represent reality and that has clear political underpinnings as it criticises bourgeois norms and portrays women as victims of societal structures. Reflecting on naturalist fiction also allows women writers to participate in contemporary debates, mainly around women's social condition and to critically consider the current scientific and sociological discourses that naturalist fiction engages with. This dialogue with naturalism thus appears to have served as a catalyst for women's writing in Germany, France, and Norway, an aspect of the reception of naturalism which this thesis seeks to further illuminate.

[45] Mireille Dottin-Orsini, *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale. Textes et images de la misogynie fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Grasset, 1993), p. 247.

## II. Women Writers' Reception of Naturalism

The propensity to metaliterary reflection in Zola's and Ibsen's texts calls for a broad definition of naturalism, as these authors reflect on the reception of their own works and thus pave the way for redefining what it means to be a naturalist writer. The use of the adjective 'naturalist' in this thesis can be considered as an umbrella term to designate literary works that share common poetics, worldviews, as well as a similar cultural background.[46] The history of naturalism's rise, diffusion, and eventual decline is complex, particularly from a comparative perspective, and falls beyond the scope of this thesis.[47] Crucial, however, are the factors that allowed women writers to engage with and respond to naturalist poetics across borders. Advances in mobility and communication technologies, a steady rise in literacy rates, and the growing availability of translations all contributed to the widespread reach of naturalism.[48] As a literary movement, naturalism is both what Richard Lehan calls 'an expression of an era',[49] born out of the scientific and social debates of its time, and a critical response to them, redefining what role an author can and has to play in societal debates.[50] Crucially for this thesis, Michael Bies convincingly argues that naturalist poetics can be understood as a group of works that consciously interact with one another and position themselves within a broader European literary space.[51] Recent research has explored the cultural and literary exchanges within a triangular configuration between France, Germany, and Norway, with a critic like Georg Brandes emerging as a key actor in these interactions and the spread of naturalist poetics.[52] The geographical focus of

[46] My use of the word 'naturalist' mainly aligns with the work of Baguley (1990), Chevrel (1993), and Alain Pagès (2013), pp. 3–20.
[47] Chevrel's 1993 monograph on naturalism as a European movement is still a work of reference regarding this question.
[48] Chevrel (1993), pp. 33–34.
[49] Richard Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 3.
[50] Chevrel (1993), p. 49.
[51] Michael Bies, 'Der europäische Naturalismus. Zur Bestimmung einer literaturgeschichtlichen Kategorie', *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, 67 (2023), pp. 359–76 (p. 373).
[52] On Brandes, see Henk van der Liet, 'Georg Brandes as a Literary Intermediary', *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, 25:1 (2004), pp. 93–110. On the triangular approach, see *Literarische Transnationalität. Kulturelle Dreiecksbeziehungen zwischen Skandinavien, Deutschland und Frankreich im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed.

this study lies in the reception of Zola and Ibsen by women authors from France, Germany, and Norway, but it is crucial to acknowledge that rather than being confined to one national tradition, naturalism functions as a 'network of references',[53] resonating across Europe, to which the women writers discussed in this thesis actively contribute.

With the sources available at the time of writing, I cannot prove that the women authors in my corpus read each other across borders, as it seems that the translation of their works was somewhat limited despite their success in their home countries.[54] What justifies a comparative analysis of their works is their readings of and reactions to the works of Ibsen and Zola, which often marked their entry into public debates and a turn in their own literary production. Ibsen and Zola's works represent, even today, a cross-cultural phenomenon that has shaped the reception of naturalism across Europe and beyond. Zola was translated into German from 1880 onwards,[55] and his works were also widely debated in the Norwegian press.[56] Zola was one of the key mediators of Ibsen's plays in France,[57] and Ibsen's success in Germany is evident from his numerous exchanges with German translators, theatre directors, and more generally German intellectuals.[58] As a dramatist,

by Karin Hoff, Anna Sandberg, and Udo Schöning (Würzbrug: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015).

[53] Bies, p. 373.

[54] Jean-Paul Socard has listed translations of Peyrebrune's works (mainly in Spanish and Italian, two in German). See Jean-Paul Socard, *Georges de Peyrebrune : itinéraire d'une femme de lettres, du Périgord à Paris* (Périgueux: ARKA, 2011), pp. 217–18. Amalie Skram's works were successful in Germany with eleven translations of her novels being published from 1893. German translations of *Constance Ring* (1885) and *Lucie* were published in 1898. See Janet Garton, *Et Forfatterliv* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2011), pp. 342–43. Such work still needs to be done for the reception of Hedwig Dohm, Gabriele Reuter, Rachilde in their own countries and beyond. I was only able to find a Danish translation of Reuter's *Aus guter Familie* by Anna Høyer, published in 1904 by V. Pios. For recent contributions on the transnational exchanges among women writers during the long nineteenth century, see *The Palgrave Handbook of Transnational Women's Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Claire Emilie Martin and Clorinda Donato (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

[55] Vera Ingunn Moe, *Deutscher Naturalismus und ausländische Literature. Zur Rezeption der Werke von Zola, Ibsen und Dostojewski durch die deutsche naturalistische Bewegung (1880-1895)* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1983), p. 72.

[56] Scandinavian readers who did not read French could access his works in translation. For instance, *L'Assommoir* was translated in Swedish in 1879 and in Danish in 1882. See Øystein Sjåstad, *Christian Krohg's Naturalism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), p. 22. For an overview of Zola's reception in Norway, see Ragni Bjerkelund, *Amalie Skram. Dansk borger, norsk forfatter* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1988), pp. 41–48.

[57] Yves Chevrel, '"Ce n'est pas clair pour nos cervelles de Latins." L'irruption d'Ibsen sur la scène française', *Europe. Numéro spécial sur Henrik Ibsen*, 840 (April 1999), pp. 191–201 (pp. 195–96).

[58] See Ruth Schor, 'German Reception', in *Ibsen in Context*, ed. by Narve Fulsås and Tore Rem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 166–74.

Ibsen holds a unique position within this thesis, although his plays were often published before being staged and may have been as familiar in printed form as they were from the theatre itself.[59] Ibsen's relationship to naturalist poetics is complex: Ibsen's texts engage with other contemporary trends, including symbolism, and he never claimed to be a naturalist himself. Nevertheless, his choice of topics and critical portrayal of bourgeois values led his contemporaries to view him as a naturalist.[60] Ibsen remains central to my analysis, largely because of his portrayal of female characters, which had a profound impact on his contemporaries. While the writers in my corpus also wrote for the stage, the novel emerges as the primary form through which they engage with naturalist poetics and my analyses will therefore focus on women writers' short- and long-form prose.

A comparative approach to naturalism must consider the two key struggles that shape the European literary landscape and which impact women writers' reception of naturalist fiction: the national struggle and the rise of political feminism. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of nationalism, which had a wide-ranging impact on literary exchanges. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, France and Germany became adversaries on the geopolitical scene, influencing how French literature, particularly Zola's works, was received in Germany. At first enthusiastic about naturalist poetics as exemplified by Zola's novels, German naturalism sought to establish itself as a distinctly 'German' literary movement, thus rejecting French influences. German naturalists then turned to Scandinavia, notably to Ibsen, for alternative models.[61] Norwegian literature of the time was shaped by the efforts of intellectuals and authors to establish a Norwegian cultural identity after becoming independent from Denmark and entering a personal union with Sweden in 1814.[62] The success of naturalist writers, with their realistic portrayals of

[59] Schor (2021), p. 168.
[60] On Ibsen and Zolian naturalism, see Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, 'Science', in *Ibsen in Context*, *op.cit.*, pp. 82–90, p. 88.
[61] Moe, p. 58 and p. 106.
[62] Moi (2006), pp. 39–40.

Norwegian society, marked a significant milestone in this process. However, despite these efforts toward cultural independence, Copenhagen and Denmark remained the cultural centre for Norway, as witnessed by the fact that being published by the Danish branch of Gyldendal was considered a mark of success by Norwegian writers.[63] At the same time, the concept of Scandinavia as a cultural unity gained importance for both Scandinavian intellectuals and those beyond its borders throughout the nineteenth-century.[64] These national struggles complicate the spread and reception of naturalism somewhat, influencing which texts were accessible to the writers in my corpus.

The nineteenth century is also the century of the so-called 'woman question' with numerous debates around 'how women might inhabit the public spheres of formal politics, political argument or print culture, and what their qualifications were to do so'.[65] Discussions about the roles of men and women, along with issues of sexuality, reflect deeper anxieties surrounding societal 'decadence'.[66] Numerous discourses present the 'woman' as 'other' and make her a figure to be deciphered and controlled if society does not want to fall prey to unrestricted forces of sexuality, madness, and degeneracy.[67] Public debates at the time reveal a tension between bio-medical justifications for sexism, which had supplanted religious discourse, and the growing feminist movement.[68] In France, Germany, and Norway, women were beginning to organise politically, using the press and

[63] See Magnus Qvistgaard, 'Henrik Ibsens Gengangere und der Kampf um ein neues Theater', in *Literarische Transnationalität. Kulturelle Dreiecksbeziehungen zwischen Skandinavien, Deutschland und Frankreich im 19. Jahrhundert*, *op.cit.*, pp. 73–97 (p. 77).
[64] See Karin Hoff, Anna Sandberg, and Udo Schöning, 'Relations in a Cultural Triangle: Aspects of Cultural Mediation between Germany, France, and Scandinavia', trans. by Sabina Fazli, in *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, ed. by Steen Bille Jørgensen and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Leiden: Brill, Rodopi, 2021), pp. 229–49 (p. 230).
[65] Lucy Delap, 'The "woman question" and the origin of feminism', in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. by Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 319–48 (p. 320).
[66] See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 3.
[67] Showalter (1992), pp. 6–10.
[68] Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders. The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1976), pp. 11–12.

fiction to advocate for women's emancipation and political rights.[69] Naturalist writers occupy an ambiguous position within this debate: while they often depict female characters as victims of societal structures, such as Gervaise in Zola's *L'Assommoir*, or as striving for recognition as autonomous individuals, like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, both Zola and Ibsen firmly distanced themselves from the feminist movement itself.[70] Their portrayal of female characters reveal emancipatory ideas, but also anxieties about femininity.

As I explore in this thesis, women writers in my corpus actively participate in these debates on women's rights and emancipation. However, their individual relationship to feminism as a political movement is a complex one. Rachilde and Reuter both reject the label for themselves, which can be partly explained by the 'marketing' danger it could pose: their works would be considered as exclusively aimed at women and therefore not worthy of present or future recognition.[71] Dohm and Peyrebrune both claimed to be

[69] On the rise of political feminism in Europe during the long nineteenth century, see the volume *Women's Emancipation Movements in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Sylvia Paletschek and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). On French feminism, see Florence Rochefort, 'The French Feminist Movement and Republicanism, 1868-1914', pp. 77–101. On Germany, see Ute Gerhard, 'The Women's Movement in Germany in an International Context', pp. 102–22. On Norway, see Ida Blom, 'Modernity and the Norwegian Women's Movement from the 1880s to 1914: Changes and Continuities', pp. 125–51.

[70] See Zola's declaration: 'Je ne suis certes pas hostile au mouvement féministe, à l'émancipation de la femme, mais n'exagérons rien. On a trop longtemps traité la femme en esclave et on n'a que trop tardé à lui reconnaître certains droits, mais de là à la considérer comme l'égale de l'homme, à la traiter comme telle, il y a loin. Ni moralement ni physiquement, elle ne peut prétendre à cette égalité et l'émancipation ne doit se faire que dans la mesure de nos mœurs, de nos usages, je dirai même des préjugés de notre édifice social' (*I am indeed not hostile to the feminist movement, to women's emancipation, but let us not exaggerate. We have treated woman like a slave for too long and we have waited too long to recognise some of her rights, but to consider her man's equal, to treat her as such, there is a long way to go. Neither morally nor physically can she pretend to that equality and emancipation should only happen according to our customs, traditions, I would even say according to the prejudices of our social edifice*). See Pierre Neblis, 'Le Féminisme et le désarmement', *Gil Blas*, 2 août 1896, p. 2. See also Ibsen's speech at the Festival of the Norwegian Women's Rights League: 'I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To men it has seemed a problem of mankind in general. And if you read my books carefully you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the *description of humanity*'. Henrik Ibsen, 'Speech at the Festival of the Norwegian Women's Rights League', Christiana, 26 May 1898, trans. by Evert Sprinchorn, quoted in *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre*, edited by Christopher Innes (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 73. See also Toril Moi, 'Feminism', in *Ibsen in Context*, *op.cit.*, pp. 91–98.

[71] Renate von Heydebrand, 'Der literarische Kanon und die Geschlechterdifferenz. Vorüberlegungen am Beispiel von Gabriele Reuter und Theodor Fontane', *Jahrbuch für finnisch-deutsche Literaturbeziehungen*, 29 (1997), pp. 86–99 (p. 89). On Rachilde's complex relationship with feminism see Nelly Sanchez,

feminists, but Peyrebrune's concrete engagement seems to have been more discreet than Dohm's as the latter published several feminist essays. Skram's legacy in Norway is that of a feminist writer, but she was also concerned with broader social issues, such as the exploitation of the working classes. Their careers as writers unfolded in a context of political advocacy for women's rights and increasing opportunities for women in the public and literary spheres. As such, their works were debated within the backlash against the feminist movement, and the attempts, by scientific discourses, to naturalise gender differences across Europe. In "Werde, die Du bist!" Dohm represents a widow who is rejected by society because of her perceived lack of social utility.[72] Reuter portrays through Agathe the figure of the 'alte Jungfer', the unmarried woman who is a burden to her family.[73] In France, both Peyrebrune and Rachilde respond to the rise of natalist discourses in France by representing 'bad' mothers or women who refuse motherhood. In Norway, Skram contributes to debates about prostitution, sexual morals, and marriage, adding to the conversation started by Krohg's *Albertine* and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's drama *En Hanske* (*A Gauntlet,* 1881).[74] These authors' dialogue with naturalist fiction, as seen with their metaliterary references to naturalism, allows them to engage in discourses around the 'woman question', using their fiction as space for challenging the patriarchal discourses of their time.

While this thesis adopts a close reading approach to explore the dialogue with naturalist fiction evident in the texts by women in my corpus, it is necessary to contextualise each woman writer's unique position in the European literary landscape during their careers. A contextualisation of women writers' reception of naturalist fiction

'*Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe*. Rachilde ou la provocatrice rétrograde', in *Rachilde ou les aléas de la postérité. De l'oubli au renouveau*, ed. by Thierry Poyet (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2023), pp. 81–94.
[72] Abigail Dunn, *Virtuous Victim or Sexual Predator? The Representation of the Widow in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century German Fiction* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 206.
[73] Katja Mellmann, 'Die Mädchenfrage. Zum historischen Bezugsproblem von Gabriele Reuters *Aus guter Familie'*, *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, 33 (2008), pp. 1–25.
[74] Elias Bredsdorff, *Den store nordiske krig om seksualmoralen* (Viborg: Gyldendal, 1973), p. 8.

across France, Germany and Norway will show what they found productive in naturalist fiction, what they distance themselves from, and, more generally, what their reception of naturalist poetics reveals of their own conceptions of literature. Each individual writer was chosen to show the range of responses to naturalist fiction on a European scale to demonstrate the diverse ways in which naturalism served as an inspiration for women's writing in the late nineteenth century, but also because they all enjoyed a notable commercial success in their countries, making them significant figures of the late-nineteenth-century literary scene.

### 2.1 France: Georges de Peyrebrune and Rachilde

The two French writers of this thesis' corpus offer an interesting contrast when it comes to their relationship with naturalism.[75] While Peyrebrune's novel *Victoire la Rouge* is probably the closest to naturalist poetics out of all the texts studied in this thesis, Rachilde parodies them in *La Marquise de Sade*. These literary differences can partly be explained by their trajectories as women writers in late-nineteenth-century Paris. Georges de Peyrebrune, pseudonym of Mathilde Marie Georgina Elisabeth de Peyrebrune Judicis, was born in 1841 in the Dordogne and died in 1917 in poverty, forgotten by the French public despite her literary success in the 1880-90s. In a series of articles from 1879 to 1880 published in a regional journal, Peyrebrune defended Zola and the principles of naturalist aesthetics at a time when he faced widespread criticism, calling him a 'chef d'école, et d'une école avec laquelle il faudra compter' (*leader of a school and of a school which will have to be reckoned with*).[76] Peyrebrune characterises naturalism as an inevitable progression for French literature, presenting herself as adhering to this new poetics.[77]

[75] See also Nelly Sanchez, 'Les Filles cachées du naturalisme', in *Création au féminin*, ed. by Marianne Camus and Valérie Dupont, 3 vols (Dijon: Presses Universitaires de Dijon, 2009), iii, pp. 185–198.
[76] Georges de Peyrebrune, 'M. E. Zola et Mme *** de Périgueux', *Le Réveil Périgourdin*, 12 May 1879, quoted in Nelly Sanchez, '"Le cas d'Émile Zola" par Georges de Peyrebrune', *Excavatio*, 17:1–2 (2002), pp. 178–88 (p. 184).
[77] Lydia De Haro Hernandez and Jean-Paul Socard, *Défense et illustration des femmes de lettres en France au XIXe siècle. Réédition critique du texte de George de Peyrebrune "Jupiter et les Bas-bleus" paru dans le*

Although Zola wrote to 'Monsieur [sic] Peyrebrune' to thank her for her articles,[78] the two authors never collaborated.

After coming to Paris in 1871, Peyrebrune became an important member of feminist literary circles and took part in the first jury of the *Prix de la Vie heureuse*, future *Femina* prize, in 1904.[79] Highly critical of the sexism of the French publishing industry and women writers' lack of recognition, she wrote a comic play, *Jupiter et les Bas-bleus* (1894), staging Zola under the traits of Jupiter who refuses to recognise the talent of his female contemporaries, criticising his lack of public support for women writers like her.[80] This text is also a direct response to writers like Barbey d'Aurevilly who devotes an entire volume of his literary study, *Les Œuvres et les hommes* (1860-1909), to discrediting women writers, and Han Ryner whose *Le Massacre des Amazones* (1890) mocks both Peyrebrune and Rachilde. Both men claim that women are biologically incapable of writing literary works comparable to men's, revealing male writers' anxieties at seeing women writers becoming rivals on the literary market,[81] to which Peyrebrune responds with irony and feminist solidarity. As Sophie Ménard argues, Peyrebrune was read as a naturalist by her contemporaries, some of whom saw her adherence to naturalist poetics as a literary *faux-pas*, especially because she was a woman,[82] evoking the gendering of naturalism as masculine by both Zola and contemporary critics. Peyrebrune's literary works, however, are remarkably diverse, including not only novels close to the naturalist mode of writing, but also sentimental novels, comic and burlesque texts. As with the other

*recueil Celui qui revient, Paris, P. Ollendorff, 1894* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2020), p. 75.

[78] Émile Zola, 'Lettre à Georges de Peyrebrune', May 1879, in Émile Zola, *Correspondance, tome XI. Lettres retrouvées*, ed. by Owen Morgan and Dorothy E. Speirs (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2010).

[79] Socard (2011), p. 95.

[80] De Haro Hernandez and Socard, p. 65.

[81] Anita Staron, *Au carrefour des esthétiques. Rachilde et son écriture romanesque 1880-1913* (Łódź: Presses Universitaires de Łódź, 2015), p. 76.

[82] Sophie Ménard, 'Préface', in Georges de Peyrebrune, *Victoire la Rouge*, *op.cit.* (2024), pp. 7–29 (pp. 13–14).

authors examined in this thesis, the text selected for analysis represents only a fragment of Peyrebrune's overall oeuvre.

In *Victoire la Rouge* (1883), Peyrebrune tells the story of a farm maid, Victoire, who is an outsider because of her status as an illegitimate child. Her exclusion worsens when she becomes pregnant from a rape. After giving birth and returning to work, Victoire is raped a second time and kills her child in a moment of despair. When she returns from prison, she lives with a violent man and finally ends her life when she sees no hope for the future. The novel denounces the double standards of a rural community portrayed as patriarchal, violent, and backward and that accepts male violence against women but punishes them for showing the signs of their victimisation. Because of its focus on countryside life and a working-class female character, Peyrebrune's novel seems close to Zola's production. This impression will however be nuanced by a close reading of Peyrebrune's narrative as it does not rely on biological factors to explain the character's trajectory. *Victoire la Rouge* questions the biological conception of the individual as defined by their heredity and physiological instincts, a trope often found in naturalist fiction. Peyrebrune recognises the contradictions inherent in defending a naturalist worldview, particularly its potential to rely on sexist portrayals of female characters, and distances herself from some of the assumptions of naturalism as a result.

Rachilde (1860-1953), born Marguerite Eymery, shares many similarities with Peyrebrune: both came from the Périgord – which they often use as the setting of their stories – and were active members of Parisian literary circles from the 1880s onwards. The friendship between the two, evident from their letters, is nonetheless surprising as their literary productions were quite dissimilar. Designated as 'Mademoiselle Baudelaire' by Maurice Barrès,[83] Rachilde became famous by a *succès de scandale* when publishing

[83] Maryline Lukacher, 'Mademoiselle Baudelaire: Rachilde ou le féminin au masculin', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 20:3–4 (1992), pp. 452–65 (p. 453).

*Monsieur Vénus* in 1884. In 1889, she married Alfred Valette, founder and director of the literary journal and then publishing house *Le Mercure de France*. Rachilde's literary critiques for the *Mercure* were exceptionally diverse and give us an insight into her own poetics, which are influenced not only by naturalism but also by decadent and symbolist literary production.[84] She wrote reviews of Ibsen's plays, and her own works were staged at the Théâtre de L'Œuvre in Paris, which also hosted productions of several of Ibsen's plays.[85] Rachilde's own literary production is marked by a diversity of styles and the labels 'naturalist' or 'decadent' would be too narrow to qualify it. As Anita Staron puts it, Rachilde's works are symbolic of an 'esthétique des extrêmes' (*aesthetic of extremes*),[86] which includes, but does not limit itself, to a dialogue with naturalism.

In her reviews of the period, Rachilde praises some naturalist novels for their character constructions and realistic representations, notably commending 'les seuls naturalistes dignes de ce nom […] qui ne se perdent point en des divagations d'occulte jonglerie, mais […] qui s'efforcent de toucher aux plus secrètes fibres de la chair avec des mains pures de médecin affectueux…' (*the only naturalists worthy of the name […] that do not lose themselves in delirious and occult jugglery, but […] who strive to touch the most secret fibers of the flesh with the pure hands of an affectionate doctor*).[87] This passage reveals Rachilde's knowledge of naturalist aesthetics, evident in her adoption of the doctor metaphor. She is however critical of Zola's later works, which she deems too didactic, and she reproaches certain naturalists with typifying their characters and distorting reality.[88] It seems that Rachilde was committed to some degree of realist representation in her writing, as she claims in her autobiography: 'Nous ne sommes pas faits, nous autres, les romanciers, les historiens, les conteurs, pour exister par nous-mêmes, nous sommes

[84] Staron, p. 21.
[85] Staron, p. 115.
[86] Staron, p. 181.
[87] Rachilde, 'J.-H. Rosny, *Les Xipéhuz*', *Le Mercure de France*, August 1896, pp. 346–48 (p. 346). Quoted by Staron, p. 92.
[88] Staron, pp. 93–95.

destinés à refléter; nous ne vivons pas, nous sommes des miroirs' (*Us novelists, historians, storytellers are not made to exist for ourselves, we are destined to reflect; we do not live, we are mirrors*).[89] Staron also observes that Rachilde shares with naturalist writers an interest in the pathological and its origins.[90] Diana Holmes summarises Rachilde's ambivalent attitude towards naturalist poetics thus:

> Despite her espousal of decadent disdain for the contingent and the social, she displays in her fiction a hard-won (quasi-naturalist) respect for the determining effect of material and political circumstance: those on the wrong side of power can scarcely avoid acknowledging its reality.[91]

Holmes however adds that Rachilde rejects the idea of determined and stable gender identity and of a single objective truth,[92] leading her to subvert naturalist representations of female characters.

In *La Marquise de Sade* (1888), Rachilde portrays Mary Barbe as a young girl with a morbid curiosity who becomes a sadistic young woman who takes pleasure in torturing men. Despite the provocative title, Mary's transgressions are not described in detail as her childhood takes up most of the novel and, as this thesis will uncover, her sadism is not portrayed as an inherited trait but rather explained by her socialisation. As Lisa Downing highlights, Rachilde reflects on contemporary medical discourses to analyse 'the prevailing social conditions that create that [patriarchal] orthodoxy'.[93] Social determinism indeed plays a central role in *La Marquise de Sade*, explaining the protagonist's trajectory and relationships,[94] as it does in works by Zola and Ibsen. Nonetheless, Rachilde distances herself from naturalism, notably by parodying some of its tropes in her novels. Because of her controversial choices of topics and her strong heroines, Rachilde has received a lot of attention in recent scholarship, but her production is sometimes reduced to her provocative

[89] Rachilde, *Quand j'étais jeune* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1947), p. 32.
[90] Sanchez (2001), pp. 292–93.
[91] Diana Holmes, *Rachilde. Decadence, Gender and the Woman Writer* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001), p. 98.
[92] Holmes (2001), p. 97.
[93] Lisa Downing, 'Notes on a Proto-Queer Rachilde: Decadence, Deviance and (Reverse) Discourse *in La Marquise de Sade*', *Sexualities*, 15:1 (2011), pp. 16–27 (p. 18).
[94] Holmes (2001), p. 125.

descriptions of female sexuality and gender identity.[95] Examining Rachilde's relationship to naturalism can uncover further aspects of her eclectic and subversive works.

### 2.2 Germany: Hedwig Dohm and Gabriele Reuter

The reception of naturalism by Hedwig Dohm and Gabriele Reuter is of particular interest because of their national background: as German authors, they hold a central position in the transnational exchanges that contribute to the spread of naturalism. Their fiction and poetics are shaped by their engagement with the works of Zola and Ibsen and by their interactions with German naturalist circles.

Dohm (1831-1919) gained fame by publishing feminist essays. One of the first German feminists demanding women's right to vote,[96] she published essays on women's education, such as *Die wissenschaftliche Emancipation der Frau* (*Woman's Academic Emancipation*, 1874), and responded to sexist discourses in *Die Antifeministen. Ein Buch der Verteidigung* (*The Antifeminists. A Defence Book*, 1902). In *Der Frauen Natur und Recht* (*Woman's Nature and Right*, 1876), Dohm posits that gender norms are based on social constructs, asserting that women's oppression cannot be justified by theories of a so-called 'male' or 'female' nature.[97] She declares that men's understanding of women is hindered by their projections, what they have 'written' on and upon them:

> Man redet viel von der Sphinxnatur des Weibes. Scheint dem Mann ihre Seelenschrift gleich der eines Palimpsestes, so liegt es daran, daß er nur die äußere, die obere Schicht der Schrift, die er selbst geschrieben hat, lesen kann. Die Urschrift aber kann und wird nur die Frau selbst entziffern. Viel Zeit läuft wohl noch ins Meer der Ewigkeit, ehe sie ganz entziffert sein wird.[98] (*There is a lot of talk about woman's sphynx-like nature. If a man sees her soul written as a kind of palimpsest, it is because he can only read the outer, upper layer of this writing that he himself wrote. But only the woman herself can and will decipher the original. A lot of time running into the sea of eternity will certainly pass before it will be completely deciphered.*)

[95] See Thierry Poyet, 'Introduction : Scandale et postérité', in *Rachilde ou les aléas de la postérité, op.cit.*, pp. 11–44 (p. 17).
[96] Isabel Rohner, *Spuren ins Jetzt. Hedwig Dohm – eine Biografie* (Frankfurt: Ulrike Helmer, 2010), p. 62.
[97] Gaby Pailer, *Hedwig Dohm* (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2011), p. 33.
[98] Hedwig Dohm, *Die Mütter. Beitrag zur Erziehungsfrage* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1903), pp. 31–32. My translation.

This metaphor of the palimpsest, as Isabel Rohner highlights, is central in her 1894 novella "Werde, die Du bist!" which portrays a widow trying to free herself from restrictive gender discourses that have forced her to lead a meaningless life as a wife and mother.[99] The cost of her attempts at deciphering her true self is her fall into madness.

Dohm probably encountered naturalist fiction because of her proximity to Berlin's literary circles, notably through her husband Ernst Dohm, director of the satirical journal *Kladderadatsch*, and her own journalistic and essayistic production. In a letter to Fritz Mauthner, who wrote *Von Keller bis Zola. Kritische Aufsätze* (*From Keller to Zola. Critical Essays*, 1887), Dohm defends Zola and claims that the French author introduced a kind of *tabula rasa* in literature which, she claims, cannot be ignored:

> Ich habe kaum je ein's der Zola'schen Bücher aus der Hand gelegt ohne eine immense moralische Erschütterung und läuternde Schwermuth […]. In meiner Meinung ist Zola ein keuscher Schriftsteller, und mir scheint, er gibt den geschlechtlichen Beziehungen nur genau den Raum, den sie im wirklichen Leben einnehmen. Auch meine ich, daß nach Zola niemand mehr schreiben kann, wie vor ihm geschrieben wurde.[100] (*I have hardly ever put down one of Zola's books without feeling an immense moral shock and purifying melancholy* […]. *In my opinion, Zola is a chaste writer, and it seems to me that he only gives sexual relationships exactly the space they occupy in real life. I also think that after Zola no one can write as before.*)

This defence of Zola highlights a key source of inspiration for many women writers of the time: the honest and straightforward representation of gender dynamics and sexuality which play a pivotal role in shaping women's destinies.[101] Dohm also certainly knew of Ibsen's plays, having either read them or seen them performed, as her laudatory poem for the playwright's 75th birthday attests.[102]

Dohm's production has sometimes puzzled scholars because of the tension between her optimistic call for women's liberation in her essays and her fictional works that seemingly 'provide no overwhelming portrait of strength'.[103] Indeed, her fiction, as in

[99] Isabel Rohner, *In Litteris Veritas. Hedwig Dohm und die Problematik der fiktiven Biografie* (Berlin: Trafo, 2004), p. 137.
[100] Hedwig Dohm, Letter to Fritz Mauthner, Undated 1887, in *Briefe aus dem Krähwinkel*, ed. by Nikola Müller and Isabel Rohner (Berlin: Trafo, 2009), p. 42.
[101] Pailer (2011), p. 86.
[102] Hedwig Dohm, 'Henrik Ibsen. Gedenkblätter zum 75. Geburtstage', in *Bühne und Welt. Zeitschrift für Theaterwesen, Literatur und Musik*, 9:12 (1903), p. 499.
[103] Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, 'The Ambiguous World of Hedwig Dohm', in *Gestaltet und Gestaltend: Frauen in der deutschen Literatur. Special Issue of Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik*, ed. by Marianne

"Werde, die Du bist!" analysed in this thesis, mainly represents women's difficulties in challenging the status quo. As Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres underlines, this choice of representing heroines who finally crumble under the weight of gender discourses is linked to Dohm's use of a realist style. While her essays are optimistic about the future and seeks concrete solutions, her fiction represents women's situation as it is.[104] I argue the pessimism that Joeres attributes to Dohm's fiction stems from her dialogue with naturalism, from which she appropriates a portrayal of women as victims of their social circumstances to move the reader and ultimately encourage social change.

Gabriele Reuter (1859-1941) achieved popular success with the publication of *Aus guter Familie. Leidensgeschichte eines Mädchens* in 1895. Prior to this breakthrough which marks Reuter's turn to realist poetics, she published novels taking place in colonial settings, inspired by her own childhood in Egypt, to financially support herself and her family.[105] Reuter's novel provoked a public debate around women's role in society and education, but was also praised for its realist characterisations and observations.[106] Reuter encountered naturalist poetics through three sources, thus experiencing naturalism in a truly transnational manner. Reuter read the works of Zola, Flaubert, the Brothers Goncourt, and Maupassant in 1890-1891.[107] In her autobiography, *Vom Kinde zum Menschen: Die Geschichte meiner Jugend* (1921), Reuter mentions several encounters with Ibsen, whom she admired, and her contacts with the naturalist circles of Weimar, Berlin, and Munich. Reuter recounts with humour being cautioned against embracing naturalist poetics:

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von Buckhard (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980), pp. 255–76 (p. 273).

[104] Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, 'Die Zähmung der alten Frau: Hedwig Dohms *Werde, die du bist*', in *Der Widerspenstigen Zähmung. Studien zur bezwungenen Weiblichkeit in der Literatur von Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Sylvia Wallinger and Monika Jones (Innsbruck: Institut für Germanistik der Universität Innsbruck, 1986), pp. 217–27 (p. 226).

[105] See Gabriele Reuter, *Glück und Geld. Roman aus dem heutigen Egypten* (Leipzig: Friedrich, 1888) and *Kolonistenvolk. Roman aus Argentinien* (Leipzig: Friedrich, 1891).

[106] Linda Kraus Worley, 'Gabriele Reuter: Reading Women in the "Kaiserreich"', in *Autoren damals und heute: Literaturgeschichtliche Beispiele veränderter Wirkungshorizonte*, ed. by Gerhard Knapp (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 1991), pp. 419–39 (p. 420).

[107] Faranak Alimadad-Mensch, *Gabriele Reuter. Porträt einer Schriftstellerin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1984), p. 88.

> Und der Leiter einer der größten illustrierten Blätter schrieb mir: 'Senden Sie uns etwas Leichtes, Heiteres, Liebenswürdiges, denn Ernstes, Düsteres, Trübes wollen wir unsern Lesern nicht naheführen.' — Und doch bereitete sich schon der Naturalismus vor, der auch dem simpelsten Familienblatt einen etwas ernsteren Ton hinterlassen sollte.[108] (*And the director of a big illustrated journal wrote to me: 'Send us something light, cheerful, amiable, we do not want to give our readers anything serious, dark, or gloomy'. And yet, naturalism was already emerging and would grant even the lightest family journal a somewhat more serious tone.*)

Similar to Dohm, Reuter retrospectively describes naturalism as a kind of revolution that deeply changed German literature, just as it influenced her own writing.

Reuter aims to represent the 'typical',[109] as did her naturalist inspirations. As such, she is particularly interested in unveiling the extent to which women's lives were determined by social norms, as a passage from *Das Tränenhaus* (1909), a novel dealing with illegitimate motherhood, illustrates:

> Wir glauben alle, unser ganz persönliches leben nach unserm Wollen zu führen, und dabei leben wir doch zugleich mit dem persönlichen noch ein typisches Leben der Zeit, das wir nur in seltenen Augenblicken durch die Hülle des persönlichen hindurch erkennen. [110] (*We all believe that we lead our lives according to our will and simultaneously, we are living a life typical of the time, which we only recognise through the shell of the personal in rare moments.*)

While inspired by naturalist fiction, Reuter declares that she nevertheless felt inadequate to take on the similar task of portraying proletarian characters.[111] To represent what she calls the 'Menschentragik'[112] (*human tragedy*), Reuter chooses to portray the destiny of a typical Prussian bourgeois woman in *Aus guter Familie*. This focus on middle-class women's destinies is a common thread throughout my corpus, with the notable exception of Skram's *Lucie* and Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge* which both portray the trajectories of working-class characters. For Reuter, portraying a familiar figure is key to achieving the highest degree of truth and of typicality, an aim she shares with naturalist writers.

Reuter's novel depicts the trajectory of Agathe Heidling, the daughter of a Prussian civil servant, from her religious confirmation to her fall into madness. Far from describing a rebellious heroine, this novel aims to show the tragedy of a young woman whose

[108] Reuter (1921), p. 338.
[109] Alimadad-Mensch, p. 142.
[110] Gabriele Reuter, *Das Tränenhaus* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1909), p. 162. Quoted in Georgia A. Schneider, *Portraits of Women in Selected Works of Gabriele Reuter* (Frankfurt, Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), p. 13.
[111] Reuter (1921), p. 432.
[112] See Reuter (1921), p. 432.

attempts at conforming to nationalistic and gender discourses lead to repeated failures and eventually to her mental breakdown. This novel, like Dohm's novella, unveils gender and nationalist stereotypes as cultural constructs that actively hinder women's happiness.[113] The link made by Reuter between realism and subjectivity – writing about what one knows – is not as distant from naturalist poetics, as theorised by Zola, as it might initially appear. For Zola, the naturalist author observes reality and applies scientific methods and theory in his fiction. However, artistic subjectivity – in Zola's words, the 'tempérament d'écrivain' (*the writer's temperament*) – also plays a role in rendering of reality: 'Si nous ne donnons jamais la nature toute entière, nous vous donnerons au moins la nature vraie, vue au travers de notre humanité' (RE, p. 94 – *If we never give you nature as a whole, we will at least give you true nature, seen through our humanity*).[114] Both Dohm and Reuter, through their reflections on contemporary literature and interactions with avant-garde literary circles, demonstrate a keen understanding of naturalist poetics, selectively adopting its mode of writing and themes that best serve their feminist message.

### 2.3 Norway: Amalie Skram

Of all the women writers analysed in this thesis, Amalie Skram (1846-1905) is certainly the most famous in her birth country and beyond. Skram started her career as a literary critic and wrote about contemporary Norwegian realists and naturalists such as Ibsen, Bjørnson and Krohg, whom she admired for having brought women's destinies into literature, something that she did in her own writing.[115] Her first novel, *Constance Ring*

[113] Gaby Pailer, 'Der Staatsdiener, der Staatsfeind und die gute Tochter. Gender und Nation in Gabriele Reuters *Aus guter Familie* (1895)', in *Geschlecht – Literatur – Geschichte II. Nation und Geschlecht*, ed. by Gudrun Loster-Schneider, 2 vols (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2003), ii, pp. 101–19 (p. 103).
[114] On Zola, Reuter, and subjectivity, see also Charlotte Woodford, *Women, Emancipation and the German Novel 1871-1910. Protest Fiction in its Cultural Context* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 60–61.
[115] Irene Engelstad, *Sammenbrudd og gjennombrudd. Amalie Skrams romaner om ekteskap og sinnssykdom* (Oslo: Pax Forlag A/S, 1984), p. 16. On Skram and Ibsen, see Janet Garton, 'Amalie Skram og Henrik Ibsen: En forsømt anledning', *Amalie Skram-selskapet* (2013), pp. 45–57.

(1885), published at the height of the Scandinavian debate over the double standard concerning men's and women's premarital sexual experiences, was compared to Zola's *Nana* by her contemporaries.[116] Skram's defence of Krohg's *Albertine* gives us insight into her own poetics: for her, naturalists describe a character's evolution in dramatic and lively *tableaux* which should stir the reader's compassion and foster solidarity.[117] Although her brother claimed that she never read Zola, it is evident from her letters and articles that she engaged with similar ideas, notably sharing his interest in determinism.[118] In a letter to Arne Garborg about her debut novel, Skram claims to be writing a 'document humain',[119] an expression also found in both the Goncourt's diaries and Zola's *Le Roman expérimental*,[120] demonstrating Skram's engagement with naturalist poetics. Skram was an active member of the literary circles in Copenhagen, where she moved in 1884 after her marriage to the Danish author Erik Skram. Much like Ibsen, Skram mostly describes Norwegian society and culture in her works but found her adopted country more accepting of her works, to the point of calling herself a 'Danish writer' in response to the harsh reviews she received in Norwegian newspapers.[121]

Skram's authorship also holds a unique position within my corpus because she is categorised as a naturalist writer by most scholars. This classification of her works as naturalist is linked to questions of canon and gender dynamics. Her most acclaimed work is the *Hellemyrsfolket* saga (1887-1898) which was considered by her contemporaries to display a 'masculine style'.[122] In his obituary for Skram in 1905, Georg Brandes deems

[116] Edvard Brandes, Letter to Alexander Kielland, 18 June 1885, quoted by Bredsdorff, *op.cit.*, p. 145.
[117] Hamm (2006), p. 259 and Engelstad, (1984), p. 19.
[118] Irene Engelstad, 'En moderne dame – "At fylde sin ånd og sit hjerte med sin tids ideer"', in *Amalie Skrams Verden*, ed. by Irene Engelstad, Liv Køltzow, and Gunnar Staalesen (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1996), pp. 109–73 (p. 120).
[119] Amalie Skram, Letter to Arne Garborg, 11th August 1885, in *Amalie Skram. Brevveksling med andre nordiske forfattere*, ed. by Janet Garton (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels, 2005), p. 134. In French in the letter.
[120] David Baguley, 'Le *Journal* des Goncourt, document naturaliste', in *Les Frères Goncourt : art et écriture*, ed. by Jean-Louis Cabanès (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1998), pp. 105–114. Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, p. 51.
[121] Bjerkelund, pp. 243–47.
[122] Garton (2011), p. 295.

*Hellemyrsfolket* to be her best work because it deals not with herself but society as a whole,[123] feeding into the stereotype of women's writing being mainly of autobiographical inspiration. In this cycle of four novels, the author describes the trajectory of a family plagued by alcoholism and poverty in Bergen, using the region's dialect in the dialogues. The scope of this saga is aligned with naturalist poetics as it follows a family over several generations and observes the effects of heredity on the characters.[124] The reception of Skram's saga and her contemporary reputation of being 'a woman who writes like a man'[125] demonstrates the strong association between the naturalist mode of writing and masculinity. Skram, however, was critical of this gendering of her works, as she reflects in a letter to Gustav Wied:

> Og for det andet er jeg nu så kjed af denne evige opsang om mod og dristighed og mandig ukvindelighed, eller hvad det alt sammen heder, både fra tilhængere og fornægtere, at jeg gierne skulde sælge min sjæl til den danske jurisdiktion, eller noget endda verre, for at blive en af de rigtige, kvindelige dameforfattere.[126] (*And secondly, I am now so tired of this eternal chant about courage, boldness, and something manly-unwomanly, or whatever it is called, both from supporters and critics, that I'd rather sell my soul to the Danish jurisdiction, or something even worse, to become one of the real, feminine authors.*)

While her supporters saw this label of 'masculine style' as the highest praise for a woman writer, Skram was critical of such a compliment. *Hellemyrsfolket* is something of an exception within Skram's extensive body of work. While it still portrays memorable female characters, it focuses on the trajectory of the male protagonist, Sivert, diverging from Skram's portrayals of women's destinies found in her other works.

This thesis focuses on Skram's works that are less evidently aligned with naturalist poetics and that, as I will explore, are critical of the naturalist worldview. In *Lucie*, Skram portrays a *transfuge de classe* (*class defector*) character from a sociological perspective: Lucie is a former dancer who marries a lawyer, Gerner, but his inability to forgive her sexual past leads their marriage to an impasse. Gerner represents a modern individual who

[123] Bjerkelund, p. 253.
[124] Bjerkelund, p. 50.
[125] Gerhard Gran, 'Biografiske skisse', *Samtiden* (1897), pp. 148–54 (pp. 148–49). Quoted in Garton (2011), pp. 295–96.
[126] Amalie Skram, Letter to Gustav Wied, 25 May 1891, quoted in *Amalie Skrams Verden*, *op.cit.*, p. 18.

has internalised bourgeois views on marriage and sexuality, as well as ideas around determinism leading him to trap Lucie in the stereotype of the working-class and promiscuous woman. In her 'asylum duology', *Professor Hieronimus* and *Paa St. Jørgen* (1895), Skram describes the stay of a painter, Else Kant, at two psychiatric institutions and her protagonist's refusal at being labelled as 'mad' by the psychiatrist Professor Hieronimus. This duology unveils the role of gendered power dynamics in contemporary views on women's mental health and denounces the fatalistic categorisation of individuals deemed 'abnormal'. Reading women writers' works alongside canonical naturalist texts will demonstrate that these authors' blending of naturalist ideas and mode of writing with a feminist message leads them to adopt a somewhat critical stance towards some naturalist tropes.

## III. Women Writers' Dialogue with Naturalism: Critical Perspectives

A common thread in the reception of naturalist fiction by women writers is their admiration for naturalist representations of female characters which they deem to be more realistic than romantic and idealist ones because they take biological and sociological factors into account. In their own fiction, they adopt the mimetic mode of writing and scientific vocabulary of naturalism to analyse women's positions in contemporary societies in France, Germany, and Norway. In this thesis, I explore how the authors in my corpus respond to the scientific and sociological perspectives on womanhood found in naturalist fiction. Recontextualising their writing within the discursive trends found in naturalist fiction will highlight what they adopt and reject from naturalist poetics and worldview when it comes to representations of femininity. I argue that their portraits of female characters can be seen as embodying a form of early feminist resistance to patriarchal discourses that seek to naturalise women's inferior social status. A comparative

perspective, which has already established naturalism as a European movement,[127] illustrates how women writers' responses to naturalist fiction and larger social discourses is also a European phenomenon.

Women authors' dialogue with naturalist fiction can be qualified as 'hypertextual', as defined by Gérard Genette. Hypertextuality describes the relationship between two texts: the hypertext, which derives from and imitates or transforms an anterior text, the hypotext.[128] Unlike an intertextual relationship, the reader of a hypertext does not need to have read the hypotext, as the hypertext has an autonomous meaning but can nonetheless remain ambiguous because of the presence of a hypotext.[129] Genette distinguishes this relation from metatextuality which is the medium of (literary) critique while the domain of hypertextuality is predominantly that of fiction: a hypertext is a 'fiction dérivée d'une autre fiction' (*a fiction derived from another fiction*).[130] It can however have the value of a metatext, meaning that an hypertext can be a critical transformation of the anterior text,[131] an aspect of hypertextuality which is of particular interest when considering women writers' dialogue with naturalist fiction. Hypertextuality is a common literary relationship, as any text can invite what Genette calls a palimpsestic reading, a reading of a text in relation to another.[132] Hypertextuality allows for an open-ended reading: as Genette highlights, this relational reading does not create any hierarchy between the hypotext and the hypertext. A palimpsestic reading instead invites readers to uncover the playful and critical aspects of literary texts in how they interact with one another.[133]

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[127] Riikka Rossi calls for a comparative approach to the study of naturalism in Riikka Rossi, 'Influences, Intertextualities, Genres: History of Naturalism and Concepts of Comparative Literature', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 37:4 (2010), pp. 370–81. See also Chevrel (1993), Bies, and *Naturalism in the European Novel: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1992).
[128] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 23.
[129] Genette, p. 617. On the need of reader's interpretation to establish this hypertextual relationship, see p. 25.
[130] Genette, p. 617.
[131] Genette, p. 617.
[132] Genette, p. 619.
[133] Genette, p. 619.

The women writers analysed in this thesis adopt and adapt from naturalist fiction a literary method to represent contemporary women's social condition. This hypertextual dialogue with naturalism also allows women writers to engage with a vast array of discourses embedded in naturalist fiction, namely contemporary sociological and scientific theories which sought to define womanhood through a scientific lens. Just as Dohm uses the palimpsest metaphor to illustrate how men have imposed their vision of femininity onto women, women writers deliberately engage with previous texts, including naturalist works, to challenge and rewrite the many layers of discourses imposed on women. Through their hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction, women writers address readers who have read or seen naturalist fiction on stage, inviting them to critically reflect on the naturalist production.[134]

Naturalist fiction appealed to women writers not only for its realistic portrayals of women's conditions, but also for its counterdiscursive nature and its challenge of dominant narratives and values. Naturalist fiction provoked strong critical reactions because of its critique of religious dogma and institutions, bourgeois hypocrisy and individualism, and its portrayal of women from all social strata. As Richard Terdiman argues, culture can be described as a '*field of struggle*',[135] a struggle taking place between different discourses fighting for dominance. Wanting to dominate the cultural field is typical of all cultural production.[136] Like other nineteenth-century literary movements and authors, such as those analysed by Terdiman, naturalism tries to find a new mode of expression to challenge the dominant discourse.[137] As Baguley argues, identifying as a naturalist allows authors to present themselves in opposition to established discourses, making naturalism a movement

[134] See Geneviève De Viveiros, 'Naturalisme et théorie littéraire dans "Le Sang" de Jane de la Vaudère', *Fabula / Les colloques. « Penser la prose. Théorie littéraire féminine à la Belle Époque »* (2023) <https://www.fabula.org/colloques/document10997.php> [Accessed 06 March 2025].
[135] Richard Terdiman, *Discourse / Counter-Discourse. The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 25.
[136] Terdiman, p. 40.
[137] Terdiman, p. 49.

of cultural critique.[138] Naturalists' appropriation of scientific discourses and methods can thus be interpreted as a means to associate with the authority of a field that is, in the second half of the nineteenth century, on its way to becoming hegemonic.[139]

The gendering of naturalist poetics as masculine by Zola can be seen as another way of proving naturalists' prestige and authority. Naturalist authors appropriate scientific discourses centred on the observation and experimentation on the 'abnormal', which, in the context of nineteenth-century thought, encompassed women's bodies and minds. Naturalism thus builds its authority on contemporary discourses which have a strong tendency to essentialise femininity. But, as Terdiman underlines, 'dominant discourse is not a "thing" but a complex and shifting formation', and as soon as a discourse emerges, it will be contradicted and resisted.[140] To better account for this hypertextual dialogue between naturalist fiction and women's writing, I adopt the notion of 'counterdiscourse' found in Foucauldian and feminist analyses describing how any discourse can be countered from within.[141] Naturalism creates a fluid counterdiscursive space which is taken on by women writers who, as we will see, create what we could call a 'counter-counterdiscourse'. While naturalist fiction challenges some hegemonic discourses, it also reinforces others, notably some representations that tend to naturalise women's oppression, an aspect of naturalist fiction challenged by women writers in their own narratives.

[138] Baguley (1995), p. 173.
[139] Michel Foucault describes how sciences, and among them psychiatry, took on the role of social regulator during the century, notably imposing itself by developing a discourse on the abnormal. Michel Foucault, *Les Anormaux. Cours au Collège de France. 1974-1975* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 1999), pp. 109–10.
[140] Terdiman, p. 57.
[141] Foucault introduces the notion of 'discours en retour' in *Histoire de la sexualité I. La Volonté de savoir*, in *Œuvres II*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), ii, pp. 690–91. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as VS in the main text. Shelley Tremain describes Foucault's genealogical method as a way to uncover the origins of moral beliefs and values, including on gender and disability, see Shelley Tremain, 'This is What a Historicist and Relativist Feminist Philosophy Looks Like', *Foucault Studies*, 19 (2015), pp. 7–42 (p. 11).

Women writers' hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction is indeed exemplary of a discursive struggle over definitions of femininity. In a comment on French women's writing in the *fin-de-siècle* period, Rachel Mesch observes:

> Ironically, whether women agreed with his point of view or not, Zola's writing provided a vocabulary and a mode of speaking that was a useful starting point for those wishing to examine female sexuality from their own perspective; in this sense, his discourse enabled their counterdiscourses.[142]

I argue that women writers' critical examination of biological and social factors determining women's trajectories is their main point of contention with naturalist fiction. As Mike Hawkins explores in a study of the spread of social Darwinism in Europe, Darwinian theories led to 'a reinterpretation of nature' which was used to argue both in favor of and against women's emancipation.[143] Questions of heredity and determinism led to a questioning of the 'nature' of men and women and 'the extent to which these natures were biologically or culturally determined'.[144] As an analysis of texts by Zola and Ibsen will show, naturalist writers oscillate between biological and social factors to explain their characters' destinies. I contend that the women writers under study are aware of this oscillation in naturalist fiction, but overcome this concurrence of explanations by denouncing the way in which social discourses are at the root of women's downfall. They reject biological factors as possible explanations for their characters' trajectories to illustrate how women are not born victims of their biological dispositions, but become trapped by their social circumstances.

Women writers' resistance to the idea of biological determinism is intrinsically linked to the question of women's claim to authorship. In nineteenth-century Europe, women's access to the public sphere, notably through publication of their works, was highly contested. A woman becoming a writer was seen as neglecting what were

[142] Mesch, p. 84.
[143] Hawkins, p. 249.
[144] Hawkins, p. 249.

considered to be women's 'natural' duties, namely domesticity and procreation.[145] Scientific and sexist discourses deemed the act of writing as either an inevitable source of infertility amongst women on account of their intellectual exertion – thus threatening the perpetuation of the nation – and/or as hysterical, therefore posing a risk to the social equilibrium.[146] The woman writer encapsulates turn-of-century anxieties about modernity, degeneracy, and radical politics. Biological determinism was used to justify women's exclusion from the literary domain – to no avail, it seems, as the numbers of women publishing across Europe rose.[147] The notion of biological determinism, which the women writers analysed in this thesis confront in their fiction, is what had historically prevented them as women with literary aspirations from being granted legitimacy. Exploring these five writers' hypertextual dialogue with naturalism enables us to understand their position within these social and literary dynamics.

A central aspect of women writers' reception of naturalist fiction is how they recognise that naturalism is attempting to renew the tragic mode. Naturalism indeed participates in the nineteenth-century trend that borrows the metaphysical concept of the 'tragic' from the genre of tragedy and adapt the tragic mode to other literary forms, like the novel. Naturalist fiction's interest in determinism manifests itself in the tragic logic that their narratives follow as they portray characters as trapped by biological, social, and psychological factors. The modernisation of the tragic mode by naturalist writers results in its politicisation: instead of succumbing to fatalism, naturalist writers use the tragic mode to convey their social critique and invite readers to recognise the need for social change. In the first chapter, I explore how women writers appropriate this political use of the tragic

[145] Adrianna M. Paliyenko, *Genius Envy: Women Shaping French Poetic History, 1801–1900* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), p. 12.
[146] On the anxieties around women's authorship, see Paliyenko, p. 50 and Mesch, p. 15. Scientists like Paul Broca theorised that women's intellectual inferiority came from their smaller brain size which made them prone to 'nervous exhaustion and to potential breakdown'. See Michael R. Finn, 'Physiological Fictions and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Female Brain', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 39:3–4 (2011), pp. 315–31 (p. 315).
[147] See Claire Emilie Martin and Clorinda Donato, 'Transnational Flows: Women Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century', in *Transnational Women's Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century*, *op.cit.*, pp. 1–27.

mode from naturalist fiction. Instead of staging female characters liberating themselves from biological and social constraints, their narratives describe protagonists who are trapped by their social circumstances, which function as a modern form of fate. They do however reclaim the power stripped away from their characters by transcending, through creativity, the biological destiny assigned to women by contemporary discourses. Their intended audience is thus dual: by depicting women's destinies to challenge existing discourses, they not only seek to engage with a female audience, but also with a male one.[148] This dual audience is the receiver of their political message that challenges discourses that sought to justify women's oppression by an idea of 'nature'. Women's fiction illustrates how scientific and patriarchal discourses that try to naturalise women's inferior place and their roles within society serve as the prime catalyst of the fictional characters' demise. I analyse how naturalist writers and women authors in dialogue with naturalism share an anti-tragic message, but that women writers ultimately challenge the use of biological determinism as a narrative device in naturalist fiction.

My second and third chapters focus on two central aspects of nineteenth-century discourses on femininity, namely sexuality and madness. While the two concepts are closely linked in contemporary thought as women are often described as prone to madness because of their non-existent or exaggerated sexual drives,[149] this separation mirrors the one established by the writers in my corpus as they challenge discourses that depict women as entirely defined by their bodies. Both chapters use a Foucauldian approach to consider the influence and subversion of contemporary scientific and social discourses in both naturalist and women's writing. The second chapter uses the concept of 'hysteria' as defined by Foucault as the way in which nineteenth-century scientific and literary

[148] See Colombo, p. 249.
[149] For a contemporary definition of hysteria linking it to 'abnormal' forms of sexuality, see Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia sexualis, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der conträren Sexualempfindung. Eine klinischforensische Studie* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1894), pp. 338–39.

discourses have represented women's bodies as saturated by sexuality and as meant to fulfil the sole goal of procreation. I explore how naturalist fiction responds to the contemporary interest in sexual violence by portraying female characters' sexual 'fall' as the result of patriarchal brutality. Women writers are also interested in sexual violence but from a wider perspective: they portray sexual violence as both physical and discursive, demonstrating how female characters' experiences of sexuality are defined by social discourses rather than physiological factors. They also distance themselves from naturalist representations of motherhood that oscillate between idealised and monstrous mother figures to portray motherhood as an alienating experience. This second chapter will demonstrate how women writers, inspired by naturalist depictions of sexuality, are aware that women's bodies are the site of a violent struggle – both physical and discursive – and illustrate how this violence is the result of social dynamics.

Turning to the 'mind' and the domain of madness, the third chapter takes as a point of departure the relationship between the emerging psychiatric discourses and naturalist fiction, namely how naturalist writers adopt the concept of the 'clinical gaze' to depict madness. This detached depiction of madness is challenged by women writers' attempts to convey the subjective experience of madness. I analyse how women writers reappropriate what Foucault identified as 'the autobiographical account', imposed and manipulated by the psychiatric system, to give their protagonists a voice and counter discourses that naturalise gender and disability. Women writers indeed contradict contemporary theories of madness as the result of hereditary and biological predispositions to instead unveil the impact of social factors on their characters' mental health.

An overview of their dialogue with naturalist fiction shows that these women writers are not minor writers, writing in isolation, but rather that they appropriate from naturalist fiction a political conception of literature, notably through their use of the tragic

mode to invite readers to become aware of women's lived experiences and the impact of patriarchal discourses. As women taking up the pen, they also counter contemporary discourses that saw women's intellectual pursuits as a challenge to prevalent ideas of a so-called 'feminine nature' and as a danger to their physical and mental health. By tackling the topics of sexuality and madness, women writers reclaim the right to participate in public debates and provide a counter-narrative.

# Chapter One – Overcoming Tragedy: The Political Use of the Tragic Mode

In an open letter to Yves Guyot, editor of the French newspaper *Le Bien Public*, Émile Zola defends his recently published novel, *L'Assommoir* (1877), from critics who accused him of portraying working-class people in a negative light, thereby undermining the socialist cause:

> Aux républicains idéalistes qui m'accusent d'avoir insulté le peuple, je réponds en disant que je crois au contraire avoir fait une bonne action. J'ai dit la vérité, j'ai fourni des documents sur les misères et sur les chutes fatales de la classe ouvrière, je suis venu en aide aux politiques naturalistes qui sentent *le besoin d'étudier les hommes avant de les servir*.[150] (*To the idealist Republicans who accuse me of having insulted the people, I answer by saying that, on the contrary, I think I have done a good deed. I told the truth, I provided documents on the miseries and the fatal failings of the working class, I came to help the naturalist politicians* who feel the need to study people before serving them.)

[150] Émile Zola, 'Lettre à Yves Guyot', in *Œuvres Complètes. Le Scandale de L'Assommoir 1877-1879*, dir. by Henri Miterrand, ed. by Marie-Ange Voisin-Fougère, 21 vols (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2003), viii, pp. 804–8 (p. 808). My emphasis.

Zola presents naturalist fiction as a vehicle for political change, notably through an exact study of reality. This militant goal is contradicted, however, by Zola's use of the word 'fatal' which in French can mean both 'deadly' and 'as fixed by destiny'. The idea of fatality, implying that some circumstances are impossible to change on account of their being the result of some greater force, stands in direct opposition to any hope of transforming society. Despite what Zola's theory claims in terms of positivism and aspirations for social change, naturalist fiction often expresses what Baguley calls an entropic vision in which determinism acts as a form of fate.[151] The representation of inexorable forces can lead readers to interpret naturalist narratives as pessimistic and even fatalistic, an interpretation in contradiction to Zola's claim that naturalist representations of reality can empower readers to control it.[152]

Zola's use of the notion of fatalism outside the realms of tragic drama or religious discourse also illustrates a significant shift occurring in the nineteenth century: tragedy simultaneously spreads from drama into other literary forms and becomes the object of philosophical inquiry.[153] The notion of 'tragic' as a broader, also metaphysical, concept distinct from the literary form of tragedy first emerged in German romanticism and idealism and is the result of what Rita Felski designates as a 'process of secularization, disenchantment, and individualization'.[154] The end of the belief in an external, divine force controlling human life did not eliminate the view of the human condition as tragic, as reflected in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.[155] Instead, nineteenth-century

[151] Baguley (1990), p. 100.
[152] Georg Lukács' critique of Zola's method is one example of this kind of reading. Lukács reproaches Zola of representing a mechanical rather than a dynamic society and thus not allowing for political intervention. See Georg Lukàcs, 'Zum hundertsten Geburtstag Zolas', in *Balzac und der französische Realismus* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1952), pp. 88–99. See also Jacques Pelletier, 'Lukács, lecteur de Zola', *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 41 (1971), pp. 58–74.

[153] Rita Felski, 'Introduction', in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. by Rita Felski (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 1–25 (p. 2).
[154] Felski, p. 2.
[155] See Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), pp. 37–40.

writers and thinkers redefined tragedy, expanding its meaning to probe deeper into humanity's existential struggles.[156] In this chapter, I adopt the notion of 'tragic mode' used by Felski to differentiate between tragedy as genre, with its established dramatic conventions, and the expanded nineteenth-century understanding of 'tragedy' which manifests itself across various literary forms.[157] As Lissette Lopez Szwydky comments with respect to nineteenth-century British society – a trend which can also be observed in other European countries – the tragic mode is also increasingly used in political rhetoric and 'discourses of social action'.[158] This politicisation of tragedy is evident in naturalist writers' adaptation and modernisation of the tragic mode in their fiction, a literary innovation in turn adopted by the women writers analysed in this thesis.

