The Queer Fatality of Norwegian Nature

An Ecocritical Approach to the Homosexual Breakthrough in Europe

◊Per Esben Svelstad

Ideas of gender, sexuality, and nonhuman nature are closely connected. In the period spanning the fin-de-siècle aesthetics of the 1890s up to the great backlash in human rights for lesbians and gays in the 1930s, Europe witnessed a growing fascination with nonheteronormative sexualities. In Scandinavia, the turn of the century has been called the period of "the homosexual breakthrough" (Eman 1999). Homosexuality was commonly considered "against nature," while same-sex desire grew particularly visible in urban areas, in large part due to the nascent homosexual rights movement.

In this article, I discuss three narrative texts that take their cue from but also challenge tropes that conflate homosexuality with the unnatural and with urban decadence. They all depict same-sex attracted characters and feature at least one important plot point set in Norway.[1] In *Noodlot* (1990 [1890]) [*Footsteps of Fate* (2013)] by Dutch author Louis Couperus (1863-1923), the impoverished but charming and manipulative Bertie van Meren moves in with his friend Frank Westhove. The two men live an extravagant life thanks to Frank's wealth. Their relationship turns sour, however, when a third party is introduced: the British noblewoman Eve Rhodes, whom