The broadening of the definition of tragedy and its appropriation by social and political discourses during the nineteenth century is the object of a vast scholarly debate. In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner argues that the eclipse of tragedy as a genre and the decline of a tragic worldview coincide with the rise of a literature that conveys a political message rather than a metaphysical one. This shift is characterised by the idea that the events depicted in drama could be hindered:

> I believe that any realistic notion of tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe. Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This again is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy.[159]

The rejection of fatalism, which Steiner deems crucial for a tragedy's plot, emerges for him in relation to the French Revolution, which radically changed the social order and introduced an optimism that contrasted starkly with established ideas around fate. Steiner refuses the label of 'tragedy' for Henrik Ibsen's plays, for example, because they express precisely such a 'militant hope' – a desire to change the social circumstances and

[156] Felski, p. 3.
[157] Felski, p. 14.
[158] Lissette Lopez Szwydky, 'Forms and Media', in *A Cultural History of Tragedy in the Age of Empire*, ed. by Michael Gamer and Diego Saglia (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 23–44 (p. 32).
[159] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 8.

discourses that trap the characters in desperate situations.[160] Ibsen's plays 'presuppose the withdrawal of God from human affairs', rejecting the ancient concept of fatality as the expression of a divine agency.[161] In parallel with 'the triumph of rationalism and secular metaphysics',[162] it is the rise of the novel which, according to Steiner, ultimately seals tragedy's fate as it is a bourgeois, secular, and inherently optimistic genre.[163] The naturalist worldview is at first glance the expression of a secularised and positivist worldview and its militant goals are in direct contradiction with the idea of the inevitability of fate, making the possibility of a 'naturalist tragedy' oxymoronic in Steiner's view.[164]

Nevertheless, as Ralph M. Leck underlines, naturalist fiction is defined by a tension between its 'militant hopes' and its illustration of determinism's inexorable laws: 'Naturalism combined two conflicting views of human nature: biological determinism and the engrained premise of immutability, on the one hand, and the view that human relations were unjust and subject to change, on the other'.[165] Raymond Williams' definition of tragedy resolves the contradiction between naturalism's faith in the power of reason and its use of the tragic mode by suggesting that society, in the naturalist worldview, is perceived as 'an impersonal process, a machine with certain built-in properties […]. The machine might be described or regulated, but was not, ultimately, within human control'.[166] While naturalist writers do reject the idea of fate, their fiction depicts new mechanisms that limit their characters' freedom and will. This aligns their work with the broader tradition of tragedy which explores the complex interplay of freedom and determinism in human life.[167] However, the reception of the naturalist use of the tragic mode, aimed at changing socio-

[160] Steiner, p. 297.
[161] Steiner, p. 293.
[162] Steiner, p. 193.
[163] Steiner, p. 118.
[164] See also Chevrel's argument that naturalist writers go against fatalism by wanting to understand, and ultimately master, natural and psychological phenomena. Chevrel, (1993), p. 62.
[165] Ralph M. Leck, *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology. The Birth of Modernity, 1880-1920* (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 54.
[166] Williams, p. 70.
[167] Terry Eagleton, *Tragedy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 12.

political conditions, is fraught with tensions, as we have seen with the critics of Zola's *L'Assommoir*. As Williams highlights:

> The most influential kinds of explicitly social thinking have often rejected tragedy as in itself defeatist. Against what they have known as the idea of tragedy, they have stressed man's powers to change his condition and to end a major part of the suffering which the tragic ideology seems to ratify.[168]

The naturalists' use of the tragic mode, which implies that their fictional characters are not entirely masters of their own destinies thus might seem to contradict their hope for social reform.

The German sociologist Georg Simmel and his use of the notion of tragedy provide a pertinent framework for understanding this tension and enable us to consider positive uses of the tragic mode within naturalist fiction. Close to naturalist circles in Berlin at the turn of the century, Simmel was influenced by their literary production and what Leck calls the 'naturalist counterculture'.[169] In 'The Concept of Tragedy and Culture', Simmel asserts:

> Denn als ein tragisches Verhängnis – im Unterschied gegen ein trauriges oder von außen her zerstörendes – bezeichnen wir doch wohl dies: daß die gegen ein Wesen gerichteten vernichtenden Kräfte aus den tiefsten Schichten eben dieses Wesens selbst entspringen; daß sich mit seiner Zerstörung ein Schicksal vollzieht, das in ihm selbst angelegt und sozusagen die logische Entwicklung eben der Struktur ist, mit der das Wesen seine eigene Positivität aufgebaut hat.[170] (*In general we call a relationship tragic – in contrast to merely sad or extrinsically destructive – when the destructive forces directed against some being spring forth from the deepest level of this very being; or when its destruction has been initiated in itself, and forms the logical development of the very structure by which a being has built its own positive form.*)[171]

Using a literary vocabulary, Simmel considers that man-made structures in modern society have become obstacles to freedom and agency and thus lead to a tragic experience of modernity.[172] According to Robert Button, Simmel's 'sociologization of fate'[173] is not only to be interpreted as an expression of the cultural pessimism prevalent in the late-nineteenth century. For Simmel, tragedy is an inherent aspect of life which brings us to an

[168] Williams, p. 63.
[169] Leck, p. 23.
[170] Georg Simmel, 'Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur', in *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen, 1909-1918*, ed. by Rüdiger Kramme and Klaus Latzel, 2 vols (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), i, pp. 194–223 (p. 219).
[171] Georg Simmel, 'The Concept of Tragedy and Culture', in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, trans. by K. Peter Etzkorn (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), p. 43.
[172] See Leck, p. 25: 'The tragic subjugation of the free-willing individual by the forces of social convention that dominated Naturalist literature was the central presupposition of Simmel's sociology and philosophy'.
[173] Robert William Button, 'Fate, Experience and Tragedy in Simmel's Dialogue with Modernity', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29 (2012), pp. 53–77 (p. 53).

anagnorisis, to the recognition of life's natural dialectic between destructive and creative forces.[174] Similarly, the naturalist writing that aided Simmel in developing this view adopts a tragic worldview to express a political message: by comprehending the forces at play and how 'tragic suffering [is] realized in and through sociocultural conditions and processes',[175] naturalist authors encourage readers to recognise how these conditions can be changed on account of their being man-made and thus arbitrary. The reader's anagnorisis enacted by naturalist fiction is intended to be positive: they are supposed to recognise that the characters' tragic endings could have been avoided.

In an article on contemporary naturalist production, Amalie Skram responds to debates around naturalist fiction's supposed pessimism by adopting what she calls an 'Optimistisk Læsemaade' (*optimistic reading mode*).[176] She argues that the naturalist depiction of life as it is can aid in improving society.[177] In a similar manner to Skram, this chapter offers a positive reading of texts that have been interpreted as pessimistic and even fatalistic to unveil the political potential of the naturalists' use of the tragic mode and argues that this politicisation of the tragic mode is also central in women writers' literary production.

The texts discussed in this chapter separate tragic determinism from divine predeterminism to redefine the notion of tragedy to fit these writers' hopes of social change. Ancient tragedy already explores the notion of inheritance which finds its modern expression in the nineteenth-century concept of biological determinism, leading the contemporary French neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot, to declare that 'La fatalité antique [est] aujourd'hui remplacée par la fatalité héréditaire' (*Ancient fatality is today replaced by*

[174] See Robert William Button, 'An Exploration of the Idea of the Tragic in the Writings of Georg Simmel: *Peripeteia* and Modernity', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 12:1 (2012), pp. 135–158 (p. 148).
[175] Button, 'Fate, Experience and Tragedy', p. 66.
[176] Amalie Skram, 'Optimistisk Læsemaade', *Dagbladet*, 19th February 1881. Quoted in Amalie Skram, *Optimistisk Læsemaade. Amalie Skrams litteraturkritikk*, ed. by Irene Engelstad (Oslo: Gylendal Norsk Forlag, 1987), pp. 64–69.
[177] Skram (1987), p. 67.

*hereditary fatality*).[178] Biological determinism, while presented as an immovable fact, is contradicted within naturalist narratives by social determinism, which appears as the main factor shaping the characters' trajectories. Naturalist fiction illustrates how social forces ultimately cause the characters' tragic outcome, especially the female figures, thereby highlighting the need for social change. While women writers are inspired by naturalist representations of modern life as tragic, their narratives do not oscillate between biological and social explanations and rather focus on the weight of social determinism on their female protagonists, thus overcoming the potential fatalism linked with naturalist fiction's use of biological determinism as a narrative device.

In their modernisation of the tragic mode, naturalist writers elevate female characters and their common destinies to tragic intensity. Tragic female characters become the landmark of naturalist fiction in which the type of the 'fallen woman'[179] best represents how the modern individual is limited by biological, social, and psychological determinism. This foregrounding of ordinary and non-noble figures has been seen as potentially non-tragic, as Felski comments:

> In critical decisions about what counts as tragedy, judgments about subject matter – its weightiness, seriousness, and universal import – are often as salient as questions of form, such that attention to the feminine and domestic has often disqualified texts from being considered tragic.[180]

But it is precisely this fictional representation of women's condition that has led the women writers discussed in this thesis to engage in a hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction and appropriate the tragic mode to depict female characters as victims of their circumstances. Scholars have also commented on women writers' blend of high and low genres in their novels and their use of sentimental and melodramatic tropes to convey their political message.[181] This chapter builds on those analyses to explore how these writers

[178] Jean-Martin Charcot, *L'Hystérie*, ed. by E. Trillat (Toulouse: Privat, 1971), p. 143. Quoted by Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies. Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 246.
[179] Baguley (1992), p. 23.
[180] Felski, p. 8.
[181] On Reuter and sentimentalism, see Woodford (2012). On Skram and the feminist potential of melodrama, see Christine Hamm, *Medlidenhet og melodrama. Amalie Skrams romaner om ekteskap* (Oslo: Unipub

elevate what had been hitherto considered as 'low' subject matter to the realm of tragedy and thus continue the modernisation of the tragic mode initiated by naturalism.

Just as naturalist fiction has been interpreted as fatalistic and as crushing any political hopes for change, women writers' use of the tragic mode has the potential to undermine positive feminist interpretations of their texts. Feminist scholars are sometimes suspicious of tragedy, mainly for its having been interpreted as representing 'universal suffering' when the tradition, despite its memorable tragic heroines, is mainly authored by men.[182] Others argue that 'tragic fatalism is how historical injustices normally are justified'.[183] However, Victoria Wohl contends that a feminist interpretation of tragedy can unveil its potential political impact by looking at 'the connection between tragedy's representation of the feminine and the institutional, experiential, or ideological status of women beyond the tragic stage'.[184] An analysis of women writers' appropriation of the tragic mode reveals how they resist women's oppression in a society that denies their individuality and rights. In contrast to Zola's and Ibsen's texts which oscillate between biological and social factors to explain their characters' tragedy, women writers explore how the idea that women are biologically determined is a social construct which has tragic consequences within the fictional realm.

In his study of naturalism, published in 1892, the German critic Leo Berg asserts that nineteenth-century literature, and more specifically the naturalist movement, expresses 'die medizinische und sexuelle Tragödie'[185] (*the medical and sexual tragedy*) of its time. Berg thus associates naturalists' favoured themes, sexuality and illness, with modern tragedy. Interestingly, he adds that 'Das nächste Jahrhundert wird uns vermutlich die

forlag, 2006).

[182] Victoria Wohl, 'Tragedy and Feminism', in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. by Rebecca Bushnell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 145–60 (pp. 145–47).

[183] Kathleen M. Sands, 'Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time after Time', in *Rethinking Tragedy*, *op.cit.*, pp. 82–103 (p. 95).

[184] Wohl, p. 147.

[185] Leo Berg, *Der Naturalismus. Zur Psychologie der modernen Kunst* (Munich: Poessel, 1892), p. 132.

politische und soziale Tragödie bringen'[186] (*The next century will probably give us political and social tragedy)*. I argue that the social and political use of the tragic mode was already central in naturalist fiction, which discusses issues of sexuality and illness in political terms. In turn, women writers represent their female characters by using the tragic mode to show how it is social discourses that condemn women to tragic destinies and not their natural dispositions. To discuss the potential impact of these authors' use of the tragic mode on their readers, this chapter uses the notion of the implied reader, which Wolfgang Iser defines as the reader implicitly woven into the text who is intended to understand the author's meaning.[187] The implied reader of the texts discussed here is supposed to experience a political anagnorisis, the recognition that the female characters' tragedy within the narrative could have been avoided.

The cathartic effect of these narratives is intended to provoke the readers' outrage and encourage their political action, as Gabriele Reuter reflects in her autobiography on the response that her novel, *Aus guter Familie* (1895), provoked:

> Ganz Deutschland beschäftigte sich mit dem Buche. Es weckte einen Sturm in der Frauenwelt — die wildeste Erregung unter Vätern und Müttern. Ernste, reife Männer haben mir noch nach Jahren versichert, die Lektüre habe ihr Herzensverhältnis zu ihren Töchtern von Grund auf verändert. Die Verwandten erklärten das Buch für ein Teufelswerk. Auf einen literarischen Erfolg hatte ich gehofft — den kulturellen Einfluß, den mein Buch auf die Entwicklung des deutschen Mädchens, der deutschen Familie haben würde, konnte ich nicht voraussehen![188] (*Everyone in Germany was talking about the book. It caused a storm among women – the wildest excitement among fathers and mothers. Serious, mature men have assured me years later that reading it fundamentally changed their relationship to their daughters. Relatives declared the book to be the devil's work. I had hope for a literary success – I could not anticipate the cultural influence my book would have on the development of the German girl and the German family!*)

It is difficult to determine whether Reuter is exaggerating the cultural influence of her novel in Germany, although we know it was a bestseller.[189] Similarly, measuring the effect these novels had on their readers is challenging. This chapter does not adopt a reception history approach, as the impact these narratives had on their respective societies is not

[186] Berg, p. 132.
[187] See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 1978), p. 34.
[188] Reuter (1921), p. 474.
[189] Heydebrand, p. 87. By 1931, *Aus guter Familie* had gone through 28 editions, with at least 28000 copies printed. On the reception of Reuter's novel and its political message, see Woodford (2014), pp. 58–60.

easily quantifiable. However, we can infer that the fiction of these women writers was an integral part of the feminist awakening in France, Germany, and Norway and that is why thinking in terms of the implied reader allows us to explore the intended effect these writers' use of the tragic mode.

This chapter contributes to the ongoing discussion on the modernisation of tragedy in the nineteenth century by exploring how the renewal of tragedy serves political purposes for both naturalist and women writers in France, Germany, and Norway. The first section examines literary paratexts by canonical naturalist writers and by Gabriele Reuter to highlight how they define their own literary works in relation to the tragedy tradition. In the second section, I explore how texts by Zola, Ibsen, and Rachilde reject a tragic ending for their characters, an anti-tragic stance which reinforces their political message. I argue that although these texts present themselves as anti-tragic, they still grapple with the idea of the tragic nature of modern existence, resulting in an optimistic outlook fraught with tensions. The final part analyses texts by Zola, Ibsen, Peyrebrune, Dohm, Reuter, and Skram and how they modernise traditional aesthetic devices, such as anagnorisis and catharsis, and politicize the tragic mode. The texts discussed in this chapter delve into the tension between determinism and freedom, highlighting the critical role of class and gender in shaping women's trajectories in modern societies. The implied reader's feelings of pity and terror in response to the female characters' tragic stories are intended to provoke a political awareness that encourages action to change the real-world factors contributing to the characters' tragedies.

## I. Modern Tragedy and Politics in Literary Paratexts

In this section, I survey literary paratexts by the writers of my corpus to demonstrate how naturalist writers consider themselves as heirs to the tradition of tragedy and actively strive

to renew it by using the tragic mode to discuss issues of class and gender. The Brothers Goncourt discuss, in their preface to *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865), how they aim to represent a poor and common character's tragedy. Zola, in his theoretical texts, thinks of ways to adapt the tragic mode to the novel. These authors frame their modernisation of the tragic mode as part of the movement towards the democratisation of society. Ibsen's notes for *Et Dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*, 1879) reveal a conscious effort to theorise the tragic nature of contemporary women's lives. Lastly, I discuss Reuter's reception of naturalist fiction as tragic and how she adapted the tragic mode to her own poetics and political message. This section explores how male canonical writers and women writers inspired by naturalist poetics frame the tragic mode in political terms, aiming to adapt it to respond to contemporary debates.

### I.1 Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, Emile Zola: Tragedy, Class, and the Novel

*Germinie Lacerteux* (1865) is a foundational text for the naturalist literary movement, not only because of its claim of applying a scientific method within a fictional scenario but also for its aspiration to set, as Baguley calls it, 'an exemplar for naturalist tragedy'.[190] In their preface, the Goncourts highlight their story's originality because of its depiction of a poor and ordinary character who is no longer relegated to the realm of the comic but is elevated to that of tragedy. This approach makes naturalist writers the heirs of a rupture from the classical hierarchy of genres that began with romanticism and was carried forward by realist writers.[191] With their novel, the Goncourts declare that:

> Il nous est venu la curiosité de savoir si cette forme conventionnelle d'une littérature oubliée et d'une société disparue, la Tragédie, était définitivement morte ; si dans un pays sans caste et sans aristocratie légale, les misères des petits et des pauvres parleraient à l'intérêt, à l'émotion, à la pitié,

[190] Baguley (1990), p. 78.
[191] On romanticism and tragedy, see Jeffrey N. Cox, 'Romantic Redefinitions of the Tragic', in *Romantic drama*, ed. by Gerald Gillespie (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1993), pp. 153–65, p. 155. On Balzacian realism and tragedy, see Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 93.

> aussi haut que les misères des grands et des riches.[192] (*We were curious to know whether this conventional form of a forgotten literature of a vanished society, Tragedy, was definitely dead; if in a country without castes and without a legal aristocracy, the misfortunes of the lowly and the poor would arouse interest, emotion, and pity as strong as the misfortunes of the great and the rich.*)

It seems, at first glance, that the Goncourts' definition of tragedy aligns with that of Steiner: tragedy is no longer compatible with a modern society which has moved beyond archaic hierarchies in its movement towards democratisation. They claim however that societal changes in France make a renewal of tragedy necessary. The Goncourts present their novel as a two-fold experiment: the naturalist experiment – in the sense of observing the influence of deterministic laws on a character and doing what they call 'une clinique de l'Amour'[193] (*a clinic of Love*) – and a reception experiment. The latter aims to assess whether their audience will feel the same empathy for 'low' characters as they do for the noble protagonists of ancient and classical tragedy, as theorised in Aristotle's *Poetics* under the notion of catharsis.[194] Alongside their claim to originality, the Goncourts' reference to tragedy, 'the most prestigious and aristocratic of literary categories',[195] can be seen as a strategy to gain prestige, as naturalist authors are aware that their worldview and fictional works run against the grain of contemporary ideas and literary production.

In a similar vein to the Brothers Goncourts' experiment, Zola has the ambition to adapt the tragic genre to the realities of his time and deems the 'common people' as worthy of being the heroes of a tragic narrative: 'Nous avons bien dit la vérité sur les hautes classes, nous dirons la vérité sur le peuple, pour qu'on s'épouvante, pour qu'on le plaigne et qu'on le soulage' (RE, p. 246 – *We told the truth about the upper classes, we will tell the truth about the working classes, so that we can be terrified, pity, and relieve them*). Zola's use of the verbs 'terrify', 'pity', and 'relieve' are reminiscent of Aristotle's concept of catharsis, aimed at purging the spectator's emotions. However, for Zola, this catharsis now

[192] Goncourt, p. 21.
[193] Goncourt, p. 20.
[194] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. and ed. by Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 32.
[195] Baguley (1990), p. 78.

has a political function as it is supposed to encourage readers to take action to purge society of its ailments.

Zola's interest in the tragic also extends to the question of form and genre. In *Le Naturalisme au Théâtre* (*Naturalism in the Theatre*, 1881), he advocates for the application of a naturalist method in drama and considers the enduring legacy of tragedy. Zola does not reproach tragedy for its content but rather for its implacable stylistic rules and imagines a naturalist poetics and worldview which are tragic, while rejecting a form that he judges archaic:

> Je crois donc qu'on doit remonter jusqu'à la tragédie, non pas, grand Dieu ! pour lui emprunter davantage sa rhétorique, son système de confidents, de déclamation, de récits interminables ; mais pour *revenir à la simplicité de l'action et à l'unique étude psychologique et physiologique des personnages*. Le cadre tragique ainsi entendu est excellent : un fait se déroulant dans sa réalité et soulevant chez les personnages des passions et des sentiments, dont l'analyse exacte serait le seul intérêt de la pièce. Et cela *dans le milieu contemporain, avec le peuple qui nous entoure*.[196] (*I believe, therefore, that we should go back to tragedy, not, heavens! to borrow any more of its rhetoric, its system of confidants, declamation, never-ending recitals; but* to come back to the simplicity of action and to the unique psychological and physiological study of the characters. *Understanding the tragic framework in this way is excellent: a fact unfolding in its reality and arousing passions and feelings in the characters, the exact analysis of which would be the play's sole interest.* And this in a contemporary milieu, with ordinary people.)

Zola takes inspiration from the formal structure of traditional tragedy by asserting that the tragic framework, the idea of a contained action unfolding according to a tragic logic, allows for naturalist experimentation and observation of the characters' physiological and psychological reactions. He insists on the simplicity of action which corresponds to the naturalist focus on one milieu, one family, or one character in a set situation from which the dramatic action emerges according to deterministic laws. He also emphasises that the observation should be rooted in the contemporary world, focusing on common people, echoing the preface of *Germinie Lacerteux*. In Zola's theory, the naturalist novel emerges as the ideal medium for formal experimentation to adapt the tragic mode and effectively portray the modern tragic.[197] French naturalist writers pave the way for the expression of

[196] Émile Zola, *Le Naturalisme au théâtre : les théories et les exemples* (Paris: G. Charpentier et E. Fesquelle, 1881), p. 23. My emphasis.
[197] On the French naturalists' attempts to adapt the naturalist formula to the stage see Baguley (1990), pp. 52–53.

modern tragedy by bringing the tragic mode into the novel and adapting it to modern concerns, making class a central concern of their tragic narratives.

### 1.2 Henrik Ibsen and Women's Tragedy

While naturalist fiction has its share of tragic male characters, the tragic nature of modern life is most often conveyed through the portrayal of a female character. In his preparatory notes for *A Doll's House* (1879), Ibsen imagines a scenario for a 'nutids-tragedien'[198] (*contemporary tragedy*).[199] The play portrays the trajectory of Nora who illegally contracts a debt to pay for her husband's medical treatment. Their marriage crumbles as Nora discovers that her husband is too caught up by social appearances to understand her sacrifice. Ibsen also highlights why women characters make for poignant tragic protagonists: 'En kvinde kan ikke være sig selv i nutidens samfund, der er et udelukkende mandligt samfund, me[n]d love skrevne af mænd og med anklagere og dommere der dømmer den kvindelige færd fra mandligt standpunkt'[200] (*A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view*).[201] This distinction between male law and female behavior prefigures the argument in Eva Figes' anthropological study of tragedy, in which she defines the tragic form as a ritualistic reenactment of society's taboos. According to Figes, the tragic mechanism arises from the belief in inevitable punishment when a taboo is transgressed.[202] Because women in the nineteenth century are still constrained by numerous taboos, most often linked to sexuality,

[198] Henrik Ibsen, 'Optegnelser til nutids-tragedien. Rom, 19.10.78', ed. by The Henrik Ibsen Centre, University of Oslo <https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_Du%7CDu41113a_1r_1v.xhtml?facs=Ja> [Accessed 03 March 2025].
[199] Henrik Ibsen, '*A Doll's House*: Commentary', in *The Oxford Ibsen. Volume V*, trans. and ed. by James Walter McFarlane, 8 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), v, p. 436.
[200] Ibsen, 'Optegnelser til nutids-tragedien'.
[201] Ibsen (1961), p. 436.
[202] Eva Figes, *Tragedy and Social Evolution* (London: John Calder, 1976), p. 11 and p. 103.

they make compelling tragic characters in the modern era, as these taboos (in the language of this thesis, social norms and discourses), are 'inviolable'. [203] Women are best representative of the tragic nature of modern life because no social solutions, no 'temporal remedies' as in Steiner's conception of the tragic,[204] can break those taboos within the fictional realm.

*A Doll's House* does not end with a traditional tragic catastrophe, with death and desolation, but with Nora slamming the door and leaving her husband and children behind for an unknown future. Nevertheless, Ibsen envisions the play's ending in tragic terms in his notes: 'Katastrofen nærmer sig ubønhørligt, uafvendeligt. Fortvivlelse, kamp og undergang'[205] (*The catastrophe approaches, ineluctably, inevitable. Despair, resistance, defeat*).[206] The ending of the play is tragic in the sense that there is no restoration of the original order, nor is there any reconciliation – an open-endedness contrary to classical tragedy and that scandalised contemporary audiences to the point that Ibsen wrote an alternative ending for the German stage where Nora chooses to stay for the sake of her children which restores the status quo disturbed in the original ending.[207] The tragic elements in Ibsen's play serve his social critique, which, in the case of *A Doll's House*, centres on the institution of marriage and women's limited access to education and the public sphere as independent individuals.[208] We can find parallels to Ibsen's ambition to represent an ordinary woman trapped in the confines of her daily life in women writers' portrayal of the tragic sides of women's condition in their own fiction.

[203] Figes, p. 138.
[204] Steiner, p. 291.
[205] Ibsen, 'Optegnelser ti nutids-tragedien'.
[206] Ibsen, 'Commentary', (1961), p. 437.
[207] Innes, p. 86.
[208] Moi (2006), pp. 246–47.

### 1.3 Gabriele Reuter and Naturalist Tragedy

In her autobiography, Gabriele Reuter reflects on what inspired her to write *Aus guter Familie* and her appropriation of the tragic mode. She mentions contemporary literary production that foregrounds the proletariat and its suffering, a clear reference to naturalist fiction, but she claims that she found herself unable to imitate this strand of naturalist writing:

> Aus literarischen Gründen ins Volk hinabsteigen und das Elend des Proletariats studieren, war mir ein greulicher Gedanke. Ich las in Mackays Büchern und in andern Schriften von dem furchtbaren Jammer, dem ewig hoffnungslosen, zu dem Millionen Menschen verdammt waren, – aber da ich diesen Jammer innerlich nicht miterlebte, so ließ er mich kühl. Wenn ich mir selbst gegenüber ehrlich sein wollte, mußte ich mir gestehen, ich war unfähig, in glühender Sprache und flammender Begeisterung für die arbeitenden Klassen einzutreten. Ich kannte sie zu wenig. Und ich wollte nicht lügen.[209] (*To go down to the people and to study the misery of the proletariat, out of literary motivations, was a horrible thought to me. I read in [John Henry] Mackay's and other books about the terrible, eternally hopeless misery to which millions of people were condemned – but since I did not experience this misery myself, it left me cold. If I wanted to be honest with myself, I had to admit that I was incapable of speaking for the working classes with glowing words and flaming enthusiasm. I did not know them well enough. And I did not want to lie.*)

Her own literary project is defined instead by her empathy for the characters and personal knowledge of the subjects she aims to depict. Reuter describes her inspiration for her bestselling novel as a kind of epiphany:

> Und plötzlich wußte ich, wozu ich auf der Welt war —: zu künden, was Mädchen und Frauen schweigend litten. Nicht die großen Schmerzen der Leidenschaften, die wie rote Flammen gen Himmel steigen, an deren Pracht die Dichter aller Zeiten und Zonen sich müd gesungen. Nein, — *die stumme Tragik des Alltags wollte ich künden* — sie, an der Tausende von blühenden Geschöpfen zugrunde gingen, ohne noch von irgendeinem Poeten verherrlicht worden zu sein.[210] (*And suddenly I knew why I was in the world: to bear witness to what girls and women were suffering in silence. Not the great sufferings brought by passions that rise like red flames towards heaven, whose splendour the poets of all times and origins had sung until the point of exhaustion. No,* I wanted to portray the silent tragic of everyday life – *the tragic that made thousands of creatures perish without being glorified by any poet.*)

Reuter refuses an exaggerated and artificial language as well as dramatic actions that she sees in the tragic tradition, but also in some naturalist texts, arguing instead for a renewal of the tragic by portraying those missing from it: middle-class women.

Reuter's expression of 'die stumme Tragik des Alltags' (*the silent tragic of the everyday*) encapsulates the essence of the tragic nature of the modern experience portrayed

[209] Reuter (1921), pp. 431–2.
[210] Reuter (1921), p. 432. My emphasis.

by the women writers analysed in this thesis. It emphasises the everyday as both deserving of attention and harbouring the potential for tragic situations. The term 'silent' alludes to the overlooked aspects of modern life and how women are silenced by social norms. While female characters have always been central in the tradition of tragedy, Reuter insists on focusing on women's ordinary lives, aiming to represent typical rather than exceptional situations. As this chapter argues, women writers frame their representation of women's shared experience at the end of the nineteenth century through the tragic mode. Their fiction rejects any excessive pathos or dramatization to reflect instead on how women's tragedies are often rendered invisible both in society and in literature. Thus, in their dialogue with naturalism's renewal of the tragic mode, these writers follow a political purpose, seeking to portray this 'Alltag' (*daily life*), particularly women's oppression due to social discourses, not as a fact to be accepted unquestioningly, but as something to be critically examined and ultimately transformed.

While both naturalist and women writers reject some traditional features of tragedy, they clearly position their own poetics in relation to it, claiming to renew the genre. As the programmatic statements discussed here have shown, the writers of my corpus present themselves as contributing to the ongoing tragic tradition, aspiring to adapt it to the concerns of the nineteenth century. The naturalist innovation, appropriated by the women authors of my corpus, is thus a formal one as it is marked by the ambition to revitalise and modernise tragedy, notably through their portrayal of tragic female protagonists. As we saw, an author like Reuter reads naturalist fiction as conveying the tragic nature of modern life and consciously employs the same mode of writing in her own fiction. Women writers adopt from naturalist fiction the tragic mode as a political tool to denounce how social discourses trap women in tragic circumstances, taking part in contemporary debates around

determinism, gender, and class. The authors discussed here share a common political goal: representing reality in order to inspire social change, and thus, ultimately, to overcome tragedy.

## II. Refusing Tragedy? Émile Zola, Henrik Ibsen, and Rachilde and the Anti-Tragic Stance

The positioning of Zola and Ibsen in relation to the tradition of tragedy is complicated by the anti-tragic stance they adopt in some of their texts which constitute their response to accusations of pessimism and even fatalism. Zola mentions these critiques in *Le Roman expérimental*:

> Et j'arrive ainsi au gros reproche dont on croit accabler les romanciers naturalistes en les traitant de fatalistes. Que de fois on a voulu nous prouver que, du moment où nous n'acceptions pas le libre arbitre, du moment où l'homme n'était plus pour nous qu'une machine animale agissant sous l'influence de l'hérédité et des milieux, nous tombions à un fatalisme grossier, nous ravalions l'humanité au rang d'un troupeau marchant sous le bâton de la destinée ! (RE, p. 27 – *And I now come to the biggest reproach that critics believe that they are heaping upon naturalist novelists by calling them fatalists. How many times have they wanted to prove to us that, from the moment that we did not accept free will, from the moment that man was nothing more to us than an animal machine acting under the influence of heredity and the milieux, we fell into a crude fatalism, we reduced humanity to the rank of a herd marching under the stick of destiny!*)

Zola makes a sharp distinction between fatality, that which is the result of an external and divine will, and determinism which is the result of natural phenomena which can ultimately be influenced:

> Il faut préciser : nous ne sommes pas fatalistes, nous somme déterministes. […] Comme le dit très bien Claude Bernard, du moment où nous pouvons agir, et où nous agissons sur le déterminisme des phénomènes, en modifiant les milieux par exemple, nous ne sommes pas fatalistes. (RE, p. 28 – *We must clarify: we are not fatalists, we are determinists. […] As Claude Bernard aptly points out, if we can act, and when we act on the determinism of phenomena, by modifying the milieux for example, we are not fatalists.*)

The question of free will, central to tragedy, leads to that of political action: fatalism precludes the possibility to change the characters' circumstances, while the belief in determinism, as outlined by Zola, presupposes the possibility to act on it, to change or adapt one's milieu, and thus allow for social change.

To strengthen their critique of contemporary society, some naturalist narratives deliberately reject a tragic worldview and conclusion. Zola concludes the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle on a surprisingly optimistic note with *Le Docteur Pascal* (1893). With this novel, Zola resolves the tension between pessimism and optimism that runs throughout the entire cycle with the main character, Pascal, symbolising the conscious choice of optimism and the hope in transcending determinism. *Le Docteur Pascal* also marks a turn in Zola's poetics towards more optimism and the celebration of progress, amid renewed critiques against the naturalist method.[211] In *Fruen fra havet* (*The Lady from the Sea*, 1888), Ibsen 'closes the investigation of marriage that began in *A Doll's House*'[212] with optimism as the play ends on the reconciliation of the main couple, Dr. Wangel and Ellida. In both texts, the main couples symbolise the hope of influencing and adapting to one's milieu, expressing the naturalists' hope of overcoming tragedy.

Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* stands as an exception within my corpus as it is the only woman-authored text that does not culminate into a tragic ending for its female protagonist. Rachilde adopts a parodic tone in her hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction by subverting both the tradition of tragedy and naturalist topoi.[213] Rachilde's portrayal of her protagonist, Mary, as a *femme fatale* undermines contemporary clichés around a figure that is often punished by the end of the story for her transgression. Instead, parodying the Darwinian idea of adapting to one's milieu, Mary is depicted as thriving in a decadent society. Rachilde's anti-tragic stance underscores her critique of sexist clichés that confine women in tragedy.

[211] On this transition in Zola's œuvre, see David Baguley, *Fécondité d'Emile Zola : Roman à Thèse, Évangile, Mythe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 19–22.
[212] Moi (2006), p. 297.
[213] When talking about 'parody', I use the definition developed by Linda Hutcheon in *Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York, London: Methuen, 1985), which, though focusing on postmodern texts, can be applied to earlier ones. Hutcheon defines parody as a literary tool and a reflexive process in which a source text (in Genette's terms, the hypotext) is both imitated and transformed through the critical distance of the parodying text (the hypertext). See Hutcheon, p. 6 and Yen-Mai Tran-Gervat, 'Pour une définition opérationnelle de la parodie littéraire : parcours critique et enjeux d'un corpus spécifique', *Cahiers de Narratologie*, 13, (2006) <http://journals.openedition.org/narratologie/372> [Accessed 06 March 2025].

These texts' anti-tragic message is, however, complicated by the fact that these texts nonetheless portray their characters as struggling to overcome their social circumstances. In Ibsen's play, the happiness of the main couple contrasts with the limited options given to another female character when it comes to marriage, highlighting the difficulty of escaping social expectations. Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal* still uses the tragic mode in some scenes to heighten their dramatic effect, while Rachilde's novel presents a strikingly modern conception of trauma conveyed through the repetitive nature of Mary's trajectory – a technique often found in tragedy. I argue that this tension within the texts' anti-tragic worldview ultimately serves their political message: the tragic elements highlight the divide between the contemporary society these authors criticise and a future, more just society they aim for, emphasising that only drastic social change can bridge that gap.

### 2.1 Émile Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal*: Metaphysical Optimism and Tragic Aesthetics

*Le Docteur Pascal* exemplifies Zola's rejection of fatalism by concluding the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle on the symbolic triumph of life with the birth of Pascal's son. The eponymous character is portrayed as the ideal scientist collecting documents on his family to better understand determinism and a messianic figure with an unwavering faith in progress.[214] The novel presents a dynamic oscillation between destruction and self-regeneration, between positive and negative forces, ultimately culminating in the triumph of optimism. This dialectic echoes Simmel's positive definition of tragedy: 'Das Wesen der Tragödie ist diese: daß das tiefste Wollen des Menschen verneint wird, und daß diese Verneinung im tiefsten Grunde gewollt wird' (*The nature of tragedy is this: that the deepest will of man comes to be negated, and that this negation, at the deepest level, comes*

[214] Jean-Louis Cabanès, *Le Corps et la Maladie dans les récits réalistes (1856-1893)* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1991), p. 73 and p. 406.

*to be willed*).[215]As Button points out, Simmel interprets tragedy as representing the process of 'realization and affirmation in destruction'.[216] The spectator or reader is brought to the recognition that 'life persists and affirms itself in and despite its negation'.[217] By oscillating between the extremes of tragedy and optimism, *Le Docteur Pascal* invites readers to experience a similar moment of anagnorisis, to recognise the self-regenerative forces in life. Although some scholars highlight the tensions permeating the novel's optimism,[218] I argue that these contradictions ultimately reinforce Zola's affirmation of the potential to transcend one's circumstances and overcome fatalism, thus fostering political hope.

Pascal's vision is not optimistic in a naive sense, but consciously opposes a tragic vision that sees degeneracy and limited freedom as pervading all aspects of life. When Pascal shows his notes on his family to his niece Clotilde, in the fifth chapter, Zola stages a reversed tragic anagnorisis. Clotilde becomes aware of her origins and its risks, which could lead her to despair, but this recognition seals her conversion to Pascal's worldview:

> Le torrent fangeux avait roulé devant elle, pendant près de trois heures, et c'était la pire des révélations, la brusque et terrible vérité sur les siens, les êtres chers, ceux qu'elle devait aimer […]. Malgré tout, c'était un cri de santé, d'espoir en l'avenir. Il parlait en bienfaiteur, qui, du moment où l'hérédité faisait le monde, voulait en fixer les lois pour disposer d'elle, et refaire un monde heureux.[219] (*The muddy river had rolled before her for nearly three hours and it brought the worst of revelations, the sudden terrible truth about those closest to her, dear beings, the people she was supposed to love […]. In spite of everything, it was a cry of sanity, of hope in the future. He spoke as a benefactor who, since heredity made the world, wanted to set down its laws to make use of it, and to make a new and happy world afresh*.)[220]

The scientific – and naturalist – hope of understanding the world's laws and ultimately guide them expressed by Pascal is anti-tragic in Steiner's definition: 'Tragedy speaks not of secular dilemmas which may be resolved by rational innovation, but of the unaltering

[215] Georg Simmel, 'Aus dem Nachgelassen Tagebuche', in *Fragmente und Aufsätze aus dem Nachlaß und Veröffentlichungen der letzten Jahre* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1923), pp. 1–46 (p. 39). Quoted and translated in Button, 'Peripeteia and Modernity', p. 148.
[216] Button, 'Peripeteia and Modernity', p. 137.
[217] Button, 'Peripeteia and Modernity', p. 148.
[218] See Cabanès who interprets *Le Docteur Pascal* as typical of *fin-de-siècle* scientific thinking as it oscillates between the science of determinism with the forces of the unknown and of the indeterminate, p. 196.
[219] Émile Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire V*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), v, p. 1022. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as DP in the main text.
[220] Émile Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, trans. by Julie Rose and ed. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2020), p. 104. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as DP2 in the main text.

bias toward inhumanity and destruction in the drift of the world'.[221] Pascal is the ideal scientist and a proponent of what Steiner calls 'rational innovation' which fosters scientific and social progress. He represents a form of metaphysical optimism that acknowledges the existence of forces, such as heredity, which may currently be beyond human comprehension and control, but which he maintains will ultimately be mastered. This optimism has political implications by asserting that individuals can potentially master their circumstances. This scene of anagnorisis, staged by the doctor, leads Clotilde to believe in and defend Pascal's anti-tragic vision even after his death and is meant to also 'convert' the implied reader.

In the same chapter, Pascal describes to Clotilde the family's individual stories, a scene that stands as a metaliterary summary of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. Pascal uses the vocabulary of tragedy for this exposition, which speaks to the entry of the word 'tragic' into the daily vocabulary of the time. This passage can be interpreted as a reflection on the poetic logic of the *Rougon-Macquart* as Pascal exclaims: 'Quelle fresque immense à peindre, quelle comédie et quelle tragédie humaines colossales à écrire, avec l'hérédité, qui est la Genèse même des familles, des sociétés et du monde !' (DP, p. 1008; *What a tremendous fresco there is to paint, what a colossal human comedy and tragedy to write, on heredity, which is the very Genesis of families, and societies, and of the world!* – DP2, p. 91). Pascal's exclamation encapsulates Zola's poetic project, presenting this interplay between the tragic and comic modes as better encompassing all aspects of reality. Pascal no longer speaks like a doctor in this passage, but as a poet, admitting that life is composed of opposing forces. This acknowledgement does not undermine his metaphysical optimism as it is founded on the radical acceptance of life's oscillation between the positive and the negative. In addition to biological determinism, social determinism also exerts a significant influence on the characters, playing a central role in the naturalist worldview. The impact

[221] Steiner, p. 291.

of the social environment is crucial in shaping the trajectories of Zola's characters. For instance, Clotilde's removal from the detrimental influence of her father Saccard and her brother Maxime leads her to flourish under the influence of her uncle and the southern sun, which highlights that social determinism can potentially be mastered. Avoiding tragedy becomes a matter of transcending one's origins and heredity which is not available to all characters, as an analysis of Zola's *L'Assommoir* will show.

Nonetheless, heredity plagues some of the characters in the novel, as in the rest of the cycle, and Zola uses it as an aesthetic tool to heighten the dramatic tension in certain scenes. The death of Charles, Tante Dide's great-grandchild, is revelatory of Zola's aesthetic use of the tragic by portraying Tante Dide watching her offspring die without being able to help him:

> Un grand cri de la folle, un appel de terreur aurait suffi. Mais elle ne criait pas, elle n'appelait pas, immobile, avec ses yeux fixes d'ancêtre qui regardait s'accomplir le destin, comme desséchée là, nouée, les membres et la langue liés par ses cent ans, le cerveau ossifié par la démence, dans l'incapacité de vouloir et d'agir. (DP, p. 1103; *A loud cry from the madwoman, a terrified call would have been enough. But she didn't cry, she didn't call; she sat motionless, with the staring eyes of a forebear watching fate play out, as though she'd dried out there on the spot, gnarled, her limbs and her tongue tied by her one hundred years, her brain ossified by insanity, incapable of willing or acting.* – DP2, p. 182)

The tragic mode used by Zola here goes against the message of scientific hope professed by Pascal, but it makes the scene more effective on the narrative level and aesthetically more poignant. It is used to link the origin of this poor heredity, Tante Dide, with its most extreme potential ending, Charles. The novel however presents a contrast to this scene: Clotilde's son is technically of this last generation (although the incest somewhat blurs the genealogy) as he is Charles' cousin and stands as the other probability, the possibility of transcending heredity. Pascal's and Clotilde's son represents a positive unknown, an open ending as Pascal's written interrogation on the genealogical tree symbolises: 'L'enfant inconnu, à naître en 1874. Quel sera-t-il ?' (DP, p. 1182; *The unknown child, to be born in 1874. What will he be?* – DP2, p. 258). The fact that his son, a product of incest, is

heralded as a sign of hope and the triumph of life at the end of the novel confirms Pascal's belief that self-regeneration can come from within the family.

Another tension within Pascal's anti-tragic stance lies within his own character. When showing Clotilde his notes, Pascal claims that he is not concerned by his family's fatal heritage: 'je me sens autre, différent, sans communauté aucune' (DP, p. 1021; *I feel myself to be alien, different, that I have absolutely nothing in common with them* – DP2, p. 104) which could be interpreted as a sign of hubris by a scientist who has just proven that biological heredity is all-powerful in his own family. And this is what he comes to think, later in the story, as he fears that he is falling into madness, like Tante Dide:

> Lui qui, deux mois plus tôt, se vantait si triomphalement de n'en être pas, de la famille, allait-il donc recevoir le plus affreux des démentis ? Aurait-il la douleur de voir la tare renaître en ses moelles, roulerait-il à l'épouvante de se sentir aux griffes du monstre héréditaire ? Sa mère l'avait dit : il devenait fou d'orgueil et de peur. L'idée souveraine, la certitude exaltée qu'il avait d'abolir la souffrance, de donner de la volonté aux hommes, de refaire une humanité bien portante et plus haute, ce n'était sûrement là que le début de la folie des grandeurs. (DP, p. 1033; *Two months earlier he'd boasted so triumphantly of not being part of the family, but was he now about to get the most appalling refutation of this? Would he have the pain of seeing the family defect spring up again in his own marrow? Would he spend his life in terror at feeling himself to be in the clutches of the hereditary monster? His mother had said it: he was going mad with pride and fear. The presumptuous notion, the fanatical certainty he'd had of eliminating suffering, giving men willpower, making humanity anew, healthy and nobler—this was surely just the onset of delusions of grandeur*. – DP2, p. 115)

This scene shows the positive hero succumbing to a tragic logic: his hubris ('delusions of grandeur') made him blind to a force greater than his own will, heredity. Biological determinism as a fatal force is thus exploited by Zola for its poetic potential. As with Charles and Tante Dide, this moment of despair is however overcome by the end of the novel as Clotilde reflects on the birth of her son as the promise of a renewal:

> Et, après tant de Rougon terribles, après tant de Macquart abominables, il en naissait encore un. La vie ne craignait pas d'en créer un de plus, dans le défi brave de son éternité. Elle poursuivait son œuvre, se propageait selon ses lois, indifférente aux hypothèses, en marche pour son labeur infini. Au risque de faire des monstres, il fallait bien qu'elle créât, puisque, malgré les malades et les fous qu'elle crée, elle ne se lasse pas de créer, avec l'espoir sans doute que les bien portants et les sages viendront un jour. (DP, p. 1219; *But after so many terrible Rougons, after so many abominable Macquarts, yet another one had been born. With the daring defiance of its eternity, life wasn't afraid of creating one more. It went on with its work, propagated itself according to its laws, indifferent to hypotheses, moving on in its unending labour. At the risk of making monsters, it was compelled to create since, in spite of the sick and the mad it creates, it never gets tired of creating, in the hope no doubt that the healthy and the wise will come along one day.* – DP2, p. 295).

Even if Pascal's death were to be interpreted as a result of his family's poor heredity, his belief in self-regeneration is validated by the end of the novel. Although the ending is potentially contradicted by Zola's use of the tragic mode in some scenes which shows the pervasiveness of a tragic vision and aesthetic amidst scientific hopes, I interpret this novel as choosing an open ending to reaffirm its anti-tragic stance. In opposition with the tragic endings found in the cycle which symbolise the characters' inability to master their own destinies, Pascal's son represents the hope in constant human improvement which strengthen Zola's political vision: understand the laws of nature in the hope of one day using this knowledge to improve life.

### 2.2 Henrik Ibsen's *Fruen fra havet*: Overcoming Social Determinism

Ibsen's play *Fruen fra havet* (*The Lady from the Sea*) at first appears to have all the elements required by a tragedy. It stages the conflict of Doctor Wangel and his second wife, Ellida, and their struggle to communicate as Ellida seems on the verge of madness. Ellida is haunted by the promise she made to an American sailor, 'the Stranger', before her marriage, the memory of which resurfaced when she lost her child, three years before the play's action takes place. In contrast to Ibsen's two previous plays, *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*, 1884) and *Rosmersholm* (1886), the ending of *The Lady from the Sea* culminates in an optimistic note with the reconciliation of Wangel and Ellida who freely chooses to remain with her husband. Toril Moi interprets this play as a critique of the idealist aestheticization of female sacrifice and a portrayal of a modern marriage between two free individuals.[222] This couple's happy ending is however contrasted by Wangel's daughter's decision to marry, made under duress of her fiancé and social norms. In the society portrayed by Ibsen, overcoming social circumstances remains challenging for women, who are often on the brink of experiencing a tragic ending. The portrayal of two contrasting

[222] Moi (2006), p. 315.

couples serves Ibsen's political message: only through a radical change in the social institution of marriage can tragedy be overcome in real life.

In act five, when the Stranger comes back to claim Ellida, whom he believes is bound to him in a symbolic marriage, the play has the potential to fall into tragedy, as the Stranger has a revolver and claims he will use it on himself if Ellida does not follow him. The tragedy is however avoided when Wangel finally recognises Ellida's freedom to choose between the two men: 'Der er ingen anden redning mulig for dig. Jeg øjner i alle fald ingen anden. Og derfor – derfor så lar jeg – handelen nu straks gå om igen. – Nu kan du altså vælge din vej – i fuld – fuld frihed'[223] (*There is no other means of saving you. At least I can't see any. So… I agree to… cancel our transaction. Now you can choose… in absolute freedom*).[224] This leads Ellida to choose to remain with Wangel who, she declares, has been able to cure her: 'Men du har været en god læge for mig. Du *fandt*, – og du voved at *bruge* det rette middel, – det eneste, som kunde hjælpe mig' (FH, HIS: 694; *But you have been a good doctor to me. You found… and had the courage to apply… the right remedy – the only one that could help me* – FH2, p. 122). This scene depicts marriage as a 'transaction' that can be freely ended by both parties, rather than as a romantic ideal, as defended by the Stranger, or a religious and social institution whose authority is unquestionable. Wangel's acknowledgment of Ellida's right to make a free choice counters the tragic paradigm as it allows her to resolve the dilemma through a third option, affirming her autonomy and freedom.

Wangel's 'cure' for Ellida also challenges the logic of biological determinism that would condemn Ellida to madness because of her heredity, which is mentioned at the start of the play by her stepdaughter Wilde: 'Hendes mor blev jo også gal. Hun døde som gal,

[223] Henrik Ibsen, *Fruen fra havet*, ed. by The Henrik Ibsen Centre, University of Oslo <https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_FH%7CFHht.xhtml> [Accessed 03 March 2025], HIS: 691. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as FH, HIS: page number in the main text.
[224] Henrik Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea*, in *The Oxford Ibsen. Volume VII*, ed. by James Walter McFarlane and trans. by Jens Arup and James Walter McFarlane, 8 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), vii, p. 121. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as FH2 in the main text.

det véd jeg' (FH, HIS: 559; *Didn't her mother go mad! She died in the mad-house, that much I do know* – FH2, p. 56). Ellida's fall into madness is definitely avoided when she is able to make a free choice and is liberated from the guilt she had over her past. Biological determinism as an implacable form of fate is further undermined at the end of the play as the painter, Ballested, reverses the symbol of the dying mermaid. In the opening scene, Ballested describes his project for a painting, inspired by Ellida, of a mermaid dying because she cannot return to the sea. This could seem to be foreshadowing a tragic ending, but Ibsen reverses expectations at the end of the play by having Ballested declare: 'Bare med den forskel at *havfruen – hun dør af det*. Menneskene derimod – de kan aklam-akli-matisere sig. Jo, jo, – jeg forsikrer Dem, fru Wangel, – de *kan* a-kli-matisere sig!' (FH, HIS: 697; *Except for one difference. The mermaid dies. On the other hand, men and woman can acclam – acclimatize themselves. Yes, yes, I assure you Mrs. Wangel, they can… acl…cli…matize themselves* – FH2, pp. 123–24). Ballested's line – although comic because he cannot pronounce the word 'acclimatise' correctly – is a clear reference to the Darwinian belief in the survival of the fittest.[225] It suggests that through adaptation and resilience, one can overcome tragedy and that heredity is not necessarily destiny.

But this happy ending is contradicted within the play not least when, also in act five, Wangel's daughter, Bolette, is coerced by her former schoolmaster into marrying him. When she expresses her desire to explore the world and embrace freedom, he frames their marriage as her sole avenue, with a barely veiled menacing tone:

> Vil De gi' afkald på at få se noget af verden udenfor? Gi' afkald på at få være med om alt det, som De selv siger, De går her og tørster efter? Vide, at der er så uendelig meget til, – og så alligevel aldrig få rigtig rede på noget af det? Betænk Dem vel, Bolette. (FH, HIS: 676; *Are you going to abandon all thoughts of seeing something of the world outside? Abandon all those things you say you sit here dreaming about? Knowing that life has so much to offer… yet never having any real contact with it? Think well, Bolette.* – FH2, pp. 113–14)

[225] Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 76.

As Moi argues, 'The contrast between Ellida's and Bolette's choices tells us that even within a sexist society there are degrees of freedom and degrees of responsibility. Ibsen, then, is alert to the social and economic pressures that undermine women's freedom of choice'.[226] Bolette's fate is left open, but the marriage proposal hints at a potentially unhappy marriage as she did not make a free choice.

The play's examination of marriage as a social institution encourages a broader reflection on the forces of social determinism, especially on women's lives. At the time of the play's writing and staging, marriage was still deeply rooted in women's economic dependency and societal coercion. Bolette's engagement exemplifies a realistic, albeit negative, portrayal of marriage – a theme echoed in other works within my corpus. In Skram's *Lucie*, for instance, Lucie's marriage is condemned to a tragic ending as her husband uses her economic dependency to emotionally abuse her, a fate that could potentially befall Bolette. On the other hand, Ibsen's play presents Ellida's free choice as an ideal to be pursued, a choice enabled by Wangel who, as a doctor, acts according to a forward-looking rationality. The parallel made between the anti-tragic and the potentially tragic couple here serves Ibsen's political message: only through radical social change can women achieve true freedom of choice and thus overcome the potential for their destinies to fall into tragedy.

### 2.3 Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*: Parody and Repetition

In *La Marquise de Sade*, Rachilde refuses a tragic outcome for its main character, Mary Barbe, and parodies sentimental and tragic clichés. Unlike the other female protagonists in woman-authored texts analysed here, Mary is not portrayed as a passive victim of patriarchal dynamics, but as the one who brings tragedy to the men around her and is never punished for her sexual and gender transgressions. The novel also parodies the Darwinian

[226] Moi (2006), p. 314.

notion of the struggle of the fittest: unlike Zola or Ibsen who gesture toward a better future in their texts, Rachilde portrays a female protagonist who thrives in a decadent society and has no ambition of changing it. But Rachilde's social critique shines through the novel's ironic and parodic tone as this decadent society is represented as violent, especially for women and other vulnerable beings. The cyclical nature of the novel introduces some tension in Rachilde's anti-tragic stance: Mary's reversal of patriarchal dynamics leads her to merely imitate the violence she was once a victim of, thus portraying patriarchal violence as unescapable, even for the female protagonist who appears to be in power. Rachilde exploits this tension between the novel's parodic tone and its repetitive structure, reminiscent of tragedy, to amplify her social critique.

The novel's title, 'La Marquise de Sade', announces the main protagonist's gender subversion, but also Rachilde's parody of past and contemporary artistic representations of women as passive victims of male violence. As an adult, Mary is portrayed as a *femme fatale* who is in control of her environment and who shapes the lives of the men around her, displaying a will and power that a tragic character does not have. For instance, Mary stages an anagnorisis scene between her husband and her lover, Paul, more reminiscent of a boulevard play rather than a 'serious' tragedy: 'L'amant… c'est mon fils!!!…' (MS, p. 263 – *The lover… he's my son!!!*...). The exaggerated punctation heightens the comic of a scene staged by Mary who wanted to exert her vengeance on her husband: 'Eh bien! oui, avoua-t-elle, je voulais me venger ! Puis, il me plaisait. Vous m'aviez appelée courtisane. Je voulais mériter amplement cette injure et vous faire tuer votre fils. […] Je l'aime, entendez-vous? Je regrette cette scène ridicule' (MS, p. 263 – '*Well, yes!' she confessed. 'I wanted to get revenge! And I liked him. You called me a harlot. I wanted to entirely deserve this insult and make you kill your son. […] I love him, you hear? I regret this ridiculous scene'*). The novel's first level of parody is aimed at narratives representing

female characters as victims since it portrays Mary as in control of the game of adultery and the one who exerts violence on men.

A second layer of parody within the novel is Rachilde's ironic subversion of the typical trajectory of the *femme fatale* in nineteenth-century narratives, which usually represent the femme fatale as the figure who 'both gives death in return for male sexual weakness and receives death as the punishment for her wantonness'.[227] Unlike Zola's Nana who rots after bringing decay to upper Parisian society, Mary is never punished for her actions. Instead, the novel's ending shows Mary as thriving in a decadent society: 'Son être d'une chair incorruptible passait au milieu des hystéries de son temps comme la salamandre au milieu des flammes' (MS, p. 304 – *Her being, made of an incorruptible flesh, passed through the hysterias of her time, like a salamander through flames*). To use Ballested's word, Mary *acclimated* herself to a perverse society, ironically undermining sexist discourses that posit women's innate criminality, by proving that it is society that is perverse, not the individual. As Mary can adapt herself to society's perverse values, she does not meet a typically tragic ending. This parody of Darwinian adaptation underscores the violence of a society where only violent individuals can survive, mirroring the contemporary interpretation of the 'struggle of the fittest' as the 'struggle of the strongest' which fuels tragic scenarios,[228] often at the expense of the most vulnerable, namely women, children, and animals.

Despite this parodic tone and the refusal of a tragic ending, Rachilde represents Mary as trapped in a traumatic cycle in which Mary reenacts her initial trauma when acting out her sadistic desires. This brings a tension within the novel's overarching anti-tragic tendencies, as repetition underscores the character's alienation, trapped in an inescapable

[227] Lisa Downing, *Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 8.
[228] Williams, p. 39.

cycle which is reminiscent of tragedy.[229] The novel opens with Mary witnessing the killing of an ox by a butcher which traumatises her as she identifies with the animal:

> Mary fit un geste de suprême angoisse. Ses mains, qu'elle avait jointes à la façon des bébés indifférents, derrière son dos, elle les porta à sa nuque par un mouvement instinctif. Elle venait de ressentir là, juste au nœud de tous ses nerfs, le coup formidable qui assommait le colosse. (MS, p. 30 – *Mary made a gesture of supreme anguish. She brought her hands, that she had clasped behind her back, in the manner of indifferent babies, to her neck with an instinctive movement. She had just felt there, right at the knot of all of her nerves, the formidable blow that knocked out the colossus.*)

As Downing highlights, this scene shapes Mary's attitude to relationships with men and sexuality: 'rather than submit to their [men's] cruelty in the place of the slaughtered ox, she will model her own agency and identity on that of the butcher, gaining sadistic pleasure from blood-letting, cruelty and, in adulthood, murder'.[230] The repetitive nature of Mary's violence draws a parallel with what Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer observed in their hysterical patients, namely how they were reminiscing and re-enacting their initial trauma,[231] with the main difference that Mary takes on the role of the perpetrator in this reenactment. This repetition of the ox's killing only partly empowers Mary as she appears alienated by this cycle of violence that she is not able to extricate herself from.

Mary's childhood, which explains her becoming a sadistic woman, is influenced by her father's disappointment at not having a son, resulting in his mishandling of her and denial of affection, which intensifies following the birth of her brother:

> Le pire était que le colonel, ayant désiré un garçon de tout temps, se demandait quelquefois ce que signifiait la présence de cette fille, alors que le second poupard aurait dû naître le premier, mieux portant, plus vigoureux. Sans réfléchir qu'il lui avait coûté l'existence de sa femme, il lui trouvait une raison d'être, tandis que la fille lui semblait un objet inutile, représentant un avenir incertain. (MS, p. 116 – *The worst was that the colonel, having desired a boy all this time, sometimes asked himself what the presence of this girl meant, when the second child should have been born first, healthier, more vigorous. Without thinking that this boy had cost him his wife's life, he found a justification for his existence, while the girl seemed to him like a superfluous object, representing an unknown future.*)

This passage denounces how girls are not considered as subjects, but how, from their birth, their gender is viewed as an inevitable fate, limiting all their prospects. Aware of this

[229] For an exploration of tragedy and the representation of trauma, see Patrick Duggan and Mick Wallis, 'Trauma and Performance: Maps, Narratives, and Folds', *Performance Research*, 16:1 (2011), pp. 4–17.
[230] Lisa Downing, 'Sexual Perversion as Textual Resistance in the Works of Rachilde and Monique Wittig', in *Modernist Eroticisms. European Literature after Sexology*, ed. by Anna Katharina Schaffner and Shane Weller (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), pp. 195–212 (p. 198).
[231] Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studien über Hysterie* (Leipzig: Deuticke, 1895), p. 5.

injustice, Mary comes to hate her brother and does not prevent his death by suffocation, reclaiming some power. The tragic logic of patriarchal violence is further highlighted when Mary witnesses another instance of violence as she stays with Madame Corcette and her husband. After playful banter that ends with the husband physically hurting his wife, Madame Corcette tells Mary: 'C'est *toujours* la même chose […] quand on joue avec un garçon' (my emphasis; MS, p. 90 – *It is* always *the same […] when you play with a boy*). This passage suggests that male violence is systemic and thus difficult to escape, even for the protagonist who comes to dominate the men around her. Rachilde refuses the cliché of the *femme fatale* whose violence is arbitrary and detached from the patriarchal context. Instead, the novel presents Mary's violence as a survival strategy, a form of perversion stemming from her socialisation and circumstances.[232] The fact that Mary imitates male violence hints at her potential alienation and limited freedom because she seems unable to break the cycle of violence. This tragic note in Rachilde's novel serves her social critique as she pushes social contradictions *ab absurdum*: even in her freedom, Mary is still restricted by patriarchal dynamics.

The three texts discussed in this section seem to validate some theorists' claims that naturalist and, more generally, modern fiction is consciously anti-tragic. Both Ibsen and Zola represent characters who overcome tragedy by their optimism and who are able to liberate themselves from external constraints. Nevertheless, those texts present episodes in which the tragic logic comes back in full force, depicting characters struggling to overcome their circumstances. The hope for liberation from socially constructed expectations, especially in Ibsen's play, is portrayed as difficult to attain. Zola also uses the tragic to heighten the aesthetic effect of some scenes, while Rachilde questions the possibility of the female protagonist escaping the repetitive cycle of patriarchal violence. I

[232] Staron, p. 152.

argue that this tension between a tragic and anti-tragic worldview is a conscious feature of these texts as it serves their social critique: showing the limits of the characters' freedom, mainly brought about the constraints of social determinism, is meant to encourage readers to understand what it takes to avoid tragedy in contemporary reality. While Zola and Ibsen do present alternatives to the current social models, Rachilde's subversion lies in its refusal to provide any solution and its invitation to readers to reflect on the discrepancy between the *femme fatale* myth and women's lived reality in a patriarchal society. These texts deploy a different strategy from the texts discussed in the next section as they refuse a tragic ending for their characters, but they share the same objective: bring readers to an anagnorisis to invite them to overcome tragedy in their own social reality.

## III. Anagnorisis and Catharsis: The Tragic Mode as a Political Tool

Most texts in the naturalist canon and by women writers engaging in a hypertextual dialogue with naturalism follow a tragic pattern: they portray characters disempowered by external forces and brought to a tragic ending. The narratives replace the ancient concept of fatality, born out of a divine will, with the forces of reality itself, namely determinism, be it biological, social, or psychological.[233] Just like the texts discussed in the previous section, however, these narratives ultimately reject fatalism by using the tragic mode to convey a political message, and engage with categories from the tradition of tragedy to fortify their political stance. These narratives represent women's lives as tragic on the narrative level, but also invite their implied reader to reflect on the arbitrariness of the characters' trajectory, suggesting that the tragic outcome could have been potentially altered. Such a politicisation of the tragic mode aligns with Christoph Menke's conceptualisation of the modern tragedy as prompting what Menke calls a 'metatragic' reflection, leading readers and spectators to the realisation that tragedy is not the end.[234]

[233] Baguley (1990), p. 100.
[234] Christoph Menke, *Die Gegenwart der Tragödie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), p. 98.

Unlike the tragic protagonists who are unable to learn from the catastrophic events that befall them, the audience is invited to reflect on the tragic story and learn from it, in order to act on reality.[235] The subsequent close readings in this section each demonstrate how naturalist authors and women writers employ traditional features of tragedy and modernise them to enhance their political message.

To demonstrate these authors' use of the tragic mode as a political tool, I explore how they modernise the Aristotelean concepts of anagnorisis and catharsis. This is not because I believe that any tragic plot must strictly adhere to Aristotelian rules (as critics like Steiner suggest), rather, my analysis acknowledges that both concepts were debated by nineteenth-century European writers as landmarks of the tragic tradition, which my authors adapt as a means of representing modern realities.[236] In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines anagnorisis as a moment of recognition, the passage from ignorance to knowledge: the tragic protagonist becomes aware of their actual situation, an awareness that most often brings about a reversal of their condition.[237] In adapting it to modern concerns, naturalist authors infuse the scene of anagnorisis with additional meaning. As Baguley comments, it becomes a scene in which the tragic protagonist is confronted with their own degraded image.[238] In women writers' narratives, this recognition of the loss of self comes with the protagonist's realisation that her trajectory is shaped by social discourses which she is unable to change. These moments represent a tipping point, where the character ultimately gives up and either dies or becomes entirely passive.

These scenes of anagnorisis are rendered even more poignant by the characters' inability to express their own suffering. Unlike the eloquence of ancient or classical tragic

[235] Menke, p. 122.
[236] In the second half of the nineteenth century French authors still grapple with the weight of the classical tradition, represented by Racine, while German authors are heirs of authors like Lessing and Lenz who consciously moved away from Aristotelian and classical conventions. See Gail Finney, 'Modern Theater and the Tragic in Europe', in *A Companion to Tragedy*, *op.cit.*, pp. 471–87.
[237] Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 1.
[238] Baguley (1995), p. 85.

characters, these female protagonists only have a stilted language, hindering them from sharing their suffering and being understood. As Terry Eagleton notes:

> If, as some believe, one transcends the tragic in the act of articulating it, then those who have lost the power to name their condition, or who never had it in the first place, may well be considered the most lamentable of all.[239]

While the characters recognise their inability to change their own situation, I argue that the writers of my corpus leverage the pathos and heightened sense of tragic of these scenes to evoke an anagnorisis in their implied reader – a recognition intended to inspire political action.

This moment of recognition is closely bound up with catharsis, that is, the emotions the implied reader should feel when facing the tragic recognition of the characters' powerlessness and inevitable doom. Aristotle's definition of catharsis and its exact translation is contested but is commonly described as an emotional response, a combination of pity and fear, brought about by the form and content of a tragedy.[240] For Aristotle, the purging of the audience's emotions when witnessing the characters' tragic fate on stage is a tool for the city-state (*polis*) to function properly. Pity and fear provoked by the tragic action allow spectators to overcome these emotions, making tragedy 'an instrument for regulating social feelings', a sort of safety valve where harmful emotions are expressed and released, preventing them from disturbing the community.[241] Over the course of the nineteenth century, catharsis acquired an additional signification, linked to emerging scientific discourses. Catharsis for the German philologist Jacob Bernays serves as a psychological release of bad emotions, restoring an individual's psychological equilibrium, a theory which inspired Freud's concept of the talking cure as a means of

[239] Eagleton (2003), p. 69.
[240] Andrew S. Mason mentions that 'catharsis' can either be translated through the medical term of 'purgation' or the religious concept of 'purification'. For a more general discussion of debates around the understandings of catharsis, see the whole chapter 'Aristotle, Catharsis', in Andrew S. Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 87–100.
[241] Eagleton (2003), p. 153.

emotional release.[242] This medical conception of catharsis is meant to heal individuals, arguably with the same goal as in Aristotle's theory, namely, to maintain social stability.

In *Le Roman expérimental*, Zola appropriates this medical conception of catharsis, presenting the naturalist writer as complementary to the doctor, but infuses it with a political dimension: by representing social ills in order to heal them, naturalist fiction does not aim at an individual catharsis, but at a collective one:

> Nous cherchons les causes du mal social ; nous faisons l'anatomie des classes et des individus pour expliquer les détraquements qui se produisent dans la société et dans l'homme. […] Mais nous apportons les documents nécessaires pour qu'on puisse, en les connaissant, dominer le bien et le mal. (RE, p. 101 – *We seek the causes of social ill; we make the anatomy of social classes and individuals to explain the disorders that occur in society and man. […] But we bring the necessary documents so that we can, by knowing them, dominate good and evil.*)

The naturalists' use of the tragic mode coupled with scientific knowledge is meant to empower readers and offer a remedy to social problems. Instead of aiming for an individual psychological release that maintains the status quo, the authors discussed in this chapter ground their representation of 'the silent tragic of the everyday' in the sociological reality of the time: they provide the reader with a realist representation of contemporary women's condition but infuse it with tragic emotion to provoke reader's indignation and call for social change.

In the following sections, I explore how the authors discussed reflect on the tensions between free will and determinism in modern society, and their consequences on women's lives especially. Both Zola and Ibsen reject the idea of a divine agency controlling their characters' trajectories, but still show them as trapped by biological and social determinism. Zola's and Ibsen's texts however focus on what can be changed, namely social conditions and bourgeois norms, demanding an active and critical anagnorisis on the part of their audience. Inspired by naturalist fiction, Peyrebrune, Dohm, Skram, and Reuter craft their narratives using the tragic mode to denounce the role of

[242] Peter-André Alt, 'Katharsis und Ekstasis. Die Restitution der Tragödie als Ritual aus dem Geist der Psychoanalyse', in *Die Tragödie der Moderne. Gattungsgeschichte – Kulturtheorie – Epochendiagnose*, ed. by Daniel Fulda and Thorsten Valk (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 177–205 (pp. 182–83).

social discourses in their female protagonists' loss of freedom. Their texts invite a reflection on social prejudices that cast women as biologically determined and thus impede their will. As in naturalist fiction, gender and class become the main factors behind the female protagonists' tragic trajectories. Modernising the concepts of anagnorisis and catharsis, the texts discussed here use the tragic mode as a political tool meant to elicit the implied reader's sympathy and encourage political action.

### III.1 Émile Zola's *L'Assommoir*: Gervaise Macquart and 'les hasards du pavé'

In his preparatory notes for *L'Assommoir*, Zola claims to represent 'la femme du peuple' (*the working-class woman*) and her environment.[243] The novel portrays Gervaise Macquart's journey from her initial ascent from poverty to her death by starvation in the Parisian neighbourhood of la Goutte d'Or. After the Brothers Goncourt's *Germinie Lacerteux*, *L'Assommoir* is a prime example of the naturalist modernisation of tragedy where sociological forces – mainly class and gender – become the driving factors of the characters' downfall. At the beginning of the novel, Gervaise explains her modest hopes for the future to Coupeau, a friendly roofer, whom she will marry despite her promise to never remarry after being abandoned by her lover and father of her two sons:

> Mon Dieu ! je ne suis pas ambitieuse, je ne demande pas grand-chose… Mon idéal, ce serait de travailler tranquille, de manger toujours du pain, d'avoir un trou un peu propre pour dormir, vous savez, un lit, une table et deux chaises, pas davantage… Ah ! je voudrais aussi élever mes enfants, en faire de bons sujets, si c'était possible… Il y a encore un idéal, ce serait de ne pas être battue, si je me remettais jamais en ménage ; non, ça ne me plairait pas d'être battue…[244] (*I don't want anythin' special, you know, I don't ask for much… My ideal would be to get on with me work in peace, always have somethin' to eat and somewhere decent to sleep… You know, just a bed, a table, and a couple of chairs, that's all… Oh, and I'd like, if I could, to bring up me kids and make sure they're good, decent people… And there's one other thing I'd like, if I ever lived with somebody again, it's not to get knocked about; no, I really don't want to be knocked about…*)[245]

[243] Émile Zola, 'Dossier préparatoire de *L'Assommoir*', in *La Fabrique des Rougon-Macquart. Édition des dossiers préparatoires*, ed. by Colette Becker and Véronique Lavielle, 8 vols (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005), ii (folio 158), p. 936.
[244] Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire II*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), ii, pp. 410–11. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as A in the main text.
[245] Émile Zola, *The Assommoir*, trans. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2021), p. 37. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as A2 in the main text.

The tragic irony of this passage resides in Gervaise's gradual descent into the antithesis of her humble dreams, building a reversed anticipation of her trajectory. Out of laziness, Gervaise progressively abandons her work ethic, ultimately dying of starvation in an undignified 'trou' (*hole*), having lost all her material wealth. She loses contact with her sons and her daughter, Nana, born from her marriage with Coupeau, will become a prostitute. The couple is initially prosperous, but Coupeau's fall into alcoholism, mirroring his father's journey, transforms him into a violent man. The novel is exemplary of what Jean Borie calls Zola's tragic worldview,[246] offering a reflection on free will and the protagonist's limited options for escape, a theme typical of tragedy. This fictional sociological study portrays how Gervaise's fate, instead of being dictated by a divine agency, is shaped by multiple factors, spanning biological, social, and psychological determinism. Zola's use of the tragic mode has political implications: the complex entanglement of various forms of determinism remains out of Gervaise's understanding and control, but the reader is invited to recognise the main factor behind her downfall, namely her environment. As we saw in Zola's response to critics who accused him of having misrepresented the working class and thus undermining its militant message, the challenges Gervaise faces are not portrayed as inevitable, but as subject to change.

In accordance with Zola's overall project, *L'Assommoir* mentions Gervaise's biological heredity. This inheritance is already made clear in the description of Gervaise's conception in the cycle's opening, *La Fortune des Rougon*:

> Conçue dans l'ivresse, sans doute pendant une de ces nuits honteuses où les époux s'assommaient, elle avait la cuisse droite déviée et amaigrie, étrange reproduction héréditaire des brutalités que sa mère avait eu à endurer dans une heure de lutte et de soûlerie furieuse.[247] (*Conceived when her parents were drunk, no doubt during one of the nights when they beat each other senseless, her right thigh was smaller than the left and showed signs of curvature, a curious hereditary result of the brutality her mother had to endure during her drunken brawls with Macquart.*)[248]

[246] Jean Borie, *Zola et les mythes ou de la nausée au salut* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 30.
[247] Émile Zola, *La Fortune des Rougon*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire I*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), i, p. 124.
[248] Émile Zola, *The Fortune of the Rougons*, trans. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2020), p. 115.

This passage emphasises Gervaise's disability as a tangible reminder of the heredity weighing on her fate,[249] as well as her parents' alcoholism which is a major factor in her downfall. Domestic violence is inscribed on her body and Gervaise will also become a victim of it, mirroring her mother's trajectory. Gervaise's journey is determined by both physiology and gender because, as is often the case in Zola's *Rougon-Macquart*, it is implied that it is the mother's heredity which is most influential, tracing back to the family's origins with Tante Dide. The weight of matrilineal heredity on the characters suggests that the tragic is born out of women.[250] The impact of gender on Gervaise's tragedy is not entirely biological, but also grounded in sociological reality: Gervaise unwittingly repeats her mother's fate because of her social vulnerability.

Despite these details in *La Fortune* and the beginning of *L'Assommoir*, Gervaise's biological heritage is not the focus of the novel and cannot entirely account for the dynamics behind her downfall. With *L'Assommoir*, Zola aims to represent a set environment, a working-class Parisian neighbourhood: '*L'étude du milieu sur une femme ni bonne ni mauvaise*, qui a déjà eu de tristes exemples sous les yeux, mais prête par sa nature à réagir et à travailler' (The study of the environment on a woman, neither good nor bad, *who has already witnessed bad examples, but ready by her nature to react and work*).[251] Gervaise's balanced nature corresponds to Aristotle's idea of a tragic hero who should be neither a villain, nor an innocent individual brought to a pathetic ending: 'the person in between: a man not outstanding in virtue or justice, brought down through vice or depravity, who falls into adversity not through vice or depravity but because he errs in some way'.[252] Aristotle's ideal tragic hero is 'everyman', but its gendering is far from

[249] Shoshana-Rose Marzel, 'Narrative of Feminine Illness in Émile Zola's *Rougon-Macquart*', *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research*, 6:2 (2017), pp. 107–22 (p. 117).
[250] Margarita López Mendez, 'Construction déterministe du personnage féminin chez Émile Zola et Miguel de Carrión', *Literatura: teoría, historia, crítica*, 21 (2019), pp. 93–115 (p. 110).
[251] Zola, 'Dossier préparatoire de *L'Assommoir*', folio 112, *op.cit.*, pp. 898–99.
[252] Aristotle, p. 32.

neutral, as Wohl highlights that for Aristotle the tragic 'everyman' is 'literally, a man'.[253] It is significant that Zola adapts Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero and its idea of typicality but changes its gendering: for Zola, the best conveyor of the modern tragedy is a working-class woman whose social circumstances shape her trajectory.

During her conversation with Coupeau at the start of the novel, Gervaise herself supports this idea that the environment plays a key role in one's life:

> Son rêve était de vivre dans une société honnête, parce que la mauvaise société, disait-elle, c'était comme un coup d'assommoir, ça vous cassait le crâne, ça vous aplatissait une femme en moins de rien. Elle se sentait prise d'une sueur devant l'avenir et se comparait à un sou lancé en l'air, retombant pile ou face, selon les hasards du pavé. (A, p. 417; *Her dream was to live with nice people, because if you're in bad company, she said, it was like being bashed on the head, it cracked your skull open and knocked you flat in no time, if you were a woman. She dreaded thinking about the future and said she was like a coin tossed up and landing heads or tails, depending on how it hit the pavement.* – A2, p. 43)

Her comparison to 'un sou lancé en l'air' (*coin tossed up*) and the addition of an element of chance – 'les hasards du pavé' (not conveyed in the translation: '*the coincidences of the pavement*') – is a particularly telling image of Gervaise's tragedy because it is her environment that not only witnesses her rise and fall but also actively contributes to it. The neighbourhood of La Goutte d'Or – whose name is obviously ironic because its several taverns represent a threat for a former alcoholic like Gervaise – marks the limits of the protagonist's space and opportunities. It is from the 'pavement' that Gervaise witnesses Coupeau's fall, his physical fall anticipating her symbolical one.[254] The pavement is also the symbol of the ultimate humiliation for Gervaise because, in chapter twelve, she is reduced to 'arpenter le pavé' (A, p. 760; *walking up and down the streets* – A2, p. 361),[255] that is begging and prostituting herself. In a moment of anagnorisis, expressed through the use of free indirect speech, Gervaise comes to recognise the tragic irony of her fate:

> Non, vrai, c'était comique, comme tout ça se réalisait ! Elle ne travaillait plus, elle ne mangeait plus, elle dormait sur l'ordure, sa fille courait le guilledou, son mari lui flanquait des tatouilles ; *il ne lui restait qu'à crever sur le pavé*. (My emphasis; A, p. 778; *No, really, it was quite funny how it was all turning out! She wasn't working any more, she wasn't eating any more, she slept in filth, her*

[253] Wohl, p. 145.
[254] Claude Seassau, *Émile Zola : Le Réalisme symbolique* (Paris: José Corti, 1989), p. 370.
[255] Brian Nelson translates 'pavé' as both 'street' and 'pavement', thus breaking the metaphorical links made between all the mentions of the 'pavé' in the original.

> *daughter was on the game, her husband beat her black and blue; the only thing that could happen to her now was that she'd peg out in the street.* – A2, p. 378)

The 'pavé' marks the start and end of Gervaise's fate and becomes a symbol for social determinism, illustrating the impossibility for the female character to escape her condition.

When she finally recognises her own fall, watching her grotesque shadows on the street of La Goutte d'Or, the moment of anagnorisis comes too late for Gervaise to change anything:

> Puis, lorsqu'elle s'éloignait, le guignol grandissait, devenait géant, emplissait le boulevard, avec des révérences qui lui cassaient le nez contre les arbres et contre les maisons. Mon Dieu ! qu'elle était drôle et effrayante ! Jamais elle n'avait si bien compris son avachissement. (A, p. 772; *Then, when she moved away, the clown grew bigger, gigantic, filling the whole boulevard, giving bows that made it knock its head against the trees and houses. My God! What an odd, frightening sight! She'd never realized how far she'd sunk.* – A2, p. 372)

The use of free indirect speech here highlights the tension between Gervaise's own responsibility and the multiple factors that led her there in the first place – a tension typical of nineteenth-century tragedies that reject ideas of 'original sin' but rather reflect on the idea of 'tragic responsibility'.[256] Zola maintains this tension between Gervaise's responsibility and external factors to convey his political message: by changing some factors, Gervaise, who is not inherently bad or 'cursed' by a divine fate, could have been saved. As Zola summarises, the moral of this novel is 'Fermez les cabarets, ouvrez les écoles' (*Close the pubs, open the schools*), emphasising the need to change the social circumstances of the most vulnerable.[257] *L'Assommoir* describes how Gervaise, who was at first hardworking and capable to rise above her initial condition, is gradually condemned to passively accept her downfall. The image of Gervaise as a grotesque clown symbolises her alienation in a violent and poor environment. Rather than being used to convey a pessimistic worldview, Zola's use of the tragic mode makes Gervaise's story more poignant for readers to encourage them to reflect on the social factors underlying her downfall.

[256] Thomas Rice Henn, *The Harvest of Tragedy* (London: Methuen & Co, 1966), p. 5.
[257] Zola, 'Lettre à Yves Guyot', *op.cit.*, p. 805.

## III.2 Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*: Helene Alving and Tragic Irony

Ibsen's *Gengangere* (*Ghosts*, 1881) renews the tragic mode by making it relevant to a modern setting and by portraying the tension between the characters' hope of controlling their fate and the unavoidable tragic catastrophe. *Ghosts* stages the reunion of Helene Alving, a middle-class widow, with her son Osvald whom she sent abroad to protect him from what she deemed was his late father's detrimental influence. When Osvald discloses his illness – implied to be syphilis[258] – and his hope of marrying Regine, the maid who is in fact his half-sister, Helene is forced to confront her inability to shield her son from repeating his father's fate. The play ends with Osvald begging his mother to kill him to avoid falling into madness. For Borie, a contemporary audience would have seen this play as a fictionalisation of contemporary medical theories around heredity.[259] Neither the audience nor the characters can be certain, however, whether it is indeed biological determinism that leads Osvald to unknowingly repeat his father's actions, or whether it is social norms that drive individuals to unconsciously mimic their ancestors.[260] Helene's attempts to control Osvald's trajectory are revealed as illusory,[261] symbolic of the play's tragic irony. Menke defines tragic irony, building on an analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, as the process inviting the audience to reflect on how the tragic hero's destiny is self-inflicted, namely how the tragic hero, through his actions and words, brings about his own tragedy. Tragic irony arises when the tragic protagonist believes they have distanced themselves from the tragic events, yet their reflections on the action prove misguided.[262] In *Ghosts*, tragic conflict is no longer created by a divine will, but by social forces,[263] which

[258] Evert Sprinchorn, 'Syphilis in Ibsen's *Ghosts*', *Ibsen's Studies*, 4:2 (2004), pp. 191–204 (p. 192).
[259] Jean Borie, *Un siècle démodé. Prophètes et réfractaires au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Payot, 1989), p. 78.
[260] Eivind Tjønneland argues that this hesitation reflects contemporary debates around acquired traits. Eivind Tjønneland, 'Repetition, Recollection and Heredity in Ibsen's Ghosts – The Context of Intellectual History', in *Ibsen on the Cusp of the 21st Century. Critical perspectives*, ed. by Pål Bjørby, Alvhild Dvergsdal, and Idar Stegane (Laksevåg: Alvheim & Eide, 2005), pp. 193–205 (p. 200).
[261] Asbjørn Aarseth, 'Ibsen's two most tragic dramas', in *Ibsen, Tragedy, and The Tragic. Ibsen Conference in Athens 2002 (Acta Ibseniana II)* (Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies, 2003), pp. 99–107 (p. 102).
[262] Menke, pp. 63–65.
[263] K.M. Newton, *Modern Literature and the Tragic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 12.

overpower the characters, shattering their illusion of control. Ibsen uses the tragic mode in this play to invite spectators to reflect on the impact of social determinism in modern life and recognise that overcoming tragedy requires challenging and resisting oppressive social norms.

For Ibsen's characters, heredity has become a source of terror. More than Osvald – whose fall into madness and yearning for death could also be viewed as tragic – Helene's fate is tragic because of her awareness of Osvald's father's past and her inability to prevent her son from repeating it.[264] Helene appears at first to be a self-assured woman who tries to free herself from the constraints of social norms: 'Ja, dette med lov og orden! Jeg tror mangengang, det er *det*, som volder alle ulykkerne her i verden. […] Jeg må arbejde mig ud til frihed' (G, HIS: 447; *Oh, all this law and order! I often think that's the cause of all the trouble in the world! […] I must work myself free* – G2, pp. 381–82). When she explains to Pastor Manders her reasons for sending Osvald abroad as a boy, it appears that Helene believes in deterministic laws, claiming that she had removed Osvald from the paternal home so that he could not imitate his father's example: 'Jeg vilde ikke, at Osvald, min egen gut, skulde ta' nogetsomhelst i arv efter sin far' (G, HIS: 438; *I did not want Oswald, my son, to inherit a single thing from his father* – G2, p. 377). This view reveals the tragic tension in Helene's choice, though: her trying to claim her son as hers alone, rather than a mix of both his parents, could be seen as a sign of hubris. She presents herself as entirely in control of the play's action, of the dynamics of her son's life, by trying to avoid the consequences of his heredity: 'Men *så* er også dette lange stygge komediespil tilende. Fra iovermorgen af skal det være for mig, som om den døde aldrig havde levet i dette hus. Her skal ingen anden være, end min gut og hans mor' (G, HIS: 441; *But* then *this long, ghastly farce will be over. After tomorrow, I shall feel as though that man had never lived in this house. There'll be nobody else here but my son and his mother* – G2, p. 378).

[264] Aarseth, p. 103.

This passage is typical of the play's use of tragic irony: in a kind of *mise-en-abyme* moment, Helene presents herself as a stage director, but the rest of the play invites the spectator to reflect that Helene's sense of control is only illusory. Helene's past decision betrays some degree of naivety: if Osvald's disease is indeed congenital, the result of biological determinism, then it is virtually impossible to prevent it. Because she sent Osvald away, however, it seems that Helene believes that an individual's milieu is the most important determining factor, but by doing so, she lost her influence over him. Whether biological or social determinism, the result is the same, Osvald has contracted syphilis and is bound to go the same path that his father, namely madness.

Helene's hope to exorcise the past is delusory because Osvald is no longer a 'boy' whom his mother could control or deny his free will. That is why she feels as though she has seen a ghost when she surprises him in his attempt to seduce Regine, because the scene repeats her late-husband's own act of adultery with Regine's mother:

> Gengangeragtigt. Da jeg hørte Regine og Osvald derinde, var det som jeg så gengangere for mig. Men jeg tror næsten, vi er gengangere allesammen, pastor Manders. Det er ikke bare det, vi har arvet fra far og mor, som går igen i os. Det er alleslags gamle afdøde meninger og alskens gammel afdød tro og sligt noget. Det er ikke levende i os; men det sidder i alligevel og vi kan ikke bli' det kvit. (G, HIS: 452; *Ghosts. When I heard Regine and Osvald in there, it was just like seeing ghosts. But then I'm inclined to think that we are all ghosts, Pastor Manders, every one of us. It's not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunt us. It's all kind of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs theories, and things like that. It's not that they actually* live *on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them.* – G2, p. 384).

The ghosts represent the past haunting the characters in the form of social discourses, leading them to imitate the dead to sustain social norms.[265] This recognition of the role of social forces in human life is incomplete, however, because Helene still thinks of herself as above them at this point in the play,[266] and she is still trying to control another individual's life.

Helene undergoes a second instance of anagnorisis through her conversations with Osvald and his search for 'livsglæde' (*joy of living*): 'Du kom før til at tale om livsglæden;

[265] Michael Meeuwis, 'Politics of City and Nation', in *A Cultural History of Tragedy in the Age of Empire*, *op.cit.*, pp. 105–20 (p. 117).
[266] Newton, p. 14.

og da gik der ligesom et nyt lys op for mig over alle tingene i hele mit liv. […] I *ham* var livsglæden oppe, du!' (G, HIS: 506; *You were talking earlier about the joy of living. And suddenly I seemed to see my whole life… everything in a new light. […]* He *had plenty of the joy of living, I can tell you!* – G2, p. 412). Helene finally realises her own role in the unhappiness of their marriage, recognising that it was caused by her strict upbringing and the bourgeois values she brought to their home:

> De havde lært mig noget om pligter og sligt noget, som jeg har gået her og troet på så længe. Alting så munded det ud i pligterne – i *mine* pligter og i *hans* pligter og –. Jeg er ræd, jeg har gjort hjemmet uudholdeligt for din stakkers far, Osvald. (G, HIS: 508; *They'd taught me various things about duty and suchlike, and I'd simply gone on believing them. Everything seemed to come down to duty in the end* – my *duty and* his *duty and… I'm afraid I must have made the house unbearable for your poor father, Oswald.* – G2, p. 413)

In this second anagnorisis scene, Helene recognises that she was not entirely a passive victim in her marriage, but that her own interiorisation of social norms actively contributed to its deterioration.[267] While the characters are shown as unable to escape these forces on the narrative level, the audience is invited to undergo the same process of anagnorisis, to recognise that the true threat to individual happiness and the attainment of the 'joy of living' lies in outdated and rigid social norms.

But this realisation comes too late for Helene as Osvald confesses that he does not truly know his father or mother and can therefore not love them, shattering Helene's belief in the inherent love children have for their parents: 'Når et barn ikke har noget at takke sin far for? Aldrig har kendt ham? Holder du virkelig fast ved den gamle overtro, du, som er så oplyst forresten?' (G, HIS: 513; *What if a child has nothing to thank its father for? Never knew him? You don't really believe in this old superstition still, do you? And you so enlightened in other ways?* – G2, p. 416). Osvald mocks his mother's pride at having transcended old prejudices, revealing that she has not truly overcome all of her inherited beliefs. Their confrontation and revelations culminate in Helene's tragic dilemma at the end of the play, as Osvald asks her to end his life. It is logical, in the economy of the play,

[267] Newton, p. 16.

to make Helene face this choice because she was the one who flattered herself as being in control of her son's destiny, and indeed now she has the power to end it: 'Jeg har ikke bedt dig om livet. Og hvad er det for et slags liv, du har givet mig? Jeg vil ikke ha' det! Du skal ta' det igen!' (G, HIS: 522; *I never asked you for life. And what sort of life is this you've given me? I don't want it! Take it back!* – G2, p. 420). As Theoharis C. Theoharis points out, Osvald's demand 'redefines motherhood for Helene, precisely in the terms of freedom and action she has never been able to take for her own, but has always wanted to live by'.[268] This radical redefinition of motherhood builds the tragic irony of the ending as Osvald gives Helene the power she prided herself to have all along, namely the control of her son's life and demands her to overcome her prejudices.

The play's open ending, leaving Helene's tragic dilemma unresolved, does not provide the audience with any catharsis, in the sense that it offers neither reconciliation, nor resignation and thus leaves the reader or spectator responsible for extracting a moral from it.[269] The play also never clarifies the ultimate cause of the tragic catastrophe: while we could believe that Osvald's illness is caused by biological determinism and is thus inevitable, the play focuses largely on Helene and the role of social discourses in shaping her character and behaviour. Even if she undergoes several moments of recognition, Helene is still portrayed as imprisoned by social prejudices. Helene's belief in deterministic laws leads her to deny her son's free will and autonomy, offering a critique of contemporary family dynamics and their constraints on individual freedom. While for KM. Newton this reversal of catharsis marks Ibsen's rejection of tragedy, as 'the audience at the end of *Ghosts* ought to feel contempt for the socio-cultural system that has precipitated this disaster',[270] I argue that it is a conscious manipulation of the tragic mode to provoke a political anagnorisis. Ibsen employs the tragic mode to encourage spectators to challenge

[268] Theoharis, p. 88.
[269] Rice Henn, p. 178.
[270] Newton, p. 17.

bourgeois values and their destructive influence, as depicted on stage. While the characters realise the oppressive weight of social norms too late, the play offers the audience an opportunity for an active and socially critical anagnorisis which leads them to examine and perhaps eradicate the 'ghosts' that burden their own reality.

### III.3 Georges de Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge*: Victoire and Social Vulnerability

Georges de Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge* (1883) is reminiscent of the portrayal of working-class protagonists by the Brothers Goncourt and Zola in how it depicts the eponymous character's tragedy as stemming from her class and gender vulnerability. As an illegitimate child, Victoire is considered an outsider by the rural milieu which further ostracises her when she is raped and becomes pregnant three times. After her second pregnancy, Victoire commits an infanticide out of fear of being discovered. Her imprisonment, which is not described in the text, leads her to exhibit what the narrator calls 'un masque farouche et froid, presque tragique' (V, p. 124 – *a fierce and cold mask, almost tragic*). The story culminates in Victoire's suicide after being rejected by her lover on announcing her third pregnancy. Despite its unflinching portrayal of sexual and class violence, Peyrebrune's novel rejects any form of exaggerated pathos often found in nineteenth-century novels depicting working-class characters. Peyrebrune's political use of the tragic mode leads her to subvert some tragic tropes that are unsuitable for depicting a farming maid. The portrayal of Victoire is however marked by a tension in how Peyrebrune sets her up for tragedy: on the one hand, Peyrebrune deploys some naturalist tropes by portraying Victoire as close to nature and driven by primal instincts, which partly excuse her actions as being motivated by her survival instinct. On the other hand, Peyrebrune's social critique is aimed at a community that condemns Victoire from the start because of her social origins. The novel questions contemporary theories of innate criminality by highlighting the influence of class and social vulnerability on Victoire's

trajectory. Peyrebrune elevates Victoire to tragic dignity by portraying her journey from an unrefined, almost animalistic woman, into a sensitive and unjustly condemned character. In this section, I explore how *Victoire la Rouge* illustrates how an exaggerated belief in biological determinism condemns socially vulnerable women to a tragic fate, thus rejecting the idea that Victoire is only a victim of her instincts.

At the start of the novel, Victoire is compared to a beast and defined by her proximity to nature and basic instincts in descriptions reminiscent of naturalist fiction:

> Elle avait les inconsciences natives de l'être primitif, ses appétits, ses instincts et aussi son attachement pour la nature féconde qui donne la vie et germe sans cesse afin de nourrir la progéniture immense qui se colle à ses flancs. (V, p. 125 – *She had the innate unconsciousness of the primitive being, their appetites, their instincts, and also their attachment to fertile Nature that gives life and germinates endlessly to feed her immense offspring that clings to her flanks.*)

This connection to nature and fecundity adds an element of tension in Peyrebrune's realistic style, as Victoire's repeated pregnancies appear improbable, a form of exaggerated bad luck. However, they drive the tragic narrative, condemning Victoire to repeatedly being rejected by the rural community which deems her a 'fallen woman'. By the end of the novel, Victoire comes to see her own fecundity and survival instinct as a curse: 'Mais pourquoi aussi avait-elle faim ? Sans cet appétit de vivre qui la travaillait avec une force plus grande, à mesure qu'elle passait ses vingt-cinq ans, elle serait peut-être demeurée un soir dans quelque fossé profond, se laissant mourir' (V, p. 132 – *But why was she hungry ? Without this appetite for life which affected her with greater force as she passed her twenty-five years, she would have perhaps remained one evening in some deep ditch, letting herself die*). Peyrebrune subverts the contemporary idealisation of life instinct and fecundity by depicting Victoire's survival instinct as a malediction, repeatedly condemning her to victimisation as she is unable to escape male violence and her community's harsh judgments. While these descriptions of Victoire could seem dehumanising as they fit the contemporary cliché of working-class women as brutes, they align with the novel's tragic logic. Victoire's reliance on her survival instincts stems from her extreme vulnerability in a

social environment that both exploits and rejects her. Victoire's tragedy lies in being trapped by her social condition which prevents her from transcending the physical realm and her instincts.

To designate social determinism as the primary factor behind Victoire's tragedy, Peyrebrune employs the motif of blood and the act of killing animals in a subversive manner. These are misinterpreted by middle-class characters as a sign of Victoire's inherent cruelty when they are, in fact, a straightforward reminder of her social status. After being forced to abandon her first child to a religious orphanage, Victoire is employed by Madame Maleyrac, a stingy and judgmental farm owner. Madame Maleyrac exaggerates what she deems to be Victoire's insensibility in front of her guests who are witnessing the maid plucking a duck:

> Victoire entendait des voix apitoyées qui plaignaient les pauvres bêtes sans défense, que ces misérables servantes martyrisaient. Mais ces filles n'avaient ni cœur, ni entrailles : des brutes. […] Madame Maleyrac racontait en gémissant que la Victoire avait saigné un porc, toute seule, sans la moindre émotion. (V, p. 87 – *Victoire heard pitying voices that felt sorry for these poor defenceless animals that these despicable servants tortured. But these girls had neither heart nor guts: they were brutes. […] Madame Maleyrac bemoaned that Victoire had bled a pig, alone, without the slightest emotion.*)

The scene ends on Victoire's exclamation : 'Faut bien que quelqu'un le fasse, pourtant !' (V, p. 87 – *Someone needs to do it, though!*). What could be read as a foreshadowing of Victoire's infanticide is annulled by the practicality of her remark, acting as a reminder of her status as farm maid. Peyrebrune subverts the technique of tragic foreshadowing to highlight that Victoire is not inherently violent, but that her acts are determined by her social vulnerability.

It is also the blood of an animal that is splashed on Victoire's dress when she takes the police officer to the place of her crime: 'la Victoire passait, sinistre dans ses jupes éclaboussées de rouge, les mains sanglantes' (V, p. 117 – *Victoire went by, sinister with her skirt splashed with red and her bloody hands*). This portrayal of a bloody Victoire, exaggerating her nickname 'la Rouge' (*the red one*), originally attributed to her because of

her red hair, feeds into the contemporary belief that criminality is marked onto one's body, that its physical signs are apparent.[271] The community is only able to condemn her in retrospect, pretending that they could tell she was a criminal: 'ils disaient que l'on voyait bien qu'elle était née pour le crime, celle que l'on appelait sinistrement la Rouge' (V, p. 120 – *they said that you could easily see that she was born for crime, the one they grimly called 'la Rouge'*). The reader is aware that this blood comes from her slaughtering an animal for her employers, not from her infanticide. This passage suggests that the witnesses misinterpret this blood as a mark of her inherent cruelty, thereby challenging ideas of innate criminality and undermining the tragic trope of the tragic character's guilt being visibly inscribed on their body.

The ending of the novel further challenges the concept of biological determinism as it depicts Victoire finding safety and contentment as the mistress of a farmer who lets her take care of the household and adopt animals. Once Victoire's basic needs are fulfilled – food, shelter, and affection – her instincts are refined and she moves beyond her animalistic state: 'C'était en quelque sorte l'épanouissement d'un être moral sous le coup d'un rayon de bonheur' (V, p. 171 – *It was in a way the blossoming of a moral being brought about by a ray of happiness*). This positive reversal of her fortune however marks the end of her survival instinct and her wish to live and challenges the idea that she is biologically determined. This moment of respite indeed heightens Victoire's despair once the farmer rejects her and her unborn child:

> Autant valait en finir tout de suite. D'ailleurs, le désespoir de se voir arracher, tout à coup, tout son bien-être matériel, l'amour de son maître, son espoir d'avenir, pour retomber dans la fuite, dans la misère, dans la honte de son crime et de la prison qu'elle avait subie, et de la surveillance infamante dont elle demeurait frappée, tout cela lui donna un dégoût subit de la vie, le premier qu'elle eût ressenti et auquel elle s'abandonna. (V, p. 182 – *Might as well end this now. The despair of seeing her material comfort, the love of her master, her hopes for the future, taken away from her, all of a sudden, to fall into flight, destitution, the shame of her crime and the prison that she had endured, and the shameful surveillance which she was still under, all of this gave her a sudden disgust for life, the first she had ever felt and to which she succumbed.*)

[271] Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson, 'Editors' Introduction', in Lombroso, Cesare, and Ferrero, Guglielmo, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman*, ed. by Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 3–33 (p. 7).

Although Victoire's decision to commit suicide is defined by some degree of passivity, it also reverses the positive meaning attached to the notion of survival instinct: after having experienced a happy and dignified life, Victoire is no longer able to adapt back to the shame and vulnerability of her past life and thus decides to die. This reversal in Victoire's condition, from despair to potential happiness to another bitter disappointment, makes for a poignant ending, that may provoke a cathartic and political reaction in the implied reader.

Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge* is the only text in my corpus depicting a suicide. Margaret Higonnet comments on how representations of women's suicide in art by men became a prominent motif in nineteenth-century culture, which depoliticised women's choice to commit suicide.[272] Higonnet's discussion does not consider women writers' representation of female suicide, nor does it reflect on how suicide was depoliticised because it became pathologised in the course of the nineteenth century. In *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* (1893), the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso declares that women commit suicide less frequently as they 'naturally' adapt better to poverty (which he sees as one of the main causes for suicide) because they have fewer needs and less pride and also because their children encourage them to survive at all costs.[273] On the other hand, Lombroso also argues that the most common cause of women's suicide is their passionate and irrational nature, thus contributing to the pathologisation of suicide by no longer attributing it to a rational choice, but to madness.[274]

This contemporary discourse on femininity and suicide is challenged by Peyrebrune's portrayal of Victoire's suicide. The fear of becoming poor again does play a significant role in Victoire's decision, but, more crucially, it is the loss of dignity and her

[272] Margaret Higonnet, 'Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide', in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Susan Suleiman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 68–83 (pp. 68–71).
[273] Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman, op.cit.*, p. 208.
[274] Lombroso, pp. 209–11

anticipation of returning to an animalistic state that drive Victoire's decision. Furthermore, her decision is not made in a moment of madness where she would be devoid of control over her own actions, but in the most lucid moment of her life. However, I believe that Peyrebrune's choice of ending is not meant to be interpreted as a triumph for the female protagonist, a sort of demonstration of her agency, but rather as a tragic waste. The end of the novel shows Victoire as entirely accepting her fate:

> Même elle pria, car elle n'avait point de colère. Elle avait toujours pensé que *tous ces malheurs lui arrivaient naturellement*, parce qu'elle était bâtarde, c'est-à-dire jetée sur terre comme une bête abandonnée, pour servir, pâtir et souffrir. (My emphasis; V, p. 187 – *She even prayed because she had no anger. She always thought* that all these misfortunes happened to her naturally, *because she was a bastard, that is, thrown on the earth like an abandoned beast, to serve, endure, and suffer*.)

On the one hand, Victoire seems to have accepted the fatalistic logic of the community that rejected her because of her social origins, believing that she was born to suffer this fate. On the other hand, Peyrebrune gives us access to Victoire's thoughts, particularly on the infanticide she committed, as she finally recognises, out of her survival instinct.

The portrayal of Victoire's gradual awakening of her consciousness and sensitivity has a political meaning: her suicide could have been avoided through the overcoming of social prejudices and solidarity. The rural community's belief in biological determinism – that a fallen woman will always remain a fallen woman – is a form of fatalistic thinking denounced by Peyrebrune as irrational, but also as having tragic consequences for vulnerable women. This rejection of biological determinism is a pattern that emerges in women's texts analysed in this thesis as they depict discourses around biological determinism as social constructs that trap women in a tragic cycle of victimisation.

## III.4 Hedwig Dohm's "Werde, die Du bist!": Agnes Schmidt and the Tragic Transition

In an analysis of Dohm's novelistic trilogy (composed of *Schicksale einer Seele* (1899), *Sibilla Dalmar* (1896), and *Christa Ruland* (1902)), Joeres observes that despite Dohm's call for strong women and emancipation in her essays, her fictional heroines 'provide no overwhelming portrait of strength; their vacillation, their inability to move forward, and their weakness give the strongest impression left by the trilogy'.[275] Similarly, Agnes Schmidt, the protagonist of "Werde, die Du bist", is unable to lead a fulfilling existence. Her diary shows how, despite her freedom after the death of her husband, Agnes remains constrained by social discourses. She falls into madness and ultimately dies in a psychiatric institution without having been able to find her true self. This difference between theory and practice is expressed by Dohm's use of the neologism 'Übergangsgeschöpf' (*being in transition*) in *Christa Ruland* which symbolises the tensions between women's current conditions and their hopes for the future.[276] This feeling of being born too soon makes Dohm's heroines reflect on the discrepancy between the new ideals for women and the possibilities available to them in their current circumstances.[277] Agnes' destiny could have been improved by what Steiner calls 'temporal remedies' because her fall into madness is not caused by a wrathful god, but by her lack of access to education and to creativity, to the freedom to marry or have children (or not), and access to a fair psychiatric treatment. Nonetheless, these remedies are far from accessible in Dohm's fictional world, and as Joeres argues, Dohm's fiction portrays the 'clash between the prescriptions of femininity and the political hopes of feminism; she offers extensive evidence of the tensions between what she might wish herself and her characters to be and what, under the circumstances,

[275] Joeres (1980), p. 273.
[276] Hedwig Dohm, *Christa Ruland* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1902), p. 161.
[277] Gisela Brinker-Gabler, 'Perspektiven des Übergangs. Weibliches Bewußtsein und frühe Moderne', in *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen. Zweiter Band 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Gisela Brinker-Gabler, 2 vols (München: C.H. Beck, 1988), ii, pp. 169–205 (p. 199).

they can be'.[278] It is this polarity indeed, coupled with Agnes' awareness of it, that makes her stories tragic insofar as she can recognise the obstacles she faces, but remains powerless to overcome them. The tragic mode supports Dohm's feminist message by encouraging readers to undergo the same process of anagnorisis as Agnes, thereby realising the need for social change in their own lives.

Dohm's "Werde, die Du bist!" stands out among the texts under discussion on account of its use of a homodiegetic narrative perspective, presenting the protagonist's trajectory through her diary. By reading Agnes' direct account, the reader gains insight into Agnes' increasing awareness of the social constraints imposed upon her. She is able to reflect on her past and her lack of freedom, attaining a degree of awareness not granted to many of her contemporaries: 'Ich war ein Mechanismus, den fremde Mächte in Bewegung setzten. Und nun ringe ich mich von diesem Wahnsinn los. Ich ringe, ringe um meinen Willen, um mein Selbst, um mein Ich' (W, p. 32 – *I was a mechanism that was set into motion by foreign forces. And now I am wrestling myself free from this madness. I wrestle, wrestle for my will, my Self, my soul*). Agnes soon realises the impossibility of her freeing herself entirely from those social constraints – signified here as 'fremde Mächte'– an inability symbolised by the leitmotif of the coffin, in which Agnes imagines she is trapped.[279] This anagnorisis does not liberate her, however, because the recognition of her past alienation comes too late:

> So habe ich Recht, um mich zu weinen, daß ich nun zu spät erwacht bin, da es zur Neige geht. Das Unrecht, das man mir getan, man hat es Allen getan. Was in mir erlöst sein will, zugleich will es Andere erlösen. Hindert Ihr den Baum am Wachstum, Ihr tötet auch die Früchte, Ihr tötet die Schatten, die Andere erquickt hätten. Oft zähle ich in rasender Angst die Minuten. Wie wenige bleiben mir noch! Dann stirbt Agnes Schmidt. Aber ich? ich auch? (W, p. 41 – *So I am right to cry about my lot, for having awakened too late, now that it is the end. The injustice that was done to me was done to everyone. That which wants to be liberated in me also wants to be liberated in others. If you prevent the tree from growing, you also kill its fruits, you kill the shadows that would have*

[278] Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, *Respectability and Deviance. Nineteenth-Century German Women Writers and the Ambiguity of Representation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 87.
[279] Abigail Dunn, '"Ob im Tode mein Ich geboren wird?": The Representation of the Widow in Hedwig Dohm's "Werde, die du bist" (1894)', in *Women and Death 3: Women's Representations of Death in German Culture since 1500*, ed. by Clare Bielby and Anna Richards, 3 vols (Rocherster NY: Camden House, 2010), iii, pp. 88–100 (p. 94).

*refreshed others. I often count the minutes in raging fear. How few I have left! Then Agnes Schmidt will die. But what about me? Me too?*)

This passage develops a political message, addressed to a collective 'you', suggesting that personal liberation from social constraints is unattainable without a radical transformation of society. Agnes' dissociation between her current self and her past self, by referring to herself in the third person as 'Agnes Schmidt', is a symbol of her tragic struggle. 'Schmidt' being a common surname likewise symbolises the typicality of Agnes' trajectory as a woman in late-nineteenth-century Germany.[280] She no longer identifies with that name as it symbolises her past conformity to societal expectations, feeling divided, as she is finally discovering her true self through writing, yet with a tragic sense that this self-discovery comes too late.

Agnes' diary ends abruptly after taking up most of the short story, signifying Agnes' fall into madness and her loss of voice and willpower. The ending comes back to the framing strand of the story, told from an external perspective and portraying the reaction of Agnes' intended reader, her psychiatrist. As she is dying, Agnes again expresses the hope she had articulated throughout her diary, namely the ability to transcend the limitations of her own body and even death: 'Eine Greisin, die an Geburtswehen stirbt. Ob im Tode mein Ich geboren wird? – ob ich im Jenseits werde, die ich bin?' (W, p. 57 – *An old woman dying of labour pains. Will my Self be born in death? Will I become who I am in the afterlife?*). The last question directly references the title, Pindar's aphorism that was appropriated by Nietzsche, and feminised by Dohm.[281] Despite its hopeful tones, the title and Agnes' aspirations are ultimately negated by the story which has shown that this ideal of becoming oneself is impossible for a woman of her generation.[282] As I explore in the third chapter, the diegetic reader of Agnes' diary explains her madness as a result of

[280] Gaby Pailer, 'Intertextualität und Modernität im erzählerischen Werk Hedwig Dohms', in *Deutschsprachige Schriftstellerinnen des Fin de siècle*, ed. by Karin Tebben (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), pp. 138–61 (p. 142).
[281] Pailer (2011), p. 76.
[282] Rohner (2004), p. 134.

biological determinism, while her writing has shown that it is Agnes' isolation and lack of opportunities for growth that have caused the degradation of her mental health. The psychiatrist is said to be moved – 'Doch war er von tief menschlicher Rührung ergriffen' (W, p. 57 – *He was moved by deep human emotion*) – upon seeing her dying, but his pity holds no political weight within the narrative as it is lacks a deeper awareness of what truly caused Agnes' madness.

Similar to Victoire in Peyrebrune's novel, Agnes' death carries no political weight within the narrative itself; this reflects Dohm's strategy to represent the world as it is and to portray the old woman as a tragic figure. By employing a mimetic mode of writing and modernising the tragic mode, Dohm's short story seeks to achieve political catharsis for the reader, encouraging them to imagine another society, as in the programmatic political ideal she articulates in her essay *Die Mütter* (1903):

> Gegen den Tod ist kein Kraut gewachsen; aber gegen den zu frühen Tod des Weibes sind viele Kräutlein gewachsen. Das kräftigste heißt: bedingungslose Emanzipation der Frau und damit die Erlösung von dem brutalen Aberglauben, daß ihr Daseinsrecht nur auf dem Geschlecht beruhe.[283] (*There is no herb that can cure death, but there are many herbs that have grown that can be used against women's premature death. The most powerful is woman's unconditional emancipation and through it the release from the brutal superstition that her right to exist is based only on her sex.*)

Although change remains elusive for the fictional character, the narrative of "Werde, die Du bist" is envisioned as precisely such a 'herb': by encouraging the implied reader to recognise the factors shaping women's lives and to strive for political change in the real world in a way in which Agnes Schmidt could not. The texts analysed in this section all employ the tragic mode to make the reader aware of this social 'transition', expressing the hope that women's tragic trajectories can ultimately be overcome in this period of change, one that allows the emergence of counter-narratives.

[283] Dohm (1903), p. 223.

### III.5 Amalie Skram's *Lucie*: Lucie's Anagnorisis

In his obituary for Skram, the Danish critic Georg Brandes describes her works as expressing the tragic nature of existence: 'Saa smuk hun selv var, det var ikke den Skønhed, Tilværelsen rummer, hun følte trang til at paavise, snarere det Stygge og Sørgelige, som gør Tilverelsen tragisk'[284] (*As beautiful as she was, it was not the beauty of existence that she felt the urge to portray, but rather the ugly and the sorrowful which make existence tragic*). This gendered comment highlights the uneasiness contemporary readers felt toward women's use of the tragic mode and toward their hypertextual dialogue with naturalist poetics, which led them to focus on the 'ugly' sides of life. In *Lucie*, Skram adopts the idea of a 'literary experiment' from naturalist poetics by describing a marriage condemned to failure because of the different social origins of the protagonists, Lucie and Gerner, and the weight of society's double standards when it comes to sexuality.[285] The narrative shows that it is Gerner's deterministic worldview that condemns their marriage because of his jealousy.[286] Gerner, who has interiorised middle-class prejudices, sees Lucie as determined by her social origins, reducing her to the image of the promiscuous working-class woman. Their marriage progressively deteriorates and takes a dramatic turn when, in a fit of jealousy, Gerner leaves Lucie alone in the streets of Kristiania (Oslo) where she is raped by a drunk man. The novel reaches its climax when Lucie gives birth and expresses her hatred towards Gerner, as her belief that the child is her rapist's plunges her into a hallucinatory fever. Skram subverts the traditional anagnorisis scene by portraying how both characters remain unable to overcome their misunderstanding of the situation: while Lucie dies believing that the child is a sign of her guilt, Gerner is unable to recognise his

[284] Quoted in Janet Garton, 'Georg Brandes og nordiske kvinneforfattere: Amalie Skram og hennes samtidige', in *Georg Brandes og Europa. Forelæsninger fra første international Georg Brandes Konference*, ed. by Olav Harsløf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004), pp. 203–14 (p. 209).

[285] Engelstad (1996), pp. 150–51.
[286] Engelstad (1984), p. 111.

responsibility in their marriage's failure. The reader is invited to overcome this blindness and recognise the role of oppressive bourgeois norms which are behind Gerner's denial of Lucie's freedom and autonomy.

During the birth scene, Lucie interprets a physical sign on her child as an indication of her guilt, drawing on naturalism's use of bodily signs as a medium to expose the individual's memory and unconscious mental life.[287] Lucie has a nervous breakdown at the sight of a mole on her child's face, which she interprets as evidence the child is her rapist's:

> Lucie saa en liden, brun Føflæk med bløde, mørke Haar paa det venstre Kind linge under Øjet. "Ta det væk! Væk!" skreg Lucie og slog fra sig med Armene. Hendes Ansigt var blet mørkegraat og stivt. Saa fik hun et Anfald af Krampelatter, som varte i over en Time. (L, p. 180; *Lucie saw a little brown birthmark with soft dark hair on the left cheek directly under the eye. 'Take it away! Away!' Lucie screamed, wildly flailing her arms. Her face had become dark grey and rigid. Then she had a fit of hysterical laughter that lasted over an hour.* – L2, p. 143).

As Christine Hamm notes, Lucie interprets this physical mark as a sign of her inability to escape her past and the idea that she has committed a sin.[288] Lucie's recognition is fraught with uncertainty, however, as the text leaves it undecided whether this mole is real or an hallucination, or even if the child is truly her rapist's offspring, underscoring her inability to understand and control the events unfolding around her.

This physical sign triggers Lucie's death by provoking a deadly fever, it also enables her to finally recognise and express her husband's role in her demise: 'Er det Dig, Theodor? Du er den værste og den fæleste af alle, og saa'n væmmelig Tøsefut da. – Du er mye, mye værre end saa jeg noensinde har vært' (L, p. 181; *Is that you, Theodor? You are the worst, the most rotten of all of them – a disgusting whore-monger. You're much, much worse than I've ever been* – L2, p. 144). Lucie's outburst shows a side of her that Gerner had tried to suppress in his attempt to mould her into the ideal bourgeois wife. It is her

[287] Sophie Ménard, *Émile Zola et les aveux du corps. Les savoirs du roman naturaliste* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014), p. 20.
[288] Hamm (2006), p. 115.

fever that allows her to finally express herself, but Lucie's speech is followed by what could be called an anti-anagnorisis on Gerner's part:

> Han kom til det Resultat, at han intet havde at bebrejde seg. […] Naar det ikke var lykkedes bedre, var det ikke hans Skyld, men dels hendes egen, dels noget, der havde vært stækere end han selv, dette, at han ikke havde kunnet glemme hendes Fortid. (L, p. 182; *He came to the conclusion that he had nothing to reproach himself for. […] That it hadn't been more successful was not his fault, but partly her own, partly something stronger than himself – his inability to forget her past.* – L2, p. 145)

As in Dohm's short story, in which the male reader of Agnes' diary is unable to recognise the role of social discourses in the protagonist's trajectory, Gerner is unable to understand his own responsibility in their marriage's failure and his guilt for her death. Gerner challenged bourgeois expectations by marrying a former dancer but is unable to truly overcome the social conventions he has interiorised (symbolised by his formulation 'something stronger than himself'), causing him to mistrust Lucie because of her 'past'. This scene unveils what Lucie has tried to suppress in order to fit Gerner's idea of the bourgeois wife; Lucie recovers her voice to denounce what she endured because of social norms, but on the narrative level, her listener does not come to an anagnorisis, inviting readers to reflect on the forces provoking Lucie's death.

After her outburst, Lucie progressively loses control over her own mind and body, a powerful symbol of her lack of power in their marriage:

> Efter Latteren fulgte hysteriske Graadanfald, saa voldsomme og vedholdende, at det var som hendes Legeme skulle brydes istykker. Hun fo'r op i Sengen og vilde frem, og da hun ble holdt tilbage med Magt, kasted hun sig omkring som en rasende. (L, p. 180; *The laughter was followed by a hysterical fit of weeping, so violent and continuous that it seemed as if her body would be shaken to pieces. She sat bolt upright and tried to get out of bed, and when they forcibly restrained her, she thrashed about like a madwoman.* – L2, p. 143)

Lucie's suffering, not understood by her tormentor, is finally expressed through her body, which is what Gerner reduced her to throughout their marriage. Earlier in the novel, Gerner declares in a fit of jealousy: 'Det er altfor haabløst […]. Du blir aldrig anderledes. […] Jeg har jo gjort Dig opmærksom paa lignende Ting hundrede Ganger før, […] *men de sidder Dig i Blodet*' (my emphasis; L, p. 34; *It is completely hopeless […]. You'll never be any different […] I've called your attention to similar things a hundred times before […]* but

it's in your blood – L2, pp. 27–28). The mention of 'blood' is reminiscent of biological determinism and traps Lucie in the identity of the promiscuous woman who cannot help but seduce men because of her biological dispositions. Gerner's perception of Lucie as unable to control her instincts is a contemporary classist cliché, denounced by the narrative as the reason why Gerner is unable to understand his own responsibility in Lucie's death.

Some scholars interpret this ending as following a naturalist logic in the way it supposedly shows that Lucie cannot escape her milieu.[289] I argue, however, that this deterministic reading corresponds to Gerner's perspective which is denounced as reducing Lucie into this image of promiscuous woman. It is Gerner's repeated affirmation that Lucie cannot escape her past that condemns her, not her inherent nature, and the fact that she is economically dependent on him. In parallel with Lucie's anagnorisis, which ultimately fails to make Gerner understand his own responsibility, this novel invites the implied reader to confront the 'ugly' sides of women's economic and moral dependency on men and understand the sociological forces behind their oppression.

Unlike *Lucie,* Skram's psychiatry duology, *Professor Hieronimus* and *Paa St. Jørgen* (1895), refuses a tragic ending for her protagonist, Else Kant. Skram rejects the fatalistic vision of madness as an inevitable and definitive loss of consciousness and will by portraying how Else is able to overcome her traumatic experience in the psychiatric system thanks to her promise of writing about her experience. Else's creative and self-reflective act allows her to reclaim the power that was taken away from her by psychiatry. As I explore in the last chapter on representations of madness, Else is not trapped by her poor mental health, but by a system that has labelled her as mad and uses patriarchal and medical discourses to justify its power. In this duology, Skram nevertheless uses the tragic mode to explore how a social institution can rob an individual of their will and freedom: 'Saa reduceret kunde et Menneske altsaa bli ved den Urets forsmædelige Lidelse,

[289] Engelstad (1984), p. 111.

ligeoverfor hvilken man stod magtesløs' (PJ, p. 418; *That's how degraded you became, when you stood powerless against the shame and misery of injustice* – UO, p. 337). Despite their divergent endings, Skram's narratives use the tragic mode to reflect on the role of social discourses in how they are used to label women and limit their freedom.

### III.6 Gabriele Reuter's *Aus guter Familie*: Agathe and Political Catharsis

In *Aus guter Familie*, Reuter also explores how social forces shape her protagonist's trajectory. In her autobiography, Reuter describes what she means by 'the tragedy of woman's lot' by identifying women's social conditioning as the root cause of their alienation:

> Die Tragik in dem Los des Weibes: geboren zu sein, erzogen zu werden für eine Berufung, die sie gelehrt ist, als ihr einziges Glück zu betrachten, und dieses Glück, diese Berufung wird ihr stets vor Augen gehalten und doch nie gewährt – niemals darf sie eintreten in den Tempel des Gottes, zu dessen Priesterin sie doch gebildet ist.[290] (*The tragedy of woman's lot: to be born, to be raised for a calling that she is taught to see as her only way to happiness, and this happiness, this call is always held in front of her and yet never granted to her – she is never allowed to enter the temple of the god whose priestess she is trained to be.*)

In *Aus guter Familie*, the protagonist, Agathe Heidling, is raised to idealise and strive for marriage and motherhood. These aspirations are thwarted, however, as she is unable to square this with the contradictory feminine ideal of the seductive and passive woman, on the one hand, but also more practically owing to her lack of dowry which renders her unattractive on the marriage market. The other options presented to her, such as turning to religion, pursuing a job, or focusing on art, are successively shown as unviable or undesirable.[291] Agathe is not portrayed as rebelling against the constraints imposed on her, but rather as crumbling under the weight of social discourses she has internalised but cannot conform to.[292] Her final breakdown is provoked when her last hope of liberation is shattered by her cousin Martin, who has successfully freed himself from family demands and become an influential socialist, but who is unable to understand her circumstances

[290] Reuter (1921), p. 432.
[291] Mellmann, pp. 21–23.
[292] Kraus Worley, p. 433.

fully. Unlike Martin, Agathe is incapable of gaining the social or political agency necessary in order to change her situation. This ending aims to provoke the implied reader's pity and terror by depicting the most extreme possible consequence of women's social conditioning: Agathe's loss of control over her consciousness and actions.

Throughout the novel, Martin plays an important role in the Agathe's trajectory, acting as a symbolic catalyst for her successive recognitions of her limited options. It is through Martin that Agathe experiences a potential political awakening when he entrusts her with his books and papers as he is flying from the police. Agathe hopes to find an escape from her current life in those papers:

> Unter diesem braunen Papier glühte eine Offenbarung. Martin – der war stark und freudig – der war gerettet! Gab es hier Erlösung von der Gewalt, die heimlich an ihr sog und sog, daß das Blut ihr blaß und krank wurde, daß die Sehnen ihr erschlafften und die Nerven in schmerzlichem Zucken vibrierten, daß alles klare Denken in ihr zu einem dumpfen, fieberhaften, quälerischen Träumen wurde –? (GF, p. 101 – *Beneath this brown paper glowed a revelation. Martin – he was strong and joyful – he was saved! Was there a deliverance from the power, which secretly sucked and sucked her energy, so that her blood made her turn pale and sick, her tendons went limp, and her nerves vibrated with painful twitches, so that any thought became a dull, feverish, tormenting dream to her –?*)

While she idealises the possibilities offered by this 'revelation', Agathe is too deeply conditioned to liberate herself. While reading, Agathe is quickly brought back to her material reality: 'Aber sie konnte so stehend nicht weiter lesen. Der Rücken that ihr zu weh. Die Arme waren ihr wie gelähmt vom Hantieren mit den schweren Wäschestücken' (GF, p. 102 – *But she could not keep on reading and standing like this. Her back was hurting her. Her arms felt paralysed from handling the heavy laundry*). In this passage, Reuter questions to what extent women are able to liberate themselves when they have been conditioned to submit to social expectations and are mentally and physically exhausted by the demands this places on them. Instead of reclaiming her autonomy, Agathe is trapped in her imagination and circumstances, unable to act.

Agathe's last meeting with Martin, when she is in Switzerland with her father in the hope of improving her health, seals her fate by provoking her final breakdown and descent

into madness. Throughout the novel, Agathe's physical and mental state progressively deteriorates as each attempt to escape her family home fail, including a potential marriage with an older man which falls through because of her lack of dowry. In the novel's final scene, Agathe experiences two successive moments of recognition, both provoked by Martin's actions. Now a successful writer and activist, Martin gives Agathe new hopes by inviting her to live with him and even encourages her to write about her story to help other women:

> Kümmere Dich nicht um die Form! Sag' Deinen lieben Mitschwestern nur ehrlich und deutlich, wie ihr Leben in Wahrheit beschaffen ist. Vielleicht bekommen sie dann Mut, es selbst in die Hand zu nehmen, statt sich von ihren Eltern und der Gesellschaft vorschreiben zu lassen, wie sie leben sollen, und dabei kranke, traurige, hysterische Frauenzimmer zu werden, die man mit dreißig Jahren am liebsten alle miteinander totschlüge! (GF, p. 196 – *Don't worry about the form! Tell your lovely fellow women honestly and clearly how they truly live. They might then be brave enough to take it into their own hands, instead of letting their parents and society dictate how they must live and become sick, sad, and hysterical spinsters whom, at the age of thirty, one would like to kill all together!*)

One could infer that this future novel is the one the reader has in their hands, corresponding to Reuter's expressed aim of provoking the reader's recognition of women's condition through her realist style. However, the reader is also invited to distance themselves from Martin whose idealism seems naive and lacking in any awareness of gender dynamics. Unlike Martin, who appears as a hero of a *Bildungsroman*, able to escape his social origins and conditioning, Agathe is trapped by a society that prevents women from realising their potential in the same manner.[293]

Martin himself shatters Agathe's hope of liberating herself as she realises that he is flirting with a young waitress, a few minutes after having criticised an older man for harassing her: 'War sie denn verrückt geworden, daß sie Martin plötzlich verwandelt sah? Dem widerlichen Kerl, nach dessen Verschwinden sie aufgeatmet hatte – dem sah er ähnlich...' (GF, p. 197 – *Was she then going mad in thinking that Martin suddenly changed? He resembled that disgusting fellow after whose disappearance she had sighed*

[293] Richard L. Johnson, 'Men's Power over Women in Gabriele Reuter's *Aus guter Familie*', in *Gestaltet und Gestaltend: Frauen in der deutschen Literatur*, *op.cit.*, pp. 235–53 (p. 246).

*with relief*). Agathe scrutinises Martin's facial expressions and concludes that he also objectifies the waitress, thus going against his promise of an equal partnership between men and women. While Agathe might still be influenced by her romantic ideals in this scene, as Linda Kraus Worley points out,[294] she also sees through Martin's self-righteous attitude and the limits of his solidarity with women when it comes to sexuality and to treating them as equal individuals.[295] Agathe's hope of another life is finally crushed by her realisation that even Martin upholds patriarchal standards in his behaviour, and thus even he will not – or cannot – save her. In Martin, Reuter highlights here the limits of contemporary politics, which fails to understand women's social conditioning and – even if unconsciously – still upholds patriarchal power dynamics.

This anagnorisis leads the novel to its climax with Agathe's descent into madness, a breakdown foreshadowed in the earlier chapters. Agathe's recognition is contradictory: she demonstrates lucidity when recognising Martin's double standards, but this realisation is a catalyst for her losing control over herself, leading her father to send her to a sanatorium. As is often the case in the tradition of tragedy, Agathe – as the mad character – proves to be the one who gives voice to truth, albeit in a veiled form, as when she tells her father: 'Ich habe nur eine solche Sehnsucht, einmal ganz allein zu sein – gar nicht sprechen zu brauchen – und gar keine Stimmen zu hören. Ich kann Eure Stimmen nicht mehr vertragen – das ist die ganze Geschichte' (GF, p. 203 – *I have just one longing, to be all alone for once – to not need to speak – and to not hear any voices. I cannot tolerate your voices anymore – that's the whole story*). These 'voices' – a sign of her mental instability – can also be interpreted as the expectations to which Agathe has been trying to conform, the voices that controlled her trajectory and made it impossible to liberate herself. While this final anagnorisis is tragic on the narrative level because it condemns Agathe to madness

[294] Kraus Worley, p. 436.
[295] Lisabeth Hock, 'Shades of Melancholy in Gabriele Reuter's *Aus Guter Familie*', *The German Quarterly*, 79:4 (2006), pp. 443–64 (p. 459).

and silence, it also provokes a process of anagnorisis and catharsis for Reuter's intended readership.[296] Feelings of pity and terror at witnessing Agathe's demise challenge the implied reader to recognise the impact of social discourses on women's lives, but instead of falling into despair, reading Agathe's story should spur them into action. Like the other women writers of my corpus, Reuter's novel thus seeks to portray the silent suffering of many women and the role of social discourses in shaping their lives – trajectories that often end tragically, yet remain largely silenced.

By modernising the Aristotelian notions of anagnorisis and catharsis, these narratives aim to provoke a political awakening in their readers. The texts by women writers appropriate from naturalist poetics the idea of a literary experiment, combined with a tragic mode of writing, to convey their critique of the oppressive weight of social norms on women's trajectories. Their portrayal of female characters highlights the tragic consequences of their social circumstances which are portrayed as dictated by social discourses and norms and thus subject to change. These tragic endings demand that the implied reader goes beyond the characters' failure to understand and express their tragic situation in order to understand the political message expressed by the authors. The tragic mode encourages readers to recognise that the circumstances condemning the fictional characters are social and, therefore, changeable.

## Conclusion

This chapter has grappled with the potential contradiction of calling naturalist works 'tragic' when they break formal conventions of ancient and classical tragedy and express a

[296] See also Charlotte Woodford, 'Bertha von Suttner's *Die Waffen nieder!* and Gabriele Reuter's *Aus guter Familie*: Sentimentality and Social Criticism', in *The German Bestseller in the Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Charlotte Woodford and Benedict Schofield (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), pp. 206–23 (pp. 220–21).

political message at odds with the idea of fatality. Naturalist fiction rejects the inevitability of fate and instead denounces man-made, and thus potentially mutable, structures by portraying characters who struggle against and are eventually subdued by biological, social, and psychological determinism. The naturalist literary experiment not only entails applying scientific methods to fiction and showing the consequences of deterministic laws on the characters, but is also a reception experiment: it is aimed at provoking readers' emotions and asking what kind of change a literature that aims to unveil contemporary society's 'plaies saignantes'[297] (*bleeding wounds*) can bring.

While most of the texts analysed in this chapter use the tragic mode to enhance their political message, others explicitly express an anti-tragic worldview and refuse a tragic ending for their characters, as the second section explored. These texts however share the same goal as the ones using the tragic mode: they aim to bring the reader to a political recognition of what aspects of society need to be changed to overcome tragedy. In the same vein as the anti-tragic texts, the naturalist canon counts some female characters that cannot be cast as tragic, as Pauline in *La Joie de Vivre* (1884), Caroline in *L'Argent* (1892), or Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. This type of female character is however still rare in the naturalist canon with the 'fallen woman' as one of its landmarks,[298] and is seemingly not the type of character that inspired the women writers under discussion. As seen with Reuter's comments on naturalism and the tragic mode, women writers' reception of naturalist poetics is defined by their drawing inspiration from naturalist portrayals of contemporary women's condition through the tragic mode. They portray female characters who, on the narrative level, are unable to fight against obstacles on their path, which are no longer the result of fate, but of determinism. These narratives, which become a site of political intervention, strive to provoke what I called a political catharsis: the female

[297] Émile Zola, *Mes Haines. Causeries littéraires et artistiques* (Paris: Achille Faure, 1866), p. 69.
[298] Baguley (1990), p. 102.

characters' tragic endings are not meant to prompt the reader's resignation, but to inspire them to challenge the status quo by understanding that the causes behind the protagonists' tragedies are the result of social determinism, and thus prone to change.

This chapter looked at the parallels between naturalist and women writers' use of the tragic mode, but also revealed a potential tension within this hypertextual dialogue. While naturalist authors use biological determinism as a narrative device, as in Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* which stages Tante Dide's madness as the origin of her offspring's degeneracy, the women writers of my corpus entirely reject it as a potential factor to explain their characters' trajectories. By representing the 'fallen woman' or the madwoman as a tragic type, naturalist writers still participate in discourses with potentially sexist undertones, suggesting that women's tragic fates are inscribed on their bodies and that they are punished for their transgressions against what is deemed as the natural order. Women writers invite a deeper reflection on determinism by representing a society that has accepted ideas around biological determinism and uses it to condemn women. The next chapters, on representation of sexuality and madness, explore how in their dialogue with naturalist representations of female characters, women writers develop their feminist message by denouncing biological determinism as a social construct, a tragic myth even, used to limit women's freedom.

# Chapter Two – The Hysteric and the Mother: Representations of Sexuality

A distinctive feature of the 'sexuelle Tragödie'[299] (*sexual tragedy*) portrayed in naturalist fiction is its frequent representation of female characters as victims of their own bodies and their subsequent sexual 'fall'.[300] This motif is used for its tragic potential but also functions as a means to interact with contemporary discourses around sexuality. Naturalist writers indeed participate in the '*scientia sexualis*' (VS, p. 653) of their time, the proliferating scientific discourses around sexuality which serve to analyse but also control individuals.[301] These discourses were far from homogeneous in Western Europe, but they were united by a shared engagement with questions of fertility and of 'abnormal' or 'pathological' forms of sexuality, both of which are of particular concern to the authors under examination in this chapter.[302] Through the domain of sexuality, nineteenth-century science sought to naturalise gender differences,[303] notably by characterising women as defined by their physiology and thus lacking willpower over themselves and their bodily reactions. The literary appropriation of these discourses by naturalist writers is initiated by the 'clinique de l'Amour'[304] (*the clinic of love*) in the Brothers Goncourt's *Germinie Lacerteux*, which presents the female protagonist's tragedy as caused by her pathological sexuality.[305] The stereotypical naturalist narrator most often adopts a detached attitude towards the female

[299] Berg, p. 132.
[300] Baguley (1990), p. 104.
[301] See Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir*, pp. 724–25.
[302] In Scandinavia, debates around sexuality focused on prostitution and marriage. Numerous intellectuals tried to naturalise the contemporary sexual morals that saw prostitution as a necessary evil and middle-class women's frigidity as the norm. See Bredsdorff, pp. 18–20. On the appropriation of medical discourses on 'sexual pathologies' in German literature, see Dietrich von Engelhardt, *Medizin in der Literatur der Neuzeit*. *I Darstellung und Deutung*, 5 vols (Stuttgart: Guido Pressler, 1991), i, pp. 121–46. For the French context, see Mesch and Beizer.
[303] See Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions. Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Century* (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 5.
[304] Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, p. 20.
[305] See Baguley (1990), p. 83.

character, making her experience of sexuality the object of a scientific observation.[306] By building on emerging scientific discourses that centre on sexuality, naturalist fiction breaks numerous taboos, notably around sexual violence, childbirth, and infanticide, using their literary experiment as a space to explore the role of sexuality in shaping one's individuality. In turn, women writers' dialogue with naturalism allows them to participate in these contemporary debates and to challenge scientific definitions and fictional perspectives of women's experiences of sexuality.

One instance of both naturalist and women writers dealing with contemporary anxieties around female sexuality is Zola's and Dohm's portrayal of the 'older woman' type. The opening of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871), introduces the character of Adélaïde Fouque, who is at the origin of the family's legitimate and illegitimate branches. Tante Dide can be seen to go mad after the violent death of her lover, Macquart, who is killed by a policeman, and her madness has a sexual dimension. Despite her old age at the time the action is taking place, Tante Dide is still plagued by sexual desires:

> Ce pauvre corps, que des névroses détraquaient depuis le berceau, était vaincu par une crise suprême. Les nerfs avaient comme mangé le sang ; le sourd travail de cette chair ardente, s'épuisant, se dévorant elle-même dans une tardive chasteté, s'achevait, faisait de la malheureuse un cadavre que des secousses électriques seules galvanisaient encore.[307] (*Her poor body, racked by neuroses ever since birth, had been delivered a final blow by some supreme shock. Her nerves had, so to speak, sucked away all her blood; the obscure workings of this passionate flesh, now devouring itself in the chastity of old age, were in their final stages transforming the poor creature into a corpse, galvanized only by sudden spasms.*)[308]

This scene, narrated from an external perspective, creates the impression of a scientist examining a pathological subject. The self-eating flesh metaphor symbolises the character's passivity in relation to her body and sexual desires, portraying her sexualised body as turning against her and annihilating her willpower. This image of a female body consumed by chastity is in keeping with contemporary medicine, which argues that

[306] Mesch, p. 27.
[307] Zola, *La Fortune des Rougon*, p. 297.
[308] Zola, *The Fortune of the Rougons*, p. 276.

women's continence could result in hysterical symptoms.[309] Female sexuality, therefore, carries a dual threat: for Tante Dide herself, who is unable to dominate her sexual impulses, and for society, as her desires are viewed as being incompatible with her age and unmarried status. Tante Dide's madness is also portrayed as contaminating her offspring and her sexual transgression as the origin of their 'fêlure' (*crack*), linking together anxieties around untamed female sexuality and motherhood.[310]

In "Werde, die Du bist!", Dohm also tackles the controversial topic of sexuality and old age. Representing an older female protagonist allows Dohm to engage critically with contemporary discourses on sexuality which sought to categorise which desires were considered acceptable. Dohm criticises how women's old age is viewed as incompatible with sexuality as it is no longer fertile.[311] In the novella's opening scene, Agnes declares her love for a young doctor accompanying her psychiatrist who turns out to be the man she fell in love with on Capri, as told in the diary. This love declaration scandalises her psychiatrist who diagnoses her with an 'Anachronismus des Herzens. Nichts Seltenes bei bejahrten Frauen mit allzu sensiblem Nervensystem' (W, p. 8 – *Anachronism of the heart. Nothing unusual in elderly women with an extremely sensitive nervous system*). According to Richard von Krafft-Ebing, author of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), old age presents potential risks for both men and women, as sexual expression can take on a pathological dimension when an individual's sexual life has been dormant for an extended period, resulting in shamelessness.[312] Applying this theory to this case, the psychiatrist quickly censors his patient by telling her: 'Besinnen Sie sich, Frau Schmidt, vergessen Sie nicht, daß Sie eine alte Dame sind' (W, p. 6 – *Control yourself, Frau Schmidt, don't forget that you are an old lady*). The psychiatrist's reaction is not elicited by Agnes' spontaneous

[309] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 132.
[310] Chantal Bertrand-Jennings, *L'Éros et la femme chez Zola. De la chute au paradis retrouvé* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1977), p. 50.
[311] Dunn (2013), p. 206.
[312] Krafft-Ebing, p. 39.

declaration of love for a man she is not supposed to know but is rather motivated by her age and the social boundaries she crosses by expressing her desire. His labelling of Agnes' outburst as a sign of 'erotische[r] Wahnsinn' (W, p. 6 – *erotic madness*) not only shows his incomprehension of his patient's inner life, but also his adherence to contemporary ideas that pathologise women's sexuality. By giving readers access to Agnes' diary after this scene, Dohm's text invites readers to question the psychiatrist's diagnosis and thus subverts a dynamic often found in naturalist fiction, that of a male narrator taking on the perspective of the scientist, to observe the body and mind of a female character.[313] Rather than being portrayed as the result of a disorderly biological reaction, the diary explains how Agnes' love for the young doctor is born out of her feeling of being young again now she is freed from the shackles of marriage and motherhood.

Through their portraits of elderly women's experiences of sexuality, both Zola and Dohm delve into two closely intertwined anxieties that dominate contemporary debates: the fear of hysteria – a concept defining women as determined by their physicality and their sexual organs to the extent of being considered pathological – and concerns around fertility and motherhood. Nineteenth-century scientific discourses attempt to alleviate those fears through a discursive process that Foucault describes as the 'hysterization of the female body':

> [Le] triple processus par lequel le corps de la femme a été analysé, qualifié et disqualifié comme corps intégralement saturé de sexualité ; par lequel ce corps a été intégré, sous l'effet d'une pathologie qui lui serait intrinsèque, au champ des pratiques médicales ; par lequel enfin il a été mis en communication organique avec le corps social (dont il doit assurer la fécondité réglée), l'espace familial (dont il doit être un élément substantiel et fonctionnel) et la vie des enfants (qu'il produit et qu'il doit garantir, par une responsabilité biologicomorale qui dure tout au long de l'éducation) : la Mère, avec son image en négatif qui est la 'femme nerveuse', constitue la forme la plus visible de cette hystérisation. (VS, p. 692) (*[A] threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed-qualified and disqualified as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children's education): the Mother, with her negative image of 'nervous woman,' constituted the most visible form of this hysterization.*)[314]

[313] Mesch, p. 27.

‘Hysteria’ thus appears as a category used to naturalise women’s sexual identities and experiences and turn them into the objects of scientific observation and control. In turn, naturalist fiction appropriates this representation of women as saturated by a pathological form of sexuality, as with Tante Dide who embodies the ‘nervous woman’ type under the gaze of the detached narrator. Feminist scholarship has commented on how naturalist fiction participates in this process of the ‘hysterization of the female body’, notably by representing female characters’ ‘sexual fall’ as driven by innate factors and deploying a punishment logic for any protagonist that transgresses sexual norms.[315] Although the idea that hysteria was linked to women’s sexual organs and sexuality was contested in the second half of the nineteenth century, naturalist writers appropriate this link between psychological disorder and sexuality for narrative purposes, playing with the ambiguities of contemporary scientific theories.[316] In parallel, naturalist fiction also portrays the type of ‘the Mother’ as an ideal figure in opposition to the ‘nervous woman’, building on contemporary theories that presented motherhood as the remedy to hysteria and as a means to preserve the social order.[317] As we saw, Dohm, in her novella, is critical of the category ‘hysterical’, as used by the doctor figure to censor his patient, and questions the description of women’s experiences of sexuality by both scientific discourses and naturalist fiction. I argue in this chapter, that although they are inspired by naturalist portrayals of women’s

[314] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 104. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as VS2 in the main text.
[315] See notably Naomi Schor, *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 127–34, for an analysis of *Germinie Lacerteux* and Bertrand-Jennings’ analysis of Zola’s *Les Rougon Macquart*.
[316] On the use of this ambiguity between social and biological factors by Zola, See Pierluigi Pellini, ‘Zola : hystérie et fêlure. Autour de *Pot-Bouille*’, in *Paradigmes de l'âme. Littérature et aliénisme au XIXe siècle*, ed. by Jean-Louis Cabanès, Didier Philippot, and Paolo Tortonese (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2012), pp. 229–65 (p. 250). For an example of a refutation of the link between sexual organs and female hysteria, see Charles Richet, ‘Les démoniaques d’aujourd'hui’, *La Revue des deux mondes*, 15th January 1880, pp. 340–72. Quoted by Pellini, p. 229.
[317] See Patricia Carles and Béatrice Desgranges, ‘Émile Zola, ou le cauchemar de l’hystérie et les rêveries de l’utérus’, *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 69 (1995), pp. 13–32 (p. 32).

sexuality, women writers challenge the contemporary categories of the 'nervous woman' and 'the Mother' in their narratives.

The indeterminacy between social and biological factors in naturalist representations of sexuality and motherhood indeed introduces a tension within women writers' hypertextual dialogue with naturalism. As we saw, while Zola appropriates a contemporary discourse that pathologizes older women's sexuality for narrative purposes, Dohm creates a critical distance from this portrayal by presenting her protagonist's subjective vision of her own story. In this chapter, I argue that naturalist fiction provides women with a scientific and sociological vocabulary to speak about sexuality, thus allowing them to create a counter-narrative.[318] The construct of sexuality by nineteenth-century science, notably through the classification of its 'abnormal' expressions, also opened the possibility for a counterdiscourse, as Foucault demonstrates: 'Le discours véhicule et produit du pouvoir, il le renforce mais aussi le mine, l'expose, le rend fragile et permet de le barrer' (VS, p. 690; *Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it* – VS2, p. 101). Foucault uses the example of homosexuality, which was pathologized by medical and institutional discourses in the nineteenth century: this in turn, he argues, created an opportunity for a reappropriation of those discourses by those concerned: 'l'homosexualité s'est mise à parler d'elle-même, à revendiquer sa légitimité ou sa "naturalité" et souvent dans le vocabulaire, avec les catégories par lesquelles elle était médicalement disqualifiée' (VS, p. 690; *homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified* – VS2, p. 101). This chapter will demonstrate that something parallel happens with respect to discourses on female sexuality in the texts by the women writers analysed herein. Aware of the

[318] Mesch, p. 84.

representations of female characters as being bound by their sexuality and their reproductive duties, women writers find ways to disrupt those discourses within a fictional space, thereby challenging several naturalist tropes, including that of the 'nervous woman' whose sexual fall is inevitable and that of the ideal mother. Just as the increased control of, and discourses around, homosexuality enabled its exploration, so too did the women writers analysed here develop an alternative image of sexuality, portraying it as saturated by power dynamics and as the result of a patriarchal socialisation.

Both naturalist authors and women writers in *fin-de-siècle* Europe conceived sexuality as essential in the construction of an individual's identity,[319] more particularly in how it was shaped by normative discourses as well as by biological and social factors. In parallel to numerous inquiries into 'pathological' forms of sexuality, the nineteenth century also witnesses the emergence of a discourse around sexual violence, from Auguste Ambroise Tardieu's *Étude médico-légale sur les attentats aux mœurs* (*Forensic Study of Indecent Assaults*, 1859), a treatise developing a physical definition of rape for a legal and medical audience, to Josef Breuer's and Sigmund Freud's *Studien über Hysterie* (*Studies on Hysteria*, 1895), that uncovers the role of sexual trauma behind hysterical symptoms and thus questions theories that constructed hysteria as stemming exclusively from hereditary factors.[320] By offering portrayals of experiences of sexuality often fraught with violence, as with Tante Dide's hysteria being triggered by the violent death of her lover, naturalism takes part in this contemporary interest in sexual violence. In the first section of this chapter, I explore how naturalist depictions of sexual violence complexify the 'nervous woman' type because, as contemporary definitions of hysteria oscillate between physical and psychological explanations, naturalist fiction never entirely explains the female

[319] For an analysis of how modern sexual discourses are linked to definitions of subjectivity, see Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir,* p. 667.
[320] More specifically, Breuer and Freud challenge Pierre Janet's definition of hysteria as stemming from hereditary dispositions. Breuer and Freud, p. 89.

characters' 'sexual fall' by either biological or social factors.[321] Women writers, however, refuse this concurrence of explanations and portray the 'nervous woman' not as a biological type but as an individual entrenched in social dynamics. They appropriate the naturalist interest in how social factors shape experiences of sexuality and replace the 'nervous woman' type with that of the victim of patriarchal power dynamics.

The rise of natalist discourses throughout Western Europe, particularly in France, and the scientists' and intellectuals' tendency to reduce women to their roles as mothers also participate in the process of the 'hysterization of the female body', as motherhood is constructed as both a biological and moral obligation.[322] Naturalist fiction participates in the idealisation of motherhood but also questions the notion of 'maternal instincts' by portraying monstrous mother figures and by considering the impact of social factors on the experience of motherhood. While motherhood is presented as a potential cure to the violence between men and women in naturalist fiction, women writers' narratives denounce the contemporary idealisation and naturalisation of motherhood as a form of physical and discursive violence made onto women's bodies and minds.

The elements that Foucault distinguishes in the 'hysterization' process, namely the constructs of the 'nervous woman' and 'the Mother' will guide my analysis of naturalist texts and of narratives by women writers in dialogue with naturalist fiction. I argue that naturalist fiction introduces tensions within the scientific discourses it appropriates, and, in turn, women authors portray the material and psychological consequences of this struggle on their female characters' trajectories. In the final section, I analyse Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* and how its female protagonist offers, on the fictional level, opportunities for resistance to these various discourses. The women writers analysed in this

[321] Pellini, p. 253.
[322] Susanna Balmer, *Der weibliche Entwicklungsroman. Individuelle Lebensentwürfe im bürgerlichen Zeitalter* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2011), p. 47. On the rise of natalism in France, see Joshua H. Cole, '"There are only Good Mothers": The Ideological Work of Women's Fertility in France before World War I', *French Historical Studies*, 19:3, pp. 639–72.

chapter explore in their narratives how external discourses shape women's experiences of sexuality and motherhood, linking together physical violence with discursive forms of violence, and challenge the notion of biological determinism, thus introducing a tension in their hypertextual dialogue with naturalism.

## I. 'The Nervous Woman' and Sexual Violence

By interacting with contemporary scientific discourses, naturalist fiction participates in the construction of a new myth around female sexuality, as Baguley argues:

> There is such a large corpus of naturalist literature that turns on the workings of such '*fatalities of the flesh*' and conveys disaster through the woman's body with such an obsessive insistence that we are clearly dealing with a myth that is as imperious as any of the myths that fashioned ancient texts, *the myth of catastrophic female sexuality*. It was a myth fuelled by contemporary physiologists, doctors, psychiatrists, whose learned writings on heredity, hysteria and menstruation authenticated and sometimes directly inspired the literary dramas.[323]

One facet of naturalist representation of 'fatalities of the flesh' remains underexplored, namely the role of sexual violence and its influence on female characters' paths to hysteria. As Chantal Pierre argues, rape is presented as a common destiny among female characters in the naturalist corpus, contributing to a myth that sexual violence is the inevitable corollary to gender relations.[324] Naturalist writers are inspired by contemporary miscellaneous rubrics in the press and their depictions of sexual violence, although naturalist appropriation of this contemporary fascination is often more explicit.[325] By making it a leitmotif in their fiction, naturalist authors actively participate in the contemporary debates around sexual violence, but also unsettle contemporary biological discourses by considering how sexuality is shaped by social determinism. The fatalistic logic deployed in texts like Zola's *La Curée* (1872) and Christian Krohg's *Albertine* (1886) however circles back to the trope of the 'nervous woman' who is physiologically

[323] Baguley (1990) p. 103. My emphasis.
[324] Chantal Pierre, 'Viols naturalistes : "commune histoire" ou "épouvantable aventure" ?', *Tangence*, 114 (2017), pp. 61–78 (p. 63).
[325] Lucie Nizard, 'Le roman du second XIXe siècle et les faits-divers de violences sexuelles : une esthétique ambivalente', *Loxias*, 74 (2021), pp. 2–12 (p. 2).

determined to fall into 'abnormal' forms of sexuality after being raped. In those texts, the figure of the 'nervous woman' thus merges with that of the 'fallen woman'.

In my analysis of portrayals of sexual violence as the root of female characters' hysteria in naturalist fiction and women writers' texts that are in dialogue with naturalism, I adapt the Foucauldian method to include a more feminist lens.[326] Foucault's theoretical tools, as Johanna Oksala argues, allows us to consider how individual experiences of sexuality are entangled with external discourses describing them, but also how the individuals described as 'deviant', including 'hysterics', can suffer from the discrepancy between this label and their own experience.[327] The nineteenth century marks a significant turn as scientific and legal discourses begin to name and designate sexual violence. These discourses, as Foucault argues, aim to classify and punish deviancy and thus often focus on the perpetrators.[328] In parallel, new theories emerge that doubt women's lack of consent and resistance in cases of sexual violence. For instance, Tardieu's physical definition of rape posits that all adult women can resist sexual assault, a theory that finds its fictional expression in the naturalist cliché of female characters passively accepting male violence.[329] As I explore in this section, naturalist fiction represents sexual violence in a

[326] Some feminist scholars have taken issue with Foucault's analysis of the Jouy trial which aimed at showing how certain sexual practices were classified as 'abnormal' and became the object of a medico-legal discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century. The critical issue for feminist scholars is how Foucault argues that external discourses impact and construct individual experience, to the point that we might question the reality of a victim's trauma resulting from sexual violence. As Teresa De Lauretis demonstrates, Foucault argued for 'the decriminalization (and the desexualization) of rape' proposing that it should be seen 'as an act of violence like any other, an act of aggression rather than a sexual act' to keep the realm of sexuality outside the psychiatric and legal framework of pathologization and punishment. Foucault's argument thus ignores the power dynamics in sexual encounters and how they contribute to women's social oppression – women are raped as *women* in a patriarchal system that sees their submission as natural, disqualifying Foucault's separation of the realm of sexuality from technologies of power. Foucault analyses in detail the Jouy case in the lecture of March 19th, 1975, in *Les Anormaux*, *op.cit.*, p. 275–303. For a summary of the debate around this case in feminist scholarship, see Chloe Taylor, *The Routledge Guidebook to Foucault's The History of Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 152–66. See also Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (London: MacMillan Press, 1987), pp. 36–37.

[327] Johanna Oksala, 'Sexual Experience: Foucault, Phenomenology, and Feminist Theory', *Hypatia*, 26:1 (2011), pp. 207–23 (pp. 214–15).

[328] Oksala, p. 213.

[329] Pierre, p. 71. Tardieu only admits a few cases which could explain an adult woman's ('femme faîte') lack of resistance, ranging from sleep to 'idiocy', see *Étude médico-légale sur les attentats aux mœurs* (Paris: J.B. Baillière, 1859), pp. 61–66.

way that both reiterates contemporary constructs but also explores the power dynamics inherent in sexual violence and their psychological impact on the female characters. In parallel with a dynamic observed throughout this thesis, naturalist fiction names and portrays sexual violence first, and women writers, in turn, appropriate this representation to unveil that sexual violence arises from patriarchal relations.

My analysis of the descriptions of sexual violence focuses on this tension between external discourses and women writers' focus on victims' perspectives and suffering. Peyrebrune, in *Victoire la Rouge*, shows how her female protagonist is cast as a fallen woman by her community, unable to reclaim her status as a subject. In Skram's *Lucie*, Lucie's husband imposes on her the ideal of the virtuous wife, but is himself unable to overcome prejudices linked to her sexual past, trapping her in the image of the promiscuous woman unable to control her own body and desires. Finally, Reuter describes in *Aus guter Familie* how her protagonist fails to reconcile her sexual desires with patriarchal norms and comes to embody the 'hysteric' as described by Breuer and Freud. Women writers unveil the discrepancy between contemporary discourses and their female characters' experience of sexual violence by challenging the idea that women are hysterical because they are victims of their own bodies and instincts. Instead, they unveil how contemporary constructs of women's sexuality are further forms of sexual violence trapping women in the type of the 'nervous woman'.

### I.1 Naturalist Fiction: The Fatalities of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence often provokes naturalist female characters' 'sexual fall', that is, their fall into what contemporaries would consider 'abnormal' and 'pathological' expressions of sexuality, such as incest or prostitution. The naturalist rape scene, however, is more than a narrative device meant to shock readers. It is often, rather, the pivotal factor in female

characters' trajectories, explaining their 'fall' not as an instinctual phenomenon or a direct consequence of their physiological dispositions but as the consequence of their social circumstances and of their trauma. In Zola's *La Curée*, the main character, Renée, is not so much defined by her heredity, as she is not part of the Rougon-Macquart family, but by her family's conservative values.[330] Renée is condemned from the start to become a 'fallen woman', not because of a predisposition to vice, but rather by her first traumatic experience of sexuality described by the narrator in the third chapter:

> La faute qui amena plus tard son mariage avec Saccard, ce viol brutal qu'elle subit avec une sorte d'attente épouvantée, la fit ensuite se mépriser, et fut pour beaucoup dans *l'abandon de toute sa vie*. Elle pensa qu'*elle n'avait plus à lutter contre le mal*, *qu'il était en elle*, que la logique l'autorisait à aller jusqu'au bout de la science mauvaise.[331] (*The lapse that led to her marriage with Saccard, the brutal rape she underwent with a sort of frightened expectation, made her despise herself, and accounted in large measure* for the subsequent abandonment of her whole life. *She thought that* she need no longer struggle against evil, that it was in her, that logic authorized her to pursue the study of wickedness to its ultimate conclusions.)[332]

This passage reveals Renée's own fatalistic reading of this event, showing how she has interiorised contemporary ideas about the 'fallen woman' and consequently accepted to push the vice further. While the novel stages her fall into incest as inevitable, this passage also highlights that Renée's inclination towards sexual deviance is not a biological instinct: it stems from her traumatic experience of being raped and is exacerbated by her family's desire to keep up the appearances, which lead to her marriage with Saccard to hide her pregnancy. The inclusion of this passage within the narrator's recounting of Renée's childhood and its influence on their relationship highlights how profoundly sexual trauma shapes Renée's behaviour. Marie Scarpa points out that Renée's rape can be metaphorically linked with another rape, that of Paris, transformed and mishandled by speculators like Saccard.[333] I disagree, however, with Scarpa's argument that Renée's rape is silenced by the

[330] Anthony Zielonka, 'Renée et le problème du mal : explication d'une page *de La Curée*', in *La Curée de Zola ou 'la vie à outrance'. Actes du colloque du 10 Janvier 1987*, ed. by David Baguley (Paris: SEDES, 1987), pp. 161–70 (p. 164).
[331] Émile Zola, *La Curée*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire I*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), i, pp. 421–22. My emphasis.
[332] Émile Zola, *The Kill*, trans. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 100.
[333] Marie Scarpa, '"La chère enfant a eu un malheur." Le destin d'une femme violée : Renée dans *La Curée* de Zola', *Études françaises*, 58:2 (2022), pp. 109–28 (p. 116). Saccard is also a rapist in *L'Argent* and his

novel.[334] It is indeed not detailed, but is nonetheless described as 'brutal' and its psychological consequences are clear, thus complicating the image of the female character passively accepting men's violent desires. Rape is established as a traumatic experience, but the recurrent motif of the 'soft flesh' in Zola's narratives introduces a tension as it portrays female characters as lacking the willpower to resist,[335] as in Renée's 'frightened expectation' which is described as a physical reaction.

Renée is blind to the impact this rape has on her actions throughout the novel, until the mirror scene which can be interpreted as a moment of anagnorisis for the female protagonist. The question 'Qui l'avait mise nue ?'[336] (*Who had stripped her naked?*)[337] is repeated obsessively in Renée's internal monologue to signify how she finally realises that her behaviour has been determined by the men in her life: 'et elle avait honte d'elle, et un mépris de sa chair l'emplissait d'une colère sourde contre ceux qui la laissaient ainsi, avec de simples cercles d'or aux chevilles et aux poignets pour lui cacher la peau'[338] (*She was ashamed of herself, and contempt for her body filled her with mute anger at those who had left her like this, with mere bangles of gold at her wrists and ankles to cover her skin*).[339] This scene of recognition goes against the naturalist logic of the 'fatalities of the flesh', as Renée recognises that the responsibility for her fall was not hers.[340] Renée's awareness of her own nudity becomes a symbol of her vulnerability under the male gaze, making her feel like prey in a society defined by its violence. Interpretations of Renée as a *femme fatale*, dangerous because she takes on a masculine role in her relationship with her stepson

victim gives birth to Victor who embodies the type of the degenerate rapist. See Pierre, pp. 75–76.
[334] Scarpa, p. 127.
[335] See Pierre, quoting Zola's preparatory documents for *La Débâcle* (1892): 'Je pourrais faire celle-ci [Silvine, raped by Goliath] à demi-consentante, ce qui vaudrait mieux, car je ne crois pas aux filles violentées, prises malgré elles' (*I could make her [Silvine, raped by Goliath] semi-consenting, which would be better, because I don't believe in assaulted girls, taken despite themselves*) (BnF, ms 10. 286, f°83), p. 72. This denial of adult women's lack of consent is in keeping with the contemporary view of rape that doubted that 'conscious' women would not defend themselves against their aggressor. See Tardieu, pp. 61–66.
[336] Zola, *La Curée*, p. 572.
[337] Zola, *The Kill*, p. 239.
[338] Zola, *La Curée*, p. 572.
[339] Zola, *The Kill*, p. 239.
[340] Scarpa, p. 126.

Maxime,[341] are thus complicated by this anagnorisis at the end of the novel which reveals to what degree Renée's choices were unconsciously influenced by her traumatic experience rather than inherent degeneracy or an evil feminine nature.

The contemporary image of female character yielding to men's desires because of her inherent passivity is also nuanced within naturalist fiction in how it portrays the influence of social determinism, positioning women as victims of patriarchal violence. In his novel *Albertine* (1886), Krohg portrays the trajectory of Albertine, a young seamstress in Kristiania, who attempts to avoid falling into prostitution. She is raped by a policeman who uses her fear of the police to lure her into his apartment and make her drink alcohol. Krohg's use of the stream of consciousness technique poignantly details Albertine's reaction:

> Hva var det, hva var det, hvor var hun? Hun følte en knugende vekt på brystet så hun var nær ved å kveles. Det var noe som gjorde forferdelig vondt. Et skrik – – – det var hennes, og lysvåken og edru og angst til døden forsto hun med en gang alt, og kolrte og slo og krafset og skrek. –[342] (*What was it, what was it, where was she? She felt a crushing weight on her chest, so hard that she was close to suffocating. It was something that hurt terribly. A scream – – – it was hers, and wide-awake and sober and scared to death, she understood everything at once, and thrashed, and kicked, and scratched, and screamed.* –)

This passage depicts Albertine as dissociating her thoughts from her body as this traumatic event happens to her. There is no doubt for the reader that this is a rape because the policeman tricks her and then used his physical strength to overpower her. Later, motivated by his jealousy, the policeman also uses his institutional power to make Albertine undergo a humiliating medical examination reserved for prostitutes. Once again, Krohg gives us access to Albertine's inner monologue to signify that she experiences this examination as a rape:

> Og grepet av redsel følte hun de skjelvende knær rent mekanisk gå fra hverandre, og hun syntes hun måtte dø av skam, og alt gikk rundt for henne, det svartnet for øynene og hun trodde hun skulle besvime. Så plutselig følte hun instrumentet mot sitt blottede legeme, og hun skvatt til, men ble så liggende der i dyp redsel uten å tore røre en muskel og med en rent unaturlig klar bevisshet.[343] (*And gripped by terror she felt her trembling knees opening mechanically, and she thought she would die*

[341] Bertrand-Jennings, pp. 65–67.
[342] Christian Krohg, *Albertine* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1987), p. 88. My translation.
[343] Krohg, p. 108.

> *of shame, and everything was spinning, her vision darkened, and she thought she was going to faint. Then suddenly she felt the instrument against her bare body, and she flinched, but then lay in deep terror without daring to move a muscle and with an unnaturally clear awareness.*)

This second violent experience proves fatal for Albertine as it makes her lose all sense of shame and dignity, thus provoking her fall into prostitution, having been treated as such by an official institution.[344]

What is particularly striking in *Albertine* is the role played by the police and medicine in Albertine's 'fall'. Both institutions are supposed to control what was deemed as anti-social and pathological sexuality, epitomised by prostitution. Albeit tolerated as a 'necessary evil' to control men's sexuality without endangering the purity of upper-class women in Scandinavia, the figure of the prostitute gave rise to worries around risks of her 'degeneracy' contaminating society.[345] There is a cynical reversal in Krohg's novel, as both institutions are designated as causing Albertine's trauma and subsequent fall. Albertine's vulnerability is also heightened because of her status as a working-class woman. However, as is the case with Renée after her rape, naturalist female characters are also helpless when facing their destiny. Albertine's sexual fall appears as irresistible because she is represented as lacking any strength of character. Naturalist narratives thus follow a fatalistic logic by ultimately making their female protagonists fit the 'nervous woman' type as they appear as victims of their own bodies, unwittingly falling into pathological forms of sexuality.

Naturalist representations of rape combine instances of both social and biological determinism: women are helpless when facing male violence which leverages not only men's physical strength, but also a structural power, such as medicine or the law, to overpower them. Naturalism complicates the contemporary vision of women's pathological sexuality as caused by physiological factors by showing the psychological impact of sexual trauma on their characters. Zola's and Krohg's narratives however also deploy a fatalistic

[344] See Sjåstad, p. 138.

[345] Sjåstad argues that Krohg's goal with the novel was to render prostitution illegal in Norway, which effectively happened in 1888. See Sjåstad, pp. 30–31. For a contemporary discourse on prostitution, see Lombroso's study of the 'born criminal woman' which both justifies prostitution as a 'moral safety valve' (p. 37) and argues that it resulted from some women's innate criminality (pp. 213–22).

logic by portraying their female characters as internalising the idea that they are 'fallen women'. These figures come to embody the 'nervous woman' type because of their inability to resist their subsequent sexual fall, leading me to argue that naturalist fiction tends to naturalise sexual violence and its consequences. The women writers analysed in this chapter further complicate matters by unveiling the role of social norms in women's sexual victimisation. They reject the oscillation between biological and social factors found in naturalist fiction as the naturalisation of sexual violence would imply that it is an immutable fact. Instead, they portray how the idea of the 'nervous woman' is a myth imposed on women externally and used to hide the social nature of patriarchal violence.

### I.2 Georges de Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge*: Sexual Exploitation

The premise of Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge* is reminiscent of naturalist narratives, as it portrays a vulnerable working-class character in a rural milieu who is the victim of sexual violence three times. This novel also mirrors the naturalist mode of writing in its descriptions of Victoire that animalise her, thus introducing a tension in Peyrebrune's critique of patriarchal violence which, I argue, is partly due to the classist clichés sometimes deployed by the author. However, the three rape scenes, which give the narrative its dramatic rhythm and result in three unwanted pregnancies, are shown to contribute to Victoire's 'abrutissement' (*stupor*) and passivity, thus reinforcing the idea that Victoire is the victim of her circumstances rather than her nature. The consequences of sexual violence are a central concern in Peyrebrune's overall oeuvre, [346] and in *Victoire la Rouge*, the author portrays her female character as a subject facing objectification by both her aggressors and the society around her. As Ménard points outs, contemporary critics do

[346] See *Les Femmes qui tombent* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1882), a narrative interweaving different women's experience of sexual violence and *Le Roman d'un Bas-Bleu* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1892) which portrays the impact of sexual harassment on a young woman writer.

not use the word 'rape' to describe Victoire's victimisation.[347] Instead, Jules Lemaitre speaks of Victoire's 'malheur'[348] (*misfortune*), Manoël de Grandfort qualifies it as a 'chute'[349] (*fall*), and Maxime Gaucher refers to three 'accidents'.[350] Lemaitre also comments on the fatal number of three, turning it into a sarcastic comment: 'et de trois ! c'est sa destinée' (*and three! it is her destiny*).[351] The idea of 'destiny' and these euphemistic expressions put the focus on Victoire, and what seems to be her 'bad luck'. While the novel does not qualify the three instances as 'rape' either, it portrays their violence and uncovers a systemic pattern, denouncing how Victoire's aggressors exploit her vulnerability. The novel is mainly told from a detached narrator's perspective, as in naturalist fiction, but the object of observation is no longer the female character's body and its reactions, but her social circumstances.

In the *Grand Dictionnaire Larousse* published in 1872, rape is defined as follows: 'Il y a viol toutes les fois que le libre arbitre de la victime est aboli' (*There is rape whenever the victim's free will is abolished*).[352] This definition demonstrates that *fin-de-siècle* French sensibilities admit several factors that weaken a victim's ability to consent, factors that are exposed in *Victoire la Rouge* and its descriptions of sexual violence. But, while French law tended to rely on a physiological definition of rape,[353] a social one emerges in Peyrebrune novel: its depiction of sexual violence highlights the role of social dynamics underpinning male violence and women's condemnation by society when dealing with its consequences, mainly unwanted pregnancy, as the second part of this chapter will explore.

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[347] Ménard, 'Préface', *op.cit.*, p. 20.
[348] Jules Lemaitre, 'Romanciers contemporains : Georges de Peyrebrune', *La Revue politique et littéraire*, 30 October 1886, pp. 546–49 (p. 548).
[349] Manoël de Grandfort, 'Causerie littéraire', *La Fronde*, 10 August 1898, p. 3.
[350] Maxime Gaucher, 'Causerie littéraire V', *La Revue politique et littéraire*, 1 December 1883, p. 699.
[351] Lemaitre, p. 548.
[352] Quoted in Georges Vigarello, *Histoire du viol. XVIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998), p. 165.
[353] Ménard, 'Préface', p. 22. Ménard refers to Tardieu's definition of rape as a violence exercised on woman's sexual organs. See Tardieu, p. 32.

The descriptions of Victoire's sensuality and physicality complicate the question of her passivity during the rape scenes as she is described as having active sexual desires. At the start of the novel, the narrator uses animalistic imagery that is reminiscent of naturalist fiction to describe Victoire. For instance, Victoire is said to have 'l'aspect d'une vigoureuse femelle, bâtie à point pour l'amour robuste et la vaillante fécondité' (VR, p. 53 – *the aspect of a vigorous female, entirely made for robust love and valiant fecundity*). This portrait seemingly aligns with naturalist representations of female sexuality, especially when it comes to the 'femme du peuple' (*working-class woman*),[354] which would make Victoire's sensuality an inherent trait impregnating both her body and character. Numerous descriptions focus on Victoire's physicality, her red hair, and her heaviness, which seemingly deny Victoire the status of subject who can resist sexual advances and assert her autonomy.

However, while Peyrebrune portrays Victoire as possessing somewhat animalistic traits and an acute sensuality, she also explores the social factors behind Victoire's victimisation. Victoire is constantly reminded of her outcast status and her inferior position in the social and sexual hierarchy: 'Elle comprit qu'elle ne devait point compter comme celles qui n'étaient point bâtardes, élevées à l'hospice, et qui avaient une famille, des gens qui s'intéressaient à elles' (V, p. 50 – *She understood that she did not matter like the girls who were not bastards, raised in the orphanage, and who had a family, people caring about them*). Victoire's desperate desire for affection unveils the contradictions of a patriarchal society which makes women compete for male attention when it can lead to their victimisation and ostracization. While Victoire is depicted as having sexual desires of her own, those desires never align with the violence she experiences.

In the three rape scenes, Peyrebrune sets the scene in detail before making use of ellipsis for the act itself; the context alone is sufficient for the reader to anticipate what will

[354] See Schor, pp. 131–32.

befall Victoire. In the first one, Victoire is subdued by Périco, a co-worker at the farm, whom she is in love with despite his cruelty and demeaning words. After playing a prank on her, Périco comes to free her from the shed he locked her in, where he sees her in a vulnerable position 'tout étendue et les bras en croix' (VR, p. 58 – *lying down and her arms splayed out*). The scene is narrated through the point of view of Périco who cynically sees this act as a new way to torment her: 'il pensait que c'était un bon tour à jouer à la Victoire. Et puis, une tentation l'allumait' (VR, p. 58 – *he thought it was a good trick to play on Victoire. And something excited him*). The next paragraph then jumps to a description of the harvest, silencing an act which will have drastic consequences on Victoire's life. As her pregnancy is discovered by her employer, Victoire defends herself by arguing that she let Périco brutalise her because of her desperate need for affection:

> C'est pas la force qui m'a manqué, au contraire, c'est que je voulais pas lui faire de mal, parce que, voyez, avant lui, personne jamais ne m'avait embrassée ! Jamais… Et alors ça m'a tourné le cœur ; il m'aurait tuée que j'aurais pas pu me défendre. (VR, p. 67 – *It is not that I lacked strength, on the contrary, I did not want to hurt him because, you know, before him, no one had ever kissed me! Never… And it shook my heart; he could have killed me and I could not have defended myself.*)

This passage somewhat contradicts the scene which underlined Périco's brutality as Victoire naively believes herself to be stronger than him.

However, the narrative previously insisted on Victoire's lack of confidence, desperate need for affection, and her association of sexuality with passivity and violence, partly explaining her misunderstanding of Périco's act. Her stammering words 'Je ne savais pas… […] Je n'ai pas pu' (V, p. 67 – *I did not know… […] I couldn't*) show that Victoire interprets the event as out of her control because of her own character, but the naivety she demonstrates and the moments leading to her rape act as a reminder that Périco took advantage of her vulnerability to abuse her. At the heart of this scene's denunciation is her employer's violent condemnation of Victoire for an act whose consequences she does not fully understand:

> Périco ! mais il est marié depuis les fêtes de Nöel ! […] Il n'a pas pu te promettre le mariage. Alors pourquoi l'as-tu écouté ? C'est donc par vice, parce que tu es une vaurienne, une coureuse comme ta mère, dis, dis ? (V, pp. 66–67 – *Périco! But he's been married since Christmas! […] He can't have promised to marry you. So why did you listen to him? Is it out of vice, because you're a scoundrel, a whore like your mother, say, say?*)

This scene depicts the double standards of a society that sees male desire as impossible to restrain but puts the blame on women for not being able to defend themselves against it.[355] The mention of Victoire's mother also reveals the farmer's belief in biological determinism: Victoire cannot help being a 'fallen woman' because she was brought into the world by one.

After giving birth to her first child, Victoire finds employment on a new farm where she meets a young soldier invited by her employers whose social status impresses Victoire, making her feel flattered by his attention. Victoire is shown as actively desiring him, but when he comes to her at night, she attempts to repel him: 'Elle fit un rire en le poussant mollement. Elle ne voulait pas, non… Mais sa sensualité de bête échauffée la faisait se livrer, malgré sa volonté, peut-être avec le grognement heureux d'un appétit robuste enfin satisfait' (VR, p. 93 – *She laughed while pushing him listlessly. She did not want to, no… But her sensuality akin to a heated beast's made her surrender, despite her will, maybe with the joyous groan of a robust appetite finally satisfied*). The comparison to a 'beast' and the mention of her animalistic satisfaction seems to promote a view of working-class female sexuality as instinctual. Victoire is depicted in a position of total passivity, reminiscent of the naturalist descriptions of women as yielding to male strength and desires.[356] I interpret this tension found in this second scene as stemming from Peyrebrune's choice to portray a working-class character: on the one hand, Victoire's social status is used to demonstrate her vulnerability, as Peyrebrune's denunciation of sexual exploitation is linked with her critique of physical exploitation.[357] On the other hand, while

[355] Sophie Ménard, 'Le Code pénal et le roman peyrebrunien', in *Victoire la Rouge*, *op.cit.*, pp. 213–40 (p. 217).
[356] See Pierre, p. 70.
[357] Ménard, 'Préface', p. 29.

we could argue that portraying Victoire as close to nature, almost primitive, is meant to further explain her vulnerability in those scenes, it is also born out of contemporary clichés around working-class women.[358] However, it is made clear earlier by the narrator that she is asleep once the soldier comes to her and in a position of social vulnerability, as a farm maid, making her ability to consent already fragile.

This second sexual encounter leads to Victoire committing infanticide, which I analyse in the second part of this chapter. After her time in prison, which is not described, Victoire returns to the Périgord and finds work in an isolated farm whose master has a sinister reputation and who bribes her by promising marriage and an eternal refuge. Victoire surrenders out of a desire to survive: 'Et c'était une faiblesse qui la gagnait. Encore la faim, encore le froid, encore la course échevelée qui allait recommencer, si elle ne mourait pas de cette nuitée par les bois' (VR, p. 168 – *A weakness was overtaking her. Again the hunger, again the cold, again the wild race that would resume, if she did not die during the night in the forest*). While Victoire consents to this relationship, it is undeniably exploitative, evident in the urgency conveyed by the repetition of 'again'. Victoire is acutely aware of the potential repercussions of such a relationship, yet her determination to survive outweighs her reservations.

In these three scenes, the omniscient narrator adopts a tone reminiscent of a naturalist narrator assuming a detached stance. Peyrebrune's representation of sexual violence, while exceptionally explicit for the time, is marked by underlying tensions because of the numerous comparisons of Victoire to an animal and her contradictory reactions to the violence she experiences. However, as Ménard argues, Peyrebrune makes the subtle difference between 'yielding' and 'consenting' in those scenes that are set to demonstrate the unequal power dynamics based on class difference and a patriarchal

[358] See Schor's analysis of *Germinie Lacerteux* and the clichés deployed to depict the sexuality of 'la femme du peuple', pp. 127–34.

system of sexual exploitation.[359] The narrative repeatedly highlights Victoire's vulnerability, which is not caused by her natural sexual desires, but by her social status. While Victoire is not cast as a 'nervous woman', as this label was mainly used for upper- and middle-class women,[360] Peyrebrune still analyses the effects of sexual violence on her working-class protagonist, showing its devastating consequences on a woman who is repeatedly denied the status and dignity of a subject. In *Victoire la Rouge*, sexual violence is represented as a form of physical violence, but the novel also uncovers the role of social structures and working-class women's vulnerability in the perpetuation of women's victimisation.

### I.3 Amalie Skram's *Lucie*: Objectification and Hysterization

In *Lucie*, Skram rewrites the Pygmalion myth by exploring the abusive dynamics of a married couple in which Gerner, the husband, attempts to turn Lucie into an ideal bourgeois wife.[361] These attempts fail as in the eyes of society and of her husband, Lucie is 'en "Kvinde med Fortid"' (L, p. 114; '*a woman with a past*' – L2, p. 92) because of her prior sexual experience. The novel makes clear that their marriage is based on an inherent power imbalance as Lucie is economically dependent on Gerner. As Irene Engelstad highlights, Gerner's jealousy and controlling behaviour is shaped by his deterministic worldview,[362] which leads him to reproach Lucie of behaving as determined by her 'Plebejerblodet' (L, p. 156; *plebian blood* – L2, p. 125). Gerner repeatedly sanctions her for behaving familiarly with men and thus revealing her origins and past: 'Minde alle Mennesker om, hvad det er for en Tøs, jeg har giftet mig med. […] Bare et Mandfolk ser paa deg, saa dirrer det i hele Kroppen paa Dig […]. Du prostituerer mig' (L, p. 94;

[359] Ménard, 'Préface', p. 21.
[360] Foucault (2015), p. 706.
[361] Irene Engelstad, 'Etterord', in *Lucie* (Oslo: De norske Booklubbene, 1992), pp. 143–46, p. 143.
[362] Engelstad (1984), p. 111.

*Reminding everybody of what a trollop I married. […] If a man so much as looks at you, your whole body starts to tremble […]. You make me look ridiculous* – L2, p. 76). Gerner characterises Lucie's body as an object outside of her control, on which he imposes social expectations supposed to reflect his own status and honourability. Gerner denies Lucie any autonomy by casting her as 'hysterical', in the sense that she has supposedly no control over her body. Skram subverts the male perspective often found in naturalist fiction, where a detached narrator observes a female character, by revealing how Gerner's beliefs in biological determinism are subjective and the result of his own socialisation. His deterministic worldview, while revealed as a social construct, has tragic consequences for Lucie as her efforts to fit bourgeois ideals are disqualified by her past and body. Sexual violence, in *Lucie*, is portrayed as both physical and discursive: Lucie is raped by a drunk man after being left alone by her husband but is also the victim of Gerner's repeated dismissal of her control over her own body.

While Gerner goes against contemporary social conventions by marrying Lucie, he also sees her inferior social status as an advantage. As a friend of Gerner's describes marriage as a 'lottery', where a man can never be certain of the kind of wife he will ultimately have, Gerner shows himself confident in his ability to control Lucie: 'Hun staar i et ubegræsent Afhængigheds- og Taknemmelighedsforhold til mig. Der er saa at sige mig, som har skabt og upfundet hende. Hun er ung og blød som Voks, jeg kan gjøre ud af hende, hvad jeg vil' (L, p. 29; *She feels boundless gratitude toward me and is utterly dependent. I have, so to speak, created and invented her. She is young and soft as wax, I can make her into whatever I want* – L2, p. 23). The metaphor of the wax is reminiscent of the Pygmalion myth, but Gerner's assurance is revealed as illusory, as Lucie repeatedly escapes his control, as in her choice of readings:

> Sad hun ikke der igaarmorges og læste op af Avisen om forførte Piger, om Fødsel i Dølgsmaal og om Prostitutionen! Istedetfor at være paa sit bare Liv for at undgaa enhver Hentydning til sligt. Det var jo hver Gang som hun stak en Kniv ind i Hjærtet paa ham. (L, p. 97; *Only yesterday morning she*

> *was reading out loud from the newspaper about seduced girls, secret births, and prostitution! Instead of doing her utmost to avoid every reference to such things. He felt, each time, as if she were plunging a knife in his heart.* – L2, p. 78)

Gerner reads Lucie's simplest actions as provocative and determined by her working-class background and sexual past, effectively making it impossible for Lucie to correspond to his expectations. All her actions are read through the lens of classist and sexist prejudices, effectively trapping her in the identity of a woman to be controlled because her instincts are inherently hysterical.

While most naturalist texts adopt an omniscient point of view with a narrator coded as male and who takes on a distanced stance towards his characters, Skram introduces this distance by letting Gerner's inner monologue dominate most of the novel and by revealing how his excessive jealousy and cruelty towards Lucie are the products of his socialisation. Gerner's jealousy has drastic consequences as he leaves Lucie alone on the streets of Kristiania after a dispute where she is raped by a drunk man. This event is not directly narrated as it instantly focuses on Gerner's thoughts after he abandoned Lucie. In his anger, Gerner expresses how he considers Lucie as a sinner who should be grateful to be with him:

> Han var fuld af Vrede mod Lucie og af Medlidenhed med sig selv. Denne letfærdige Tøsekvinde, som han havde hævet op af Snavset og gjort til sin Hustru, satte sig op imod ham. […] Hun skulde vært ydmyk og angrende, en bodfærdig Magdalena i Sind og Minner. (L, p. 96; *He was filled with rage at Lucie and pity for himself. This frivolous tart that he had lifted out of filth and made his wife was setting herself against him. […] She ought to be humble and repentant, a penitential Magdalene in mind and deportment.* – L2, p. 77).

The mention of Magdalene casts Lucie as a biblical type, the repentant fallen woman, revealing how Gerner's thinking is influenced by bourgeois and Christian discourses. This passage also unveils the double standards permeating Gerner's attitude. During the fight, Lucie remarks that 'Du var vel kanske en Uskyldighed, Du, da Du giftet Dig med mig' (L, p. 94; *I suppose you were lily-white when you married me* – L2, p. 76). Gerner is unable to hear this contradiction, becomes violent and leaves her in a dangerous position. Adopting Gerner's point of view in this pivotal scene allows Skram to better unveil how the

discourses motivating his actions are entirely determined by his social background rather than Lucie's behaviour. Gerner's ideal of purity for Lucie is highly contradictory as he was first attracted to her because of her sexual experience,[363] but his inability to overcome his prejudices directly leads to Lucie's rape.

Lucie's own sensual desires, however, are far from what Gerner imagines. Their dispute was provoked by Lucie dancing with a young lieutenant, Knut, who charmed her. After the rape, Lucie feels deeply the cruel irony of having been raped by a drunken man while dreaming of another man whom she idealised: 'Ja, saa'n var det her i Verden. Hun drømte om den søde Løjtnanten, og saa var det en sjofel Arbejdsmand, kanske et Tugthuslem eller en Mordbrænder, som var rømt' (L, p. 107; *Well, that was life. She had been dreaming about the sweet lieutenant and got a common labourer, maybe even a jailbird or an arsonist who had escaped* – L2, p. 86). Skram uses the cliché image of the drunk working-class rapist, typically used in classist narratives to warn women of the danger of losing their purity.[364] She subverts this myth, however, by clearly showing how Gerner, as Lucie's husband, failed to protect her and even led her to this situation in the first place. Lucie's pregnancy following this rape introduces a layer of irony in Gerner's perspective. Gerner, once again reducing Lucie to her physicality, sees her pregnant body as an object in his possession: 'Dette skjønne, frodige Legeme var hans Ejendom og havde tilhørt ham, ham alene i over fire Aar' (L, p. 158; *This beautiful and lush body was his possession, and it had belonged to him alone for over four years* – L2, p. 126). The irony lies in the fact that the child could be her rapist's as Gerner left her in a vulnerable position, leading to the realisation of his worst fear, namely that Lucie becomes the object of another man.

[363] Irene Engelstad, 'Seksualitet, kropp og grenser. En undersøkelse av Amalie Skrams og Vigdis Hjorths romaner', in *Klinik tenkning og psykoanalysen*, ed. by Erik Stänicke and others (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2019), pp. 258–73 (p. 269).
[364] Vigarello, p. 84.

By this point in the novel, Lucie has also internalised Gerner's discourses and thinks of her rape as a punishment for which she is entirely to blame: 'Men hvis hun nu mon havde vært en fin Dame, en af dem, som aldrig havde havt med andre end sin Mand at gjøre, saa havde hun vel dræbt sig efter dette' (L, p. 104; *But if she were a fine lady, one of those who had never been with anybody except her husband, she probably would have killed herself after this* – L2, p. 84). Lucie identifies her social origins and that she had a lover before being married – the fact that she is not 'a fine lady' – as the reason why it has befallen her. Lucie's internalisation of the idea of being a 'fallen woman' establishes an interesting parallel with Zola's Renée and Krohg's Albertine,[365] but Skram's narrative handles this label in a more critical manner. Instead of being a passive victim of her body and her sexual desires, Lucie is portrayed as the victim of male violence. Nonetheless, marriage, rape, and pregnancy reduce Lucie to her body and render impossible her hopeless attempts to escape the physical realm to which Gerner condemns her. Gerner adopts a deterministic point of view which the narrative reveals to be a perspective embedded in social prejudices and emotions and is thus far from the objectivity claimed by the naturalist narrator. In *Lucie*, the figure of the 'nervous woman' is unveiled as a myth imposed on the female protagonist externally and that has no grounding in reality and as participating in a discursive form of sexual violence.

### I.4 Gabriele Reuter's *Aus guter Familie*: The Origins of Sexual Repression

In Reuter's *Aus guter Familie*, the main character, Agathe Heidling, experiences a nervous breakdown at the end of the novel after having failed to correspond to Prussian social expectations of marriage and motherhood. Freud himself positively reviewed Reuter's

[365] See how Krohg's Albertine uses the same expression as Lucie when comparing herself to upper-class women: 'gid, jeg var en fin dame!' (*god, if I were a fine lady!*). Krohg, p. 41.

bestselling novel as an 'unique insight into the origins of neuroses'.[366] While never using the word 'hysteria' to qualify her protagonist's illness, Reuter explores in her narrative the role played by repressed sexuality on her character, as Agathe experiences several frustrations linked to sexuality. For Agathe, the imposition of ideals of femininity results in the repression of traumatic experiences and her own sexual desires. This repression subsequently culminates in the 'Spaltung der Psyche'[367] (*splitting of consciousness*), a symptom identified by Freud and Breuer as central to hysteria. Agathe exemplifies what Freud and Breuer describe as the nature of hysteria: 'Das Mädchen ahnt im Eros die furchtbare Macht, die ihr Schicksal beherrscht und entscheidet, und wird durch sie geängstigt. Um so grösser ist die Neigung, wegzublicken und das Aengstigende aus dem Bewusstsein zu verdrängen'[368] (*The girl senses in Eros the terrible power which governs and decides her destiny and she is frightened by it. All the greater, then, is her inclination to look away and to repress from her consciousness the thing that frightens her*).[369] Reuter, however, goes further than Freud and Breuer because while they admit that hysterics do not necessarily have more intense sexual desires than 'normal' individuals, but fall ill because of the repression of their desires,[370] they do not delve into the social origins of this repression to the extent that Reuter does in her novel.[371] *Aus guter Familie* demonstrates that biological determinism is an oversimplification used to regulate women's sexuality and highlights how Agathe's own trajectory is thwarted by the discourses imposed upon her. Rather than becoming hysterical – in the sense of feeling split in her consciousness – because of her body, Agathe is driven to hysteria by the gender norms of her time, thus

[366] Sigmund Freud, 'Zur Dynamik der Übertragung', in *Studienausgabe. Ergänzungsband: Schriften zur Behandlungstechnik*, ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich and others, 11 vols (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1971), xi, pp. 157–68 (p. 161). Quoted by Hock, p. 443. Hock also underlines that Reuter was critical of psychoanalysis and saw its effects as detrimental. See Reuter (1921), p. 255.
[367] Breuer and Freud (1895), p. 197.
[368] Breuer and Freud (1895), p. 216.
[369] Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. by James Strachey and Alix Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1956), p. 246.
[370] Breuer and Freud (1895), p. 216.
[371] Anna Richards, *The Wasting Heroine in German Fiction by Women 1770-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 156.

overcoming the oscillation between biological and social determinism found in naturalist representations of sexuality.

The novel opens with the scene of Agathe's religious confirmation which marks her entry into womanhood, as she is of marrying age. At the family lunch, the priest and her father present her with her future, informed by gender norms and nationalist ideals: 'Denn das Weib, die Mutter künftiger Geschlechter, die Gründerin der Familie, ist ein wichtiges Glied der Gesellschaft, wenn sie sich ihrer Stellung als unscheinbarer, verborgener Wurzel recht bewußt bleibt' (GF, p. 11 – *For the woman, the mother of future generations, the founder of the family, is an important member of society, so long as she remains fully aware of her position as a discreet, hidden root*). German womanhood is thus defined by the two men representing the patriarchal system who impose on Agathe's body and mind their own ideals and norms.[372] On the one hand, the priest enforces the Christian association of sexuality with sin and shame and on the other, the father represents the Prussian ideology of marriage and motherhood.

After this crucial scene, Reuter shows how Agathe internalises Christian ideals, to the point of using its extreme vocabulary: 'Alle ihre Träume und Phantasieen waren von dem Gift der Sünde befleckt. Wie schlecht, wie durch und durch verdorben war sie!' (GF, p. 163 – *All her dreams and fantasies were tainted by the poison of sin. How bad, how utterly corrupt she was!*). As Karin Tebben highlights, Agathe is forced to live an asexual existence, which leads her to mentally self-destruct because of her lack of opportunity to express or act on her desires.[373] The effects of Agathe's suppression of her own desires because of internalised shame is reminiscent of Breuer and Freud's reflections on the causes of hysteria: 'die feinorganisirten Naturen von grosser sexualer Erregbarkeit, aber ebenso grosser moralischer Reinheit, welche alles Sexuale als unvereinbar mit ihrem

[372] Karin Tebben, *Literarische Intimität. Subjektkonstitution und Erzählstruktur in autobiographischen Texten von Frauen* (Munich: Francke Verlag, 1997), p. 150.
[373] Tebben, p. 160.

sittlichen Inhalt empfinden, als Beschmutzung und Befleckung'[374] (*there are natures of a refined organization who, though their sexual excitability is great, have an equally great moral purity and who feel that anything sexual is something incompatible with their ethical standards, something dirtying and smirching*).[375] But while Freud and Breuer identify this 'moral purity' as a character trait, Reuter portrays it as originating from Agathe's socialisation which causes her to develop feelings of shame and disgust towards sexuality.

Agathe's association of sexuality with shame is exacerbated by her role as a bystander in the rape of Wiesing by her brother. The family's young maid comes to Agathe for help with changing her lock to her room as her young master has been visiting her at night. What particularly shocks Agathe is the association between Wiesing's dirty room and her brother who is supposed to represent bourgeois values: 'Und Walter – ihr peinlich sauberer, eleganter Bruder, in seiner glänzenden Uniform war hier gewesen ... wie war es nur möglich? Es schüttelte sie ein Grauen, ein Ekel' (GF, p. 61 – *And Walter – her meticulously neat, elegant brother, in his shiny uniform, had been here… how was it possible? She was shaken by horror, disgust*). This realisation shatters Agathe's 'Tugendideal'[376] (*ideal of virtue*), but she is unable to help Wiesing as she has no power within the household. Elke Frederiksen argues that this episode establishes men as the wrongdoers but also women like Agathe as upholders of patriarchal double standards by her inability to act.[377] Agathe's agency in this case is however limited by her role as a 'daughter from a good family' and her brother is quick to dismiss her when she tries to rebuke him for his actions: 'Ich verbiete Dir, Dich in meine Angelegenheiten zu mischen – hörst Du? Du beträgst Dich nicht wie eine Dame, sondern wie ein exaltiertes

[374] Breuer and Freud (1895), p. 216.
[375] Breuer and Freud (1956), p. 245.
[376] Lilo Weber, *'Fliegen und Zittern'. Hysterie in Texten von Theodor Fontane, Hedwig Dohm, Gabriele Reuter und Minna Kautsky* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 1996), p. 205.
[377] Elke Frederiksen, 'Der literarische Text im späten 19. Jahrhundert als Schnittpunkt von regionalen, überregionalen und Geschlechts-Aspekten: Gabriele Reuters *Aus guter Familie* zum Beispiel', in *Literatur und Regionalität*, ed. by Anselm Maler (Frankfurt am Main, New York: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 157–66 (p. 166).

Frauenzimmer. Es ist unpassend von Dir, an solche Dinge zu rühren!' (GF, p. 63 – *I forbid you to interfere in my affairs – do you hear me? You are not behaving like a lady but like an irrational woman. It is inappropriate for you to get involved in such things!*). Walter's categorisation of his sister as a hysteric – in the contemporary sense that women are by nature nervous and overly sensitive – is an easy way to discredit her voice and indignation, and it effectively silences her. Agathe's witnessing of sexual violence exposes the double standards prevalent in Prussian and Christian discourses. Her inability to defend Wiesing adds to Agathe's feeling of dissociation between the norms she has internalised and the indignation and disgust she feels at the injustice she witnesses, leading her to repress this episode.

Wiesing, through her working-class background, is one figure of women's oppression while Agathe's mother builds another parallel to Agathe's destiny by symbolising the fate of the bourgeois wife sacrificing everything to her husband, as is demanded of her:

> Ihr Mann hielt die in feine Form gekleidete geistige Bescheidenheit an der Frau vor allem hoch, und liebt man einen Mann, so sucht man doch unwillkürlich genau so zu werden, wie er es gern hat. Ja – und die vielen Wochenbetten und der Tod von kleinen Kindern – das macht den Kopf einer Frau recht müde. Aber dafür hat man seine Pflicht im Leben erfüllt. (GF, p. 24 – *Above all, her husband valued a woman's spiritual modesty, clothed in elegance, and if you love a man, you involuntarily try to become exactly what he wants you to be. Yes – and the many postpartum weeks and the deaths of small children – that makes a woman's head quite tired. But in return you have fulfilled your duty in life.*)

Frau Heidling embodies the passive internalisation of gender norms, highlighting its repercussions on women's physical and mental well-being.[378] The ideal of the traditional housewife and mother ultimately proves to be impractical, forcing women to renounce their individual aspirations.[379] Agathe, however, strives for this ideal, not only because it has been imposed on her since her confirmation, but also, as Jenny Bauer underlines, because motherhood represents a way to be sexually active in a socially acceptable

[378] Woodford (2012), p. 219.
[379] Balmer, p. 186.

manner.[380] The impossibility for Agathe to fulfil her sexual desires leads her to feel split: 'Es war nur ein fortwährender Streit zwischen ihrer individuellen Natur und dem Wesen, zu dem sies ich in liebendem Eifer nach einem ehrwürdigen, jahrtausende alten Ideal gemodelt hatte' (GF, p. 150 – *It was only a constant conflict between her individual nature and the being into which she had lovingly fashioned herself according to a venerable, millennia-old ideal*). Hysteria is shown not as the result of a biological heritage, from mother to daughter, but as the consequence of middle-class women's socialisation that leads women to the unsolvable dilemma of either going down the unfulfilling path of marriage or motherhood, as Frau Heidling, or being unable to express one's sexual desires in an acceptable manner, as Agathe.

The portrait of her childhood friend who becomes her sister-in-law, Eugenie, provides interesting counterpoints to Agathe's relationship to sexuality and gender norms. Despite receiving the same education – although Eugenie's father is portrayed as much more lenient than Agathe's – Eugenie reveals herself to be able to play the role demanded of her once an adult: 'Eugenie spielte nun ein reizendes Hausmütterchen. Walters Kameraden feierten sie als das Muster der deutschen Offiziersfrau' (GF, p. 84 – *Eugenie now played a lovely housemother. Walter's comrades celebrated her as the model of the German officer's wife*). Both women, as Lilo Weber underlines, see through the hypocritical sexual morals of their time, but Eugenie is the only one able to use it to her advantage.[381] While Agathe's inability to conform with social standards leads to the breaking of her psyche, Eugenie is able to reconcile, from a young age, her own sexual desires and activity with the role of the ideal wife and mother and is thus able to survive by playing with the symbolic laws women are submitted to.[382]

[380] Jenny Bauer, *Geschlechterdiskurse um 1900. Literarische Identitätsentwürfe im Kontext deutsch-skandinavischer Raumproduktion* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016), p. 145.
[381] Weber, p. 203.
[382] Balmer, p. 181.

This pathological relationship to sexuality is eventually worsened as Agathe is sent to a sanatorium and her psyche shatters at the sight of Eugenie openly flirting with the doctor. This shock leads Agathe's inner monologue to become frantic as Agathe uncovers how Eugenie can push the limits of established womanly ideals while she has failed to attain both marriage and motherhood herself. Agathe's breakdown is thus linked with sexuality, as she remembers her successive upsetting experiences:

> Wenn sie draußen sind, wo keiner sie mehr sieht, da küssen sie sich – der Doktor und – Eugenie ha ha ha – und Walter küßt sie auch und Wölfchen – alle küssen sich. Martin und die Kellnerin und der Commis – alle, alle ... pfui! Warum kommen sie zu ihr ins Zimmer – das ist so boshaft. (GF, p. 209 – *When they are outside, when no one sees them, they kiss each other – the doctor and – Eugenie ha ha ha – and Walter kisses her too and Wölfchen – they all kiss. Martin and the waitress and the clerks – everyone, everyone… ugh! Why do they come to her bedroom – that is so wicked.*)

Agathe expresses her disgust towards the adulterous couple made by Eugenie and the doctor, and the mention of the 'bedroom', where men and women meet, could be evoking Wiesing's rape by her brother. Agathe's repression of her own sexual desires is not only caused by feelings of shame and disgust, but also by her association of sexuality with violence and fear. Eugenie plays the role of catalyst in Agathe's feelings of shame and rejection as it seems to Agathe that her sister-in-law's promiscuity is reflected on herself.

*Aus guter Familie* reaches its climax with Agathe's frantic inner monologue in the concluding chapters, where Agathe's psyche fails to reconcile the ideal she strives for with the double standards she uncovers within it. She comes to embody the type of the 'nervous woman', no longer in control of her thoughts and body. Her breakdown is, as we have seen, connected to events involving sexuality, aligning with Freud and Breuer's theories published the same year as the novel. However, Reuter's narrative insists on how social discourses on sexuality heavily influence Agathe's feelings of shame, disgust, and fear, rather than her natural sexual desires, highlighting the crucial role of social determinism. Agathe is not portrayed as biologically determined to have a nervous breakdown because her consciousness shatters at the double standards she uncovers without being able to

overcome them. Going further than Freud and Breuer, who uncovered the role of sexual violence and repression of traumatic memories on women's mental health, Reuter reveals how psychoanalysis – and naturalist fiction – ultimately fails to identify that hysteria is caused by bourgeois norms and expectations, unveiling how sexual violence can take on a discursive form.

By exploring the psychological consequences of sexual violence on their fictional characters, naturalist fiction introduces a tension into the contemporary discourses that portray women as entirely determined by their bodies and physiological reactions. As I argued, this representation is however fraught with contradictions: while naturalist narratives almost unveil sexual violence as a sociological rather than a natural fact, they deploy a fatalistic logic by naturalising male violence and portraying women's subsequent 'sexual fall' as inevitable. The texts by women writers analysed in this section respond to naturalist portrayals of sexual violence and represent it as born out of social dynamics. While the consequences of sexual violence on the characters portrayed by Peyrebrune, Skram, and Reuter are tragic, they are not shown as resulting from their natural disposition for hysteria. Rather, the label of the 'nervous woman' is revealed as a myth used to deny the reality of sexual violence and to condemn women who show physical and psychological traces of patriarchal brutality. The women writers discussed here thus portray the 'nervous woman' as both a construct and an effect of a patriarchal violent order.

## II. The Mother

In the second half of the nineteenth century, definitions of hysteria are linked with motherhood as women's sexuality is scrutinised through the lens of what has been constructed as its 'natural' endpoint, namely procreation. Pregnancy was often prescribed

as a cure for hysteria, and motherhood designated as women's natural destiny.[383] By making women the keepers of the biological and social equilibrium, these discourses confine women to the private realm and aim to alleviate anxieties around their 'untamed' sexuality.[384] In naturalist fiction, mother figures oscillate between the ideal and the monstrous – that is, the unhealthy and corrupted mother –, presenting a contradictory image of motherhood that appears to be determined not solely by physiological factors but also by social ones. As with sexual violence, naturalist narratives break numerous taboos around maternity which in turn inspires women writers to further question the naturalisation of motherhood. Unlike Zola whose narratives oscillate between the contemporary clichés of the ideal mother and that of the 'bad' mother, the texts by Peyrebrune, Dohm, and Reuter reveal how contemporary discourses violently restrict women's experiences of sexuality. Their portrayal of motherhood as a negative experience or at best ambivalent introduces a tension in their hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction as they challenge the idea that women are naturally drawn to motherhood, to instead portray how social factors shape their experiences of maternity. Peyrebrune, in *Victoire la Rouge*, engages critically with the idea of maternal instincts by using infanticide as a narrative device to unveil the hypocrisy of natalist discourses. Dohm's "Werde, die Du bist!" and Reuter's *Aus guter Familie* reject motherhood as the determining factor in women's identity and a meaningless repetition of abusive family dynamics. They challenge the contemporary construct of motherhood as an antidote to hysteria by portraying how it contributes to women's alienation.

### II.1 Naturalist Motherhood: Between Disgust and Fascination

In naturalist fiction, contemporary anxieties around the female body and sexuality are somewhat tamed by representations of motherhood as the sole path to happiness for female

[383] Beizer, p. 51.
[384] See Baguley (1990), p. 103 and Carles and Desgranges, p. 32.

characters.[385] The most striking idealisation of motherhood takes place in Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal* which reinforces the anti-tragic message of the novel, as I explored in the first chapter. Pascal is captivated by the mystery of procreation, which builds the essence of the enigma of femininity, and wants to unveil the origins of life by experimenting on corpses of pregnant women to answer the question: 'Pourquoi et comment un être nouveau ?' (DP, p. 944; *Why and how did a new life come into being?* – DP2, p. 31). For Pascal, the womb represents the place where heredity occurs and dissecting women thus becomes a way to 'understand and control nature'.[386] Dorothy Kelly demonstrates how Zola's novel establishes a parallel between the experimental doctor on the fictional level and the experimental novelist who both embody the fantasy of controlling women's bodies to create a world where 'men have taken over the reproductive function and can rewrite the mechanics of heredity and determinism'.[387] In naturalist narratives, the observation of pregnancy and maternity by the scientist is thus a way to alleviate the fear of the monstrous mother contaminating her children.

Clotilde, Pascal's niece, is portrayed as the ideal mother because she lets herself be moulded by Pascal. At first described as influenced by religion and her boundless imagination, Clotilde is then converted to Pascal's beliefs in science and the forces of life over the course of the novel. This conversion is symbolised by Clotilde's idealisation of procreation, to the point that she rejects literary representations of love and sexuality that do not present a child as the end goal:

> Mais, surtout, son continuel étonnement, sa continuelle indignation étaient de voir que, dans les romans d'amour, on ne se préoccupait jamais de l'enfant. […] Le sexe des héros, dans les romans distingués, n'était plus qu'une machine à passion. […] C'était malpropre et imbécile. (DP, pp. 1086–87; *But more than anything, she was always amazed and outraged to see that, in romance novels, no one ever worried about children. […] The sexual organs of the protagonists, in elegant novels, were nothing more than passion machines. […] It was immoral and moronic.* – DP2, pp. 165–66)

[385] Bertrand-Jennings, p. 98.
[386] Dorothy Kelly, *Reconstructing Woman: From Fiction to Reality in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel* (Penn: Penn State University Press, 2007), p. 117.
[387] Kelly (2007), p. 122.

In a kind of *mise en abyme*, Zola depicts a love story that stands in stark contrast to those Clotilde rejects: her relationship with Pascal is entirely defined by her becoming a mother. The final portrayal of Clotilde idealises her maternal self-sacrifice for the son who represents her hopes for the future: 'Elle, la mère, pendant qu'il buvait sa vie, rêvait déjà d'avenir. Que serait-il quand elle l'aurait fait grand et fort, en se donnant toute ?' (DP, p. 1218; *And while he was drinking her life, she, his mother, was already dreaming of the future. What would he be, when she had made him big and strong by giving herself entirely?* – DP2, p. 294). If Clotilde is a positive character, despite her family origins, it is because she is the mother of the 'redeemer', the mother who has escaped the fatal logic of heredity.[388] Clotilde's story is a successful Pygmalion story: Pascal took her out of her milieu and her maternity marks the completion of her initiation to femininity.[389] Unlike Skram's *Lucie*, in which Gerner fails to turn his wife into the ideal bourgeois wife because of his prejudices against her sexual past, Pascal is able to dispel anxieties around untamed female sexuality by moulding Clotilde into the ideal mother.

This idealisation of motherhood is however contradicted by the naturalist portrayals of pregnancy as reducing the female characters to their physicality. Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle is haunted by monstrous and unhealthy mother figures. As feminist analyses have shown, Tante Dide is established as the cause of the family's 'fêlure', attributed to her act of adultery, which is depicted as a sexual and moral transgression.[390] By having a woman at the origin of the family's decline, Zola portrays degeneracy as determined by a matrilineal logic.[391] The female womb is both an object of fascination, as we have seen with Pascal, but also of disgust because of the hereditary danger it represents and how it reduces female characters to the physiological realm.

[388] Catherine Toubin-Malinas, *Heurts et Malheurs de la Femme au 19e siècle. "Fécondité" d'Emile Zola* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1986), pp. 45–46.
[389] Yves Malinas, *Zola et les hérédités imaginaires* (Paris: Expansion Scientifique Française, 1985), p. 161.
[390] Bertrand-Jennings, p. 26.
[391] Carles and Desgranges, p. 16.

The parallel established between Pauline and Louise in Zola's *La Joie de vivre* (1884) builds an interesting contrast between two types of mothers: the spiritual and the physical mother. In a key scene, after Pauline sacrificed her love for her cousin, Lazare, so that he can marry Louise, Pauline contemplates her body and regrets its forced chastity: 'Elle était mûre pourtant, elle voyait la vie gonfler ses membres, fleurir aux plis secrets de sa chair en toison noire, elle respirait son odeur de femme, comme un bouquet épanoui dans l'attente de la fécondation'[392] (*Yet she was ripe, life was coursing through her limbs and flowering in dark tufts in the secret recesses of her body, and she could smell her womanly scent, like a floral bouquet awaiting fertilization).*[393] What Pauline grieves is what she perceives to be the natural purpose of is her healthy body, namely becoming a mother. The female body is here idealised as the bearer of life and of hope, as Pauline appears healthy and strong. But this idealisation is contrasted by the way Louise's body is described during childbirth:

> Louise n'était plus. Elle venait de s'abandonner *comme une chose*. Sa pudeur de femme, sa répugnance à se laisser voir dans son mal et dans sa nudité, avaient sombré enfin, emportées par la souffrance. Sans force pour soulever un doigt, elle n'avait conscience ni de sa peau nue, ni de ces gens qui la touchaient. Et, découverte jusqu'à la gorge, le ventre à l'air, les jambes élargies, elle restait là, sans même un frisson, *étalant sa maternité ensanglantée et béante*.[394] (*Louise no longer existed. She had renounced her humanity and* become like an object. *Her feminine modesty, her resolve not to let herself be seen naked and in agony, had finally crumbled under the onslaught of pain. Without the strength to lift a finger, she had no awareness either of her naked skin, or of the people who were touching her. And she lay there, uncovered up to her breasts, belly open to the air and legs spread wide, without even a quiver*, exposing the full spectacle of her bloody, gaping maternity.)[395]

The female sex appears as this monstrous wound at the origin of the *fêlure*,[396] and this representation blocks Louise within the realm of the physical. The mention of her becoming a mere 'chose' (*thing*) and losing her feminine attributes of coquetry designates her as less than human. Paradoxically, Pauline, even if she stays infertile, is the ideal

[392] Émile Zola, *La Joie de vivre*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire III*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), iii, p. 1043.
[393] Émile Zola, *The Bright Side of Life*, trans. by Andrew Rothwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 224.
[394] Zola, *La Joie*, pp. 1095–96. My emphasis.
[395] Zola, *The Bright Side*, p. 272.
[396] Beizer, p. 202.

mother because she not only saves the child after a complicated birth, but she also avoids the horrific physicality of motherhood, therefore staying within the ideal realm of a spiritual maternity.[397]

The narrator also hints at the fact that Pauline could have physically been a better mother than Louise:

> Elle baissait un regard désespéré vers ses hanches, vers son ventre de vierge qui venait de tressaillir. Dans la largeur de son flanc, aurait tenu un fils solide et fort. C'était un regret immense de son existence manquée, de son sexe de femme qui dormirait stérile.[398] (*She looked down in despair at her own hips, at her virginal belly which had just felt such a sympathetic thrill. Her broad flanks might have held a strong, sturdy son. She felt immense regret at her own frustrated life, her womanly sex destined to remain for ever sterile.*)[399]

Pauline avoids the loss of subjecthood which seemingly comes with giving birth and is portrayed as healthy and strong and the potential bearer of vigorous children. Spiritual maternity is presented here as a way to tame male anxieties around female genitals and sexuality,[400] but it is also implied that Pauline's chastity and infertility goes against her womanhood, her natural destiny, thus contributing to the naturalisation of motherhood.

While Tante Dide is established as figure of the 'original fall', causing the family's misfortunes because of her poor heredity, positive and healthy female figures are born of her, such as Clotilde, in the Rougon branch, and Pauline, in the Macquart branch.[401] Interestingly, a key component of Pauline's and Clotilde's physiological and psychological health is their environment: both were taken out of their original milieu – their parents' urban and immoral Paris – and social determinism thus appears as key in the characters' experience of womanhood and motherhood. In Zola's *Pot-Bouille* (1882), which interweaves the stories of several bourgeois families with those of the maids serving them,

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[397] Agnès Bonnin, 'Entre virginité et maternité : corps et rôles féminins chez Zola', *Littératures*, 20 (1999), pp. 13–37 (p. 34).
[398] Zola, *La Joie*, p. 1103.
[399] Zola, *The Bright Side*, p. 279.
[400] Bonnin, p. 33.
[401] My analysis leaves out other positive and healthy female figures such as Albine (*La Faute de L'abbé Mouret*, 1875) Denise (*Au Bonheur des Dames*, 1883), Caroline (*L'Argent*, 1891) as they are not part of the Rougon-Macquart family, but who also build interesting counterpoints to the 'unhealthy' female figures of the cycle. See Cabanès, p. 304.

the description of sexual violence and illegitimate motherhood casts light on social factors, complicating the naturalist idealisation of motherhood and maternal instincts. Adèle, a maid abused by her masters, gives birth in her room and decides to abandon her child. Using free indirect speech, Zola conveys Adèle's indignation at bourgeois hypocrisy:

> Ce n'était donc pas assez de ne jamais manger à sa faim, d'être le souillon sale et gauche, sur lequel la maison entière tapait : il fallait que les maîtres lui fissent un enfant ! Ah ! les salauds ! Elle n'aurait pu dire seulement si c'était du jeune ou du vieux, car le vieux l'avait encore assommée, après le mardi gras. L'un et l'autre, d'ailleurs, s'en fichaient pas mal, maintenant qu'ils avaient eu le plaisir et qu'elle avait la peine ! Elle devrait aller accoucher sur leur paillasson, pour voir leur tête.[402] (*So it wasn't enough to be starved to death, and the dirty drudge whom everyone bullied: her masters had to get her pregnant as well! Filthy brutes! She could not say if it was the young one or the old one that had done it. In any case, neither of them cared a damn; they had had their pleasure, while she had to suffer for it! If she went and had her baby on their doormat, that would make them take notice!*)[403]

This passage denounces patriarchal violence that places women in vulnerable situations and leaves them to grapple with the aftermath of pregnancy. Adèle, in her simple vocabulary, also sees that fact that her child is a girl as a curse, condemning her to the same fate as her mother: 'C'était une fille. Encore une malheureuse ! de la viande à cocher ou à valet de chambre'[404] (*It was a girl ! One more unfortunate girl! A tit-bit for some brawny groom or footman*).[405] Adèle's empathy for her child does not stem from an inherent maternal instinct, but from her awareness of the fate imposed on her child because of her illegitimate status. Adèle's experience of motherhood is determined by the traumatic experience of rape, by her vulnerability and the need to retain her job as a maid and by the fear that her bourgeois employers would not tolerate her illegitimate child. This representation is close to the reality of working-class women's experiences of motherhood in nineteenth-century Paris,[406] and thus illustrates that social determinism is also a key aspect of naturalist perspectives on motherhood. In *Victoire la Rouge*, Peyrebrune also

[402] Émile Zola, *Pot-Bouille*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale deune famille sous le Second Empire III*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), iii, pp. 368–69.
[403] Émile Zola, *Pot Luck*, trans. Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 361.
[404] Zola, *Pot-Bouille*, p. 371.
[405] Zola, *Pot Luck*, p. 364.
[406] See Rachel G. Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for Survival in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

portrays her character's experiences of motherhood as determined by her social circumstances rather than her biological instincts.

In his preparatory notes for *Hedda Gabler* (1890), Ibsen writes: 'De er ikke alle skabte til at være mødre' (*They are not all made to be mothers*).[407] This general comment is linked to how the play represents Hedda as disgusted by both sexuality and pregnancy. Hedda's tragedy is caused by her desperate attempts to escape from the everyday and the common female destiny as a wife and mother.[408] This idea that not all women are made to be mothers goes against the social discourses of the time that saw motherhood as women's duty.[409] For Hedda, however, pregnancy is the reminder of her passivity and her inability to create, as Løvborg – a philosopher whose manuscript she burns and whom she drives to suicide – and her husband do.[410] Similarly, Dohm in "Werde, die Du bist!" portrays her protagonist's experience of motherhood as causing her estrangement from her body and self as she is being kept within the realm of the private home without any opportunity for personal growth.

Naturalist representations of motherhood thus appear to explore several tensions without resolving them: on the one hand, female characters like Clotilde correspond to the contemporary ideal of women as keepers of society's health and her femininity is only complete once she becomes a mother. Her son represents the end of the repetitive cycle of bad heredity started by Tante Dide, but also a potential reconciliation between men and women whose relationships are no longer built on violence but on the shared goal of procreation. The contemporary construction of motherhood as women's natural drive and duty is however complicated by Zola's portrayal of illegitimate motherhood in *Pot-Bouille*

[407] Henrik Ibsen, '*Hedda Gabler* (NBO Ms.8° 2638)', ed. by The Henrik Ibsen Centre, University of Oslo, p. 28 <https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_HG%7CHG82638_NBO.xhtml?facs=Ja> [Accessed 03 March 2025]. My translation.
[408] Moi (2006), p. 317.
[409] On the contradiction between this play and Ibsen's public idealisation of motherhood, see Moi (2021), p. 97.
[410] Figes, p. 101.

and Hedda's refusal to become a mother in Ibsen's play. This oscillation between biological and social views of femininity is held up for scrutiny in the texts by the women writers discussed in this chapter, as they challenge naturalist discourses attempting to naturalise 'maternal instincts' and portray how motherhood contributes to women's alienation.

## II.2 Georges de Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge*: Illegitimate Pregnancy and Infanticide

In *Victoire la Rouge*, the three rapes undergone by Victoire result in three unwanted pregnancies. As Ménard demonstrates, Peyrebrune's novel was written as a response to the contemporary debates around a potential modification of the law of 1804 that prohibited women from seeking paternity recognition.[411] In an article defending her novel, Peyrebrune points out the double standard permeating those debates: these laws, affecting women, are made by men to protect men.[412] I also read this novel as a counterpoint to the rise of natalist discourses after the defeat against Prussia in 1871. Many French intellectuals worried about the decline in French couples' fertility and about the rise of feminism and women's increasing demands for bodily autonomy which were viewed as direct threats to the traditional roles assigned to women.[413] To counter this crisis, numerous French intellectuals – including scientists and authors – framed motherhood as women's natural drive and duty.[414] They also turned to the question of infanticide, trying to explain a phenomenon that seemed on the rise with higher arrests and prosecution rates in the 1860s and 1870s, notably after the closure of the public facilities that allowed for anonymous child

[411] Ménard, 'Le code pénal et le roman peyrebrunien', p. 213.
[412] Georges de Peyrebrune, 'Le Code pénal et le roman', *Paris*, 16 December 1883, pp. 1–2 (p. 2). Quoted in Ménard (2024), pp. 233–40.
[413] Karen Offen, 'Depopulation, Nationalism and Feminism in *Fin-de-Siècle* France', *American Historical Review*, 89 (1984), pp. 648–76 (p. 652).
[414] Cole, p. 695.

abandonment.[415] The naturalisation of motherhood thus served natalist discourses as it framed maternity as women's sole way to fulfil their destinies. The repetitions of Victoire's illegitimate pregnancies appear as parodying, albeit in a cynical manner, the natalist ideal: Victoire's extreme fertility – as she becomes pregnant after every sexual encounter – is a curse, rather than a blessing that heightens her vulnerability. Victoire is forced to abandon her first child, commits infanticide as her second child is born, and finally commits suicide upon revealing her third pregnancy. By portraying how Victoire's experience of motherhood is entirely determined by her social circumstances rather than by the constructed idea of maternal instincts, Peyrebrune's novel epitomises early feminist resistance to French natalist discourses and challenges the strict dichotomy between the ideal and monstrous mother found in naturalist fiction.

Due to her limited education, Victoire is unaware that she is pregnant after being raped by Périco. Her pregnancy is discovered by her employer, who is shocked upon seeing Victoire's swollen belly as she parades on Virgin Mary's day: 'c'était le ventre de Victoire, ventre énorme, effrayant, qui lui tombait sur les jambes et lui remontait jusqu'à la gorge. Et ce ventre s'avançait portant la bannière des vierges' (V, p. 65 – *It was Victoire's belly, an enormous belly, frightening, that fell on her legs and rose up her throat. And this belly stepped forward, carrying the virgins' banner*). The employer's perspective personifies Victoire's belly which signifies a major taboo that Victoire is unknowingly breaking during a religious event. Reduced to a mere 'ventre' (*belly*), Victoire is dehumanised by a character representing contemporary views on illegitimate pregnancies. When her employer chastises her for being pregnant, Victoire innocently compares herself to the Virgin Mary: '"Un enfant ! comme la Sainte Vierge." "Misérable !" cria la fermière indignée. "Oses-tu te comparer à celle que tu as outragée !" "Mais, reprit Victoire, obstinée, elle a bien un enfant aussi, elle ?"' (V, p. 67 – *'A child! Like the Virgin Mary!'*

[415] Fuchs, pp. 205–6 and 219.

*'You wretch!' screamed the farmer with indignation. 'How dare you compare yourself to the one you insulted?' 'But', said Victoire obstinately, 'she has a child herself, hasn't she?'*). This passage would be comic if it was not for Victoire being cast out violently by her employer afterwards. Peyrebrune's use of irony denounces the double standards of a society that both idealises the Virgin Mary and motherhood while not providing any support for vulnerable mothers.

Victoire is forced to return to the orphanage to give birth to her child, whom she leaves behind to get back to work at another farm where she meets the soldier. As we have seen in the previous section, Victoire is indeed attracted to him, but also wants to avoid pregnancy at all costs. The key focus of this narrative episode is Peyrebrune's denunciation of how upper-class men exploit and abandon women in vulnerable positions, particularly during pregnancy. Victoire is acutely aware of the consequences of this pregnancy as her first one resulted in her being cast out of her job and community, plunging her into extreme hardship: 'Elle lui avait bien dit qu'elle ne voulait pas ! maintenant, tout le malheur était pour elle' (V, p. 96 – *She had told him that she did not want to! And now, all the misfortune was for her*). This is why, upon discovering that she is pregnant for the second time, Victoire expresses hatred for her unborn child:

> Même une haine lui était venue pour cet enfant qui lui causait tant de malheurs et de souffrance. Si elle avait pu l'arracher de ses flancs et le jeter loin d'elle, comme on fait d'une bête qui se colle à vous et vous ronge, elle l'aurait fait sans pitié. De la pitié ! Qui donc en avait jamais eu pour elle ? (V, p. 109 – *She had even started to hate this child that caused her so much unhappiness and suffering. If she could have torn it out of her flanks and thrown it far away from her, as one does with a beast that sticks to you and gnaws on you, she would have done it, without mercy. Mercy! Who had ever shown her mercy?*)

At first glance, this passage might seem to foreshadow Victoire's committing infanticide, suggesting that she acted out of hatred for her child. However, the narration carefully emphasises Victoire's vulnerability: she is isolated, unable to contact the father, and refusing to return to the orphanage a second time, knowing it would mean losing her rights over her first child. This extreme reaction is motivated by Victoire's need to survive in a

milieu that she knows will condemn her for this pregnancy and cannot be interpreted as foreshadowing her later act.

Rather than employing the motif of infanticide for shock value, Peyrebrune exploits it to denounce the double standards of a society that accepts men's violence against women, while condemning women's means of survival. A clear example of Peyrebrune's disruption of the motif is the subverted foreshadowing scene taking place before Victoire's confession. Her employers and their guests express their shock and disgust upon seeing Victoire killing an animal for their meal which leads to a discussion around maids' morals and how they are supposedly insensitive. One of the guests even comments : 'Remarquez que ce sont presque toujours les servantes de la campagne qui tuent leurs enfants. L'habitude a détruit leur sensibilité. Ces filles sont très dangeureuses' (V, p. 87 – *Note that it is almost always countryside servants who kill their children. Habit has destroyed their sensitivity. These girls are very dangerous*). As I argued in the first chapter, Victoire's killing of an animal is a reminder of her social status, not a sign of an inherent propensity to crime, underlining how Peyrebrune is careful to show the social factors leading to Victoire's act. Contemporary statistics show that women who committed infanticide were living in countryside and/or were maids, single, and illiterate,[416] but unlike the middle-class guests' quick judgement, infanticide is best understood in a sociological framework, as Peyrebrune's narrative reminds us. This scene does not act as a foreshadowing of Victoire's act, but of how the people around her will be quick to condemn her as it confirms their social prejudices against working-class women.

The scene of the infanticide itself is recounted as Victoire confesses to a policeman who has discovered the corpse of a newborn in the forest. Victoire recounts the scene of her childbirth and her fear of being discovered as the baby started to cry. Free indirect speech, employing Victoire's simplistic language, is used to highlight Victoire's

[416] Fuchs, p. 213.

desperation and vulnerability when she admits that '[e]lle lui voulait du mal, bien certainement, pour ce qu'il était venu lui causer du malheur. Mais elle n'avait pas pensé à le tuer, jamais' (V, p. 118 – *[s]he wanted to hurt it, of course, as it had come to cause her so much unhappiness. But she had never thought of killing it, never*). Victoire confesses, but clearly states that the death of the child was an accident – she tried to muffle its cries to not get caught and smothered it inadvertently. Victoire is portrayed as far from feeling any 'maternal instinct', as she feels detached from the child and uncertain about what to do with:

> Elle n'y touchait pas seulement, elle le regardait. Elle n'avait pas l'idée d'en rien faire. Elle ne savait pas. Maintenant qu'elle ne souffrait plus, elle aurait voulu s'en aller et n'y plus penser. (V, p. 118 – *She did not even touch it, she simply looked at it. She never had any idea of doing anything with it. She did not know. Now that she was no longer suffering, she wished she could go and no longer think of it.*)

Victoire's account underlines her automatic behaviour after giving birth because she was preoccupied by her own survival.

The emphasis on her semi-conscious state during the act seems designed to diminish her responsibility: 'Elle éprouva le besoin de répéter qu'elle n'avait jamais eu l'idée de le faire mourir, qu'elle avait fait cela sans penser, comme elle avait dit, bien vrai…' (V, p. 119 – *She felt the need to reiterate that she had never thought of killing it, she had done it without thinking, as she said, that was the whole truth…*). Insisting on Victoire's lack of premeditation for her act brings the text to fall into a classist cliché, portraying her as too primitive to think beyond her own survival. But the narrative also emphasises how Victoire's survival depends on keeping her job at a farm where her employers rigidly uphold morals. This portrayal also builds an interesting parallel with contemporary trials for infanticide and the defence used by the accused. French jurors and judges often admitted extenuating circumstances, such as social vulnerability and temporary insanity.[417] Both these factors are employed in this scene which acts as Victoire's

[417] Fuchs, p. 203 and 211.

trial as the official one is omitted which keeps the novel focused on the rural community and its reactions.

After five years of hard labour, Victoire is forced to return to her native region and finds refuge at the farm of the 'Sauvage'. As previously explored, this illegitimate relationship is exploitative, but Victoire finally finds a moment of respite there. She adopts animals and even flinches at the sight of blood. As the narrator notes, 'Il semblait, en effet, que toute sa rudesse se fût fondue depuis qu'on l'aimait' (V, p. 173 – *It indeed seemed as if all her roughness had melted away now that she was loved*). This positive reversal, however, also serves to heighten Victoire's despair once the farmer rejects her and her unborn child. One night, the farmer announces his marriage with a neighbour who will inherit a large amount of money. He orders Victoire to stay silent on their liaison and to even stay as a maid, upon which Victoire announces her pregnancy. The farmer's reaction is immediately violent and out of fear, Victoire escapes and wanders through the forest, desperately aware that she cannot leave her region and will not be able to find work with 'son ventre' (V, p. 181 – *her belly*). As with her second pregnancy, Victoire perceives her fertility as a curse, personifying her belly as a force driving her downfall: 'Toujours ce ventre maudit, qui la martyriserait pendant toute sa vie et pour son malheur éternel !' (V, p. 181 – *Always this cursed belly, that would martyrise her for her entire life, and for her eternal misfortune!*). This personification signifies Victoire's dissociation from her own body as her 'belly' confines her to a state of passivity.

Victoire finally decides to commit suicide, and her last moments are spent reminiscing about her previous pregnancies and actions, including her infanticide:

> Seulement, elle s'étonna de n'avoir pas pensé plus tôt à s'en aller de ce monde. Si elle l'avait fait du premier coup de son malheur, elle n'aurait pas commis un crime en tuant son autre petit, à qui maintenant elle pensait. (V, p. 187 – *She was only surprised at not having thought about leaving this world earlier. If she had done it on the first stroke of bad luck, she would not have committed a crime by killing her other little one who was now on her mind.*)

Victoire's perspective on the past is still somewhat naive, with the term 'little one' expressing her tenderness and regret, but this passage also marks her realisation of the social factors behind her act. This passage confronts contemporary readers with the double standards around sexuality and pregnancy that have condemned Victoire to be isolated and othered. In this introspective scene, Victoire also thinks of her first child and the one she is currently carrying:

> Et elle pensait aussi au premier avec ce même serrement de cœur et cet amour de lui qu'elle avait toujours eu. Même celui qu'elle portait en ce moment lui donnait une angoisse. Elle ne le verrait pas, il ne viendrait pas au monde. Et c'est tant mieux pour lui, puisque aussi bien il serait bâtard comme elle, c'est-à-dire maudit. (V, pp. 187–88 – *And she also thought about the first one with the same pang of her heart and the love she had always had. Even the one she was carrying now made her anxious. She would not see it, it would not come into the world. And it was better that way, because he would be a bastard, just like her, that is, cursed.*)

Victoire relies on a superstitious vocabulary to designate herself and her unborn child, but this naive expression reveals that Victoire finally comes to understand the role of social prejudices on her life: the child will be condemned to a life of misery and shame, just like her and her own mother. Victoire sees suicide as the only way to break this cycle.

The last chapter is told from the farmer's perspective as he looks for Victoire, afraid that she has gone to the village to reveal her pregnancy. This change of perspective symbolises Victoire's final silence and reveals the selfishness of a man who exploited Victoire, an abuse tolerated by the community. His discovery of Victoire's corpse further dehumanises her as she is designated as a mere body:

> Et, comme il descendait peu à peu, épeuré, livide, il crut voir une masse sombre qui flottait. Oui, c'était bien cela ; et maintenant le soleil tout en feu embrasait le ciel et jetait comme un torrent de lumière, à travers les brumes évanouies, sur cette chose ronde, soulevée, qui paraissait s'étaler aux clartés des cieux : les flancs gonflés et fécondés de la fille morte. (V, p. 194 – *And, as he went down, step by step, frightened and livid, he thought he saw a dark mass that was floating. Yes, that was it; and now the sun, all on fire, set the sky ablaze and, through the vanished mists, cast a torrent of light on this round thing, floating, that seemed to spread out in the lights of heaven: the dead girl's swollen and fertilised flanks.*)

The passage aestheticises Victoire's dead body, in a manner reminiscent of the Ophelia painting by John Everett Millais,[418] and emphasises the opposition between fertility, the

[418] Lydia de Haro Hernández, 'Mots, couleurs et sens : la palette de Georges de Peyrebrune', *Anales de Filología Francesa*, 23 (2015), pp. 233–48 (p. 242).

flanks that tortured Victoire throughout the novel, and death. Like Louise in *La Joie de Vivre*, Victoire is designated as a 'chose' (*thing*) but this attribute is given to her by the farmer which symbolises Victoire's dehumanisation by a community that exploits her. Throughout the novel, her fertility appeared to Victoire as something out of her control, that repeatedly led her to be cast out and abused, and her final awakening has made her conscious of the social factors behind her victimisation. As the contemporary critic Camille Delaville notes, 'L'auteur arrive à faire de la matérnité, douce et supreme expiation de la faute d'une femme, une chose particulièrement ignoble et repoussante' (*The author succeeds in making maternity, sweet and supreme expiation of a woman's sin, particularly vile and repulsive*), a scandal which, for Delaville, originates from Peyrebrune's adoption of a naturalist mode of writing.[419] This negative portrayal of motherhood is however profoundly political. Published somewhat earlier than most natalist treatises, which were mainly written in the 1890s,[420] Peyrebrune's novel anticipatively challenges the arguments brought forward by French natalists: namely, that women are born to be mothers. *Victoire la Rouge* denounces social circumstances that make it impossible for vulnerable women to embody the 'good' mother ideal, imposed on them by a society unable to provide the support required to accomplish this ideal.

## II.3 Hedwig Dohm's "Werde, die Du bist!" and Gabriele Reuter's *Aus guter Familie*: Motherhood as Meaningless Repetition

In "Werde, die Du bist!", Dohm establishes a fictional parallel to her main thesis in her essay on motherhood, *Die Mütter. Beitrag zur Erziehungsfrage* (*The Mothers. Essay on the Question of Education*, 1903) that argues that individuality is one's natural right: 'Das

[419] Camille Delaville, 'Causerie littéraire', *L'Opinion nationale*, 29 October 1883, p. 1. Quoted in Sophie Ménard, 'Critiques de *Victoire la Rouge* (sélection)', in *Victoire la Rouge*, *op.cit.* (2024), pp. 241–56 (p. 243).
[420] Cole, pp. 663–64.

Erstgeburtsrecht aller Menschen ist – so denke ich – das Recht der eigenen Individualität, des Eigenlebens, das Recht, Selbstzweck zu sein. Hat der gelebt, der nichts anderes und nichts mehr war, als nur ein Mittel für das Dasein anderer?' (*The first birth right of all individuals is – I think – the right to one's own individuality, one's own life, the right to be an end in oneself. Did she live, the one who was nothing else and nothing more than the means for another's existence?*).[421] As part of Dohm's critique of society's treatment of women as mere bearer of children, this passage critiques how forcing maternity onto women results in the denial of their identities. The social discourses that establish motherhood as the sole path to female fulfillment contribute to Agnes' mental breakdown in Dohm's short story. In her diary, Agnes describes her growing sense of estrangement from her daughters following their marriages. Acutely observing how her daughters are sacrificing themselves for their husbands and children, Agnes comes to see her daughters' destiny as an unbearable repetition of her own, leading her to reject motherhood as a positive prospect for women:

> Eine Mutter soll nur für die Kinder da sein! So soll ich nur leben und arbeiten für die Tochter, und die Tochter soll wieder nur für ihre Kinder da sein. Welch ein sinnloser, unfruchtbarer Kreislauf. […] Nun aber sind sie doch gar nicht mehr meine Kinder, sie sind die Frauen ihrer Männer. Sie haben sich von mir fort verloren. (W, pp. 29–30 – *A mother should only exist for her children! So, I should only live and work for my daughters, and my daughters should only exist for their children again. What a senseless, sterile cycle. […] But now they are no longer my children, they are their husbands' wives. I lost them.*)

Motherhood, in Agnes' diary, is thus presented as a harmful cycle that traps women in unfulfilling lives that go against their inner desires. Like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who leaves both her husband and her children at the end of the play, Dohm's protagonist sees in motherhood an absurd repetition of the status quo and a limit to women's identity and freedom.

In Reuter's *Aus guter Familie*, the main protagonist also reflects on this meaningless cycle when considering her mother's trajectory:

[421] Dohm (1903), p. 186.

> In gewisser Weise war Mama immer stolz auf ihr Leiden gewesen. Sie trug es wie einen Teil ihres Lebens, als die Dornenkrone des Weibes – ihr von Ewigkeit her vorbestimmt. Wie kam Agathe als junges Mädchen, das geschont und gehütet war und niemals für das Menschengeschlecht auch nur das geringste geleistet hatte, zu diesem schrecklichen Erbe? Das war ja geradezu unnatürlich, war wie ein boshafter Hahn des Schicksals! (GF, p. 175 – *In a way, Mama had always been proud of her suffering. She wore it like a part of her life, as the woman's crown of thorns – meant for her for eternity. How did Agathe, sheltered and cared for as a young girl, and who had never done anything for mankind, come to this terrible inheritance? That was downright unnatural, like a malicious act of fate!*)

Agathe's 'terrible inheritance' from her mother is not biological, but a symbol of a fate determined by women's socialisation. What has been constructed as women's 'natural' duty of women is portrayed as leading to the female characters' renunciation of their identity. This myth of 'the Mother' is represented as limiting her possibility to escape the tragic cycle of daughters repeating their mother's meaningless trajectories.

Peyrebrune's, Dohm's, and Reuter's representations of motherhood spark a double scandal: as women writers, they are censored by a society which sees women's intellectual pursuits as leading to infertility and ultimately to social disorder as a woman could not write *and* be a good mother.[422] These writers' decision to take up the pen is made all the more outrageous by their portrayal of motherhood as alienating. As with the 'hysterization' of women's sexuality, they challenge scientific and fictional discourses that reduce women to their bodies and that deny women a destiny outside the fulfilment of what has been constructed as a biological duty, unveiling it as another form of patriarchal violence. While naturalist fiction, notably Ibsen with *Hedda Gabler* and Zola in *Pot-Bouille* opens a reflection around negative experiences of motherhood, women writers refuse the extreme types of the ideal and the monstrous mother to frame motherhood as an experience bound to one's social circumstances.

[422] See Mesch, pp. 14–15. Mesch quotes Sylvain Maréchal, *Projet d'une loi portant défense d'apprendre à lire aux femmes* (Paris : Masse, 1801), p. 36: 'Il est prouvé que les *Femmes-Auteurs* sont moins fécondes que les autres' (*It is proven that Women-Writers are less fertile than other women*).

## III. Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*: Opportunities for Resistance[423]

The narratives of women writers analysed in the previous section subvert naturalist tropes to challenge contemporary conceptions of female sexuality, rejecting the idea that it is entirely defined by biology. These texts, however, have similar endings to the naturalist works serving as their hypertextual models, as the female characters succumb to madness or death because of the pressure to conform to patriarchal expectations. As I argued in the previous chapter, the characters' tragic endings are meant to provoke the reader's indignation as these writers resist discourses that construct women as inherently hysterical while also pressuring them to conform to the ideal of motherhood. In Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*, however, the main character, Mary Barbe, is able to resist both myths of the 'nervous woman' and that of 'the Mother' in the fictional realm. Mary is the only character among all the texts analysed in this chapter who sees through the discourses imposed on her and actively resists them, thus offering a glimpse into opportunities for resistance, as in the Foucauldian model where the reappropriation of medico-legal discourses can fuel an individual's self-definition and emancipation.

By delivering a performance worthy of the *femme fatale* cliché, Mary parodies the type of the hysterical woman. Actual scenes of sadism, announced by the provocative title, are however quite underwhelming compared to the ones depicted by Rachilde's self-proclaimed model, the Marquis de Sade. As Holmes underlines, 'the novel is decidedly non-Sadean in the attention it pays to the social construction of identity'.[424] Rachilde portrays how Mary's *femme fatale* act is not born out of an inherent propensity to sadism, but rather by her socialisation.[425] In this section, however, I argue that the scholarly focus on Mary's acts of subversion overlooks scenes where her power is undermined, as the one

[423] Some material from this part have appeared in the following article: Marie Martine, '"Unhinged Women": Violence and Gender in Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) and Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020)', N*ottingham French Studies*, 63:2 (2024), pp. 207–20.
[424] Holmes (2001), p. 125.
[425] Downing (2012), p. 199.

when she is raped by her lover Paul. Mary's violence stems from her impulse to protect herself from the male cruelty she experienced as a child, and I interpret her rejection of motherhood as connected to her trauma. The resistance displayed in the novel is both deployed through the parodic mode, subverting the clichés around women's so-called hysterical tendencies, and the tragic mode, as Mary seems trapped in a traumatic cycle, showing the struggle to break free from patriarchal power dynamics.

As I analysed in the first chapter, *La Marquise de Sade* opens with Mary's initial trauma: her witnessing the killing of an ox to provide blood for her sick mother. Mary identifies with animals whose vulnerability to male violence mirrors her own.[426] This act of cruelty exposes to her the brutality of adults, particularly that of men, a violence she perceives as both senseless and arbitrary.[427] Mary's fear of male violence also expresses itself in another scene as she plays with a sheep which is stolen from her by a boy. This theft causes a violent extreme reaction because of her fear that the boy might kill the animal:

> Mais tout d'un coup une révolution s'opéra dans la passivité de la petite colonelle ; un cri rauque, un cri de chatte en colère sortit de sa gorge crispée; elle rejoignit Paul Marescut d'un seul bond et, tombant sur lui à l'improviste, elle le cribla d'égratignures. *Elle venait de déclarer sa première guerre au mâle.* On fût obligé de lui arracher ce garçon complètement défiguré. (My emphasis; MS, p. 57 – *But all of a sudden, a revolution broke out in the little colonelle's passivity; a hoarse cry, the cry of an angry cat came out of her constricted throat; she jumped on Paul Marescut in a leap and, falling on him without warning, she covered him with scratches.* She had just declared her first war on the male. *They had to tear the completely disfigured boy from her.*).

This declaration of war marks the transition for Mary from a passive to an active role and the start of her performance as a *femme fatale*, as she takes on the role of the tormentor.[428] Mary's corruption by witnessing and experiencing male violence as a child leads her to choose a lover strategically as an adult: Paul Richard (who shares the same name as the sheep's thief) is poor and innocent compared to Mary who appears as 'a wealthy and

[426] Holmes (2001), p. 127.
[427] Christine Plante, '"Les petites filles ne mangent pas de viande". Tuer, saigner, dévorer dans *La Marquise de Sade* de Rachilde (1887)', in *Corps/Décors : femmes, orgies, parodies. Hommage à Lucienne Frappier-Mazur*, ed. by Catherine Nesci (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 119–32 (p. 120).
[428] Downing (2012), p. 198.

cynical seducer', subverting traditional power dynamics.[429] She derives pleasure from Paul's frequent nosebleeds:

> Alors elle l'enlaçait plus étroitement, s'enivrant du sang qui la barbouillait; durant ces heures, elle le comblait de ses caresses les plus perverses, de ses mots les plus délirants. Elle finit par lui avouer que si on le guérissait, elle en serait fort ennuyée. (MS, p. 268 – *And then she embraced him more tightly, growing intoxicated by the blood that smeared her; in those hours, she covered him with the most perverse caresses, her most delirious words. She finally confessed that if he healed, she would be very upset.*)

Rachilde inverts the pathologizing of women's blood, interpreted as a sign of women's inherent weakness at the time, by depicting her protagonist sexually aroused by her lover's loss of blood.[430] Her sadism towards her lover thus appears as a revenge on male violence she was subjected to as a child.

Mary repeatedly withdraws sexual satisfaction from Paul, in an attempt to control him but also her own emotions:

> Elle joua de ses admirations, retardant sa chute par un raffinement de volupté, et aussi parce qu'elle voulait se convaincre qu'elle ne l'aimait guère. Les hommes sont des brutes, elle avait le mépris des jeunes comme des vieux […]. Elle espérait que, malade comme il se trouvait, il ne la violenterait pas. (MS, p. 260 – *She played with his attentions, delaying her fall with a refinement of sensuality, and also because she wanted to convince herself that she did not love him. Men are brutes, she felt contempt towards the young and the old […]. She hoped that, sick as he was, he would not assault her.*)

The power dynamics are however reversed in this scene as Paul overpowers and rapes her: '"Paul ! supplia la jeune femme déconcertée par cette sauvage attaque, je vous aime... Paul… ce serait odieux !" Ce fut odieux ! […] Elle se roulait, furieuse, échevelée, l'appelait *lâche*' (MS, p. 261 – '*Paul ! The young woman pleaded, baffled by this savage attack, I love you… Paul… it would be odious!' It was odious! […] She was rolling around, mad, dishevelled, calling him a* coward). This passage combines direct and free indirect speech to relate the violence exerted on the female protagonist in a moment when she is more vulnerable than we have yet witnessed as readers. The use of indirect speech to create an ellipsis also radically distinguishes this scene from the other sadistic ones where Mary

[429] Diana Holmes, 'Monstrous Women: Rachilde's Erotic Fiction', in *French Erotic Fiction. Women's Desiring Writing 1880-1990*, ed. by Alex Hughes and Kate Ince (Oxford, Washington D.C.: Berg, 1996), pp. 27–48 (p. 33).
[430] Holmes (1996), p. 33.

takes pleasure in torturing her lover. As in Peyrebrune's depictions of sexual violence, the lack of detail confirms Mary's vulnerability and illustrates the all-pervasiveness of patriarchal violence which seems impossible to escape even for the *femme fatale* who prides herself of being in control.

The other challenge to patriarchal norms in *La Marquise de Sade* lies in the protagonist's refusal to have children, subverting what was deemed as the natural order in nineteenth-century France.[431] On her wedding night, Mary tells her husband that she will avoid pregnancy at all costs: 'je ne veux ni enlaidir ni souffrir. De plus, *je suis assez*, EN ETANT, et si je pouvais finir le monde avec moi, je le finirais' (MS, p. 230 – *I neither want to become ugly, nor to suffer. Also,* I am enough, *BY BEING, and if I could end the world with myself, I would end it*). Dissociating her sense of self from motherhood, Mary reclaims her status as a subject and retains her autonomy over her own body and self. We can also interpret Mary's rejection of maternity as a way to break a cycle of violence when she declares: 'je ne veux pas être mère, d'abord parce que je ne veux pas souffrir, ensuite parce que je ne veux pas faire souffrir' (MS, p. 231 – *I do not want to be a mother, firstly because I do not want to suffer, and then because I do not want to be the cause of suffering*).

Mary's refusal to become a mother, which might appear as a proto-feminist choice, is however complicated by the influence of her mother's death in childbirth that she witnessed as a child:

> Morte! Maman !... cria la petite fille qui eut la vision sanglante du bœuf qu'elle avait vu tuer un jour, au fond d'une espèce de cave, d'un coup, pour en tirer quelques gouttes de sang. Une révolution s'opéra en elle ; on avait tué sa mère comme cela, du même coup, pour avoir ce petit morceau de chair… (MS, p. 100 – *Dead! Mama!... screamed the little girl who had the bloody vision of the ox she had seen killed one day, at the bottom of some kind of cellar, in one strike, to get some drops of blood. A revolution broke out in her; they had killed her mother like this, with the same strike, to get this small piece of flesh.*…)

[431] Staron, p. 159.

The scene bears similarities to the one where the sheep is taken from her by a boy: the word 'revolution' connotes her rage and rebellion against arbitrary violence. As Downing comments, Mary interprets her mother's death as a sacrifice made for the boy her parents hoped for – a common sacrifice in a patriarchal society where boys are more cherished than girls.[432] Motherhood thus appears as the denial of one's subjecthood which Mary will refuse to undergo once an adult. Unlike the protagonists in Dohm's and Reuter's texts who also see motherhood perpetuating a meaningless cycle, Mary is able to end it by refusing to bear children.

At the end of the novel, when her uncle and husband have died because of her actions, Mary aims to quench her thirst for blood, and she chooses the most vulnerable group of men for her sadistic plans: cross-dressing men. She declares:

> Aimant le sang, je choisis, pour le faire couler, celui qui est le moins utile, voilà tout. Je ne tiens pas à ce qu'on raconte que moi, la vraie femelle de l'époque des premières chaleurs du globe, j'ai pu réellement aimer l'un de ces insexués. (MS, p. 311 – *Loving blood as I do, I choose – to shed it – the one that is least useful, that's all. I don't want people to say about me, the true female at a time of the globe's first heat, that I could have really loved one of these unsexed.*)

Instead of attacking upholders of the patriarchal system, Mary is cruel towards individuals that society deems effeminate and are thus vulnerable. Mary's resistance to patriarchal dynamics is compromised as she repeats the same violence she has endured, thus affirming gender norms. I therefore agree with Holmes who argues that 'Mary seeks to usurp, not to transform, men's power' and that she is brutal to men and women alike,[433] making a feminist reclaiming of her character debatable. This passage shows the clear limitations in Mary's rebellion as the empathy she felt for the weakest members of society – women, children, and animals – is somewhat annulled by her disgust for men who display feminine traits. However, as Downing highlights, Mary's subversion would have been striking for a contemporary reader, as it reveals how power dynamics are the result of social, rather than

[432] Downing (2012), p. 198.
[433] Holmes (2001), p. 131.

biological factors.[434] This ending is purposefully provocative in its portrayal of a female protagonist wishing to shed blood and thus subvert the power dynamics she was once a victim of, although this subversion appears as aligned with patriarchal views of gender.

Mary's rebellion is somewhat thwarted by the violence she is subjected to, symbolising that patriarchal violence remains difficult to evade even for the most potent protagonist among the texts analysed here. Mary's performance as a *femme fatale* reveals how it is a mere construct by a society that cannot understand why a woman would act violently. The novel, however, also highlights how Mary's sadism is born out of her socialisation and her repeated experience of male violence. Rachilde's novel uncovers how both myths of the 'nervous woman' and 'the Mother' are linked to one another by denouncing the violence in patriarchal power dynamics and norms. Unlike the other characters in women-authored texts, Mary's awareness of these external discourses imposed on women enables her resistance.

## Conclusion

Representations of female sexuality appear as a ground where the tensions in women writers' dialogue with naturalist fiction become apparent. While naturalist writers break numerous taboos around women's sexuality in their fictional representations, they still adhere to some patriarchal constructs, such as the idealisation of motherhood and the pathologization of women's sexual desires. They thus contribute to what Foucault calls the 'hysterization of the female body', already at play in contemporary scientific discourses. As this chapter has explored, naturalist fiction, especially Zola's works, exploit the oscillation between sexual, physiological, social, or traumatic factors to explain the origins of hysteria for narrative purposes. In turn, women writers adopt naturalist tools – a mimetic

[434] Lisa Downing, 'Feminist fictions of the flesh (?): Alina Reyes's *Le Boucher* and Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 2:1 (2022), pp. 51–64 (p. 55).

representation supported by a sociological vocabulary – to uncover the origins of women's victimisation when it comes to sexuality. Thus, they uncover how the naturalist motif of the 'fatalities of the flesh'[435] is a mere social construct: they resist the type of the 'nervous woman' and challenge the image of the ideal mother, showing how women's victimisation has social rather than biological origins.

The texts analysed in this chapter not only show the reality of sexual violence – as a violence committed *on* women's bodies – but also unveil how it is a form of discursive violence. Women writers denounce as violent the myth of the 'nervous woman' that casts women as responsible for their own victimisation, as in Skram's *Lucie* where Gerner constructs Lucie as victim of her own body. This violence is more indirect in Reuter's *Aus guter Familie*, but the female protagonist is also portrayed as condemned to lose control over her own body and mind as she cannot reconcile the bourgeois norms around sexuality she has internalised, her own desires, and the violence she witnesses against the women around her. Even Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* portrays a female character who is unable to escape sexual violence despite her subversion of the *femme fatale* type. More than being victims of the fatality of their own bodies and desires, the female characters are victims of a systemic form of gendered violence whose origins are unveiled as social.

In *Victoire la Rouge*, Peyrebrune points at the discrepancies between the contemporary idealisation of motherhood, that constructed it as women's sole path to fulfilment and the reality of illegitimate pregnancies. Victoire's infanticide is portrayed as stemming from her desperate attempts to survive in a society that condemns women for showing the traces of male violence rather than an inherent propensity to crime. Peyrebrune denounces how the label of the 'fallen woman' is imposed on Victoire by her community that uses it to exploit her economically and sexually. Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* portrays a female character refusing to be reduced to motherhood, a defiant gesture mirrored by Dohm's protagonist's refusal to

[435] Baguley (1990), p. 130.

see it as a positive prospect for women. Reuter, Dohm, and Rachilde uncover the tragic logic behind the never-ending cycle of unfulfilling experiences of motherhood that traps women in the private sphere.

The female protagonists' tragedy is thus portrayed as stemming not from their natural instincts but from social structures, as well as from the social construct of an ideal femininity imposed on them. Women writers' dialogue with naturalism allows them to engage with the scientific discourses of the time and denounce how they construct women as inherently hysterical. They refuse the scientific gaze deployed by naturalist fiction, however, as it stilts female characters in cliché types and denies their individual experiences. The process of the 'hysterization of the female body' by scientific discourses is directly connected to the development of psychiatry in the second half of the nineteenth century. Naturalism engages in a dialogue with psychiatry by describing the inner life of their female characters through a scientific and detached perspective and by mirroring the competition of explanations for madness between biological and social factors in contemporary psychiatric theories. In contrast, women writers, as they do in their representations of sexuality, challenge the naturalisation of madness and portray women's 'silent tragic of the everyday' as socially determined.

# Chapter Three – Reclaiming Subjectivity: Representations of Madness

In the second half of the nineteenth century, an interesting dynamic emerges between the field of psychiatry trying to assert itself as a scientific discourse and to gain control over social life and its entering in competition with literature. As nineteenth-century psychiatry attempts to explain psychological phenomena, notably through physiology, it encroaches

upon what has hitherto been the terrain of literature.[436] This competition, however, does not prevent the two spheres from interacting with one another as both use each other to enhance their own prestige. Psychiatry finds examples of madness in literary texts while authors like the naturalists appropriate psychiatric theories for narrative purposes.[437] Naturalist authors and their fiction are in turn 'diagnosed' by contemporary doctors like Max Nordau as showing signs of degeneracy and of madness.[438] As Bertrand Marquer argues, nineteenth-century fiction contributes to the construction of a certain image of disability either by solidifying certain myths around the figure of the mad or by resisting them, and is thus a key factor in the evolution and propagation of psychiatric discourses.[439] Using this interaction between psychiatric discourses and their fictional appropriation by naturalist writers as a starting point, this chapter examines naturalist representations of madness and women writers' responses to naturalist portrayals of mad characters. It is not an attempt to systematically retrace which theories the authors analysed in this chapter reuse in their fictional texts, but instead an exploration of how the contemporary scientific interest in madness is reflected in naturalist fiction and in women writers' texts that interact with naturalism.[440] I argue that naturalist fiction appropriates the 'clinical gaze' from contemporary medicine and oscillates, as does contemporary psychiatry, between biological and social explanations for their characters' fall into madness, using this

[436] Bertrand Marquer, *Les Romans de la Salpêtrière. Réception d'une scénographie clinique : Jean-Martin Charcot dans l'imaginaire fin-de-siècle* (Genève: Droz, 2008), p. 12.
[437] Marquer, p. 14.
[438] Karolyn Steffens, 'Modernity as the Cultural Crucible of Trauma', in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. by Roger J. Krutz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 36–50 (p. 40). See Max Nordau, *Entartung*, 2 vols (Berlin: Carl Duncker, 1892).
[439] Marquer, p. 16.
[440] On the differences between psychiatric theories in Western Europe and the role of French psychiatry in 'legitimating a psychiatric science' that is 'still in the making', see Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify. The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 1–7.

indeterminacy for dramatic effect.[441] In turn, I explore how women writers reclaim these representations to challenge contemporary definitions of women's madness.

The interaction between psychiatry and naturalist fiction is most evident in the appropriation of what Foucault calls the 'clinical gaze' by naturalist narratives. Foucault describes the 'clinique' as a medical method that bases itself on observation and enunciation, notably through the medical gaze and description. It relies, Foucault argues, on the postulate of 'une corrélation perpétuelle et objectivement fondée du visible et de l'énonçable'[442] (*a perpetual and objectively based correlation of the visible and the expressible*).[443] Following this principle, the doctor translates what he sees into words, as his verbal description acts as a 'geste de dévoilement' (*revealing gesture*), notably through dissection.[444] This closely aligns with Zola's vision for the experimental novel which he describes as follows: 'le roman naturaliste […] est une expérience véritable que le romancier fait sur l'homme, en s'aidant de l'observation' (RE, p. 9 – *the naturalist novel […] is a genuine experiment that the novelist performs on mankind, based on observation*). Associating the naturalist author with the figure of the doctor, Zola establishes naturalist fiction as following a scientific method, leading to a 'procès-verbal de l'expérience' (RE, p. 8 – *exact report of experience*). The naturalist description mirrors the contemporary clinical method which is used by modern psychiatry to establish its hegemony. In both psychiatric discourses and naturalist narratives, the doctor figure is characterised by his all-seeing eye that constitutes his authority.

[441] On the oscillation between biological and social or psychological explanations for degeneracy (and, by extension, madness and any behaviour considered 'abnormal'), see Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 124–25.
[442] Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical*, in *Œuvres I*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), i, p. 888.
[443] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 242.
[444] Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique*, p. 888. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. 242.

In *Les Amours d'un interne* (1881), the French author Jules Claretie dramatizes this clinical gaze with the character of Vilandry, a young psychiatrist, as he observes Mathilde:

> Machinalement, Vilandry, qui avait salué Combette assez froidement, jeta à Mathilde un regard profond, le coup d'œil enveloppant et pénétrant à la fois du médecin devinant une nature d'élite ou un tempérament maladif, un sujet à expérience, et, sous cette espèce d'interrogatoire aigu, Mathilde, devenue pâle, eut par tout le corps un frisson de malaise et détourna la tête brusquement, comme pour échapper à une obsession.[445] (*Mechanically, Vilandry, who had greeted Combette rather coldly, looked at Mathilde intensely, with the simultaneously enveloping and penetrating gaze of the doctor guessing an elite nature or a sickly temperament, a subject for experiments, and, under this sharp examination, Mathilde, who had turned pale, had a shiver of unease through her whole body and turned her head away abruptly, as if to escape from an obsession.*)

Vilandry's reflex (he cannot help but examine the young woman, as signalled by the adverb 'machinalement') parallels Mathilde's involuntary reaction, but in this situation, Mathilde is the more powerless of the two as Vilandry's gaze categorises her as mad with accuracy, foreseeing her becoming his patient. In this passage, the clinician's gaze has a metaphorical power as it possesses the same acuity as a scalpel, unveiling Mathilde's mental state in an instant.[446] His exclamation '[p]auvre fille'[447] (*poor girl*) condemns her and here Claretie exploits the tragic potential of this diagnosis as it signifies Mathilde's unescapable future to the reader.[448] This scene also establishes the gendered duo of the male doctor observing and diagnosing a female patient, often found in literary representations of madness in the second half of the nineteenth-century.[449]

This encounter between the psychiatrist and a female figure is also portrayed in the first instalment of Amalie Skram's psychiatry duology, *Professor Hieronimus* (1895). The novel opens with the main character's, Else, struggles with her mental health leading her to accept to see the renowned psychiatrist, Professor Hieronimus: 'Det skal bli godt at faa *tale* med en Mand som Hieronimus'[450] (*It would be good to* talk *to a man like Hieronimus* – UO, p. 15). Else envisions this encounter with the doctor as a dialogue to attempt to

[445] Jules Claretie, *Les Amours d'un interne* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1881), p. 53. My translation.
[446] Marquer, p. 142.
[447] Claretie, p. 53.
[448] On the medical diagnosis as a '*fatum*', see Marquer, p. 267.
[449] See Mesch, p. 27.
[450] Amalie Skram, *Professor Hieronimus*, in *Samlede Værker*, 9 vols (Copenhagen, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1906), vi, p. 21. My emphasis. In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as PH in the main text.

improve her mental health, but her first meeting with him contradicts her hopeful expectations as Hieronimus does not let her speak: '"De er plaget af Søvnløshed," fortsatte Professoren og gjorde et lidet Ophold – "Deres Sind er meget nedtrykt" – atter Ophold – "Deres Mand fortæller mig – naa, ja, kort sagt, De har det ikke godt. Vel?"' (PH, p. 28; *'You suffer from insomnia,' the professor went on, then paused for a moment. 'Your state of mind is very depressed.' Another pause. 'Your husband tells me… Well, in short, you're not well. Is that right?'* – UO, pp. 21–22). Hieronimus' broken sentences and the lack of detail he gives from Else's story build a series of affirmations, supported by 'your husband told me'. As with Mathilde, Else is categorised by the male doctor instantly, without having a chance to speak and offer her own version. But unlike Mathilde, Else has the willpower to challenge her diagnosis, and Skram's novels portray this struggle between the psychiatrist and the female patient which can be interpreted as a fictional *mise en abyme* of women writers' resistance to psychiatric discourses and naturalist representations of madness. The topic of madness will indeed prove to be the one where most tensions arise within the hypertextual dialogue between naturalist fiction and women writers analysed in this thesis.

By appropriating the doctor's gaze and discourse in their fictional representations of mad characters, naturalist texts give readers only an indirect access to the experience of madness, mediating it through an external character's observations and comments on the mad character's delirium.[451] In contrast, as I argue in this chapter, women writers let their 'mad' female characters speak about their own suffering, in their own words, notably by exploiting the technique of free indirect speech or first-person accounts. In their representations of madness, these writers reclaim a form of subjectivity that is obstructed by psychiatric discourses and by the naturalist narrator's detached perspective. Analysing the rituals taking place within psychiatric institutions, Foucault exposes the strategy of the

[451] Horst Thomé, *Autonomes Ich und 'Inneres Ausland': Studien über Realismus, Tiefenpsychologie und Psychiatrie in deutschen Erzähltexten 1848-1914* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), p. 77.

'énoncé de la vérité'[452] (*the statement of truth*).[453] In this process, the psychiatrist requires the patient to narrate their own lives and admit their own insanity. This narrative is a means by which the patient re-enters the hegemonic discourse that regulates what is considered to be normal and strips the individual of their agency:

> [C]ette vérité, ce n'est pas celle de la folie parlant en son propre nom, c'est l'énoncé de vérité d'une folie qui accepte de se reconnaître en première personne dans une certaine réalité administrative et médicale, constituée par le pouvoir asilaire ; et c'est au moment où le malade se sera reconnu dans cette identité que l'opération de vérité sera accomplie. (PP, p. 160; *[T]his truth is not the truth of madness speaking in its own name but the truth of a madness agreeing to first person recognition of itself in a particular administrative identity and medical reality constituted by asylum power. The operation of truth is accomplished when the patient has recognized himself in this identity.* – PP2, p. 161)

In this process, the patient is considered 'healed' once they verbalise their madness and admit their abnormality within the psychiatric system. The use of the first person for this narrative is crucial because it symbolises the patient's appropriation of the hegemonic discourse as they must admit that their madness led them to accept and enact a false vision of reality. Healing, as a mad patient, means to adapt and accept the definition of reality chosen by the disciplinary system. In fictional texts, this process is often gendered as the narrator, assuming the role of the doctor, claims a position coded as masculine while the mad character is femininized as they lose their agency and control over their own story.[454]

Resistance to this forced narrative demanded of the patient can be achieved through a counter-narrative which exposes an alternative vision of madness and paves the way for what Foucault qualifies as 'madness speaking in its own name' (PP2, p. 161). By using a realist style, similar to the one developed by the naturalists, women writers analysed in this chapter are able to re-appropriate this narrative by telling madwomen's stories. Being a woman and a writer is already an act of resistance, as the contemporary medical discourse

[452] Michel Foucault, 'Leçon du 19 décembre 1973', *Le Pouvoir psychiatrique. Cours au Collège de France. 1973-1974* (Paris: Seuil, Gallimard, 2003), pp. 143–70 (p. 156). In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as PP in the main text.
[453] Michel Foucault, '19 December 1973', in *Psychiatric power: Lectures at the College de France, 1973-74*, trans. by Graham Burchell, ed. by Jacques Lagrange (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 143–71 (p. 157). In the rest of this thesis, references to this work are abbreviated as PP2 in the main text.
[454] On the gendered dynamics of the doctor/patient relationship in nineteenth-century psychiatry, see Jessie Hewitt, *Institutionalizing Gender. Madness, the Family, and Psychiatry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020), pp. 23–55.

argued that 'any stimulation of the mind put the [female] body immediately at risk'.[455] Using writing to counter a sexist discourse is already seen as an act of madness, then, but it is also an effective way of resisting the discourse imposed on women's minds and bodies. By giving a voice to their female characters, women writers resist the 'récit autobiographique' (PP, p. 158; *autobiographical account* – PP2, p. 158) imposed by the psychiatric system.

My analysis of their reclaiming of the 'autobiographical account' is not about recovering the autobiographical traces in their narratives. For instance, Scandinavian scholars have already shown that Skram's duology, *Professor Hieronimus* and *Paa St. Jørgen*, is heavily inspired by her own stay at a psychiatric hospital in Denmark which she aimed at denouncing in her writing. It is interesting to note the significant impact her novels had on the Danish public, even forcing the 'real' Hieronimus, the well-respected Knut Pontoppidan, to abandon his position, and participating in an ongoing antipsychiatry debate.[456] This example further demonstrates the interaction between psychiatry and literature in the second half of the nineteenth century and how public resistance to psychiatric discourses was already taking place.[457] What interests me in this chapter, however, is how authors like Skram, Rachilde, Dohm, and Reuter give a voice to madwomen figures and uncover literature's potential for disrupting hegemonic narratives and the imposed vision of madness and femininity. While, as I argue in the first section of this chapter, naturalist fiction uses madness for its dramatic and metaphorical potential, women writers appropriate this topic to convey a political message. By challenging contemporary visions of women's madness, they intervene within a male dominated sphere

[455] Mesch, p. 16.
[456] On the anti-psychiatry debate in the Danish press and Skram's role in it, see Bjerkelund, pp. 201–7.
[457] Several patients wrote autobiographical accounts of their experience of the asylum, for instance Hersilie Rouy with her *Mémoires d'une aliénée* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1883). See Matlock (1994), pp. 283–305.

of knowledge, but also critically reflect on naturalist fiction's appropriation of scientific discourses.

The use of the word 'madness' throughout this chapter is not aimed at 'diagnosing' a fictional character and confirming that they suffer from mental illness, it is rather used to show that those characters are *coded* – that is, described to be easily recognised – as 'mad' in both naturalist and women writers' texts.[458] In the texts analysed here, this coding of characters as mad is symbolised through a character's loss of control over their language and over how other characters perceive and talk about them. As Catherine Prendergast observes, 'while it is the visible aspect of the physically disabled that poses a threat, for the mentally disabled the threat is in speech',[459] making language a central aspect of modern definitions of mental disability. On the one hand, a naturalist character labelled as 'mad' is considered by the other characters as outside the accepted definition of reality and thus as an object to be observed and controlled.[460] Often, the naturalist narrator detaches himself from the mad character's 'enfermement dans la folle subjectivité' (*entrapment in mad subjectivity*),[461] a detachment that is enacted by the naturalist use of a 'clinical' style. On the other hand, women writers represent characters that are unable to express their own suffering because of the fragmentation of their language, but refuse to mediate this suffering through a male and medical gaze. I argue that women writers' dialogue with naturalist fiction leads them to challenge contemporary views around madness, notably

[458] I also use 'madness' as a general English term that has spanned centuries in the Western tradition to describe what we now would call mental illness or cognitive disability and in order to convey the different terms used by the writers of my corpus such as 'folie', 'déraison' or 'délire' in French, 'galskap' and 'sinnssykdom' in Norwegian, and 'Wahnsinn' or 'Irrsinn' in German. On this term and its history, see Margaret Price, 'Defining Mental Disability', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), pp. 298–307.
[459] Catherine Prendergast, 'On the Rhetorics of Mental Disability', in *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, ed. by James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), pp. 45–60 (p. 58).
[460] On the nineteenth-century definition of madness as an illness of the will and of the 'involuntary', see Michel Foucault, *Les Anormaux*, p. 146.
[461] Cabanès, p. 89.

questioning *who* is coded as mad, *by whom*, and *how* they are coded as mad, leading to a discursive struggle within a fictional space.

The appropriation of psychiatric discourses by naturalist writers is characterised by an oscillation between biological (hereditary) and social factors to explain their characters' madness, as we have seen with naturalist representations of sexuality in the previous chapter. In the first section, I argue that naturalist texts leave this tension open for its tragic and metaphorical potential, as readers are left unsure about the causes of a character's madness.[462] Women writers however challenge this oscillation, rejecting a vision that naturalises madness and makes it a biological destiny for women. Instead, they represent madness as the result of external factors and discourses. As the disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes, stories focusing on disability can invite their readers to de-naturalise disability, by distinguishing the role that social discourses play in our visions of disability and in this case, mental health.[463] De-naturalising madness means, for women authors, demonstrating how a social discourse is at the origin of the link made between the female body and madness, and that social and psychological factors undermine women. The second section of this chapter thus focuses on women writers' counter-narratives and the order in which I will discuss the different texts has a thematic and narrative logic: instead of a chronological order, the texts are studied according to the madwomen characters' level of agency and control over their discourse to account for the role of language and subjectivity in their representations of madness.

[462] Allen Thiher argues that biological determinism gave 'a materialist basis for tragedy in the second half of the nineteenth century'. See Allen Thiher, *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature* (Ann Harbor: Michigan University Press, 2004), p. 204.
[463] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, *op.cit*, pp. 333–53 (p. 336).

## I. The Detached Gaze: Naturalist Representations of Madness

Naturalist writers' appropriation of psychiatric discourses in their fictional texts is a deliberate strategy to associate themselves with a discourse that was gaining prestige, thereby justifying their own interest in the abnormal and the pathological. Self-presenting as literary doctors, naturalists claim the right to deal with any topic and unveil the mysteries of the human body and mind, as scientists for whom there is no taboo.[464] The meanders of the mind become the object of observation of a detached narrator whose voice is gendered as male, a gendering that mirrors that of psychiatry.[465] As I explore in this section, the naturalist narrator's detached gaze however affects both male and female characters. In naturalist fiction, the mad protagonist represents the risk of a disorderly subjectivity that is losing touch with reality and that risks contaminating other characters and the mimetic text. The motif of madness reveals tensions within naturalist fiction as its appropriation of the clinical gaze signals a wish to control and contain madness, but the ultimate indeterminacy in the causes and manifestations of the naturalist characters' fall into madness maintains some ambiguity within the narrative. This ambivalence serves as a springboard for the naturalist poetic use of contemporary scientific discourses and ultimately allows for a counterdiscursive space and a vision of madness that goes beyond contemporary scientific theories.

In *Les Anormaux*, Foucault argues that madness after 1850 is defined as 'involontaire' (*involuntary*), that is, as an instinctive automatism in human behaviour,[466] meaning that madness is characterised by an individual's lack of control over their own body, actions, and speech. If naturalists are fascinated by madness, Jean-Louis Cabanès argues, it is because it is the most exemplary and decipherable sign of this involuntary behaviour when

[464] Cabanès, p. 175.
[465] See Hewitt, pp. 19–22.
[466] Foucault, *Les Anormaux*, p. 146.

the body takes control of the mind and heredity determines the fate of a character.[467] The process of the body taking over the spirit, and thus questioning the character's willpower, can be seen with Gervaise at the end of *L'Assommoir*. After witnessing Coupeau's delirium in the hospital, Gervaise starts to mimic him:

> Depuis ce jour, comme Gervaise perdait la tête souvent, une des curiosités de la maison était de lui voir faire Coupeau. On n'avait plus besoin de la prier, elle donnait le tableau gratis, tremblant des pieds et des mains, lâchant de petits cris involontaires. Sans doute elle avait pris ce tic-là à Sainte-Anne, en regardant trop longtemps son homme. (A, p. 795; *From that day on, Gervaise often seemed to have gone round the bend, and people in the building would amuse themselves by getting her to do her imitation of Coupeau. In fact she no longer needed to be asked, she did it for nothing—the shaking of the hands and feet, the little involuntary squeals. She'd picked it all up at Sainte-Anne, of course, from spending so much time watching her husband.* – A2, pp. 394–95)

This imitation is a clear sign of Gervaise's madness which manifests in involuntary gestures and signifies her complete loss of free will. Gervaise's fragmented mind is symbolised by her loss of control over her own speech: not only are they involuntary, but she only utters mere 'squeals'. This scene creates a contrast between the empathetic observer that is Gervaise who comes to imitate the gestures she has observed in Coupeau to the point of becoming mad herself, and the detached narrator.[468] Gervaise's perspective is not conveyed through free indirect speech but by a detached narrative voice – blending popular French and the narrator's voice – that is judging Gervaise's madness from a normative point of view and advancing the hypothesis that Gervaise has been 'contaminated' by Coupeau. Madness as the illness of the involuntary is depicted negatively here, and its potential to invade the narrative, by having the mad character's speech replacing the narrator's, is kept at bay by the naturalist narrator staying detached from it.

The distrust towards a mad character's speech is also dramatized in two of Ibsen's plays, where a dead female figure haunts the living characters who are trying to decipher the causes of her death and her last words. In *The Wild Duck* (1884) and *Rosmersholm*

[467] Cabanès, p. 402.
[468] Chantal Pierre, 'Un héritage naturaliste ? La querelle de l'empathie', in *Naturalisme. – Vous avez dit NaturalismeS ?*, ed. by Céline Grenaud-Tostain and Olivier Lumbroso (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016), pp. 143–53 (p. 151).

(1886), the late wife suspected her husband's infidelity, but her diagnosis as mad discredited her. In both plays, her silent and spectral presence symbolises the guilt of the characters on stage and how a loveless marriage traps both men and women. In *Rosmersholm*, Beate's words are presented as unreliable to fit the other characters' narrative, especially Rosmer's, who tries to ignore the role he played in his wife's suicide. This is made clear when he asks another character: 'Kan du være i tvil om det? Eller, rettere sagt, kan der spørges om grundene til det, som en *ulykkelig, syg, utilregnelig* foretar sig?'[469] (*Can you be in any doubt about that? Or rather is it possible to inquire into the reasons why* a sick unhappy woman of unsound mind *does what she does?*).[470] It is only at the end of the play, as he learns what role Rebecca, his lover, played in the death of Beate that he declares: 'Beate har kanske set rigtig alligevel'[471] (*Perhaps Beata saw straight after all*).[472] Despite Rosmer learning the truth, there is still a hesitation as to whether Beata was truly mad, thus leaving the spectator wondering whose perspective to trust. Elsewhere, the figure of the madwoman haunting the characters is also reminiscent of the spectre of biological determinism. In *The Wild Duck*, Werle accuses his son of merely repeating his late mother's mad speech: 'Din samvittighed har været sygelig lige fra barneårene. Det er en arvelod fra din mor, Gregers; – den eneste arv, hun efterlod dig'[473] (*From being a child, you've always had a sickly conscience. It's a heritage from your mother, Gregers… one thing she did leave you*).[474] The son's taking his mother's side could be either explained by her influence over him during his childhood or, as Werle insinuates, by a biological heritage that condemns their son to madness. From both male characters' perspective, these

[469] Henrik Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*, ed. by The Henrik Ibsen Centre, University of Oslo <https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_Ro%7CRoht.xhtml> [Accessed 03 March 2025], HIS: 387. My emphasis.
[470] Henrik Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*, in *The Oxford Ibsen. Volume VI*, trans. and ed. by James Walter McFarlane, 8 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), vi, p. 324.
[471] Ibsen, *Rosmerholm*, HIS: 438.
[472] Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*, p. 350.
[473] Henrik Ibsen, *Vildanden*, ed. by The Henrik Ibsen Centre, University of Oslo <https://www.ibsen.uio.no/DRVIT_Vi%7CViht.xhtml> [Accessed 03 March 2025], HIS: 143.
[474] Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, in *The Oxford Ibsen. Volume VI*, *op.cit.*, p. 196.

female characters' words are coded as irrational and thus presented as untrustworthy, partly because women are deemed more prone to biological influences.

In both plays, the mystery of the dead character's mental state is never entirely resolved as the playwright does not reveal whether the female protagonist, both absent and present on stage, was 'truly' mad and whether her madness was caused by biological determinism or by an unhappy marriage. Ibsen reflects on contemporary attitudes towards the reliability of the mad characters' speech but also introduces some distance towards social discourses on madness: it remains uncertain whether we are meant to trust the male characters' judgement and especially Werle's belief in biological determinism that he uses to easily dismiss his son's words. Ibsen portrays madness as being constructed through language as the mad characters' words are doubted by others, but also because the sole proof of their madness is another character's subjective statement. In *La Conquête de Plassans* (1874), which depicts the 'contamination' of the husband by his hysterical wife, Zola also ironically reflects on how quickly one can be labelled as mad as the male character Mouret goes against his neighbours' opinion on the weather: 'Ces messieurs échangèrent des sourires d'intelligence. Ils avaient froid, et le ciel venait de se couvrir'[475] (*These gentlemen exchanged knowing smiles. They were chilly and a cloud had just passed overhead*).[476] A simple utterance, more akin to small talk than an objective statement, as well as how he ties his shoelaces, is enough for the entire city to condemn Mouret and to later send him to the asylum where he will indeed become mad. Although his delirious symptoms are undeniably genuine by the end of the novel, the narrator ironically dismisses the opinions of characters who are not doctors and casts doubts on Mouret's diagnosis.[477] If madness is portrayed as the imprisonment in subjectivity, any diagnosis also potentially

[475] Émile Zola, *La Conquête de Plassans*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire I*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), i, p. 1118.
[476] Émile Zola, *The Conquest of Plassans*, trans. by Helen Constantine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 213.
[477] On this medical error, see Cabanès, p. 246.

appears, in these examples, subjective as well, thus opening a reflection on the limits of the label 'mad' which the women writers analysed in this chapter carry forward.

The link between madness and subjectivity is also reinforced by naturalist narratives in which artistic figures struggle against the threat of becoming disconnected from reality. Zola, in *L'Œuvre* (1886), associates creativity with madness, adhering to the contemporary parallel between genius and neurosis.[478] Claude Lantier represents a tormented form of creativity with his 'fièvre de travail'(*work fever*),[479] but, while Claude is portrayed as a genius, he also suffers from 'une véritable paralysie de la volonté'[480] (*total paralysis of his will-power*).[481] The reader is reminded of the cause of this disordered mental state, which is Claude's heredity: 'le déséquilibrement des nerfs dont il souffrait, le détraquement héréditaire qui, pour quelques grammes de substance en plus ou en moins, au lieu de faire un grand homme, allait faire un fou'[482] (*some maladjustment of the nerve centres, or through some hereditary flaw which, because of a gram or two of substance too much or too little, instead of making him a great man was going to make him a madman*).[483] The narrator underlines that a bit of madness is necessary to make a genius, but that a degenerate heritage condemns Claude, as a Macquart offspring, to fall into madness. This border between genius and madness also has gendered implications as virility becomes the symbol and generator of creativity.[484] For instance, Claude insists on staying chaste in his marriage for the sake of his artistic creation : 'volontaire abstinence, chasteté théorique, où il devait aboutir pour donner à la peinture toute sa virilité'[485] (*the self-imposed chastity which, in theory, was to enable him to put all his virility into his*

[478] Cabanès, p. 656.
[479] Émile Zola, *L'Œuvre*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire IV*, ed. by Armand Lanoux, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), iv, p. 230. My translation.
[480] Zola, *L'Œuvre*, p. 207.
[481] Émile Zola, *The Masterpiece*, trans. by Walton Thomas and Roger Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 201.
[482] Zola, *L'Œuvre*, p. 245.
[483] Zola, *The Masterpiece*, p. 240.
[484] Cabanès, p. 648.
[485] Zola, *L'Œuvre*, p. 341.

*painting*).[486] Creativity is idealised as a noble and virile quest, even if the artist is condemned to be isolated and misunderstood by his contemporaries.

In this gendered portrayal of artistic genius, Claude's wife, Christine, is reduced to the role of muse, constantly denied sexual satisfaction, sacrificed for the sake of Claude's creative work: 'Et sa jalousie ne se trompait pas, accusait la peinture encore, car cette virilité qu'il lui refusait, il la réservait et la donnait à la rivale préférée'[487] (*Her jealousy had not deceived her in her accusations against Claude, for the virility he withheld from her he expended on her rival, the woman he preferred*).[488] In naturalist representations, male characters can turn their sexual energy into art, while female characters like Christine or Irene in Ibsen's *Når vi døde vågner* (*When We Dead Awaken*, 1899) are reduced to the role of muses whose own creativity and sexual desires are denied.[489] Claude's quest however fails as he aims to represent an ideal woman, to the point that of defying the bounds of reality, which Christine points out in their final conflict: 'regarde-la donc, ta femme, là-haut ! vois donc quel monstre tu viens d'en faire, dans ta folie ! Est-ce qu'on est bâtie comme ça ?'[490] (*Now look at her, look at her, I say, up there, the woman you love, and see what a monster you've made of her in your madness! Was any woman ever that shape?*).[491] Claude's obsession with painting an ideal female figure finally leads to his madness as he denies the realm of the physical, and thus of reality, rendering his pursuit hopeless.

This negative portrayal of artistic genius as bordering on madness is tempered within the novel by a more positive one, the writer Sandoz, who although having experienced the

[486] Zola, *The Masterpiece*, p. 340.
[487] Zola, *L'Œuvre*, p. 346.
[488] Zola, *The Masterpiece*, p. 345.
[489] In Ibsen's play, the sculptor Rubek meets his former muse, Irene, whose experience of posing for his piece 'Resurrection' has brought her to madness. Like Claude, Rubek entrapped his model in the realm of the ideal, denying her humanity and desires. Henrik Ibsen, *Når vi døde vågner* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1899). On Ibsen's play, see Moi (2006), pp. 321–24.
[490] Zola, *L'Œuvre*, p. 347.
[491] Zola, *The Masterpiece*, p. 346.

torments of art as well, is able to overcome his mental struggles and represents an healthy approach to art.[492] Even within a text like *L'Œuvre* that focuses on a mad character, the threat of madness is dissolved by a figure that adheres to naturalist poetics.[493] Claude, following the logic of the entire *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, is mainly condemned by his biological heritage but also by his time, as Sandoz states at his funeral:

> Sans doute, il souffrait dans sa chair, ravagé par cette lésion trop forte du génie, trois grammes en moins ou trois grammes en plus, comme il le disait, lorsqu'il accusait ses parents de l'avoir si drôlement bâti. Mais son mal n'était pas en lui seulement, il a été la victime d'une époque... Oui, notre génération a trempé jusqu'au ventre dans le romantisme, et nous en sommes restés imprégnés quand même.[494] (*He must certainly have suffered a great deal from that kink in his genius, those three grammes more or less that would have made all the difference, as he used to say when he accused his parents of making such an unsatisfactory job of him. But his trouble was not all personal by any means; he was the victim of his period. The generation we belong to was brought up on Romanticism; it soaked into us and we can do nothing about it.*)[495]

The influence of romantic ideals, which for Zola signifies the triumph of idealism and symbolism that the naturalist writer aims to overcome through 'la possession du réel' (RE, p. 60 – *the possession of reality*),[496] and a biological heritage are what finally lead Claude's artistic genius to turn into madness. Claude's quest for the ideal finally traps him in a false vision of reality, reinforcing the naturalist association of madness with an excessive subjectivity. *L'Œuvre* thus combines an idealisation of a masculine artistic quest and the mad character's condemnation by both biological and social factors, making the naturalist blend of madness and creativity highly ambivalent.

With the portrayal of Claude, madness is linked to a physical reality, that of biological determinism, whose signs the doctor figures are supposed to decipher. Heredity plays a central role in Claretie's *Les Amours d'un interne*, which, as I argued in the introduction to this chapter, offers a positive portrayal of the 'clinical gaze' through the hero Vilandry. In a letter to his father, the psychiatrist presents himself in the process of

[492] Cabanès, p. 682.
[493] On Sandoz as Zola's mouthpiece and as adhering to naturalist poetics, see Ann Jefferson, *Genius in France: An Idea and Its Uses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 147.
[494] Zola, *L'Œuvre*, p. 357.
[495] Zola, *The Masterpiece*, p. 357.
[496] For Zola's stance on romanticism and how the naturalist method can overcome it, see 'Lettre à la jeunesse', in *Le Roman expérimental*, *op.cit*., pp. 55–103.

dissection: ‘L’œil sur mon microscope, j’étudie, je cherche les lésions de cette moelle qui fait de l’homme un être de génie ou un fou, un héros ou un lâche, un créateur ou un idiot’[497] (*My eye on the microscope, I study, I look for the lesions in this marrow that makes of a man a genius or a madman, a hero or a coward, a creator or an idiot*). This passage builds a parallel with positivist medicine which posits that the brain is the site of madness that is possible to discover through dissection.[498] In Claretie’s novel, this description of scientific research corresponds to the ideal of the experimental and physiological method as the hero is portrayed as able to unveil the mysteries of human reason. His gaze allows him to decide who might be considered abnormal through the study of their brain, thus naturalising madness by representing it as stemming from the body. In another letter to his father, Vilandry describes the causes of madness which he sees as the result of heredity:

> Celles qu’on nous amène sont malades par hérédité. L’hérédité, chose épouvantable et qui fait qu’une mère, un père, transmettent leurs propres maux, leurs hideurs physiques à un pauvre petit être arrivant au monde. Les parents nerveux, le père alcoolique, et voilà une malheureuse créature vouée à l’hystérie, préparée à l’attaque initiale qui vient, je te l’ai dit, d’une terreur la plupart du temps.[499] (*The women brought to us are ill through heredity. Heredity, this frightening thing, and that leads a mother, a father, to pass on their own ills, their physical baseness to a poor small creature coming into the world. The nervous parents, the alcoholic father, and here is a poor creature condemned to hysteria, prepared for the initial attack that comes, as I told you, from a terror most of the time*.)

This summary leads to the rather straightforward definition of madness as heredity triggered by a shock, thus theorising that the female patients of his hospital are all biologically predisposed to madness.

This belief in madness as biologically induced leads to a frequent comparison of madness to a fatal destiny for the female protagonists, including Jeanne whose mother is Vilandry’s patient: ‘Ainsi, on ne l’évitait point, l’atroce folie ? songeait Jeanne. Quand elle vous tenait, elle ne vous lâchait plus ? C’était fatal. Et, à ce mal, elle n’avait plus l’espoir

[497] Claretie, p. 217.
[498] See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, in *Œuvres I*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), i, pp. 324–25. According to Foucault, the brain is seen as the main cause and propagator of madness in the classical age, an idea which is further developed by nineteenth-century psychiatry.
[499] Claretie, p. 208.

maintenant d'arracher sa mère'[500] (*Thus one could not hinder this atrocious madness? Jeanne thought. When it had you, it did not let you go? It was fatal. And she had no longer any hope to force her mother out of this evil*). This fatalistic vision of madness even leads to the portrait of a doctor, although idealised by the narrator, that does not believe in a cure and of the asylum as a tragic space where madness is only meant to be contained, not cured.[501] In Claretie's novel, the asylum is also exclusively a female space and the mythical symbol of deviant femininity.[502] As I argue in the next section, this gendering of the asylum is challenged by women writers. The madness diagnosis is fatal for the female characters in Claretie's novel because it is tied to biological determinism, thus portraying madness as a natural fact, a facet of naturalist fiction that women writers are also highly critical of.

Unlike Vilandry, the hero of Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal*, holds hope for curing madness that he understands as a neurological illness, caused by lesions:

> Un des rêves les plus caressés du docteur était de traiter et de guérir les fous par sa méthode, en les piquant. Puisque, chez eux, c'était le cerveau qui périclitait, pourquoi des injections de substance nerveuse ne leur donneraient-elles pas de la résistance, de la volonté, en réparant les brèches faites à l'organe ? (DP, p. 977; *One of the doctor's most cherished dreams was to treat and heal the mad using his method of hypodermic injections. Since, in their case, it was the brain that was in jeopardy, why wouldn't injections of nerve substance give them a bit of resistance, a bit of will, by repairing the lesions in that organ?* – DP2, p. 61)

Renouncing to cure his grandmother, Tante Dide, whose illness he deems irrevocable, Pascal experiments his injections on a hatter whose madness provokes murderous urges.[503] For Pascal, these injections do not only bring physical strength but also mental willpower, linking the mind and body in his conception of madness.

Pascal's hope seems, for a time, to be fulfilled as he meets the hatter again, seemingly calm and reasonable, freshly out of the asylum:

> [E]t l'expérience passionnante paraissait avoir réussi, les piqûres de substance nerveuse donnaient de la volonté, puisque le fou était là, sorti le matin même de l'Asile, jurant qu'il n'avait plus de crise, qu'il était tout à fait guéri de cette brusque rage homicide, qui l'aurait fait se jeter sur un

[500] Claretie, p. 265.
[501] On the fictional representation of the psychiatric diagnosis as a *fatum* that leaves not option for cure, see Marquer, p. 156.
[502] Marquer, p. 28.
[503] On the contemporary association between madness and criminality and the medicalization of criminality, see Nye, p. 99.

> passant, pour l'étrangler. (DP, p. 1083; *and the fascinating experiment seemed to have succeeded, the injections of nerve substance had produced willpower, since the madman was here, released from the asylum that very morning, swearing he no longer had fits, that he was completely cured of the sudden homicidal rage that would have made him throw himself on a passer-by and strangle him.* – DP2, p. 162).

This hopeful reversal is however overturned as Pascal's injections, which do not save him either, also fail to save the hatter from madness and suicide, leading Pascal to ponder on the potency of science:

> Toute la soirée, il songea à ce cas étrange, à cet homme qu'il croyait avoir sauvé de la folie homicide, par sa médication des piqûres hypodermiques […]. Il le revoyait, si parfaitement raisonnable, pendant qu'il lui conseillait de reprendre sa vie de bon ouvrier. Quelle était donc cette force de destruction, le besoin du meurtre se changeant en suicide, la mort faisant sa besogne malgré tout ? (DP, p. 1165; *For the rest of the evening, he thought about that strange case, about this man he thought he'd saved from homicidal mania by treating him with hypodermic shots […]. He could see him again, so perfectly sane, as he advised him to take up his old working life once more. What, then, was this destructive force, the need to murder that turned to suicide, death doing its job come what may?* – DP2, pp. 241–42).

This episode in *Le Docteur Pascal* is typical of the novel's oscillation between the tragic and anti-tragic modes that I analysed in the first chapter and suggests that madness is the result of physiological phenomena that can be potentially mastered. Despite this failure, Pascal works towards a cure until the end of his life, unlike Claretie's male protagonist who cannot envisage any. At no point do Pascal or Vilandry contemplate another type of cure, one that would look for the social origins of madness, which is in keeping with the contemporary vision of madness as a physical illness, stemming from the brain.

The signs and causes of madness are however not always easily decipherable as in Ibsen's *Ghosts*. As I demonstrated in the first chapter, Ibsen's play leaves the causes of Osvald's contracting syphilis open to portray how the characters' doubt over their responsibility for their own unhappiness which weighs on them like a tragic fate. As Osvald describes his symptoms to his mother, he mentions headaches and a loss of willpower which hinder his creative work. Osvald recounts his encounter with a French doctor who used a biblical metaphor to signify that his illness is hereditary: 'Tilsidst sa' han: der har lige fra fødselen af været noget ormstukket ved Dem; – han brugte netop udtrykket "vermoulu". […] Han sa': fædrenes synder hjemsøges på børnene' (G, HIS: 475;

*At last he said: there's been something worn-eaten about you since birth. He used that very word: 'vermoulu'[…] He said: the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children* – G2, p. 396). The comparison with a worm-eaten body builds a parallel with of Helene's ghost metaphor symbolising the weight of social discourses and past on an individual's trajectory; the French doctor, on the side of theories of biological determinism, follows a physiological logic to explain Osvald's state. There might be a hint of irony in this representation of a French doctor using a fatalistic vocabulary without knowing Osvald's family and origins, especially because the play ultimately does not privilege any hypothesis. This scene is however also meant to signify Osvald's blindness when it comes to his father and heighten his mother's despair as he naively declares that he believes his youth's excesses are the cause of his illness: 'Den ubegribelige sandhed! Dette jublende lyksalige ungdomsliv med kammeraterne skulde jeg afholdt mig fra. Det havde været for stærkt for mine kræfter. Selvforskyldt, altså!' (G, HIS: 476; *The incredible truth! This blissfully happy life I'd been living with my friends, I should never have indulged in it. It had been too much for my strength. So it was my own fault, you see!* – G2, p. 396). This oscillation between biological and moral explanations for syphilis[504] – which, as Osvald is poignantly aware, means a descent into madness – does not give the doctor's figure the final word, unlike other naturalist texts. Because it does not privilege the heredity hypothesis nor the social explanation, *Ghosts* provides an opportunity for another definition of madness, one that is not strictly physiological but also considers social factors.

This section has explored central aspects of the multifaceted use of the madness motif by naturalist writers. Madness in the texts analysed signifies a character's entrapment in a subjectivity outside of the realm of reality that the naturalist narrator observes in a

[504] Qvistgaard, p. 73.

detached manner, sometimes leading them and other characters to handle the mad character's discourse with suspicion. By portraying it as caused by biological and hereditary factors, naturalist fiction tends to naturalise madness, as we saw with Claude in *L'Œuvre* and Claretie's hero. This tendency is however put into question within Ibsen's plays as they leave the origins of the characters' madness open. This indeterminacy found in naturalist texts enables a challenge of biological definitions of madness, taken on by women writers. My analysis focused less on the role of gender in naturalist appropriation of psychiatric discourses, as the naturalist corpus counts many mad*men*. As I explore in the next section, however, women writers uncover the gendered implication behind the psychiatric diagnosis and representations of mad characters as losing their willpower over their actions and speech. The naturalist use of biological determinism for narrative purposes does indeed have problematic implications for women as they are constructed as more prone to madness because of biological factors, something which women writers' narratives entirely reject.

## II. Reclaiming Subjectivity: Women Writers' Reappropriation of Madness Narratives

While madness is one aspect of a naturalist character's trajectory to degeneracy, in women writers' texts it often represents the endpoint of the female protagonist's story, symbolising the impossibility for them to evade social constraints.[505] These narratives aim to denaturalise madness, by rejecting the idea that madness is inscribed into women's biological lot, to instead focus on its social origins. These texts also centre on the issue of language and how the madwoman figure is often unable to articulate her suffering, illustrating the systematic discrediting of female patient's perspective by the psychiatric

[505] See Balmer, p. 4.

system, making their rebellion futile.[506] The male doctor/female patient dynamic and its power imbalance is thus central in these narratives as they represent the process of diagnosis as gendered and symbolic of broader societal trends when it comes to women's silencing and disempowerment. By exposing the discrepancy between the male psychiatrist's diagnosis and the female characters' own perspectives on it, women writers adopt an anti-psychiatric stance, as described by Foucault: 'On peut alors appeler antipsychiatrie tout mouvement par lequel la question de la vérité sera remise en jeu dans le rapport entre le fou et le psychiatre' (PP, p. 137; *We can, then, call antipsychiatry any movement by which the question of truth is put back in play within the relationship between the mad person and the psychiatrist* – PP2, p. 137).

In this section, I explore how women writers appropriate the naturalist mode of writing which is in dialogue with contemporary psychiatric discourses to challenge both within a fictional space. While Rachilde parodies the clinical gaze through the portrayal of a female protagonist who escapes the control of a scientist figure, Skram portrays her female character as engaging in a rhetorical duel with the psychiatric to assert her autonomy and subjectivity. Dohm's use of an embedded diary serves to highlight the failure of its internal reader, Agnes' psychiatrist, who is unable to overcome his adherence to biological explanations of madness and fails to see the detrimental influence of social norms on Agnes' mental state. In Reuter's text, the main protagonist is portrayed as reduced to complete silence by an abusive psychiatric system that takes over from the family's power to make her fit bourgeois norms. The issue of the control over one's language and access to creativity is a leitmotif among all four texts analysed here and the order in which they are discussed reflect the degree of agency the female characters are portrayed to have: I start with the more empowered protagonists, in Rachilde's and Skram's texts who openly

[506] Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak. Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 37.

challenge the psychiatric discourse and system, before moving on to Dohm's story in which the protagonist's attempt at explaining her own madness fail, to finish on Reuter's *Aus guter Familie* which closes on the female character's complete silence.

## II.1 Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade*: The Parody of the Clinical Gaze

A rebellious figure like Rachilde offers compelling arguments in favour of a feminist reclaiming of madness. As Mesch remarks, in nineteenth-century France, 'the woman writer is more terrifying than the hysteric' because she claims her right to create and to take part in the public sphere.[507] Rachilde played with the concept of hysteria to market her 1884 novel *Monsieur Vénus* which depicts a love affair between an aristocratic woman and a working-class man which inverts traditional gender roles. In his preface to the novel, Maurice Barrès deploys the hysteria diagnosis to describe Rachilde and encourages readers to consider her novel as 'une anatomie' (*an anatomy*) of a perverse brain.[508] This preface is an interesting marketing move: instead of rejecting the label used to disqualify women writers from taking part in the public sphere, Rachilde reclaims it to arouse curiosity and provoke a *succès de scandale*. While the male reader, after reading such a preface, could imagine himself in the position of the scientific observer looking at an example of female hysteria without danger, Rachilde inverts this power relationship by depicting a relationship that subverts gender norms.

In the same vein, in *La Marquise de Sade*, Rachilde depicts her protagonist refusing to adopt the submissive patient's role in her relationship with her uncle by acquiring scientific knowledge to dominate the men around her. This novel satirises the modern scientific community's attempt to control women by exposing their pursuit of knowledge as a futile,

[507] Mesch, p. 139.
[508] Maurice Barrès, 'Préface. Complications d'amour', in Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus. Suivi de Madame Adonis*, ed. by Martine Reid (Paris: Gallimard, 2024), p. 37.

misogynistic desire to govern something they fear. The scientist's fixation with the female body causes him to misinterpret the signs of madness, leaving him unable to prevent Mary's sadism. Unlike other novels of this corpus, the main character is never officially diagnosed as mad by a psychiatrist, but her defiance of social norms is enough to label her as such. Rachilde mocks the doctor figure through an ironic portrayal of Célestin Barbe, Mary's scientist uncle, with whom she comes to live after her parents' death. Their master-student relationship becomes incestuous, and Mary finally defeats her uncle after having appropriated his knowledge. Mary's and Celestin's dynamic offers a striking parallel to Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal* but inverts the power dynamic in that master-student turned lovers' relationship. Although *La Marquise de Sade* was published six years prior to Zola's novel, it parodies the social power of the scientist, as found in Zola's later portrayal of *Le Docteur Pascal*. In her hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction and the scientific method it deploys, Rachilde develops a parody of the clinical gaze by subverting the sexist trope of the male doctor/female patient relationship.

In her portrait of Célestin Barbe, Rachilde ironically plays with several naturalist motifs. Firstly, the narrator underlines his contempt for women, whom he sees as objects of scientific observation rather than as human beings: 'il avait, durant sa carrière d'accoucheur célèbre, tant palpé, tant retourné, tant respiré de belles créatures répugnantes, qu'il haussait les épaules dès qu'on vantait devant lui ce fameux sexe faible' (MS, p. 191 – *During his career as a famous obstetrician, he had palpated, turned over, and inhaled so many beautiful and repugnant creatures that he shrugged whenever anyone praised this famous weaker sex in front of him*). This description denounces the violence behind science's exploitation of women's bodies which are seen as repulsive objects by the scientist who ultimately rejects women's status as subjects. The narrator uses free indirect speech to show what he thinks about Mary's presence: 'Ce morceau vivant, ni bon à

disséquer, ni propre à se conserver en un bocal d'alcool !' (MS, p. 191 – *This living piece of flesh, neither good to dissect, nor suitable for storage in a jar of alcohol!*). Célestin considers himself superior to Mary because he adheres to a gendered vision of the mind/body dichotomy in which the masculine corresponds to the realm of knowledge, while femininity is reduced to the body which is to be observed and dissected. At first, Mary fears this figure who represents male hegemony thanks to his knowledge: 'elle croisait parfois son oncle, elle s'arrêtait, tremblante, devant celui que la tradition de la famille lui avait toujours représenté sous un aspect de grand personnage, directeur de la vie des femmes et des enfants' (MS, p. 192 – *she sometimes came across her uncle, she stopped, trembling, in front of the one whom family tradition had always represented to her as a great figure, director of women's and children's lives*). Mary's fear reflects the power attributed to the doctor which he exerts on individuals that the novel has identified as society's most vulnerable, women and children.

The power dynamics between Mary and her uncle is subverted as his clinical gaze fails him. In the clinical model described by Foucault, the doctor is supposed to decipher and describe any illness thanks to his theoretical knowledge.[509] By depicting a respected scientist who is clearly blind to the signs in front of him, however, Rachilde mocks this clinical gaze. In a foreshadowing passage, Célestin remarks on the unusual length of his niece's thumb which he compares to the thumb of a dead criminal:

> C'est drôle ! dit-il, prodigieusement intéressé, et il accoupla le pouce vivant au pouce mort. Celui de Mary était presque de la même longueur quoique beaucoup plus mince, et celui de l'homme se faisait déjà remarquer par une dimension anormale. (MS, p. 200 – *That's funny! He said, tremendously interested, and he coupled the living thumb with the dead one. Mary's thumb was almost of the same length, although much thinner, and the man's own was already remarkable by its abnormal dimension.*)

Unlike a naturalist narrator who would have quickly interpreted this sign as a fatal symbol, Célestin is unable to see how Mary's physiology is a warning for his future downfall, thus discrediting his clinical gaze. Adding on to this physiological sign, the narrator ironically notes: 'A part son pouce et une tache noire au cerveau (qu'il ne devinerait jamais car elle

[509] Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique*, p. 781.

datait de trop longtemps), il la trouvait d'une superbe structure' (MS, p. 205 – *Apart from her thumb and a black stain on her brain (that he would never guess because it dated back too long ago*), *he found her to be superbly structured*). Mentioning a lesion on Mary's brain, the narrator reproduces the contemporary psychiatry theories and hints at the naturalist trope of predetermination. This passage however mocks the scientist's growing admiration for his niece as she enters puberty, which in turn hinders him from deploying the doctor's gaze to unveil his niece's supposed dangerous personality. By dint of considering women as mere bodies, Célestin is finally seduced by Mary whose decadent character remains invisible to him.

Mary's power over men derives from the scientific education she gained through her uncle, an expertise that is associated with sexual knowledge.[510] Mary is introduced to science by her uncle who does not shy away from anatomical lessons: 'Ils causaient comme deux hommes du même âge en choisissant des sujets à faire dresser les cheveux d'une demoiselle à marier' (MS, p. 202 – *They spoke as two men of the same age, choosing topics that would frighten a young unmarried woman*). Through her mastery of scientific topics, Mary can engage in discussions with her uncle as an equal. This portrayal of a young woman reading scientific treatises challenges contemporary anxieties about women gaining access to such knowledge, especially about their own bodies and sexuality.[511] Mary's initiation also leads her to find further reasons to get revenge on men: 'Elle puisait dans la nouvelle instruction un mépris des hommes' (MS, p. 204 – *She drew from this new instruction a contempt for men*). This suggests that sadism is learned, rather than biologically inscribed in Mary's personality and that, ironically, her appropriation of male knowledge leads to more contempt towards them.

[510] Melanie C. Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship. From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. 190.
[511] Matlock (1994), p. 8.

Rachilde's narrative reverses the power dynamics between Célestin and his young niece as she dominates him, confronting him with his lack of power when facing female perversity.[512] Once in possession of practical knowledge, Mary blackmails her uncle with the potential scandal of having their incestuous relationship made public. In a desperate move, Célestin even proposes to her to which she sardonically responds: 'Je ne veux pas épouser mon oncle. Est-ce qu'on épouse son oncle ? Quel singulier médecin vous faites ! "Remonter le cours des descendances familiales..." rappelez-vous un peu les phrases de vos livres sérieux' (MS, p. 213 – *I don't want to marry my uncle. Do you marry your uncle? What a strange doctor you are! 'Trace back the course of family descent…' Remember the sentences from your serious books*). Contracting an incestuous marriage would represent the ultimate betrayal to science and the deterministic worldview that have taught Célestin the principles of degeneracy associated with such unsanctioned relationships. In parallel, through her relationship with Paul, physiologically weak because of his frequent nosebleeds, Mary also inverts the gendered clichés around madness: 'Elle aimait sans souffrir, car on souffrait pour elle. Durant son paisible sommeil de pécheresse, Paul Richard se roulait sur le parquet de sa mansarde en proie à une épouvantable crise de nerfs' (MS, p. 246 – *She loved without suffering, as he suffered for her. While she was in the peaceful sleep of a sinner, Paul Richard rolled around on the floor of his attic, suffering from a terrible nervous breakdown*). As Paul is represented as clearly showing signs of hysteria, Mary is portrayed as capable of dominating men to the point of making *them* mad.

Mary is finally the winner of the battle between the male doctor and female patient as the death of her uncle symbolises the failure of male science: 'La Vénus anatomique, détachée de son piédestal, avait bondi, droite encore, mais décapitée, en travers de sa table, sur un amas de fioles brisées' (MS, p. 274 – *The anatomical Venus, detached from its*

[512] Marquer, p. 360.

*pedestal, had sprung, still upright but decapitated, across the table, among a pile of broken vials*). The anatomical Venus was a required piece in the *fin-de-siècle* scientist's office, as it was used by medical professionals to conduct research, but it also conveyed gender stereotypes as the figures most often represented women in 'passive, yet sexually inviting poses'.[513] By having this object that represents the objectification of women personified and seemingly falling out of its own accord, Rachilde denounces the sexual obsessions behind a science that uses women as experimental objects. Triumphant, Mary lets her uncle die and declares him, not without irony, a 'victime de la science' (MS, p. 274 – *a victim of science*). This fall of Venus during the scientist's death marks the definite triumph of the supposedly decadent heroine, announcing a new era which will subvert traditional gender and power dynamics.[514]

Through her parody of the scientific community, Rachilde also denounces the way in which the clinical gaze exploits women's bodies for science. As Mireille Dottin-Orsini points out, Charcot makes an appearance in *La Marquise de Sade* under the parodic name of 'Marscot'.[515] Here is how the narrator describes him at a party organised by Mary's uncle:

> Marscot, décrivant son système miraculeux du coup de tam-tam, qui plus tard, si on le laissait expérimenter, arriverait à renverser comme des capucins de cartes des tas de filles nerveuses que d'ailleurs *il ne se chargerait jamais de guérir*, se contentant des manifestations curieuses de la catalepsie, sans songer à autre chose ; *filles et chiens étaient là pour servir de vulgaires mannequins à souffrance*. (My emphasis; MS, p. 216 – *Marscot, describing his miraculous system of tom-tom beats, that later, if they let him experiment, would succeed in knocking over, like a house of cards, piles of nervous girls whom, by the way,* he would never attempt to cure, *contenting himself with the curious manifestations of catalepsy, without thinking of anything else;* girls and dogs were there to serve as vulgar mannequins for suffering.)

The narrator's cynical tone is made stronger by the parallel made between dogs and girls used for Marscot's experiments. This parallel is not insulting for women, as the novel has repeatedly associated animals' vulnerability to male violence to that of women, thus

[513] Jordanova, p. 44.
[514] See Martine, p. 211.
[515] Dottin-Orsini, p. 240.

strengthening Rachilde's critique.[516] The word 'tom-tom' is a direct reference to Charcot's methods when showcasing his patients' delirium in public lessons.[517] Rachilde denounces here how someone like Charcot built his authority by putting female patients on display in front of a male audience. This parodic passage shows how Rachilde, a contemporary of Charcot, denounces his exploitation of women's bodies and fragile mental health.[518] The clinical gaze is portrayed as contributing to medical abuse, unveiling hysteria as a performance directed by a doctor, rather than a trustworthy diagnosis.

This performance of hysteria is paralleled with Mary's own performance as a sadist. As I have explored in my previous analyses of *La Marquise de Sade*, Rachilde's novel undermines discourses that construct women's abnormal behaviour as born out of biological determinism by showing how Mary's sadism is a reaction to her socialisation. The narrator's subtle use of irony when describing Mary's sadistic traits confirms this, as in the scene where Mary is chosen to represent the goddess of war in a military show: 'elle semblait née pour jouer ce rôle de jolie cruelle' (MS, p. 181 – *she seemed born to play this role of beautiful cruelty*). Cast in this role by adult men, Mary performs it so well that she seems to be born to do so. I see in this performance a parallel to what Foucault has described as anti-psychiatry, namely the way people labelled as 'mad' have performed madness to confront psychiatry and its claim to truth when it comes to defining mental illness.[519] Rachilde develops an anti-psychiatric stance through the parodic mode by challenging contemporary discourses that saw madness as caused by heredity and casting women as more passive victims of biological determinism.[520] Additionally, as I demonstrated in the second chapter, Mary's sadism is also born out of her vulnerability to male violence and a short comment from the narrator also underlines that her incestuous

[516] Rachilde also defended animal rights and criticised contemporary science's use of vivisection. See Hawthorne, p. 190.
[517] See Goldstein, p. 380, note 6.
[518] On Charcot's scenography of hysteria and its impact on contemporary French writers, see Marquer, p. 152.
[519] See Foucault, *Le Pouvoir psychiatrique*, pp. 135–38.
[520] On 'psychiatric Darwinism', see Showalter (1987), p. 133.

relationship with her uncle undermined her power: 'Sans son oncle, et elle n'expliquait pas tout à fait cette cause, elle aurait ambitionné de demeurer à jamais la vierge glaciale, imprenable' (MS, p. 235 – *Without her uncle, and she did not entirely explain this cause, she would have aimed to forever remain this cold, unattainable virgin*). Mary's contempt for men translates itself into a refusal for sexual intercourse which her uncle transgressed. Although Mary is finally triumphant, the male doctor/female relationship is also revealed as a form of sexual violence. What could be perceived as an irrational behaviour is in fact Mary's way of reclaiming the madness diagnosis and of using it to challenge male domination, including its use of the clinical gaze that reduces women to their bodies.

### II.2 Amalie Skram's *Professor Hieronimus* and *Paa St. Jørgen*: 'A Confrontation of Two Wills'

Skram's *Professor Hieronimus*, the first installment in her psychiatric duology concluding with *Paa St. Jørgen*, opens with a scene depicting the protagonist, Else Kant, struggling with her mental health as she tries to capture on canvas a 'Livsangstens Symbol' (PH, p. 5; *[a symbol of] the agony of life* – UO, p. 3). Despite her efforts to balance her roles as a mother and wife with her creative aspirations, Else experiences an internal struggle that leads to a suicide attempt.[521] She eventually agrees to be admitted to a psychiatric unit under the care of the renowned Professor Hieronimus. As the story unfolds, the female patient and male doctor clash over Else's need for hospitalisation and come to represent two differing perspectives on madness. One of Hieronimus' proofs for Else's madness is her art:

> Den Interesse for det abnorme, som Deres Billeder viser, er ikke tiltalende. […] Deres Billeder er for mig et absolut Bevis for, at De er abnorm. Ja, jeg gaar altsaa ud fra, at De i Deres Arbejder har søgt at gjengi Deres eget Sjæleliv? (PH, p. 193; *Your paintings reflect an interest in the abnormal that is very unpleasant. […] Your paintings seem to me absolute proof that you are abnormal. I assume that you have tried in your work to represent your own inner life.* – UO, p. 155)

[521] Lise Busk-Jensen, 'Psykiske strukturer i Amalie Skrams romaner', *Kultur & Klasse*, 39 (1980), pp. 15–44 (p. 35).

Based on those descriptions of Else's creative work, we could interpret Else's art as inspired by naturalism due to its preoccupation with what Professor Hieronimus qualifies as 'abnormal', echoing contemporary critics like Nordau or Edmund Gosse.[522] Hieronimus sees naturalist aesthetics as inherently pathological and uses this belief to support his diagnosis of Else. In doing so, he pathologizes a form of art that sought to establish its legitimacy and authority by appropriating psychiatric knowledge, further complicating the relationship between psychiatry and naturalism explored in the first section of this chapter. Else instantly rejects this vision of her individuality and reflects on Hieronimus' own interest in the abnormal: 'Var det da ikke Professorens interesse for det abnorme, som havde skabt hans Autoritet og stillet ham paa denne Plads?' (PH, p. 193; *Wasn't it the professor's interest in the abnormal that had given him his authority and placed him in this position?* – UO, p. 155). Skram ironically challenges the notion of the 'abnormal' coined by psychiatry by pointing at the arbitrary divide between art and science established by Hieronimus to reinforce his authority.

Throughout the duology, both characters seek to assert their own authority over Else's mental health and, ultimately, over the definition of madness. By challenging Hieronimus' vision, Else asserts herself as a subject rather than an object to be (mis)treated by psychiatric authority. She also challenges the gendered assumptions underpinning Hieronimus' diagnosis. Skram's detailed description of the living conditions in Hieronimus' hospital and the St. Jørgen institution – where Else is sent in the second novel – serves as a denunciation of the arbitrary and abusive treatment of psychiatric patients. With her agency and dignity taken away from her, Else is left with only words and rhetorical means to rebel against Hieronimus and the system he represents.[523] In her

[522] In an article on Norwegian literature, Edmund Gosse bemoans the morbidity of the new writers' generation, including Skram, and qualifies their works as 'the literature of disease and horror'. Edmund Gosse, 'Norway Revisited', *The North American Review*, November 1898, pp. 539–40 (p. 539). Quoted in Diana Maltz, 'Hybrid Decadence and Naturalism in Amalie Skram's Fictions of the Asylum', *Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Cultures*, 2:2 (2024), pp. 272–96 (p. 278).

[523] See Judith Messick, 'Amalie Skram's Asylum Novels', in *Under Observation*, *op.cit.*, pp. 353–65 (p. 356).

duology, Skram represents what Foucault calls an 'affrontement entre deux volontés' (PP, p. 12; *confrontation of two wills* – PP2, p. 10) between the psychiatrist's and the patient's worldviews, a clash where the patient is expected to recognise their own madness and submit to treatment. Else is however able to resist the psychiatrist discourse by promising to write about her experience and therefore reclaim her 'autobiographical account' (PP2, p. 158).

Despite using the name of the psychiatrist as the first novel's title, Professor Hieronimus, Skram does not make him the hero (as Zola does with *Le Docteur Pascal*, for example), but portrays him as the accused party as he represents a system that tries to impose its discipline and worldview onto the female protagonist. In this overbearing presence of the eponymous psychiatrist, I see a parallel with Foucault's description of the asylum as a heterotopia. A heterotopia can be described as a space that exists outside of mainstream society but that enforces social norms to an extreme degree; in this way heterotopic spaces allow the rules governing social orders and spaces more generally to temporarily become visible and open to analysis and critique.[524] Skram's novels depict the asylum as a space where normality is strictly defined and enforced by the psychiatrist who holds authoritative power. The psychiatric system asserts its power on the patient through the omnipresence of the psychiatrist's body to which Else develops a strong physical reaction: 'Hvergang hun hørte Professorens Skridt, fik hun Hjærtebanken og skjalv af Modvilje' (PH, p. 115; *Every time she heard the professor's step her heart pounded and she shivered with repugnance* – UO, p. 92). Professor Hieronimus is indeed a figure of the 'pouvoir disciplinaire' (PP, p. 42; *disciplinary power* – PP2, p. 40) upholding the psychiatric system. Else directs all her energy and resentment towards Hieronimus, turning the narrative into a rhetorical battle between her and Hieronimus who embodies the psychiatric system.

[524] Michel Foucault, 'Des espaces autres', *Erès*, 54 (2004), pp. 12–19 (p. 15).

Else's perspective on the asylum uncovers the different approaches used by the representative of its power in order to break her will. Skram's description of the harmful conditions in which the patients are kept at the hospital – which resembles more a prison than a place of healing – present the asylum as a place where one's symptoms worsen.[525] As I commented in the introduction to this chapter, when she first comes to the hospital, Else waits impatiently for the psychiatrist to appear, but the tactic chosen by Hieronimus is to be as evasive and as distant as possible. Waiting will become a leitmotif in the first novel, as Else believes that each new conversation with Hieronimus will allow her to convince him that she is not mad, and that she should be allowed to leave. Hieronimus' silencing of Else demonstrates the power imbalance established from the start between the male doctor and his female patient who is not allowed to take part in her own treatment, as when he tells her: 'Jeg tænker, De lar mig om at bestemme, hvor laenge De skal bli her' (PH, p. 70; *I think you had better let me decide how long you should stay here* – UO, p. 56). As Hieronimus tells Else's husband, he intends to keep her at the hospital for a long time in order to break her will: 'Det første Halvaar vil hengaa under Protester fra Deres Hustrus Side. Saa vil hun falde til Ro, endelig forlade Hospitalet med Taknemmelighed i Hjærtet og helbredet' (PH, p. 109; *The first six months will pass under protest from your wife. Then she will quiet down, and eventually leave the hospital with gratitude in her heart, quite cured* – UO, pp. 87–88). Health is judged in terms of Else's capacity to submit to the hospital's rules. As soon as she enters the asylum space, different processes symbolise her loss of agency, such as taking all her personal belongings, keeping the door to her room always open, and conducting constant check-ups. The asylum's strict rules are enforced to bring the patients to act according to social norms which the asylum, as a heterotopic space, makes visible and explicit.

[525] Hilde Bondevik, 'Who's Afraid of Amalie Skram? Hysteria and Rebellion in Amalie Skram's Novels of Mental Hospitals', in *Illness in Context*, ed. by Knut Stene-Johansen and Frederik Tygstrup (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 181–97 (p. 190).

Through her portrayal of Hieronimus, Skram unveils how contemporary psychiatry relies on strict gender rules to reinforce itself. What particularly triggers Else's indignation is that Hieronimus opens her husband's letters which she then refuses to read, which the psychiatrist is quick to interpret as a sign of rebellion and hatred for her husband, as he tells him: 'Hendes Forbitrelse mod Dem er stor. Forleden smed hun Deres Brev hen ad Bordet. Hun vilde ikke læse det' (PH, pp. 177–78; *She feels great bitterness toward you. The other day she threw your letter on the table. She wouldn't read it* – UO, p. 142). Else has to accept the psychiatrist's complete control over her intimacy, but also fit the ideal of the 'good wife' in order to be considered healthy again. Hieronimus uses gendered language to confirm his diagnosis, as when he calls Else 'en ren Furie' (PH, p. 108; *an absolute fury* – UO, p. 86). Hieronimus never uses the word 'hysteria' or other scientific terms to diagnose Else, he simply points out her unruly behaviour: 'Deres Sygdom er den, at De ikke kan beherske Dem' (PH, p. 96; *Your illness is your inability to control yourself* – UO, p. 78). His reproach of her inability to control herself reveals his reference to the patriarchal standards of female behaviour.[526] Else herself is aware of the power held by men when it comes to her fate: 'Naar Professoren og min Mand og Dr. Tvede siger, at jeg er sindssyg, saa *er* jeg sindssyg […]. Men saa har jeg vært sindssyg hele mit Liv' (PH, p. 192; *When the Professor Hieronimus and my husband and Dr. Tvede* [her family doctor] *say that I'm insane, then I must be insane […]. But then I've then been insane all my life* – UO, p. 155). Else's use of irony, by accumulating these men's names and then undermining their assessment of her own mental health, shows her ability to unveil how the madness diagnosis is supported by contemporary gender norms.

The rhetorical battle between the male doctor and the female patient notably takes place through writing. As I already commented in the opening to this section, Skram's *Professor Hieronimus* begins with a description of Else struggling to express herself

[526] See Showalter (1987), p. 133.

through her creative work: ‘Denne Kamp mellem det, hun *vilde* male, og det, hun malte, skabte et Sammensurium af Elende, der grov sig ind i hendes Hjerne, filtred sig om alt, hvad hun hørte og opleved, lammed hendes Energi og knækked hendes Vilje’ (PH, p. 6 – *This battle between what she wanted to paint and what she actually painted left her in a confused state of misery that gnawed at her brain, colored everything she heard and experienced, paralyzed her spirit and destroyed her will* – UO, p. 4) Else’s struggle with her art symbolises the contemporary limitations put on women’s creativity and how it affects their mental health. As Anne Birgitte Rønning argues, Skram’s protagonist goes from being a painter to deciding to write about her asylum experience to combat its abuse, showing how her struggle for self-definition, as an artist and as an individual, is tightly linked with her survival.[527] Else consciously makes the choice to resist the psychiatric system and reclaims her identity through writing. In one scene, Else falls into despair at the thought of staying in the asylum forever as her destiny is in the hands of Hieronimus who controls the length of her stay. Fighting a suicidal urge, Else finds hope in a future where she will denounce and stop the abuse:

> Men selv om hun døde, vilde jo Anstalten leve. Mange Mennesker i samme Tilstand som hun vilde kanske komme herind og faa med Hieronimus at gjøre. Hvis hun slap levende herfra, saa kunde hun fortælle og advare og kanske redde om det blot var et eneste Medmenneske fra det, hun her havde oplevet. Nej, hun *maatte* leve. (PH, p. 130; *But even if she died, the institution would go on. Many human beings in a condition like hers might come here and have to deal with Hieronimus. If she could escape alive, she could tell her story – warn, perhaps save, even one fellow being from the things she had experienced. No, she* had *to live.* – OU, pp. 102–3)

This passage is a pivotal moment in Else’s trajectory and her asylum experience as her writing project encourages her survival and compassion for other people who have been falsely labelled as mad. Else’s decision to write becomes political as it is not only a way for her to survive but also a decision to denounce an abusive system.

Else’s attempts at writing during her stay are however discredited by Hieronimus and other doctors. Hieronimus reproaches her to use an extreme language in a letter she

[527] Anne Birgitte Rønning, ‘“Kvinnelig vanvidd og mannlig rasjonalitet”. En analyse av Amalie Skram: *Professor Hieronimus* og *På Sct. Jørgen’*, *Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning*, 5 (1984), pp. 275–88 (p. 286).

wrote to him to complain about her mistreatment: ‘De bruger altfor stærke Udtryk. […] De taler om Pine og Lidelser, og om, at De er berøvet Friheden […]. De har mere Frihed, end der bekommer Dem vel’ (PH, p. 208; *The language you use is much too strong. […] You talk about pain and suffering and being deprived of liberty […]. You have more liberty than is good for you* – UO, p. 167). Hieronimus corrects his patient’s choice of words to qualify her own experience which is symbolic of a psychiatrist’s discourse attempting to correct how patients present themselves, thus stifling Else’s rebellion on the level of language. Else’s expressions of anger against Hieronimus are also dismissed by the doctor in St. Jørgen who sees them as a sign of madness: ‘Alle sindssyge er vrede paa deres Læger’ (PJ, p. 268; *All mental patients are angry at their doctors* – UO, p. 215). The doctor undermines any expression of dissatisfaction at one’s treatment by identifying it as a symptom; the patient, once identified as a ‘madwoman’ cannot express herself without confirming her diagnosis. That same doctor attempts to dissuade her from writing about Hieronimus, using external judgements as an argument: ‘Hvad Virkning har den Slags Historier […]. Kun at Forfatteren faar Latteren over sig, eller i bedste Fald blir Gjenstand for Medynk. […] Den Art Stormløb fælder ikke en Autoritet som Hieronimus’ (PJ, p. 277; *What do tales like that accomplish? The author becomes the butt of ridicule or, in the best case, the object of pity. […] An authority like Hieronimus is not brought down by that kind of assault* – UO, pp. 221–22). As Marta Caminero-Santangelo highlights, ‘the symbolic function of the asylum’ is to make patients lose their credibility in the eyes of society in order to make their protest meaningless,[528] as the doctor attempts here. In this duology, however, Skram describes how a woman labelled as ‘mad’ can make the conscious decision of writing about her asylum experience and reclaim her voice.

At the end of *Professor Hieronimus*, as Else is sent to a new asylum, St. Jørgen, against her will, she writes to Hieronimus:

[528] Caminero-Santangelo, p. 37.

> Saa skrev hun i rasende Fart et brev til Hieronimus, hvori hun gav al sin Foragt og Uvilje Luft, og Punkt for Punkt stilled op sine Anklager. Tilsidst lovte hun, at Professoren, saasnart hun kom ud fra 'Sct. Jørgen', skulde bli draget til Ansvar for sin Færd mod hende og underskrev: Deres oprigtige Fiende Else Kant. (PH, p. 232; *She wrote a hurried letter to Hieronimus in which she vented her contempt and indignation, making her accusations point by point. Finally, she promised the professor that as soon as she was released from St. Jørgen's she would hold him accountable for the way he had treated her. She signed herself, 'Your sincere enemy, Else Kant'.* – UO, p. 187)

The fact that Else writes a letter as she departs from the realm of Hieronimus' power, which included his act of reading her husband's letters without her consent, is significant. Else is able to survive her second hospitalisation through this promise, using writing as a way to reclaim her own power and a means to publicly denounce Hieronimus' actions. The duology, by giving readers direct access to Else's perspective and experience overcomes the mistrust towards her writing expressed by her doctors. The psychiatric system is shown as automatically dismissing the madwoman's written word, but by the end of *Paa St. Jørgen*, Else has escaped the psychiatric system and promised to write about her experience, overcoming the silencing of the other patients.

Skram's message is however complicated by the clear lack of solidarity between the main protagonist and other patients. On the one hand, the heroine refuses the diagnosis of madness but experiences debilitating symptoms, such as insomnia and hallucinations. On the other hand, she does not truly question the diagnosis when it comes to other women in the hospital. While Else is able to relativise social definitions of madness, she also claims to recognise 'true' madness in other patients from whom she wants to distance herself.[529] For instance, she uses other patients as a measure of her own sanity: '"Men de andre patienter," bemærked Else "de er da allesammen mere eller mindre abnorme, ialtfald de, som jeg har set."' (PJ, p. 373; *'But the other patients,' Else remarked, 'they're all abnormal one way or another, at least the ones I've seen.'* – UO, p. 300). This vision prevents her from radically questioning the notion of madness. Else also adopts a voyeuristic attitude when observing other patients as when she observes another patient in St. Jørgen,

[529] Rønning, p. 280.

fascinated by her delirium and pathetic appearance: ‘Else blev staaende. Hun kunde ikke bli træt af at betragte denne Skikkelse, der trods alt det, der frastødte, havde noget rørende barnesørgmodigt i Blikket’ (PJ, p. 316; *Else was nailed to the spot. She could not tire of watching this figure who, in spite of everything repellent, had a touching, childlike look of sadness in her eyes* – UO, p. 253). The patient however stops her trance by telling her ‘Gaa deres Vej!’ (PJ, p. 316; *Go away!* – UO, p. 253), refusing her voyeuristic gaze. Engelstad argues that Else’s gaze is close to the one deployed by a naturalist narrator because of her fascination for the other patients’ quirks and delirium, but also because of the way she distances herself from them.[530] Skram however differentiates Else’s gaze from Hieronimus’ ‘cold, clinical perspective’ that does not allow for any compassion,[531] seen here in the description of the patient as ‘touching, childlike’.

Else distances herself from other patients mainly because of her classist point of view.[532] For instance, she is judgemental of a young working-class mother for committing suicide and leaving her children behind: ‘Med ét overraskedes hun af at mærke, at hun ikke alene følte Medlidenhed, men ogsaa Afsky. Mest Afsky. Denne Kvinde, der fejgt var flygtet fra sine Lidelser og sine Pligter. Ladt sine Børn saa grusomt og troløst i Stikken’ (PH, p. 146; *Suddenly she realized with surprise that she felt not only sympathy, but disgust. Mostly disgust. This woman had fled like a coward from her sufferings and her responsibilities. Left her children cruelly and faithlessly in the lurch* – UO, p. 116). Such a harsh judgement makes Else adhere to the patriarchal discourse that wants a mother to sacrifice herself, while a nurse tells her that extreme poverty and domestic abuse led her to commit suicide. However, this scene is also a pivotal moment in Else’s hospital experience as she promises herself to never leave her young child behind. She even admits to herself

[530] Irene Engelstad, ‘Sannheten og døden. Naturalismen som litterær retning og kunstnerisk metode’, in *Lysthuse: Kvindelitteraturhistorier. 10 essays skrevet af kvindelitteraturforskere fra Sverige, Norge og Danmark*, ed. by Liv Palmvig (Copenhagen: Rosinante, 1985), pp. 74–91 (p. 86).
[531] Maltz, p. 278.
[532] As Messick argues, Else is not meant to be an ‘ideal’ character and the narrator sometimes portrays her in a negative light, p. 360.

that this woman saved her from her own suicidal urges: 'En Selvmorderske havde reddet hende fra at bli Selvmorderske' (HP, p. 149 – *A suicidal woman had saved her from suicide* – UO, p. 118). Several scenes show Else's concern and care for other patients as well.[533] These contradictions in Else's questioning of the psychiatric system do not lead to an effective global rebellion as she differentiates herself from 'de rigtige Gale' (PJ, p. 304; *the real lunatics* – UO, p. 244) and wants to solely fight against misdiagnoses and bad treatment, not the psychiatric system as a whole.[534] As Mary in Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*, Else's rebellion is individualistic: both female protagonists challenge their positions as female patients and eventually triumph over a male doctor, but their subversion does not lead to a systemic change. Skram's duology however also depicts the shared suffering of female patients at the hands of psychiatry which encourages Else's writing project.[535] While voyeuristic at times, Else's gaze also allows the narrator to describe other patients' plight, thus using a naturalist stylistic device to enable a counter-narrative.

Skram's challenge of contemporary definitions of madness also leads her to reject biological explanations. At the end of the second novel, Else hears rumours about Hieronimus' own mental state and his family, rumours that demonstrate how fragile one's reputation of sanity is:

> Der var saa mange Historier om ham, og det var en temmelig almindelig Antagelse, at han selv i al Stilhed gik og var sindssyg. Der skulde ogsaa være nogle i hans Slægt, som var underlige. Hans Far havde vært en Særling. (PJ, p. 394; *There were many stories about him and it was a fairly common assumption that he himself was insane, though he kept it under wraps. A number of his relatives were peculiar, and his father had been an eccentric.* – UO, p. 317)

A striking feature of those rumours is the implicit belief in heredity: if Hieronimus has 'abnormal' relatives, the only conclusion born of the belief in biological determinism is that he must be mad himself. The rumours that circulate about Hieronimus challenge not only his authority but also the entire system he represents. Else understands that the label

[533] See Messick, p. 359.
[534] Maltz, p. 289.
[535] Messick, p. 361.

of ‘mad’ is largely dependent on the vision of others and is influenced by a popular perception of sanity that adheres to deterministic principles, seeing family antecedents as damning. The ambiguous lines between who can be classified as sane or insane highlight the arbitrary nature of the labels ‘normal’ and ‘mad’. What Skram denounces here is the circular logic and speed with which someone can be considered mad and how this logic is used to justify the abusive treatment by the psychiatric institution. If the duology does not entirely dismiss the label of ‘madness’ for every patients, it nevertheless rejects a major aspect of contemporary definitions of mental illness, namely its association with biological determinism.

In contrast to Rachilde, Skram does not mock psychiatry to discredit it; instead, she depicts her heroine engaging in a rhetorical duel with Hieronimus over his vision of madness. Their confrontation brings Else to uncover how the psychiatric diagnosis is influenced by gender norms. By questioning his diagnosis and denouncing its arbitrary and sexist nature, Else undermines Hieronimus’ prestige and authority and asserts her status as subject. Although Else questions the notion of madness as a social construct, she accepts it for other patients, preventing her from achieving a complete rejection of the label. Despite being subjected to abuse, Else finds strength and hope in her new creative project: writing to denounce the psychiatric system. By shifting her identity from a ‘madwoman’ to a writer, she retains dignity and agency over psychiatric discourses.

### II.3 Hedwig Dohm, “Werde, die Du bist!”: The Artist *Manquée*

Dohm’s novella “Werde, die Du bist !”, in a similar manner to Skram, also stages the discrepancy between the psychiatrist’s assessment of his female patient’s mental state and her own ‘autobiographical account’. The opening of the story, told from an external perspective, describes the psychiatrist’s confusion regarding Agnes’ case: ‘Der Nervenarzt,

der sich für diese merkwürdige Form von Irrsinn interessierte, zog Erkundigungen über ihr Vorleben ein. Was er erfuhr, setzte ihn in das höchste Erstaunen und war in keiner Weise angetan, das Rätsel ihres Wesens zu lösen' (W, p. 3 – *The neurologist, who was interested in this strange form of insanity, made inquiries about her past. What he heard amazed him and did not help him to solve the riddle of her nature*). Agnes appears in his eyes as an object of mystery to be deciphered, but she eludes his attempts at categorising her and her madness, thus resisting his clinical gaze. The doctor describes Agnes' case as follows: 'dieses seltene Beispiel eines gestörten Geistes, bei dem die Störung gewissermaßen ein neues Individuum geschaffen hatte' (W, p. 4 – *this strange case of a disturbed mind that had in some way created a new individual*). This notion of 'new individual' to describe madness is interesting because Dohm's novella precisely describes how Agnes' distress derives from her realisation that she was forced into a certain behaviour, namely that of wife and mother, and is unable to find her true self. The reader is capable of inferring this interpretation after reading her diary, but the internal reader, the psychiatrist responsible for her treatment, fails to understand the causes of her madness, as the narrator comments at the end of the novella: 'Doktor Behrend fand darin nicht, was er zu finden gehofft hatte: Psychologisches Material für die Entstehung von Geisteskrankheiten' (W, p. 57 – *Doctor Behrend had not found what he had hoped for in it: psychological material for the genesis of mental illnesses*). The internal reader's failure to recognise the social causes at the root of Agnes' madness symbolises Dohm's resistance to contemporary psychiatric discourses, by unveiling how its strict classifications and diagnoses do not account for one's subjective experience of madness.

It is Agnes who purposefully gives him her diary so Doctor Behrend can understand her case:

> Ich habe nach dem Tode meines Mannes angefangen, ein Tagebuch zu schreiben. Ich bitte Sie, es zu verbrennen. Sie sind Psychologe. Möchten Sie erfahren, wie und warum mein Geist gestört wurde, so lesen Sie es, bevor Sie es vernichten. Niemand sonst soll es lesen. (W, p. 8 – *I have started, after*

> *the death of my husband, to write a diary. Please burn it. You are a psychologist. If you wish to learn how and why my spirit was disturbed, read it before you destroy it. No one else should read it.*)

The narrative perspective then changes, as the reader follows Agnes' reflections on her life in her diary, whose trajectory followed the typical female bourgeois destiny of marriage, motherhood, and self-sacrifice. The diary functions as a means for Agnes to better understand herself and the social narratives that have influenced her trajectory.[536] As she notes, she aims to analyse her own life in an objective manner:

> Kalt und nüchtern will ich prüfen, wie das kam, daß ich so geworden bin. Eine Art Nekrolog will ich von mir schreiben. Ich bin ja am Ende. Es kann nichts mehr kommen. Ich will einfach das Leben von Agnes Schmidt erzählen, die 54 Jahre alt ist und seit zwei Jahren Witwe. (W, p. 9 – *I want to examine, coldly and soberly, how it came about that I became like this. I want to write a kind of obituary for myself. I am at the end. Nothing more can come. I simply want to tell the life of Agnes Schmidt, who is 54 years old and has been a widow for two years.*)

Agnes' diary exposes an interesting tension in Dohm's representation of madness: on the one hand, it is a tool for the protagonist to gain a sense of distance to discern the causes of her malaise, reclaiming her status as a subject, instead of being an object of observation for a male doctor. Her narrative voice also romanticises madness as a way to access a superior reality, thus challenging contemporary definitions of madness as the entrapment in an irrational form of subjectivity. On the other hand, her writing exposes her progressive fall into madness and how it is caused by her inability to express her suffering. Compared to Skram's protagonist, for whom the promise of writing enables her survival, writing for Agnes leads to her discovery of her life-long alienation and how it is too late for her to escape it.

Unlike Rachilde and Skram who unveil the 'madness' label as a social construct based on gendered power dynamics, Dohm represents madness as an alternative form of subjectivity. This leads the narrative to adopt a somewhat idealising tone, reminiscent of

[536] Charlotte Woodford, '"Wir hätten keine Zukunft mehr?" Hedwig Dohm's Future-Orientated Ideas of Aging in Feminist Writings from the 1900s and her Short Story *Werde, die du bist*', *English Goethe Society*, 92:3 (2023), pp. 201–16 (p. 210).

German romanticism and its reclaiming of madness as giving access to 'truths beyond rational empiricism',[537] as in Agnes' first portrayal in the asylum:

> Sie verhielt sich meist schweigsam. Zuweilen aber fing sie an zu reden, dann war es, als hielte sie Zwiesprache mit übernatürlichen Wesen. Unermeßliche Melancholie oder dithyrambische Verzückung atmeten ihre Worte. Sie sprach tiefsinnige und erhabene Gedanken aus, in einer Form, die an Nietzsches Zarathustra erinnerte. (W, p. 3 – *She mostly remained silent. At times she started to speak and then it was as if she were communicating with supernatural beings. Her words breathed with an immeasurable melancholia or dithyrambic ecstasy. She expressed profound and sublime thoughts, in a form that was reminiscent of Nietzsche's Zarathustra.*)

Madness is represented here as allowing access to a spiritual realm and a poetic language. The reference to Nietzsche is ironic: Dohm questions here the sexist double standards that decide who should be deemed to be a genius or mad. Agnes' own descriptions of her mental state throughout her diary lead her to radically question her past adherence to social norms:

> Ist nicht in der Tat der Wahnsinn viel mehr ein Stück lauterer Natur als unser abgerichteter Verstand? Der Wahnsinn läßt Eindrücke und Vorstellungen auf sich wirken, wie die Sonne auf die Pflanze wirkt, wie der Sturm auf das Meer, ohne Kritik, ohne Abwehr. (W, p. 41 – *Isn't madness, in fact, much more a part of our real nature than our trained mind? Madness lets impressions and ideas develop themselves, like the sun influences a plant, like a storm on the sea, without criticism, without defence.*)

Madness is portrayed as a visionary state, a means of accessing a spiritual dimension and breaking free from social conventions. Agnes is described as a 'Seherin' (W, p.3 – *seeress*) whose discourse is both philosophical and spiritual and therefore coded as 'mad' by the psychiatrist who adheres to contemporary definitions of madness as an irrational form of subjectivity.

Despite opening the portrayal of madness to idealisation, Agnes' diary is also meant for the reader to understand the social origins of Agnes' distress. Agnes is neither predisposed to madness because of her physiology, nor because of her artistic 'genius' as Claude Lantier in *L'Œuvre*. Instead, through writing, Agnes comes to the realisation that she has denied her own identity by following the patriarchal model of becoming a wife and mother. Agnes redefines as 'madness' the way she has obeyed a 'Fremdbestimmung'

[537] Thiher, p. 169.

(*heteronomy*), rather than living for herself: ‘Ist das Wahnsinn, so war ich länger als fünfzig Jahre wahnsinnig. Immer habe ich fremdem Willen, fremder Meinung still gehalten’ (W, p. 32 – *If this is madness, so I was mad for more than fifty years. I have always remained silent to external will, external opinion*). The patriarchal model of femininity, that of the obedient wife and selfless mother, is denounced as the root cause of women’s alienation.[538] While she is now liberated from both roles after the death of her husband, Agnes realises the extent of her lack of identity: ‘Ich war doch aber immer zufrieden? Ich? Aber ich war ja gar kein Ich. Agnes Schmidt! Ein Name! Eine Hand, ein Fuß, ein Leib! Keine Seele, kein Hirn. Ich habe ein Leben gelebt, wo ich gar nicht dabei war’ (W, p. 30 – *Was I not always satisfied? I? But I was not an ‘I’ at all. Agnes Schmidt! A name! A hand, a foot, a body! No soul, no brain. I have lived a life where I wasn’t even there*). Her rejection of the name ‘Agnes Schmidt’ becomes a leitmotif in her diary as Agnes sees it as a symbol of her missed opportunities.[539]

Age has also become a new obstacle to Agnes’ self-fulfilment: ‘Man hatte meine Natur an die Kette gelegt. Nun bin ich losgelassen, und ich irre in der neuen, fremden Welt umher und würde vielleicht Unheil anrichten, aber da ist schon eine neue Kette – das Alter’ (W, p. 29 – *My nature has been chained. Now I am free and I wander around in the new, foreign world and would perhaps cause mischief, if it were not for a new chain – old age*). More than old age – she is only fifty-four as she starts her diary – it is external perceptions of her age that play a crucial role in Agnes’ fall into madness. External judgements lead her to feel alienated from her body, as she experiences the contradictory feeling of being young again but perceived as ‘old’ by others.[540] When Agnes sees her reflection in the mirror, she realises that her body determines her in the eyes of the world: ‘Graues Haar, Falten, Runzeln! bin ich das? Nein, nein. Ich bin *in* mir, *in* mir. Ich stecke nur in einer fremden

[538] See Balmer, p. 186.
[539] Rohner (2004), p. 143.
[540] Joeres (1986), p. 223.

Haut. Seltsam, daß die Haut unser Schicksal ist' (W, p. 51 – *Grey hair, folds, wrinkles! Is that me? No, I am* in *me,* in *me. I am only stuck in a foreign skin. How strange that the skin is our destiny*). As Anna Richards notes, Agnes could achieve freedom through an 'escape from the body',[541] but this liberation from the flesh proves to be impossible: 'Sobald ich aber unter Menschen komme, sehe ich mit den Augen der Anderen, denke ich mit den Gedanken der Andern, dann fühle ich mich eines lächerlichen Anachronismus schuldig, und ich schäme mich' (W, p. 53 – *As soon as I am among people, I see with the eyes of the others, think the thoughts of the others, then I feel like I am guilty of a ridiculous anachronism and I am ashamed of myself*). While Agnes sees in madness a potential to reach a spiritual realm, away from the body, she is constantly brought back to external judgements that reduce her to her physiological state.

Agnes nonetheless attempts to find her own way to define herself outside of patriarchal discourses in her diary. As I evoked in the general introduction, Dohm uses the metaphor of the palimpsest to describe how women act as surfaces on which the patriarchal order inscribes its norms.[542] Indeed, the novella deals with intertextuality and the building of writing traditions that influence social norms; Dohm plays with references to the Bible, Goethe, and Nietzsche to reveal their sexist undertones.[543] In one passage, Agnes asks herself:

> Warum mußte ich leben, wie ich gelebt habt? weil ich ein Weib bin und weil auf uralten erzenen Gesetztafeln geschrieben steht, wie das Weib leben soll? Aber die Schrift ist falsch, falsch ist sie! Warum hat Niemand die falsche Schrift gelöscht? (W, p. 39 – *Why did I have to live the way I did? Because I am a woman and because a law is written on ancient bronze tablets of how a woman should live? But the scripture is wrong, it is wrong! Why has no one erased the false scripture?*)

This 'false scripture' represents the patriarchal and archaic laws that rule women's lives without any justification in nature. What eventually triggers Agnes' madness is her inability to find her true nature under all those foreign inscriptions.

[541] Richards, p. 187.
[542] Rohner (2004), p. 137.
[543] Pailer (2011), p. 81.

As Agnes' state becomes more and more frantic, the diary becomes incoherent, and its last entry symbolises the character's failed attempt at verbalising her suffering:

> Warum mußte ich leben wie ich – – schrieb ich das nicht schon einmal – und von den ehernen Gesetzestafeln, die – – und von dem Sarg – und – man soll sie zerschmett – zermet – mein Gott – wie schreibt man das Wort? zersch – – wie schreibt man – der Deckel – haltet! haltet! – er – ich – ja – Asche – –' (W, p. 57 – *Why did I live the way I – – didn't I write that before? And about the bronze tablets of the law, which – and about the coffin – and – they should be smashed – smasched – my God – how do you write – sma – the lid – hold! stop! He – I – yes – ashes – –*)

In a total reversal from the beginning, when writing was a way to counter madness and to discover herself, writing becomes the indicator of Agnes' loss of control over her language.[544] Agnes' madness no longer appears a means to escape from her reality, but rather functions as a reminder of the external powers that have undermined her. The closing of the diary opposes the clinical gaze whose goal is to transcribe clinical observations into ordered language. The breakdown of Agnes' writing, transcribing her confused thoughts, is a powerful symbol of Agnes' succumbing to 'die Schrift' (*scripture*), these external expectations and judgements imposed on her, demonstrating that the origins of her madness are entirely social. Dohm portrays how madness is born out of women's *natural* aspirations being hindered by social conventions, of social determinism concealed behind the mask of biological determinism, leading women's identity to remain fragmentary.

Agnes' progressive loss of control over her own writing is a comment on women's lack of access to art and creativity in nineteenth-century societies. Similarly to Else in Skram's duology, whose mental health deteriorates as she struggles to express herself in art, it is hinted at the start of Dohm's novella that Agnes' inability to create is indeed the cause of her madness, as the external narrator describes her in the asylum: 'Man hätte glauben sollen, daß diese alte Frau eine große Dichterin gewesen und daß ein Übermaß geistiger Erregung die Gehirnstörung bewirkt habe. Das Gegenteil war der Fall' (W, p. 3 – *One could have thought that this old woman had been a successful poetess and that an*

[544] Rohner (2004), p. 156.

*excessive mental exertion had caused the brain disorder. The opposite was true*). It is a contemporary cliché that too much intellectual stimulus would disturb the already fragile female minds, but Dohm here demonstrates that it is the limits put on Agnes' self-expression that led her to such a diminished state. Condemned to a fragmentary discourse, Dohm's character is far from a successful writer as her lack of control over her own language traps her in a world of fantasy.[545] Already in her diary, Agnes reflects on how her socialisation has hindered her from expressing herself through creative means:

> Was hätte aus mir werden müssen? Malerin etwa? Ja, durstig, mit Inbrunst hängen meine Augen an dem Antlitz der Natur. Ich verstehe ihre sanfte und ihre wilde Sprache. Aber ich kann ja den Pinsel nicht führen. Oder Schriftstellerin? Ich schaue, ahne, denke. Ich möchte schöpfen, schöpfen aus der Tiefe meiner Brust, da rinnt ein Quell, aber ich habe kein Gefäß zum Schöpfen und die lebendigen Wasser verrinnen, verrinnen, und mein Herzblut mit. Ich kann weinen, bitterlich aber ich kann die Tränen nicht schildern. Was ich empfinde, wild ist's wie das Meer, rauschend, unermeßlich, tödlich. Ich kann es nicht sagen. (W, p. 38 – *What should have become of me? Some kind of painter? Yes, thirsty, my eyes cling to the face of nature with fervour. I understand her soft and wild language. But I cannot guide the brush. Or an author? I observe, I suspect, I think. I want to create, to create out of the depth of my chest, there runs a spring, but I have no vessel to collect it, and the lively waters are trickling away, away, and my heart's blood with them. I can cry, bitterly, but I cannot describe the tears. What I feel is wild like the sea, rushing, immeasurable, deadly. I cannot say it.*)

As Rohner puts it, the Pindaric ideal from the title of the novella, of becoming oneself, is shown to be unattainable for women.[546] Unlike some naturalist characters, for whom madness can be productive and give access to creativity, but also has the potential to worsen a predisposition to irrationality, it is precisely because Agnes has been kept from expressing herself in painting or writing that she becomes mad.

In her diary, Agnes establishes herself as the object of her own observation and thus escapes the male and clinical gaze which is unable to categorise her mental state. While Agnes' experience of madness seems idealised at times, the narrative ends on the madwoman's silence, a silence that the psychiatrist figure is unable to understand. Her progressive loss of control over her own language is caused by the effects of social determinism, including her lack of access to creative outlets. Although the psychiatrist's lack of comprehension appears to make Agnes' articulation of her own suffering futile on

[545] Weber, p. 238.
[546] Rohner (2004), p. 134.

the fictional level, the reader is supposed to question and overcome the psychiatrist's failure as the factors behind Agnes' madness are clearly presented in the diary, albeit not in a scientific manner, but in a highly subjective one. The diary symbolises Dohm's fictional challenge of the contemporary psychiatric system that observes female patients without letting them give their 'autobiographical account' nor healing them.

### II.4 Gabriele Reuter, *Aus guter Familie*: The Silencing of the Madwoman

Like Dohm's protagonist, the main character of Reuter's novel succumbs to madness as she tries yet perpetually fails to conform to the patriarchal ideal of femininity. Unlike the scenario often highlighted by feminist scholars of madness as stemming from women's hopeless rebellion against gender norms,[547] Agathe's degrading mental state comes from her unsuccessful attempts to conform to them. Agathe's final breakdown is caused by her inability to resolve the contradictions she sees in the ideal of femininity imposed on her since her childhood. Her madness however does not allow her to express these paradoxes, as it leads to the loss of control over her language, illustrating Elizabeth J. Donaldson's argument that 'However it is romanticized, madness itself offers women little possibility for true resistance or productive rebellion'.[548] The novel's ending portrays how Agathe is entrusted to an abusive psychiatric system by her family, who actively contributed to the deterioration of her mental health. As Foucault observes, psychiatry replaces 'la souveraineté familiale' (PP, p. 86; *familial sovereignty* – PP2, p. 85) when family members are no longer able to control a member seen as deviating from the norm. Reuter's laconic but impactful description of the sanatorium and of the asylum presents the psychiatric space as a heterotopic space where the psychiatrist takes over the authority of the father to

[547] On this scenario and its limits, see Elizabeth J. Donaldson, 'Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman. Further notes toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Mental Illness', in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. by Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 91–113.
[548] Donaldson, p. 93.

enforce the 'refamilialisation de l'individu' (PP, p. 87; *the individual's refamiliazation* – PP2, p. 85), a treatment that results in Agathe's complete loss of voice.

As I explored in the second chapter, Agathe's mother acts as a reflection of what her daughter's destiny could be if she marries and becomes a mother, but also reveals how fulfilling social expectations leads to the deterioration of women's mental health. Agathe, as a child, contrasts with her mother's loss of energy: 'Frau Heidling fragte sich oft erstaunt, ob sie selbst nur einmal so schrecklich lebhaft und exaltiert gewesen sein könnte' (GF, p. 24 – *Mrs Heidling often asked herself, astonished, if she had ever been so terribly lively and exalted*). Seeing her child's excitation and energy as something to be reprimanded and which may even be ruinous is only a sign of the mother's own unhealthy and diminished state stemming from her duties as a wife and the death of several of her children. Contemporary readers might interpret Frau Heidling's exhaustion and nervousness as a sign of neurasthenia, considered the *mal du siècle* in Europe.[549] However, while her state manifests itself by physiological symptoms, its origins are clearly designated as social. As such, Agathe's own poor mental health is not to be understood as an illness inherited from her mother, but as caused by the ideal of normative femininity imposed on both women. As Agathe reflects:

> Ihr Los wird ähnlich sein, wie das ihrer Mutter, ihrer Freundinnen. Sie wird eben in ihrem Kreise bleiben. Eine Beamtenfrau – sie kennt das ganz genau. Sie kennt eine Menge von Beamtenfrauen, und alle denken und thun und reden und erleben so ziemlich dasselbe. (GF, p. 142 – *Her lot will be the same as her mother's, her friends'. She will stay within their circle. A civil servant's wife – she knows that well. She knows a lot of civil servants' wives and all of them think, do, talk, and live almost the same way.*)

This never-ending cycle of bourgeois marriage condemns Agathe to a circle of people and ideas that limits her potential for growth. Instead of accusing the mother of being a biological source of their children's suffering, as naturalist writers tended to do (e.g. by exploiting the contemporary anxieties around mothers transmitting their insanity onto their

[549] See Goldstein, p. 335.

daughters),[550] Reuter instead identifies and denounces the social conditions which force them into unfulfilling existences. Reuter shows how women's fate inevitably leads to madness: on the one hand, women, through the description of Frau Heidling, are shown as condemned to nervousness and exhaustion if they follow the normative path. On the other hand, Agathe's attempts and failures at following the same path demonstrate that even outsider figures are condemned to madness in a patriarchal society that imposes an impossible ideal onto women.[551] Their madness results in their death or leads them to the enclosed space of the asylum.

Before undergoing her treatment at the asylum, Agathe is sent by her father to a sanatorium. Just as in Clarétie's *Les Amours d'un interne*, the sanatorium described by Reuter is exclusively inhabited by women who share a similar experience and are exhausted by the demands of normative femininity:

> Frauen – Frauen – nichts als Frauen. Zu Hunderten strömten sie aus allen Teilen des Vaterlandes hier bei den Stahlquellen zusammen, als sei die Fülle von Blut und Eisen, mit der das Deutsche Reich zu machtvoller Größe geschmiedet, aus seiner Töchter Adern und Gebeinen gesogen, und sie könnten sich von dem Verlust nicht erholen. Fast alle waren sie jung, auf der Sommerhöhe des Lebens. Und sie teilten sich in zwei ungefähr gleiche Teile: die von den Anforderungen des Gatten, von den Pflichten der Geselligkeit und den Geburten der Kinder erschöpften Ehefrauen und die bleichen, vom Nichtsthun, von Sehnsucht und Enttäuschung verzehrten Mädchen. (GF, p. 205 – *Women, women, nothing but women. Hundreds of them flocked there from all parts of the fatherland at the steel springing sources, as if they could not recover from the loss of the abundant blood and iron with which the German Empire had forged its powerful greatness, that it sucked from the veins and bones of its daughters. Most of them were young, in the summer of their life. They could be separated into two approximately equal groups: the married women who were exhausted by their husband's demands, the social duties and the birth of children, and the pale girls consumed by the lack of action, longing, and disappointment.*)

This passage ironically refers to Bismarck's famous saying that German unification would be built through blood and iron,[552] and Reuter here identifies women as the true builders of this militaristic and patriarchal empire. The narrator then separates the women patients into two categories: the exhausted housewives and the eternal celibates. Agathe's mother corresponds to the first type, a selfless wife and mother who sacrificed her health and aspirations for her husband. Agathe herself stands for the second type, crushed by

[550] See Showalter (1987), p. 123.
[551] Balmer, p. 204.
[552] Pailer (2003), p. 113.

numerous rejections and her failure to correspond to the patriarchal ideal of femininity. Men are absent from this space, with only a few exceptions, as the narrator notes: ‘Männer besuchten den Ort nur selten. Ein hysterischer Künstler war jetzt anwesend, ein Oberst a. D., der seine Frau nie allein reisen ließ, und der Arzt’ (GF, p. 205 – *Men only rarely visited this place. A hysterical artist was now there, a colonel a.D. who never let his wife travel alone, and the doctor*). Those men also correspond to gendered types: the effeminate artist, sensitive like a woman and thus deemed as deserving of occupying this space, and a possessive husband. The sanatorium, like the asylum in which Agathe is subsequently placed, is thus encoded as an exclusively female space where women are isolated to facilitate their reinsertion into what is considered as ‘normal’.

While women are in this exclusive space, the doctor plays the central role in their destinies: ‘Sie erwarteten alle so viel von diesem Doktor, Gesundheit, Frohsinn, Mut und Lebenshoffnung sollte er jeder einzelnen zurückgeben. Da mußte man ihm doch ein wenig den Hof machen’ (GF, p. 206 – *They expected everything from this doctor: he had to give them all back health, happiness, courage, and hope for their lives. One had indeed to court him a little*). Already disillusioned in men’s capacity to make her happy, Agathe is highly suspicious of this doctor, which could be read as a sign of paranoia, but in actual fact reveals how she is able to recognise this doctor’s contempt for her and her peers: ‘So einen cynischen Zug hatte dieser Doktor Ellrich am Mundwinkel. Der durchschaute die Frauen ganz und gar – er verachtete sie …’ (GF, p. 206 – *Doctor Ellrich had such a cynical twist in the corner of his mouth. He saw through women completely – he despised them…*). Reuter draws a portrait of a man convinced of his own superiority and who keeps his distance from ‘mad’ women. This portrayal of the doctor is close to the one of Professor Hieronimus in Skram’s duology whose authority over female patients and nurses is absolute and feeds his contempt. Agathe’s awareness of the gendered power dynamics

building the doctor's authority do not lead to a constructive rebellion, as in Skram's novels, as Agathe shatters again when uncovering the double standards displayed by the doctor.

Her final breakdown is indeed caused by her witnessing her cousin Eugenie's flirtatious behaviour with Dr. Ellrich. As I analysed in the second chapter, Agathe is apoplectic as she realises that Eugenie allows herself to have a liaison with a man who is not her husband in public, while she has been driven to despair by having strictly followed the expected gender roles and remaining celibate. It is this attack which seals her fate, as she is subsequently sent to a psychiatric institution where she undergoes a drastic treatment:

> Mit Bädern und Schlafmitteln, mit Elektrizität und Massage, Hypnose und Suggestion brachte man Agathe im Laufe von zwei Jahren in einen Zustand, in dem sie aus der Abgeschiedenheit mehrerer Sanatorien wieder unter der menschlichen Gesellschaft erscheinen konnte, ohne unliebsames Aufsehen zu erregen. (GF, p. 210 – *In two years of baths and sleeping tablets, electricity and massages, hypnosis and suggestion, they brought Agathe to a state in which she could appear again, from the isolation of several sanatoriums, among human society without provoking any unpleasant reactions.*)

This sentence is the sole information given to the reader about Agathe's asylum experience. As Bauer underlines, this laconic tone and the lack of all other description represents how the asylum is a place outside society which is almost indescribable.[553] At this point in the narration, readers also no longer have access to Agathe's perspective and the narrator adopts a detached tone, echoing that of a naturalist narrator. The listing of the techniques used on Agathe clearly denounces the violence done to her mind and her body: Reuter's description foregrounds how these methods of treatment are used to re-condition the patients to the socially prescribed norms and expectations.

This description corresponds to Foucault's interpretation of the asylum as a disciplinary space: 'Lorsqu'un individu échappe à la souveraineté de la famille, on le met à l'hôpital psychiatrique où il s'agit de le dresser à une l'apprentissage d'une discipline pure et simple' (PP, p. 87; *When an individual escaped from the sovereignty of the family, he was*

[553] Bauer, p. 170.

*put in a psychiatric hospital, where it was a matter of training him in the apprenticeship of pure and simple discipline* – PP2, p. 85). As Agathe's father confides to Eugenie, he is at loss on how to manage Agathe's erratic behaviour:

> Kannst Du Dir das vorstellen – den ganzen Tag sitzt sie und weint – aber den ganzen Tag! Und will man sie beruhigen, dann gerät sie in eine Heftigkeit – ich habe gar nicht geglaubt, daß sie so zornig werden könnte. Ich weiß überhaupt nicht mehr, wie ich das Mädchen behandeln soll. (GF, p. 202 – *Can you imagine – she sits there and cries all day long – all day long! And if you try to calm her, she becomes very angry – I never thought she could be so angry. I don't know how I should handle the girl anymore.*)

Overwhelmed by Agathe's nervous breakdown, her father ultimately entrusts her to the psychiatric system, to restore her back to what is considered 'normal'. As Kraus Worley puts it, Agathe 'returns home to her father as perhaps the true Wilhelminian ideal "Angel of the House" – a self-less ghost'.[554] Agathe loses all power over her destiny as her cousin Eugenie declares: 'Kranke haben keine Wille' (GF, p. 203 – *The sick have no will*). This declaration fits the contemporary view of madness as a lack of willpower, justifying the total control of individuals labelled as 'mad'.[555]

Even before this episode, Reuter's novel makes clear that Agathe will not manage to make her voice heard because she has been hindered in constructing her own subjectivity by her bourgeois upbringing. As Kraus Worley demonstrates, it is Agathe's internalisation of patriarchal discourse and of '[t]he clichéd phrases of bourgeois life and the motifs of romance novels' that causes her tragedy, not her failure to rebel against it.[556] Already in the novel's opening, at her confirmation, her readings are censored as her father confiscates Herwegh's poems, gifted by her cousin Martin, as Herwegh's 'antinationalist and social democratic sentiments' are incompatible with Agathe's education.[557] To Agathe's argument in favour of the beauty of the poems – 'Die Sprache ist so wunderschön' (GF, p. 13 – *The language is so beautiful*) – the pastor answers: 'Hast Du Dir nie klar gemacht, daß diese Verse mit manchem, was ich Dich zu lehren versuchte, in Widerspruch stehen?' (GF, p. 13

[554] Kraus Worley, p. 436.
[555] Foucault, *Le Pouvoir psychiatrique*, p. 109.
[556] Kraus Worley, p. 433.
[557] Woodford (2012), p. 213.

*– Have you never realised that these verses contradict some of the things that I have tried to teach you?*). As when her father forbids her from accessing scientific books, as I explored in the general introduction, Agathe is condemned to stay within the realm of a uniform discourse but, more importantly, this renders her unable to understand and express her own situation. Unlike Skram's protagonist, Agathe cannot write because she has lost the ability to express herself after her psychiatric treatment, even when it comes to following a simple conversation: 'Agathes Gedächtnis hat gelitten – in ihrer Vergangenheit sind Abschnitte, auf welche sie sich nicht mehr besinnen kann. Einem längeren Gespräch zu folgen, ist ihr nicht möglich' (GF, p. 211 – *Agathe's memory has suffered – from her past, there are segments of which she can no longer make sense. It is not possible for her to follow a long conversation*). The third person narrative and a distanced narrator in the novel's last paragraphs are not meant to imitate the clinical gaze, as in naturalist fiction, but is a way to signify more poignantly Agathe's loss of voice because of psychiatric violence.

Just before adopting a detached voice, however, the narrator gives readers access to Agathe's inner monologue. The use of free indirect speech allows to convey Agathe's progressive loss of control over her speech and thoughts and indeed, the loss of her sense of selfhood:

> Anständigen Mädchen kamen gewiß keine blasphemischen Gedanken... Anständige Mädchen sind nicht mit dreißig Jahren noch eifersüchtig auf eine Kellnerin... […] Sie ist gar kein anständiges Mädchen. Sie hat nur geheuchelt, Zeit ihres Lebens. Aus Feigheit geheuchelt. [...] Ach, der arme Papa – so ein tadelloser Ehrenmann... wenn es sich zeigt, was seine Tochter für ein Geschöpf ist ... Nur alles über sich ergehen lassen... Sich mit aller Gewalt zusammennehmen – ruhig sein – keine Scenen mehr machen! Dann muß der Doktor sie doch für gesund erklären. Darauf kommt jetzt alles an. (GF, p.204 – *Respectable girls certainly have no blasphemous thoughts… Respectable girls are not jealous of a waitress at thirty years old… […] She was no respectable girl. She has only been a hypocrite, all her life. A hypocrite out of cowardice. […] Oh, poor Papa – such an impeccable gentleman, when he discovers what kind of creature his daughter is… Just endure everything… Pull yourself together, with everything you have – be calm – do not make a scene! then the doctor will have to declare her healthy. That is the main thing now.*)

The fragmentary nature of this passage reveals Agathe's fall into madness, as it revives fragments from her past. She first speaks of 'respectable girls', the ideal she has been given

to follow by her family and the Wilhelmine society. Having internalised those norms, Agathe condemns herself as an unrespectable woman, especially in the eyes of her father, who has repeatedly censored her when she expressed individual desires. She also reproaches herself for having been a hypocrite and having hidden her true self since she has failed to correspond to the ideal of the virtuous German woman. Her paranoia after her nervous breakdown certainly comes from this fear of being discovered, of showing what she deems to be her true self, which she knows will be censored by doctors and her relatives. The end of this passage, with its use of imperative forms, shows that Agathe still discerns what kind of behaviour she must adopt if she wants to escape the asylum, but the treatment ultimately silences her.

Agathe's two successive breakdowns, the one caused by Martin, analysed in the first chapter, and then her violent outburst directed at Eugenie, could be seen as one last attempt to rebel against the patriarchal system that condemns her to this diminished state. Just as she discovers patriarchal double standards, Agathe is unable to undertake any kind of action or express her revolt. The accumulation of deceiving experiences and her treatment at the hands of contemporary psychiatry have ensured her eternal silence. Psychiatric treatment is portrayed as taking over from the family whose expectations led to Agathe's mental breakdown to force her into conforming to bourgeois norms. Reuter thus portrays the asylum as a heterotopia where broader social trends are heightened as it violently enforces social norms onto women. The narrator's final words are tragically ironic: 'Und Agathe hat vielleicht ein langes Leben vor sich – sie ist noch nicht vierzig Jahre alt' (GF, p. 211 – *And Agathe might have a long life ahead of her – she is not yet forty years old*). While Agathe uncovers the double standard in relationships between men and woman, she is incapable of denouncing it, however. Her final outburst only causes her hospitalisation and her final defeat at the hands of an abusive medical and psychiatric

institution. Her sharp analysis of the society around her does not bring productive results, as Agathe has been crushed by it and cannot rebel against it. Agathe symbolises what Shoshana Felman describes as the madwomen's condemnation to silence: 'Quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation'.[558]

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how women writers engage in a dialogue with naturalist fiction and contemporary psychiatric discourses to develop a counter-narrative and overcome their protagonists' silence and struggles against the label of 'madwoman'. If madness is discursively constructed by modern psychiatry at the end of the nineteenth century, then the best way to contradict definitions of madness is on the level of discourse. The narratives I have analysed revolve around this question of control over speech when one has lost one's sense of self and control. The authors of my corpus ask in their fiction how a woman can ever be sane when all the opportunities for self-fulfilment and self-expression are taken from her. The question of *who* speaks about the experience of madness was thus central to my analysis of women writers' appropriation of madness narratives. While writing becomes a mean to survive for Else in Skram's *Professor Hieronimus*, for Agnes, in Dohm's short story, it is how she progressively discovers her own incapacity to entirely voice her inner turmoil, thus causing her breakdown. Reuter, in the end of *Aus guter Familie*, describes how Agathe is finally condemned to silence because of the abuse she experienced at the hands of the psychiatric system. Rachilde's protagonist, in *La Marquise de Sade*, performs the role of the aberrant *femme fatale* to undermine the authority of the male doctor. By representing female characters telling their own story or how they are

[558] Shoshana Felman, 'Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1997), pp. 7–20 (p. 8).

condemned to silence by the psychiatric system, women writers present an alternative 'autobiographical account' (PP2, p. 158) and reclaim a form of subjectivity to represent women's experiences of mental illness.

Naturalist fiction, while giving a complex representation of madness, adopts the detached 'clinical gaze', which psychiatry bases its authority on, to categorise as 'mad' some of the characters. This diagnosis can be doubted, as we saw with Ibsen, but the character labelled as 'mad' ultimately becomes the object of the narrator's or other characters' observation. More particularly, the mad character's speech is portrayed as symbolising an irrational and excessive form of subjectivity that the naturalist narrator attempts to overcome by detaching themselves from the character, thus only giving readers an indirect access to their experience of madness. In direct opposition to this approach, women writers reclaim the 'autobiographical account' challenging the silencing of mad characters by both the psychiatric system and naturalist fiction. Through their use of a diary or free indirect speech, these authors achieve what Foucault has called 'madness speaking in its own name' (PP2, p. 161).

While the authors analysed in this chapter reject the psychiatric system and its imposition of a harmful label on women, they also show the debilitating reality of the experience of mental illness. A distinctive character of the texts analysed in this chapter is the absence of an 'official' diagnosis. The uncertainty surrounding the female characters' diagnoses is a clear departure from naturalist texts which often rely on scientific terminology to corroborate their portraits of mentally ill characters. Rather than conforming to nineteenth-century psychiatric language that confined women to the narrow, but nebulous, concept of 'hysteria',[559] these women writers intentionally refrain from labelling their characters. Their representations of the asylum space as a heterotopia denounces how psychiatry relies on gendered expectations to assess who is considered

[559] Ménard (2014), p. 90.

‘sane’ or ‘mad’. All four writers de-naturalise madness by showing how it is caused by social determinism, thereby questioning the authority of psychiatry and its biological models of mental wellness and illness. They also denounce the use of biological determinism by psychiatry as a means of exerting patriarchal control of women’s identities and autonomy.

In keeping with these authors’ use of the tragic mode to portray female characters’ trajectories, these texts depict characters either entirely silenced by the psychiatric system, as in Dohm’s and Reuter’s narratives, or whose victory over male doctors is only partial, as in Rachilde’s *La Marquise de Sade* and Skram’s duology. However, by appropriating representations of madness and challenging theories based on biological determinism, all four writers radically challenge contemporary visions of madness. As in Skram’s portrayal of Else, who goes from being a painter to survive the asylum by becoming a writer, these writers reveal how literature can be a healing and political device. While their characters are portrayed as trapped, their counter-narrative enables them to overcome their characters’ loss of voice. As Caminero-Santangelo reminds us: ‘Instead of privileging the retreat into madness, then, let us privilege the forms of agency, and of active creative transformation in all its forms, which women engage in’.[560]

# Conclusion

This thesis has examined an as yet under-explored aspect of the reception of naturalism in France, Germany, and Norway by analysing the hypertextual dialogue the five women writers, Georges de Peyrebrune, Rachilde, Hedwig Dohm, Gabriele Reuter, and Amalie Skram established with naturalist fiction. It opened with an analysis of metaliterary scenes in texts by Émile Zola and Henrik Ibsen which ironically reflect on their contemporary critics by depicting female characters reacting to naturalist fiction. These passages show how naturalism engages with its own reception, while also introducing a gendered layer to this reflection: it is not coincidental that these writers depict female characters as readers of naturalist fiction, since concerns about emerging literary trends were often articulated

[560] Caminero-Santangelo, p. 181.

through debates over women's access to such works.[561] In turn, women writers appropriate this kind of metafictional scene to present themselves as both readers and commentators of naturalist fiction. While their reception of naturalism is but one aspect of all five writers' multifaceted literary works, I argued that it represents an important stage in their path to becoming writers. Reading their literary texts alongside naturalist fiction allows us to understand their own poetics and the extent to which they participate in and are sometimes critical of contemporary literary trends. More notably, their dialogue with naturalist fiction enables them to challenge some of the social and scientific discourses that naturalism interacts with.

This thesis contributes to the field of comparative literature by taking the reception of naturalism by European women writers as a case study to contextualise these authors' literary works, but also to unveil the extent of their social critique compared to contemporary and canonical male writers like Zola and Ibsen. Through thematic close readings, I explored which naturalist literary innovations the writers in my corpus adopt and which ones they distance themselves from. Their dialogue with naturalism is the result of complex intercultural factors and exchanges that can be most effectively recognised through close readings. The concept of hypertextuality, as defined by Genette, allows for a flexible analysis of this kind, since the hypertextual relationship is not hierarchical but rather a dynamic one: knowledge of and comparison with a potential hypotext enriches, rather than restricts, our reading of a hypertext.[562] Hypertextuality also invites a reflection on the critical distance created by this dialogue: I looked at the tensions arising from naturalist portrayals of female characters that women writers challenged in their own fiction, mainly by rejecting the notion of biological determinism to instead highlight the influence of social factors on their female characters' trajectories.

[561] See Baudry, p. 430.
[562] Genette, p. 618.

In the first chapter, I analysed how the naturalist portrayal of reality is mediated by a tragic 'lens' in narratives where determinism works as a new form of fate, depicting characters trapped by their heredity and milieu. By exposing the laws of determinism and the characters' failure to overcome them, naturalist fiction is meant to provoke the implied reader's indignation and inspire change, thus renewing the tragic mode for political purposes. Women writers draw inspiration from this political use of the tragic mode by also portraying their characters' social circumstances as man-made constructions which, although leading to the female protagonists' tragic endings, can ultimately be subverted. As in Reuter's project of conveying 'die stumme Tragik des Alltags' (*the silent tragic of the everyday*),[563] women writers tell the stories of unheroic and marginalised women, and show how it is their everyday and banal circumstances that bring about their tragic endings. Even the narratives with anti-tragic denouements, such as Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*, have the same goal of awakening the reader's awareness of social issues and ultimately overcome tragedy.[564]

Tensions arise however when considering how naturalist narratives often oscillate between biological and social factors to explain their characters' tragic ending. Although I argued that social determinism is most prevalent in naturalist texts, as it fits their anti-tragic political message, Zola and Ibsen leave their stories open to both explanations.[565] This indeterminacy arguably makes their narratives poetically more appealing, but the idea of a biological destiny leads women writers to distance themselves from the naturalist worldview on a political level. Biological determinism was indeed used by nineteenth-century intellectuals and institutions to naturalise gender differences and rhetorically

[563] Reuter (1921), p. 432.
[564] Not all the works by the authors discussed end tragically. Dohm, in *Christa Ruland*, portrays a character able to partly emancipate herself, while, in *Das Tränenhaus*, Reuter presents a model for women's solidarity by describing a house for illegitimate mothers. The protagonist in Peyrebrune's *Le Roman d'un Bas-bleu* can overcome the difficulties on her path to becoming an author, albeit with the help of a man. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that these writers' most popular texts upon publication and until today utilised the tragic mode.
[565] On Ibsen's use of both hereditary and environmental factors, see Sheperd-Barr (2021), pp. 84–85.

ground women's oppression in nature, presenting it as immutable.[566] Nevertheless, I demonstrated how naturalism uses literary tools for social critique, creating a fluid counterdiscursive literary space which the women writers analysed used as a springboard for their own writing. Their own social critiques, however, sometimes challenge naturalist representations in how they put into question the notion of biological determinism. Women writers' rejection of biological determinism leads to what we could call 'hypertextual tensions' as they question and rewrite naturalist representations of women's sexuality (chapter 2) and mental health (chapter 3). Their fiction unveils biological determinism as a social construct that has tragic consequences for women's destinies and portray it as a myth that the implied reader is encouraged to deconstruct.

A comparative analysis of representations of sexuality in naturalist and women-authored texts reveals women writers' critical stance towards certain tropes deployed in naturalist portrayals of the 'fatalities of the flesh'.[567] The second chapter used Foucault's concept of the 'hysterization of the female body' (VS2, p. 104), the process through which women have been represented in both scientific and literary discourses as victims of their own bodies and destined for motherhood. I argued that while women writers are inspired by naturalist portrayals of sexual violence, they challenge its fatalistic logic. They depict the victimisation of their female characters as stemming from social structures rather than physiological factors, unveiling how the concept of biological determinism is a form of discursive violence which naturalism participates in by naturalising their female characters' sexual 'fall'. The oscillation between portrayals of ideal and monstrous mothers in naturalist fiction is also absent from women writers' narratives as they portray motherhood as an alienating experience for their protagonists. Women writers refuse contemporary

[566] Karen Offen, 'Is the "Woman Question" really the "Man problem"?', in *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-siècle France. Bodies, Minds and Gender*, ed. by Christopher E. Forth and Elinor Accampo (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 43–62, p. 44.
[567] Baguley (1990), p. 103.

clichéd-types – the *femme fatale,* the 'nervous woman', and the 'mother' – sometimes deployed by naturalist fiction to instead focus on the characters' individual experiences of sexuality and how it is shaped by social norms.

The scientific gaze – or 'clinical gaze', as described by Foucault[568] – adopted by naturalist fiction is even more forcibly rejected by women writers in their representations of madness. They refuse the use of a detached narrator who takes on the perspective of a doctor to diagnose another character and instead use stylistic tools to convey a subjective experience of madness. In Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* and Skram's duology, *Professor Hieronimus* and *Paa St. Jørgen*, the female protagonists are able to reclaim the narrative around their own madness, while Reuter and Dohm represent characters silenced by a psychiatric system that is unable to uncover the social origins of their suffering. All four writers reject the idea that their characters' fall into madness is bound to their biological dispositions, thus contributing to an anti-psychiatric discourse that aims to de-naturalise contemporary definitions of madness. Their characters' mental health struggles are portrayed as tragic, but the fact that they, as writers, are able to write against prevalent representations of madness ties back to their use of the tragic mode for an anti-tragic political message.

The analyses of individual texts have revealed women writers' range of responses to naturalism, and it is worth coming back to each author's individual relationship to naturalist poetics to further illuminate which aspects of naturalism they appropriate and which ones they distance themselves from. This survey reveals how naturalism builds a fluctuating poetic space that opens itself for critique and how women writers' hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction enables their own social critique and stylistic innovations.

The legacy of Amalie Skram is to this day that of a naturalist writer. I chose however to focus on her less blatantly naturalist works, *Lucie* and her psychiatric duology,

[568] Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. 115.

*Professor Hieronimus* and *Paa St. Jørgen*, to uncover previously overlooked aspects of her connection to naturalist poetics. I argue that Skram represents in her fiction a society where theories of determinism are no longer a subject of debate, but have been internalised by individuals and are used against women. Lucie is trapped by her husband's idea that she is determined by her 'plebian blood' (L2, p. 125) and her inability to correspond to his ideal of the bourgeois wife. In *Professor Hieronimus*, Skram portrays a psychiatrist who uses contemporary ideas around abnormality and gender expectations to label the protagonist as 'mad' and disqualify her attempts at describing her own experience. Skram's use of multiple perspectives transforms the monologic naturalist style – where a detached narrator observes the fictional characters – into a more polyphonic one to show the discrepancy between male and female characters' viewpoints. Therefore, although Skram is close to naturalist poetics with her ambition to write 'document[s] humain[s]'[569] and examine a particular milieu, my analyses have shown how her fiction establishes a critical distance from the notion of biological determinism, unveiling it as a patriarchal construct participating in the naturalisation of women's oppression. An extension of the present analysis might also usefully reexamine Skram's saga, *Hellemyrsfolket*, still considered as a canonical naturalist work, and reassess its use of naturalist poetics.

Georges de Peyrebrune shocked her contemporaries by adopting a naturalist mode of writing in some of her works, a literary choice that some critics deemed unsuitable for a woman.[570] Like Skram, Peyrebrune's style was categorised as 'masculine',[571] a gendered assessment of their writing that is fraught with tensions as it is based on an essentialist vision that was used to disqualify women from writing and publishing. As discussed in the

[569] Amalie Skram, 'Letter to Arne Garborg', 11th August 1885, *op.cit.*, p. 134.
[570] H. Pellerin, 'Librairie Plon', *Le Constitutionnel*, 8 November 1883, p. 3: 'je n'ai jamais pu m'habituer à l'indifférence devant un livre... *naturaliste* écrit par une femme'. Quoted in Ménard, 'Préface', p. 13.
[571] About Peyrebrune, Delaville writes: 'Georges de Peyrebrune a beaucoup de talent, et un talent absolument viril, quoiqu'elle appartienne au sexe faible, ce qui n'est plus un mystère pour personne' (*Georges de Peyrebrune has a lot of talent, and a talent that is absolutely masculine, although she belongs to the weaker sex, which is no longer a secret for anyone*). Delaville, p. 1. Quoted in Ménard (2024), p. 241. On Skram, see Garton (2011), p. 295.

introduction, Zola's description of the naturalist project as a 'masculine' one – in keeping with the gendering of the scientific discourses with which naturalist writers engage – suggests that some level of caution is necessary when labelling women authors as 'naturalist'. Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge* however seems the most 'naturalist' novel of all the texts I analysed because of its portrayal of a working-class woman that hinges on animalistic clichés and of a closely-observed milieu defined by its violence. As I have shown, however, there is also a critical strand in Peyrebrune's adoption of naturalist tropes. Victoire is designated as a 'fallen woman' – a recurrent figure in naturalist fiction – by her community, but the narrative aims to show that this 'sexual fall' is not born out of a biological logic, but out of Victoire's social circumstances. The ongoing research on Peyrebrune's contemporary reception will further highlight her connection to naturalist poetics, but it is crucial to remember that *Victoire la Rouge* is one novel in a very diverse body of works. Some of Peyrebrune's texts show clear affiliations to idealism, as *Au Pied du Mât* (1899),[572] and labelling her as a 'female naturalist', while an efficient way of reintegrating her into the French canon, does not do justice to the stylistic variety of her works. In my analysis of Peyrebrune's hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction, I was able to uncover how she tackles controversial topics similar to those explored in naturalist fiction, such as sexual violence and infanticide, and appropriates its use of the tragic mode to convey her social critique.

Gabriele Reuter, as she comments on her bestselling novel *Aus guter Familie* in her autobiography, claims to be inspired by naturalism and its ambition to represent reality. Her reading of naturalist fiction as representing 'the silent tragic of the everyday' shows her understanding of the naturalist movement as aiming to renew the tragic mode. She was however critical of the naturalist ambition to represent working-class realities – although,

[572] Georges de Peyrebrune, *Au pied du mât* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1899). The novel won the Prix de l'Académie française and this sign of public recognition might be linked to Peyrebrune's idealistic style.

as we have seen, a working-class character like Wiesing still plays an important role in her novel. Reuter's reflection on naturalism and subjectivity (i.e. a personal connection to the subject matter) stands out among all the writers analysed in this thesis. Reuter appropriates Zola's ambition to represent reality, mediated by the artist's temperament, by setting out to write about what she claims to know best.[573] This form of subjectivity serves her social critique as she represents a typical middle-class woman who is unable to reconcile the contradictory demands of patriarchal femininity. I explored how Reuter's hypertextual dialogue with naturalism was a springboard for her own writing as her novel aims to uncover the 'typical' in an individual woman's trajectory and offer a study of a particular milieu, although her own literary experiment is critical of biological determinism as a narrative device.

Scholars have noted the discrepancy between Hedwig Dohm's optimism in her feminist essays and the pessimism of her fiction,[574] which, as I have argued, can be explained by her drawing inspiration from naturalist fiction and its political use of the tragic mode. Her short story "Werde, die Du bist!" distinguishes itself from all the texts analysed in this thesis because of its use of a first-person narrative. I highlighted how the embedded narrative symbolises how Dohm distances herself from the naturalist model of a male narrator observing a female character to instead offer the protagonist's own subjective account of her life. The internal reader, Agnes' psychiatrist, is unable to understand the source of Agnes' turmoil because of his adherence to theories that define madness as biologically determined. Similarly to Skram, Dohm brings together two opposite perspectives to show how male discourses actively contribute to the female characters' tragic demise. Dohm adopts from naturalist fiction the description of unheroic characters and its dialogue with scientific discourses, albeit in a critical manner as her use of a first-

[573] See Reuter (1921), pp. 431–32.
[574] Joeres (1980), p. 273.

person narrative unveils the patriarchal underpinnings of contemporary scientific theories and narratives.

Throughout this thesis, Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* repeatedly stood apart from all the other texts because her use of parody – a mode meant to highlight 'difference rather than similarity'[575] – constitutes a more forcible rejection of some naturalist tropes than we see in the authors previously discussed.[576] The novel depicts a protagonist who subverts the power dynamics in the male scientist/female patient and the male perpetrator/female victim relationships often found in naturalist stories. As other scholars have noted, however, Rachilde's close attention to the role of the character's childhood and socialisation, one that is traumatic and explains her evolution into a sadistic woman, brings her into proximity with the naturalist writing mode.[577] Reading Rachilde alongside naturalist fiction unveils how she also uses the tragic mode by adopting a cyclical structure that depicts her character as being trapped by male violence. However, Rachilde also portrays a female protagonist who is conscious of contemporary discourses on women's sexuality and mental health and who actively challenges them in the story itself, thus diverging from the other authors' portrayal of their protagonists as victims. An analysis of Rachilde's hypertextual dialogue with naturalist fiction reveals her critical distance from contemporary social discourses but also how she appropriates naturalist narrative schemas to convey her own social critique.

By comparing these five writers' dialogue with naturalism within fictional narratives, this study has shown how the reception of naturalism by women writers is a European phenomenon. Bringing together male canonical authors and newly rediscovered women writers enables us to see which aspects of contemporary literary trends these women

[575] Hutcheon, p. 6.
[576] See also Downing (2012), p. 201.
[577] See Michael R. Finn, *Hysteria, Hypnotism, the Spirits and Pornography. Fin-de-siècle Cultural Discourses in the Decadent Rachilde* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), p. 189 and p. 191.

authors adopt and which ones they challenge. Women writers' hypertextual connection to naturalism is particularly evident when it comes to their appropriation of the tragic mode: they recognised the political implications in the naturalists' renewal of the tragic mode and in turn appropriated it in their own fiction. They adopt from naturalist fiction its study of a set milieu and its fictional illustration of the influence of social discourses on the characters' trajectories, prompting the implied reader to recognise that the female characters' tragedies are provoked by external (social) rather than inner (biological) factors and thus call for social change. Their appropriation of the tragic mode also informs their representations of female characters' experiences of sexuality. The contemporary perception of women as 'hysterical', that is as determined by their physiological and hereditary predispositions, is unveiled in their fiction as a tragic construct that denies how women's experiences of sexual violence and motherhood are dictated by social power dynamics. Along with this focus on women's bodies, these writers also reflect on the contemporary analyses of women's minds, notably through the rise of psychiatric discourses that naturalist fiction interacts with. Women writers reclaim the ritual of the 'autobiographical account', analysed by Foucault, to contradict a patriarchal vision of madness as stemming from biological factors.

This thesis has shown how women writers carry on naturalism's critical and counterdiscursive tendencies, appropriating them to challenge contemporary views on women's experiences. I highlighted how naturalist fiction's bold tackling of controversial topics such as sexual violence, motherhood, and madness allowed women writers to in turn address the same issues and convey their social critique. I argued that these writers reject the notion of biological determinism – both as a scientific concept and as a narrative device – as it was used to discredit women's writing by their contemporaries. They challenge a sexist discourse that traps women in the realms of physicality and irrationality and reclaim

their right to participate in the public and literary spheres. This hypertextual dialogue thus appears to not only take place on the stylistic level (as in the parodic mode used by Rachilde) but also on the level of tropes deployed by naturalist fiction and the social and scientific discourses naturalism engages with. To illustrate this dynamic within women writers' dialogue with naturalism, I thus started with an exploration on the stylistic level by analysing women writers' appropriation of the political use of the tragic mode from naturalist fiction. I then analysed two themes that play a key role in the tragic logic of women writers' narratives, namely the role of contemporary discourses on sexuality and madness. These two chapters unveiled women writers' more critical stance towards naturalist narratives and tropes.

Recent scholarship on the spread and reception of naturalism has introduced a more international scope,[578] but there remains potential for a broader analysis of women writers' reception of naturalism. Future analyses could test, on a broader scale, my hypothesis that while naturalist fiction represents a catalyst for women's writing at the end of the nineteenth century, women writers reject the naturalist use of biological determinism as a narrative device in their fiction. For instance, the Finnish writer Minna Canth used naturalist techniques to convey her social critique in her plays. In *The Worker's Wife* (1885), the main character declares after shooting her deceitful lover and being taken away by the police: 'your laws and justice – that's what I meant to shoot',[579] which suggests resistance to dominant social norms. The novel *Marta* (1873) by Polish writer Eliza Orzeszkowa is a pamphlet in favour of women's education, but rather than showing an emancipated female character, able to rise above her circumstances, Orzeszkowa uses the tragic mode in a similar manner as the women writers I have analysed in this thesis to

[578] See Christopher L. Hill, *Figures of the World. The Naturalist Novel and Transnational Form* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020) and its analysis of novelists' use of a naturalist mode of writing in France, the United States, and Japan.
[579] Minna Canth, *Työmiehen Vaimo*, in *Kootut Teokset*, 4 vols (Helsinki: Otava, 1920), iii, pp. 288–89. Translated by Minna Jeffery in *Strategies for Feminist Theatre Translation: Minna Canth's The Worker's Wife from Finnish to English* (PhD Thesis, University of Kent, 2023), p. 81.

amplify her political message. There is also ground to inquire into the Spanish author Emilia Pardo Bazán's views on naturalism and her role in spreading naturalist poetics in Spain and beyond.[580] In a study of the reception of naturalism in Great Britain, William Frierson claims that the authors Ella d'Arcy and George Egerton were inspired by Maupassant's short stories,[581] a claim that has not yet been critically assessed and could lead to a more extensive study of women's use of the short prose form. Beyond Europe, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) has been read as naturalist novel,[582] but there is still scope for assessing whether its feminist message relies on a rejection of biological determinism. The analysis could also extend to other writers in the countries I examined, such as Lucie Delarue-Maldrus or Marcelle Tinayre in France,[583] or Clara Viebig in Germany.[584] A larger scope could assess to what degree the counterdiscursive poetic space opened by naturalist fiction has inspired other women writing from the margins and against the grain of social and scientific discourses that attempt to naturalise women's oppression.

Another approach would be to look at the production by women playwrights in the second half of the century (of particular relevance in Germany), which this study neglected in the interest of the greater homogeneity offered by focusing on one genre only – short- and long-form prose. It would be interesting to trace in a more systematic manner Ibsen's influence on women playwrights and their hypertextual dialogue with naturalism. For instance, one could look at how the play *Dämmerung* (1893) by the Austrian author Elsa Bernstein relates to her German male counterpart Gerhart Hauptmann's naturalist

[580] See Emilia Pardo Bazán's *La cuestión palpitante* (1882), a series of articles published in the newspaper *La Época* which defended naturalist poetics, translated and published into French in 1886 under the title *Le Naturalisme* (Paris: E. Giraud, 1886).
[581] See William C. Frierson, *L'Influence du naturalisme français sur les romanciers anglais de 1885 à 1900* (Paris: Marcel Giard, 1925), pp. 143–53.
[582] Erik Margraf, 'Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" as a Naturalistic Novel', *American Literary Realism*, 37:2 (2005), pp. 93–116.
[583] See Mesch's analysis of both authors in the chapter 'Can a Woman be a Naturalist?', in *The Hysteric's Revenge*, *op.cit.*, pp. 81–118.
[584] For an analysis of Clara Viebig as a naturalist writer, see Barbara Krauss-Theim, *Naturalismus und Heimatkunst bei Clara Viebig: darwinistisch-evolutionäre Naturvorstellungen und ihre ästhetischen Reaktionsformen* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992).

production. We could also compare the 'naturalist tragedy' model established by August Strindberg in his preface to *Fröken Julie* (*Miss Julie*, 1888) to the works of Swedish women playwrights, such as Alfhild Agrell, Victoria Benedictsson, and Anne Charlotte Leffler.[585] An exploration of women's appropriation of a medium that was coded as an exclusively male domain in nineteenth-century Europe,[586] could unveil their multifaceted contributions to the theatrical avant-garde and their use the medium of theatre to convey social critique.

This thesis dealt with five women writers who built on naturalist poetics to develop their own voice and own literary path. While they mainly portray female characters unable to liberate themselves from externally imposed norms, Peyrebrune, Rachilde, Dohm, Reuter, Skram reclaim the voice and agency lost by their protagonists by resisting those norms and developing a counter-narrative. As the naturalists before them, they reject the idealist and romantic portrayals of female characters, opting instead for a mimetic mode of writing and a close-study of a set milieu – working-class and middle-class – to achieve a realistic portrayal of women's realities. They are however also critical of new myths imposed on women, notably by emerging scientific discourses and naturalist narratives, aiming to return to what Dohm calls 'die Urschrift' (*the original script*),[587] liberated from the layers of writing men have forced onto women. A feminist reading of these writers' hypertextual dialogue with naturalism uncovers how their literary representation of 'the silent tragic of the everyday' is profoundly political. They indeed portray how female characters' private lives are determined by social power dynamics and norms, undermining the contemporary efforts to naturalise women's oppression. They lay bare the most private

[585] See August Strindberg's Preface to *Miss Julie. A Naturalistic Tragedy*, in *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, trans. by Michael Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 56–68. See Birgitta Johansson Lindh, *Som en vildfågel i en bur. Identitet, kärlek, frihet och melodramatiska inslag i Alfhild Agrells, Victoria Benedictssons och Anne Charlotte Lefflers 1880-talsdramatik* (Göteberg, Stockholm: Makadam förlag, 2019).
[586] See Sarah Colvin, *Women and German drama: playwrights and their texts, 1860-1945* (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2003), pp. 4–9.
[587] Dohm (1903), p. 31.

aspects of women's lives, namely sexuality and mental health, describing how arbitrary social structures cause women's tragic trajectories, aiming at awakening their readers' political conscience. As Skram puts it, literature becomes a means for political action – 'Arbejde, Arbejdet for at lindre'[588] (*work, work to alleviate*) – and fiction a space where social discourses can be challenged and where counter-narratives, ones that make the 'everyday' political, can flourish.

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# Appendix – Translations

**Word Count: 10,365**

**Introduction (pp. 17–58)**

**Part 1 (pp. 17–31)**

‘That day she had read a novel which was all the rage, the story of a prostitute. And she was indignant, she said it was quite untrue, and declared that she found such literature, which claimed to reflect life as it really was, disgusting, highly offensive. As if a writer could possibly describe everything! What were novels written for? To help you pass the time agreeably of course! On the subject of books and plays Nana had very fixed opinions. She wanted to read works that were romantic and noble, things that made her dream and would elevate the soul’

‘Now, between those who specialise in not making women blush and those who profit from making them blush, there are the true artists, the writers with pedigree who do not ask themselves for one second whether women will blush or not. […] The conventions, emotions produced by education, the salvation of little girls and faltering women, the police regulations and the patented morals of good spirits, disappear and do not count anymore. They aim for the truth, the masterpiece, despite everything, above everything, without worrying about the scandal of their audacities’

‘virility of truth’

‘You read that sort of thing? […] Do you think reading that sort of thing makes you feel any better, or any happier?’

‘Well, I find it seems to explain and confirm a lot of the things I had been thinking myself. That’s the strange thing, Pastor Manders… there’s really nothing new in these books; there’s nothing there but what most people think and believe already. It’s just that most people either haven’t really considered these things, or won’t admit them’

‘I found books mentioned in the newspaper, Russian, French, Scandinavian, that represented a drastic intellectual and moral change and were supposed to describe life as it really is. As it really is? Is it worth describing? I have read these books for days. At times they captivated me to the point of morbid excitement, to the point of shuddering emotion’

‘exact report of experience’

‘Something worth telling in my life! Is there such a thing? And what would it be?’

‘These authors reject what has been until now considered as irrefutable – customs, opinions, beliefs, morals! It would also not be true that a woman is an inferior being, predetermined for life’s lower functions!’

‘I say that there is an absolute lack of logic in speaking of the newspaper’s dignity, the respect due to families, if after policing the novel, we publish all the infamies of the courts. Why demand a rose-tinted lie on the one hand and accept all of life’s ferocities on the other?’

‘She subscribed to it for the feuilleton, a horrifying drama that told of how very skillful people steal, kill, poison, rape, and murder, all of it with very interesting tricks to escape the law. Madame Maleyrac absorbed this edifying reading as soon as she got up, while she drank her coffee, her feet on a heater’

‘Gerner indeed says that he does not want such books in his house’

‘I *am* not mad, and I don’t belong here. What do I say and do that isn’t normal, if I may ask?’

‘I wanted to convey the silent tragic of the everyday’

‘This human tragedy was best embodied to me by the girl from middle-class circles – the daughter of a good family. This was my home – here I knew all the reasons and underpinnings of the environment and their hearts. Here I could let my own longing, my own bitterness flow – and yet I knew: I was not portraying an individual case, I was depicting a type in which countless fellow women would recognise themselves’

‘She had recently found a wonderful book in Papa’s library. […] She would have thought that it would simply be incomprehensible for women. To her great astonishment, she was able to follow the author quite well – all she had to do was to pay attention and to think about what she had read during the day as she went about her tasks’

‘What kind of incomprehensible stuff do you want to pack into your little head? […] Next time you ask me before you get something from my bookcase. Understood? Young girls often misunderstand such works’

‘Her life blossomed into exaggerations through what the century’s philosophers call decadence, the end of everything. […] After *The Tribunals’ Gazette*, the reports of snitching journalists; the morgue; naturalist novels; the wax museums on the boulevard; the exploits of spiritual poisoners, there still remained women’s brasseries in which, with luck, you could just once witness a bloody scene of jealousy’

**Part 2 (pp. 32–50)**

‘I am indeed not hostile to the feminist movement, to women’s emancipation, but let us not exaggerate. We have treated woman like a slave for too long and we have waited too long to recognise some of her rights, but to consider her man’s equal, to treat her as such, there is a long way to go. Neither morally nor physically can she pretend to that equality and emancipation should only happen according to our customs, traditions, I would even say according to the prejudices of our social edifice’

**2.1 (pp. 38–43)**

‘the leader of a school and a school on which will have to be reckoned with’

‘aesthetic of extremes’

‘the only naturalists worthy of the name […] that do not lose themselves in delirious and occult jugglery, but […] who strive to touch the most secret fibers of the flesh with the pure hands of an affectionate doctor’

‘Us novelists, historians, storytellers are not made to exist for ourselves, we are destined to reflect; we do not live, we are mirrors’

**2.2 (pp. 43–47)**

‘There is a lot of talk about woman’s sphynx-like nature. If a man sees her soul written as a kind of palimpsest, it is because he can only read the outer, upper layer of this writing that he himself wrote. But only the woman herself can and will decipher the original. A lot of

time running into the sea of eternity will certainly pass before it will be completely deciphered'

'I have hardly ever put down one of Zola's books without feeling an immense moral shock and purifying melancholy […]. In my opinion, Zola is a chaste writer, and it seems to me that he only gives sexual relationships exactly the space they occupy in real life. I also think that after Zola no one can write as before'

'And the director of a big illustrated journal wrote to me: 'Send us something light, cheerful, amiable, we do not want to give our readers anything serious, dark, or gloomy'. And yet, naturalism was already emerging and would grant even the lightest family journal a somewhat more serious tone'

'We all believe that we lead our lives according to our will and simultaneously, that we are living a life typical of the time, which we only recognize through the shell of the personal in rare moments'

'human tragedy'

'the writer's temperament'

'If we never give you nature as a whole, we will at least give you true nature, seen through our humanity'

**Part 2.3 (pp. 48–50)**

'And secondly, I am now so tired of this eternal chant about courage, boldness, and something manly-unwomanly, or whatever it is called, both from supporters and critics, that I'd rather sell my soul to the Danish jurisdiction, or something even worse, to become one of the real, feminine authors'

**Part 3 (pp. 50–58)**

'a fiction derived from another fiction'

**Chapter One (pp. 59–125)**

**Introduction (pp. 59–68)**

‘To the idealist Republicans who accuse me of having insulted the people, I answer by saying that, on the contrary, I think I have done a good deed. I told the truth, I provided documents on the miseries and the fatal failings of the working class, I came to help the naturalist politicians who feel the need to study people before serving them’

‘In general we call a relationship tragic – in contrast to merely sad or extrinsically destructive – when the destructive forces directed against some being spring forth from the deepest level of this very being; or when its destruction has been initiated in itself, and forms the logical development of the very structure by which a being has built its own positive form’

‘optimistic reading mode’

‘Ancient fatality is today replaced by hereditary fatality’

‘the medical and sexual tragedy’

‘The next century will probably give us political and social tragedy’

‘Everyone in Germany was talking about the book. It caused a storm among women – the wildest excitement among fathers and mothers. Serious, mature men have assured me years later that reading it fundamentally changed their relationship to their daughters. Relatives declared the book to be the devil’s work. I had hope for a literary success – I could not anticipate the cultural influence my book would have on the development of the German girl and the German family!’

**Part 1 (pp. 68–75)**

**1.1 (pp. 69–71)**

‘We were curious to know whether this conventional form of a forgotten literature of a vanished society, Tragedy, was definitely dead; if in a country without castes and without a legal aristocracy, the misfortunes of the lowly and the poor would arouse interest, emotion, and pity as strong as the misfortunes of the great and the rich’

‘a clinic of Love’

‘We told the truth about the upper classes, we can tell the truth about the working classes, so that we can be terrified, pity and relieve them’

‘I believe, therefore, that we should go back to tragedy, not, heavens! to borrow any more of its rhetoric, its system of confidants, declamation, never-ending recitals; but to come back to the simplicity of action and to the unique psychological and physiological study of the characters. Understanding the tragic framework in this way is excellent: a fact unfolding in its reality and arousing passions and feelings in the characters, the exact analysis of which would be the play’s sole interest. And this in a contemporary milieu, with ordinary people’

**1.2 (pp. 72–73)**
Contemporary tragedy

‘A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view’

‘The catastrophe approaches, ineluctably, inevitable. Despair, resistance, defeat’

**1.3 (pp. 73–75)**
‘To go down to the people and to study the misery of the proletariat, out of literary motivations, was a horrible thought to me. I read in Mackay’s and other books about the terrible, eternally hopeless misery to which millions of people were condemned – but since I did not experience this misery myself, it left me cold. If I wanted to be honest with myself, I had to admit that I was incapable of speaking for the working classes with glowing words and flaming enthusiasm. I did not know them well enough. And I did not want to lie’

‘And suddenly I knew why I was in the world: to bear witness to what girls and women were suffering in silence. Not the great sufferings brought by passions that rise like red

flames towards heaven, whose splendour the poets of all times and origins had sung until the point of exhaustion. No, I wanted to portray the silent tragic of everyday life – the tragic that made thousands of creatures perish without being glorified by any poet'

**Part 2 (pp. 76–91)**

'And I now come to the biggest reproach that critics believe that they are heaping upon naturalist novelists by calling them fatalists. How many times have they wanted to prove to us that, from the moment that we did not accept free will, from the moment that man was nothing more to us than an animal machine acting under the influence of heredity and the milieux, we fell into a crude fatalism, we reduced humanity to the rank of a herd marching under the stick of destiny!'

'We must clarify: we are not fatalists, we are determinists. […] As Claude Bernard aptly points out, if we can act, and when we act on the determinism of phenomena, by modifying the milieux for example, we are not fatalists'

**2.1 (pp. 78–83)**

'The nature of tragedy is this: that the deepest will of man comes to be negated, and that this negation, at the deepest level, comes to be willed'

'The muddy river had rolled before her for nearly three hours and it brought the worst of revelations, the sudden terrible truth about those closest to her, dear beings, the people she was supposed to love […]. In spite of everything, it was a cry of sanity, of hope in the future. He spoke as a benefactor who, since heredity made the world, wanted to set down its laws to make use of it, and to make a new and happy world afresh'

'What a tremendous fresco there is to paint, what a colossal human comedy and tragedy to write, on heredity, which is the very Genesis of families, and societies, and of the world!'

'A loud cry from the madwoman, a terrified call would have been enough. But she didn't cry, she didn't call; she sat motionless, with the staring eyes of a forebear watching fate play out, as though she'd dried out there on the spot, gnarled, her limbs and her tongue tied by her one hundred years, her brain ossified by insanity, incapable of willing or acting'

‘The unknown child, to be born in 1874. What will he be?’

‘I feel myself to be alien, different, that I have absolutely nothing in common with them’

‘Two months earlier he’d boasted so triumphantly of not being part of the family, but was he now about to get the most appalling refutation of this? Would he have the pain of seeing the family defect spring up again in his own marrow? Would he spend his life in terror at feeling himself to be in the clutches of the hereditary monster? His mother had said it: he was going mad with pride and fear. The presumptuous notion, the fanatical certainty he’d had of eliminating suffering, giving men willpower, making humanity anew, healthy and nobler—this was surely just the onset of delusions of grandeur’

‘But after so many terrible Rougons, after so many abominable Macquarts, yet another one had been born. With the daring defiance of its eternity, life wasn’t afraid of creating one more. It went on with its work, propagated itself according to its laws, indifferent to hypotheses, moving on in its unending labour. At the risk of making monsters, it was compelled to create since, in spite of the sick and the mad it creates, it never gets tired of creating, in the hope no doubt that the healthy and the wise will come along one day’

**2.2 (pp. 83–86)**

‘There is no other means of saving you. At least I can’t see any. So… I agree to… cancel our transaction. Now you can choose… in absolute freedom’

‘But you have been a good doctor to me. You found… and had the courage to apply… the right remedy – the only one that could help me’

‘Didn’t her mother go mad! She died in the mad-house, that much I do know’

‘Except for one difference. The mermaid dies. On the other hand, men and woman can acclam – acclimatize themselves. Yes, yes, I assure you Mrs. Wangel, they can… acl… cli…matize themselves’

‘Are you going to abandon all thoughts of seeing something of the world outside? Abandon all those things you say you sit here dreaming about? Knowing that life has so much to offer… yet never having any real contact with it? Think well, Bolette’

**2.3 (pp. 86–90)**

‘The lover… he’s my son!!!...’

‘“Well, yes!” she confessed. “I wanted to get revenge! And I liked him. You called me a harlot. I wanted to entirely deserve this insult and make you kill your son. […] I love him, you hear? I regret this ridiculous scene.”’

‘Her being, made of an incorruptible flesh, passed through the hysterias of her time, like a salamander through flames’

‘Mary made a gesture of supreme anguish. She brought her hands, that she had clasped behind her back, in the manner of indifferent babies, to her neck with an instinctive movement. She had just felt there, right at the knot of all of her nerves, the formidable blow that knocked out the colossus’

‘The worst was that the colonel, having desired a boy all this time, sometimes asked himself what the presence of this girl meant, when the second child should have been born first, healthier, more vigorous. Without thinking that this boy had cost him his wife’s life, he found a justification for his existence, while the girl seemed to him like a superfluous object, representing an unknown future’

‘It is *always* the same […] when you play with a boy’

**Part 3 (pp. 91–123)**

‘We seek the causes of social ill; we make the anatomy of social classes and individuals to explain the disorders that occur in society and man. […] But we bring the necessary documents so that we can, by knowing them, dominate good and evil’

**3.1 (pp. 95–99)**

‘the working-class woman’

‘I don’t want anythin’ special, you know, I don’t ask for much… My ideal would be to get on with me work in peace, always have somethin’ to eat and somewhere decent to sleep… You know, just a bed, a table, and a couple of chairs, that’s all… Oh, and I’d like, if I could, to bring up me kids and make sure they’re good, decent people… And there’s one other thing I’d like, if I ever lived with somebody again, it’s not to get knocked about; no, I really don’t want to be knocked about…’

‘Conceived when her parents were drunk, no doubt during one of the nights when they beat each other senseless, her right thigh was smaller than the left and showed signs of curvature, a curious hereditary result of the brutality her mother had to endure during her drunken brawls with Macquart’

‘*The study of the environment on a woman, neither good nor bad*, who has already witnessed bad examples, but ready by her nature to react and work’

‘Her dream was to live with nice people, because if you’re in bad company, she said, it was like being bashed on the head, it cracked your skull open and knocked you flat in no time, if you were a woman. She dreaded thinking about the future and said she was like a coin tossed up and landing heads or tails, depending on how it hit the pavement’

‘the coincidences of the pavement’

‘walking up and down the streets’

‘No, really, it was quite funny how it was all turning out! She wasn’t working any more, she wasn’t eating any more, she slept in filth, her daughter was on the game, her husband beat her black and blue; the only thing that could happen to her now was that she’d peg out in the street’

‘Then, when she moved away, the clown grew bigger, gigantic, filling the whole boulevard, giving bows that made it knock its head against the trees and houses. My God! What an odd, frightening sight! She’d never realized how far she’d sunk’

‘Close the pubs, open the schools’

**3.2 (pp. 99–105)**

‘Oh, all this law and order! I often think that’s the cause of all the trouble in the world! […] I must work myself free’

‘I did not want Oswald, my son, to inherit a single thing from his father’

‘But then this long, ghastly farce will be over. After tomorrow, I shall feel as though that man had never lived in this house. There’ll be nobody else here but my son and his mother’

‘Ghosts. When I heard Regine and Osvald in there, it was just like seeing ghosts. But then I’m inclined to think that we are all ghosts, Pastor Manders, every one of us. It’s not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunt us. It’s all kind of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs theories, and things like that. It’s not that they actually live on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them’

‘You were talking earlier about the joy of living. And suddenly I seemed to see my whole life… everything in a new light. […] He had plenty of the joy of living, I can tell you!’

‘They’d taught me various things about duty and suchlike, and I’d simply gone on believing them. Everything seemed to come down to duty in the end – my duty and his duty and… I’m afraid I must have made the house unbearable for your poor father, Oswald’

‘What if a child has nothing to thank its father for? Never knew him? You don’t really believe in this old superstition still, do you? And you so enlightened in other ways?’

‘I never asked you for life. And what sort of life is this you’ve given me? I don’t want it! Take it back!’

**3.3 (pp. 105–10)**

‘a fierce and cold mask, almost tragic’

‘She had the innate unconsciousness of the primitive being, their appetites, their instincts, and also their attachment to fertile Nature that gives life and germinates endlessly to feed her immense offspring that clings to her flanks’

‘But why was she hungry? Without this appetite for life which affected her with greater force as she passed her twenty-five years, she would have perhaps remained one evening in some deep ditch, letting herself die’

‘Victoire heard pitying voices that felt sorry for these poor defenceless animals that these despicable servants tortured. But these girls had neither heart nor guts: they were brutes. […] Madame Maleyrac bemoaned that Victoire had bled a pig, alone, without the slightest emotion’

‘Someone needs to do it, though!’

‘Victoire went by, sinister with her skirt splashed with red and her bloody hands’

‘the red one’

‘They said that you could easily see that she was born for crime, the one they grimly called “la Rouge”’

‘It was in a way the blossoming of a moral being brought about by a ray of happiness’

‘Might as well end this now. The despair of seeing her material comfort, the love of her master, her hopes for the future, taken away from her, all of a sudden, to fall into flight, destitution, the shame of her crime and the prison that she had endured, and the shameful surveillance which she was still under, all of this gave her a sudden disgust for life, the first she had ever felt and to which she succumbed’

‘She even prayed because she had no anger. She always thought that all these misfortunes happened to her naturally, because she was a bastard, that is, thrown on the earth like an abandoned beast, to serve, endure, and suffer’

**3.4 (pp. 110–14)**

‘being in transition’

‘I was a mechanism that was set into motion by foreign forces. And now I am wrestling myself free from this madness. I wrestle, wrestle for my will, my Self, my soul’

‘So I am right to cry about my lot, for having awakened too late, now that it is the end. The injustice that was done to me was done to everyone. That which wants to be liberated in me also wants to be liberated in others. If you prevent the tree from growing, you also kill its fruits, you kill the shadows that would have refreshed others. I often count the minutes in raging fear. How few I have left! Then Agnes Schmidt will die. But what about me? Me too?’

‘An old woman dying of labour pains. Will my Self be born in death? Will I become who I am in the afterlife?’

‘He was moved by deep human emotion’

‘There is no herb that can cure death, but there are many herbs that have grown that can be used against women’s premature death. The most powerful is woman’s unconditional emancipation and through it the release from the brutal superstition that her right to exist is based only on her sex’

**3.5 (pp. 114–18)**

‘As beautiful as she was, it was not the beauty of existence that she felt the urge to portray, but rather the ugly and the sorrowful which make existence tragic’

‘Lucie saw a little brown birthmark with soft dark hair on the left cheek directly under the eye. “Take it away! Away!” Lucie screamed, wildly flailing her arms. Her face had

become dark grey and rigid. Then she had a fit of hysterical laughter that lasted over an hour'

'Is that you, Theodor? You are the worst, the most rotten of all of them – a disgusting whore-monger. You're much, much worse than I've ever been'

'He came to the conclusion that he had nothing to reproach himself for. […] That it hadn't been more successful was not his fault, but partly her own, partly something stronger than himself – his inability to forget her past'

'The laughter was followed by a hysterical fit of weeping, so violent and continuous that it seemed as if her body would be shaken to pieces. She sat bolt upright and tried to get out of bed, and when they forcibly restrained her, she thrashed about like a madwoman'

'It is completely hopeless […]. You'll never be any different […] I've called your attention to similar things a hundred times before […] *but it's in your blood*'

'That's how degraded you became, when you stood powerless against the shame and misery of injustice'

**3.6 (pp. 119–23)**

'The tragedy of woman's lot: to be born, to be raised for a calling that she is taught to see as her only way to happiness, and this happiness, this call is always held in front of her and yet never granted to her – she is never allowed to enter the temple of the god whose priestess she is trained to be'

'Beneath this brown paper glowed a revelation. Martin – he was strong and joyful – he was saved! Was there a deliverance from the power, which secretly sucked and sucked her energy, so that her blood made her turn pale and sick, her tendons went limp, and her nerves vibrated with painful twitches, so that any thought became a dull, feverish, tormenting dream to her –?'

'But she could not keep on reading and standing like this. Her back was hurting her. Her arms felt paralysed from handling the heavy laundry'

‘Don’t worry about the form! Tell your lovely fellow women honestly and clearly how they truly live. They might then be brave enough to take it into their own hands, instead of letting their parents and society dictate how they must live and become sick, sad, and hysterical spinsters whom, at the age of thirty, one would like to kill all together!’

‘Was she then going mad in thinking that Martin suddenly changed? He resembled that disgusting fellow after whose disappearance she had sighed with relief’

‘I have just one longing, to be all alone for once – to not need to speak – and to not hear any voices. I cannot tolerate your voices anymore – that’s the whole story’

**Conclusion (pp. 123–25)**
‘Bleeding wounds’

**Chapter Two (pp. 126–83)**

**Introduction (pp. 126–34)**
‘Sexual tragedy’

‘the clinic of love’

‘Her poor body, racked by neuroses ever since birth, had been delivered a final blow by some supreme shock. Her nerves had, so to speak, sucked away all her blood; the obscure workings of this passionate flesh, now devouring itself in the chastity of old age, were in their final stages transforming the poor creature into a corpse, galvanized only by sudden spasms’

‘Anachronism of the heart. Nothing unusual in elderly women with an extremely sensitive nervous system’

‘Control yourself, Frau Schmidt, don’t forget that you are an old lady’

‘Erotic madness’

‘[A] threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed-qualified and disqualified as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children's education): the Mother, with her negative image of ‘nervous woman,’ constituted the most visible form of this hysterization’

‘Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’

‘homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturality” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified’

**Part 1 (pp. 134–58)**

**1.1 (pp. 137–41)**

‘The lapse that led to her marriage with Saccard, the brutal rape she underwent with a sort of frightened expectation, made her despise herself, and accounted in large measure for the subsequent abandonment of her whole life. She thought that she need no longer struggle against evil, that it was in her, that logic authorized her to pursue the study of wickedness to its ultimate conclusions’

‘Who had stripped her naked?’

‘She was ashamed of herself, and contempt for her body filled her with mute anger at those who had left her like this, with mere bangles of gold at her wrists and ankles to cover her skin’

‘I could make her [Silvine, raped by Goliath] semi-consenting, which would be better, because I don’t believe in assaulted girls, taken despite themselves’

‘What was it, what was it, where was she? She felt a crushing weight on her chest, so hard that she was close to suffocating. It was something that hurt terribly. A scream – – – it was hers, and wide-awake and sober and scared to death, she understood everything at once, and thrashed, and kicked, and scratched, and screamed –‘

‘And gripped by terror she felt her trembling knees opening mechanically, and she thought she would die of shame, and everything was spinning, her vision darkened, and she thought she was going to faint. Then suddenly she felt the instrument against her bare body, and she flinched, but then lay in deep terror without daring to move a muscle and with an unnaturally clear awareness’

**1.2 (pp. 141–47)**
‘stupor’

‘and three! it is her destiny’

‘There is rape whenever the victim’s free will is abolished’

‘the aspect of a vigorous female, entirely made for robust love and valiant fecundity’

‘She understood that she did not matter like the girls who were not bastards, raised in the orphanage, and who had a family, people caring about them’

‘lying down and her arms splayed out’

‘he thought it was a good trick to play on Victoire. And something excited him’

‘It is not that I lacked strength, on the contrary, I did not want to hurt him because, you know, before him, no one had ever kissed me! Never… And it shook my heart; he could have killed me and I could not have defended myself’

‘I did not know… […] I couldn’t’

‘Périco! But he’s been married since Christmas! […] He can’t have promised to marry you. So why did you listen to him? Is it out of vice, because you’re a scoundrel, a whore like your mother, say, say?’

‘She laughed while pushing him listlessly. She did not want to, no… But her sensuality akin to a heated beast’s made her surrender, despite her will, maybe with the joyous groan of a robust appetite finally satisfied’

‘A weakness was overtaking her. Again the hunger, again the cold, again the wild race that would resume, if she did not die during the night in the forest’

**1.3 (pp. 147–51)**

‘a woman with a past ‘

‘plebian blood’

‘Reminding everybody of what a trollop I married. […] If a man so much as looks at you, your whole body starts to tremble […] You make me look ridiculous’

‘She feels boundless gratitude toward me and is utterly dependent. I have, so to speak, created and invented her. She is young and soft as wax, I can make her into whatever I want’

‘Only yesterday morning she was reading out loud from the newspaper about seduced girls, secret births, and prostitution! Instead of doing her utmost to avoid every reference to such things. He felt, each time, as if she were plunging a knife in his heart’

‘He was filled with rage at Lucie and pity for himself. This frivolous tart that he had lifted out of filth and made his wife was setting herself against him. […] She ought to be humble and repentant, a penitential Magdalene in mind and deportment’

‘I suppose you were lily-white when you married me’

‘Well, that was life. She had been dreaming about the sweet lieutenant and got a common labourer, maybe even a jailbird or an arsonist who had escaped’

‘This beautiful and lush body was his possession, and it had belonged to him alone for over four years’

‘But if she were a fine lady, one of those who had never been with anybody except her husband, she probably would have killed herself after this’

‘god, if I were a fine lady!’

**1.4 (pp. 151–58)**
‘splitting of consciousness’

‘The girl senses in Eros the terrible power which governs and decides her destiny and she is frightened by it. All the greater, then, is her inclination to look away and to repress from her consciousness the thing that frightens her’

‘For the woman, the mother of future generations, the founder of the family, is an important member of society, so long as she remains fully aware of her position as a discreet, hidden root’

‘All her dreams and fantasies were tainted by the poison of sin. How bad, how utterly corrupt she was!’

‘there are natures of a refined organization who, though their sexual excitability is great, have an equally great moral purity and who feel that anything sexual is something incompatible with their ethical standards, something dirtying and smirching’

‘And Walter – her meticulously neat, elegant brother, in his shiny uniform, had been here… how was it possible? She was shaken by horror, disgust’

‘Ideal of virtue’

‘I forbid you to interfere in my affairs – do you hear me? You are not behaving like a lady but like an irrational woman. It is inappropriate for you to get involved in such things!’

‘Above all, her husband valued a woman’s spiritual modesty, clothed in elegance, and if you love a man, you involuntarily try to become exactly what he wants you to be. Yes – and the many postpartum weeks and the deaths of small children – that makes a woman’s head quite tired. But in return you have fulfilled your duty in life’

‘It was only a constant conflict between her individual nature and the being into which she had lovingly fashioned herself according to a venerable, millennia-old ideal’

‘Eugenie now played a lovely housemother. Walter’s comrades celebrated her as the model of the German officer’s wife’

‘When they are outside, when no one sees them, they kiss each other – the doctor and – Eugenie ha ha ha – and Walter kisses her too and Wölfchen – they all kiss. Martin and the waitress and the clerks – everyone, everyone… ugh! Why do they come to her bedroom – that is so wicked’

**Part 2 (pp. 158–75)**

**2.1 (pp. 159–66)**

‘Why and how did a new life come into being?’

‘But more than anything, she was always amazed and outraged to see that, in romance novels, no one ever worried about children. […] The sexual organs of the protagonists, in elegant novels, were nothing more than passion machines. […] It was immoral and moronic’

‘And while he was drinking her life, she, his mother, was already dreaming of the future. What would he be, when she had made him big and strong by giving herself entirely?’

‘Yet she was ripe, life was coursing through her limbs and flowering in dark tufts in the secret recesses of her body, and she could smell her womanly scent, like a floral bouquet awaiting fertilization’

‘Louise no longer existed. She had renounced her humanity and become like an object. Her feminine modesty, her resolve not to let herself be seen naked and in agony, had finally crumbled under the onslaught of pain. Without the strength to lift a finger, she had no awareness either of her naked skin, or of the people who were touching her. And she lay there, uncovered up to her breasts, belly open to the air and legs spread wide, without even a quiver, exposing the full spectacle of her bloody, gaping maternity’

‘She looked down in despair at her own hips, at her virginal belly which had just felt such a sympathetic thrill. Her broad flanks might have held a strong, sturdy son. She felt immense regret at her own frustrated life, her womanly sex destined to remain for ever sterile’

‘So it wasn’t enough to be starved to death, and the dirty drudge whom everyone bullied: her masters had to get her pregnant as well! Filthy brutes! She could not say if it was the young one or the old one that had done it. In any case, neither of them cared a damn; they had had their pleasure, while she had to suffer for it! If she went and had her baby on their doormat, that would make them take notice!’

‘It was a girl! One more unfortunate girl! A tit-bit for some brawny groom or footman’

‘They are not all made to be mothers’

**2.2 (pp. 166–73)**

‘It was Victoire’s belly, an enormous belly, frightening, that fell on her legs and rose up her throat. And this belly stepped forward, carrying the virgins’ banner’

‘“A child! Like the Virgin Mary!” “You wretch!” screamed the farmer with indignation. “How dare you compare yourself to the one you insulted?” “But”, said Victoire obstinately, “she has a child herself, hasn’t she?”’

‘She had told him that she did not want to! And now, all the misfortune was for her’

‘She had even started to hate this child that caused her so much unhappiness and suffering. If she could have torn it out of her flanks and thrown it far away from her, as one does with a beast that sticks to you and gnaws on you, she would have done it, without mercy. Mercy! Who had ever shown her mercy?’

‘Note that it is almost always countryside servants who kill their children. Habit has destroyed their sensitivity. These girls are very dangerous’

‘She wanted to hurt it, of course, as it had come to cause her so much unhappiness. But she had never thought of killing it, never’

‘She did not even touch it, she simply looked at it. She never had any idea of doing anything with it. She did not know. Now that she was no longer suffering, she wished she could go and no longer think of it’

‘She felt the need to reiterate that she had never thought of killing it, she had done it without thinking, as she said, that was the whole truth…’

‘It indeed seemed as if all her roughness had melted away now that she was loved’

‘Always this cursed belly, that would martyrise her for her entire life, and for her eternal misfortune!’

‘She was only surprised at not having thought about leaving this world earlier. If she had done it on the first stroke of bad luck, she would not have committed a crime by killing her other little one, who was now on her mind’

‘And she also thought about the first one with the same pang of her heart and the love she had always had. Even the one she was carrying now made her anxious. She would not see it, it would not come into the world. And it was better that way, because he would be a bastard, just like her, that is, cursed’

‘And, as he went down, step by step, frightened and livid, he thought he saw a dark mass that was floating. Yes, that was it; and now the sun, all on fire, set the sky ablaze and,

through the vanished mists, cast a torrent of light on this round thing, floating, that seemed to spread out in the lights of heaven: the dead girl's swollen and fertilised flanks'

'The author succeeds in making maternity, sweet and supreme expiation of a woman's sin, particularly vile and repulsive'

**2.3 (pp. 174–75)**

'The first birth right of all individuals is – so I think – the right to one's own individuality, one's own life, the right to be an end in oneself. Did she live, the one who was nothing else and nothing more than the means for another's existence?'

'A mother should only exist for her children! So, I should only live and work for my daughters, and my daughters should only exist for their children again. What a senseless, sterile cycle. […] But now they are no longer my children, they are their husbands' wives. I lost them'

'In a way, Mama had always been proud of her suffering. She wore it like a part of her life, as the woman's crown of thorns – meant for her for eternity. How did Agathe, sheltered and cared for as a young girl and who had never done anything for mankind, come to this terrible inheritance? That was downright unnatural, like a malicious act of fate!'

'It is proven that Women-Writers are less fertile than other women'

**Part 3 (pp. 176–81)**

'But all of a sudden, a revolution broke out in the little colonelle's passivity; a hoarse cry, the cry of an angry cat came out of her constricted throat; she jumped on Paul Marescut in a leap and, falling on him without warning, she covered him with scratches. She had just declared her first war on the male. They had to tear the completely disfigured boy from her'

'And then she embraced him more tightly, growing intoxicated by the blood that smeared her; in those hours, she covered him with the most perverse caresses, her most delirious words. She finally confessed that if he healed, she would be very upset'

‘She played with his attentions, delaying her fall with a refinement of sensuality, and also because she wanted to convince herself that she did not love him. Men are brutes, she felt contempt towards the young and the old […]. She hoped that, sick as he was, he would not assault her’

‘“Paul! The young woman pleaded, baffled by this savage attack, I love you… Paul… it would be odious!” It was odious! […] She was rolling around, mad, dishevelled, calling him a coward’

‘I neither want to become ugly, nor to suffer. Also, *I am enough*, BY BEING, and if I could end the world with myself, I would end it’

‘I do not want to be a mother, firstly because I do not want to suffer, and then because I do not want to be the cause of suffering’

‘Dead! Mama!... screamed the little girl who had the bloody vision of the ox she had seen killed one day, at the bottom of some kind of cellar, in one strike, to get some drops of blood. A revolution broke out in her; they had killed her mother like this, with the same strike, to get this small piece of flesh’

‘Loving blood as I do, I choose -- to shed it -- the one that is least useful, that’s all. I don’t want people to say about me, the true female at a time of the globe’s first heat, that I could have really loved one of these unsexed’

**Chapter 3 (pp. 184–241)**

**Introduction (pp. 184–92)**

‘a perpetual and objectively based correlation of the visible and the expressible’

‘revealing gesture’

‘the naturalist novel […] is a genuine experiment that the novelist performs on mankind, based on observation’

‘exact report of experience’

‘Mechanically, Vilandry, who had greeted Combette rather coldly, looked at Mathilde intensely, with the simultaneously enveloping and penetrating gaze of the doctor guessing an elite nature or a sickly temperament, a subject for experiments, and, under this sharp examination, Mathilde, who had turned pale, had a shiver of unease through her whole body and turned her head away abruptly, as if to escape from an obsession’

‘poor girl’

‘It would be good to talk to a man like Hieronimus’

‘“You suffer from insomnia,” the professor went on, then paused for a moment. ‘Your state of mind is very depressed.” Another pause. “Your husband tells me… Well, in short, you’re not well. Is that right?”’

‘the statement of truth’

‘[T]his truth is not the truth of madness speaking in its own name but the truth of a madness agreeing to first person recognition of itself in a particular administrative identity and medical reality constituted by asylum power. The operation of truth is accomplished when the patient has recognized himself in this identity’

‘autobiographical account’

‘entrapment in mad subjectivity’

**Part 1 (pp. 192–203)**

‘involuntary’

‘From that day on, Gervaise often seemed to have gone round the bend, and people in the building would amuse themselves by getting her to do her imitation of Coupeau. In fact she no longer needed to be asked, she did it for nothing—the shaking of the hands and feet, the

little involuntary squeals. She'd picked it all up at Sainte-Anne, of course, from spending so much time watching her husband'

'Can you be in any doubt about that? Or rather is it possible to inquire into the reasons why a sick unhappy woman of unsound mind does what she does?'

'Perhaps Beata saw straight after all'

'From being a child, you've always had a sickly conscience. It's a heritage from your mother, Gregers… one thing she did leave you'

'These gentlemen exchanged knowing smiles. They were chilly and a cloud had just passed overhead'

'work fever'

'total paralysis of his will-power'

'some maladjustment of the nerve centres, or through some hereditary flaw which, because of a gram or two of substance too much or too little, instead of making him a great man was going to make him a madman'

'the self-imposed chastity which, in theory, was to enable him to put all his virility into his painting'

'Her jealousy had not deceived her in her accusations against Claude, for the virility he withheld from her he expended on her rival, the woman he preferred'

'Now look at her, look at her, I say, up there, the woman you love, and see what a monster you've made of her in your madness! Was any woman ever that shape?'

'He must certainly have suffered a great deal from that kink in his genius, those three grammes more or less that would have made all the difference, as he used to say when he accused his parents of making such an unsatisfactory job of him. But his trouble was not

all personal by any means; he was the victim of his period. The generation we belong to was brought up on Romanticism; it soaked into us and we can do nothing about it'

'the possession of reality'

'My eye on the microscope, I study, I look for the lesions in this marrow that makes of a man a genius or a madman, a hero or a coward, a creator or an idiot'

'The women brought to us are ill through heredity. Heredity, this frightening thing, and that leads a mother, a father, to pass on their own ills, their physical baseness to a poor small creature coming into the world. The nervous parents, the alcoholic father, and here is a poor creature condemned to hysteria, prepared for the initial attack that comes, as I told you, from a terror most of the time'

'Thus one could not hinder this atrocious madness? Jeanne thought. When it had you, it did not let you go? It was fatal. And she had no longer any hope to force her mother out of this evil'

'One of the doctor's most cherished dreams was to treat and heal the mad using his method of hypodermic injections. Since, in their case, it was the brain that was in jeopardy, why wouldn't injections of nerve substance give them a bit of resistance, a bit of will, by repairing the lesions in that organ?'

'and the fascinating experiment seemed to have succeeded, the injections of nerve substance had produced willpower, since the madman was here, released from the asylum that very morning, swearing he no longer had fits, that he was completely cured of the sudden homicidal rage that would have made him throw himself on a passer-by and strangle him'

'For the rest of the evening, he thought about that strange case, about this man he thought he'd saved from homicidal mania by treating him with hypodermic shots […]. He could see him again, so perfectly sane, as he advised him to take up his old working life once more. What, then, was this destructive force, the need to murder that turned to suicide, death doing its job come what may?'

‘At last he said: there’s been something worn-eaten about you since birth. He used that very word: “vermoulu” […] He said: the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children’

‘The incredible truth! This blissfully happy life I’d been living with my friends, I should never have indulged in it. It had been too much for my strength. So it was my own fault, you see!’

**Part 2 (pp. 204–38)**

‘We can, then, call antipsychiatry any movement by which the question of truth is put back in play within the relationship between the mad person and the psychiatrist’

**2.1 (pp. 205–12)**

‘an anatomy’

‘During his career as a famous obstetrician, he had palpated, turned over, and inhaled so many beautiful and repugnant creatures that he shrugged whenever anyone praised this famous weaker sex in front of him’

‘This living piece of flesh, neither good to dissect, nor suitable for storage in a jar of alcohol!’

‘she sometimes came across her uncle, she stopped, trembling, in front of the one whom family tradition had always represented to her as a great figure, director of women’s and children’s lives’

‘That’s funny! He said, tremendously interested, and he coupled the living thumb with the dead one. Mary’s thumb was almost of the same length, although much thinner, and the man’s own was already remarkable by its abnormal dimension’

‘Apart from her thumb and a black stain on her brain (that he would never guess because it dated back too long ago), he found her to be superbly structured’

‘They spoke as two men of the same age, choosing topics that would frighten a young unmarried woman’

‘She drew from this new instruction a contempt for men’

‘I don’t want to marry my uncle. Do you marry your uncle? What a strange doctor you are! “Trace back the course of family descent…” Remember the sentences from your serious books’

‘She loved without suffering, as he suffered for her. While she was in the peaceful sleep of a sinner, Paul Richard rolled around on the floor of his attic, suffering from a terrible nervous breakdown’

‘The anatomical Venus, detached from its pedestal, had sprung, still upright but decapitated, across the table, among a pile of broken vials’

‘a victim of science’

‘Marscot, describing his miraculous system of tom-tom beats, that later, if they let him experiment, would succeed in knocking over, like a house of cards, piles of nervous girls whom, by the way, he would never attempt to cure, contenting himself with the curious manifestations of catalepsy, without thinking of anything else; girls and dogs were there to serve as vulgar mannequins for suffering’

‘she seemed born to play this role of beautiful cruelty’

‘Without her uncle, and she did not entirely explain this cause, she would have aimed to forever remain this cold, unattainable virgin’

**2.2 (pp. 212–23)**

‘[a symbol of] the agony of life’

‘Your paintings reflect an interest in the abnormal that is very unpleasant. […] Your paintings seem to me absolute proof that you are abnormal. I assume that you have tried in your work to represent your own inner life’

‘Wasn’t it the professor’s interest in the abnormal that had given him his authority and placed him in this position?’

‘confrontation of two wills’

‘Every time she heard the professor’s step her heart pounded and she shivered with repugnance’

‘disciplinary power’

‘I think you had better let me decide how long you should stay here’

‘The first six months will pass under protest from your wife. Then she will quiet down, and eventually leave the hospital with gratitude in her heart, quite cured’

‘She feels great bitterness toward you. The other day she threw your letter on the table. She wouldn’t read it’

‘an absolute fury’

‘Your illness is your inability to control yourself’

‘When the Professor Hieronimus and my husband and Dr. Tvede say that I’m insane, then I must be insane […]. But then I’ve then been insane all my life’

‘This battle between what she wanted to paint and what she actually painted left her in a confused state of misery that gnawed at her brain, colored everything she heard and experienced, paralyzed her spirit and destroyed her will’

‘But even if she died, the institution would go on. Many human beings in a condition like hers might come here and have to deal with Hieronimus. If she could escape alive, she could tell her story – warn, perhaps save, even one fellow being from the things she had experienced. No, she had to live’

‘The language you use is much too strong. […] You talk about pain and suffering and being deprived of liberty. […] You have more liberty than is good for you’

‘All mental patients are angry at their doctors’

‘What do tales like that accomplish? The author becomes the butt of ridicule or, in the best case, the object of pity. […] An authority like Hieronimus is not brought down by that kind of assault’

‘She wrote a hurried letter to Hieronimus in which she vented her contempt and indignation, making her accusations point by point. Finally, she promised the professor that as soon as she was released from St. Jørgen’s she would hold him accountable for the way he had treated her. She signed herself, “Your sincere enemy, Else Kant”’

‘“But the other patients,” Else remarked, “they’re all abnormal one way or another, at least the ones I’ve seen.”’

‘Else was nailed to the spot. She could not tire of watching this figure who, in spite of everything repellent, had a touching, childlike look of sadness in her eyes’

‘Go away!’

‘Suddenly she realized with surprise that she felt not only sympathy, but disgust. Mostly disgust. This woman had fled like a coward from her sufferings and her responsibilities. Left her children cruelly and faithlessly in the lurch’

‘A suicidal woman had saved her from suicide’

‘the real lunatics’

‘There were many stories about him and it was a fairly common assumption that he himself was insane, though he kept it under wraps. A number of his relatives were peculiar, and his father had been an eccentric’

**2.3 (pp. 223–30)**

‘The neurologist, who was interested in this strange form of insanity, made inquiries about her past. What he heard amazed him and did not help him to solve the riddle of her nature’

‘this strange case of a disturbed mind that had in some way created a new individual’

‘Doctor Behrend had not found what he had hoped for in it: psychological material for the genesis of mental illnesses’

‘I have started, after the death of my husband, to write a diary. Please burn it. You are a psychologist. If you wish to learn how and why my spirit was disturbed, read it before you destroy it. No one else should read it’

‘I want to examine, coldly and soberly, how it came about that I became like this. I want to write a kind of obituary for myself. I am at the end. Nothing more can come. I simply want to tell the life of Agnes Schmidt, who is 54 years old and has been a widow for two years’

‘She mostly remained silent. At times she started to speak and then it was as if she were communicating with supernatural beings. Her words breathed with an immeasurable melancholia or dithyrambic ecstasy. She expressed profound and sublime thoughts, in a form that was reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra’

‘Isn’t madness, in fact, much more a part of our real nature than our trained mind? Madness lets impressions and ideas develop themselves, like the sun influences a plant, like a storm on the sea, without criticism, without defence’

‘seeress’

‘If this is madness, so I was mad for more than fifty years. I have always remained silent to external will, external opinion’

‘Was I not always satisfied? I? But I was not an ‘I’ at all. Agnes Schmidt! A name! A hand, a foot, a body! No soul, no brain. I have lived a life where I wasn’t even there’

‘My nature has been chained. Now I am free and I wander around in the new, foreign world and would perhaps cause mischief, if it were not for a new chain – old age’

‘Grey hair, folds, wrinkles! Is that me? No, I am in me, in me. I am only stuck in a foreign skin. How strange that the skin is our destiny’

‘As soon as I am among people, I see with the eyes of the others, think the thoughts of the others, then I feel like I am guilty of a ridiculous anachronism and I am ashamed of myself’

‘Why did I have to live the way I did? Because I am a woman and because a law is written on ancient bronze tablets of how a woman should live? But the scripture is wrong, it is wrong! Why has no one erased the false scripture?’

‘Why did I live the way I – – didn’t I write that before? And about the bronze tablets of the law, which – and about the coffin – and – they should be smashed – smasched – my God – how do you write – sma – the lid – hold! stop! He – I – yes – ashes – –’

‘One could have thought that this old woman had been a successful poetess and that an excessive mental exertion had caused the brain disorder. The opposite was true’
‘What should have become of me? Some kind of painter? Yes, thirsty, my eyes cling to the face of nature with fervour. I understand her soft and wild language. But I cannot guide the brush. Or an author? I observe, I suspect, I think. I want to create, to create out of the depth of my chest, there runs a spring, but I have no vessel to collect it, and the lively waters are trickling away, away, and my heart’s blood with them. I can cry, bitterly, but I cannot describe the tears. What I feel is wild like the sea, rushing, immeasurable, deadly. I cannot say it’

**2.4 (pp. 231–38)**

‘familial sovereignty’

‘the individual’s refamiliazation’

‘Mrs Heidling often asked herself, astonished, if she had ever been so terribly lively and exalted’

‘Her lot will be the same as her mother’s, her friends’. She will stay within their circle. A civil servant’s wife – she knows that well. She knows a lot of civil servants’ wives and all of them think, do, talk, and live almost the same way’

‘Women, women, nothing but women. Hundreds of them flocked there from all parts of the fatherland at the steel springing sources, as if they could not recover from the loss of the abundant blood and iron with which the German Empire had forged its powerful greatness, that it sucked from the veins and bones of its daughters. Most of them were young, in the summer of their life. They could be separated into two approximately equal groups: the married women who were exhausted by their husband’s demands, the social duties and the birth of children, and the pale girls consumed by the lack of action, longing, and disappointment’

‘Men only rarely visited this place. A hysterical artist was now there, a colonel a.D. who never let his wife travel alone, and the doctor’

‘They expected everything from this doctor: he had to give them all back health, happiness, courage, and hope for their lives. One had indeed to court him a little’

‘Doctor Ellrich had such a cynical twist in the corner of his mouth. He saw through women completely – he despised them…’

‘In two years of baths and sleeping tablets, electricity and massages, hypnosis and suggestion, they brought Agathe to a state in which she could appear again, from the

isolation of several sanatoriums, among human society without provoking any unpleasant reactions'

'When an individual escaped from the sovereignty of the family, he was put in a psychiatric hospital, where it was a matter of training him in the apprenticeship of pure and simple discipline'

'Can you imagine – she sits there and cries all day long – all day long! And if you try to calm her, she becomes very angry – I never thought she could be so angry. I don't know how I should handle the girl anymore'

'The sick have no will'

'The language is so beautiful'

'Have you never realised that these verses contradict some of the things that I have tried to teach you?'

'Agathe's memory has suffered – from her past, there are segments of which she can no longer make sense. It is not possible for her to follow a long conversation'

'Respectable girls certainly have no blasphemous thoughts… Respectable girls are not jealous of a waitress at thirty years old… […] She was no respectable girl. She has only been a hypocrite, all her life. A hypocrite out of cowardice. […] Oh, poor Papa – such an impeccable gentleman, when he discovers what kind of creature his daughter is… Just endure everything… Pull yourself together, with everything you have – be calm – do not make a scene! then the doctor will have to declare her healthy. That is the main thing now'

'And Agathe might have a long life ahead of her – she is not yet forty years old'

**Conclusion (pp. 242–54)**

'the silent tragic of the everyday'

‘Georges de Peyrebrune has a lot of talent, and a talent that is absolutely masculine, although she belongs to the weaker sex, which is no longer a secret for anyone’

‘the original script’

‘work, work to alleviate’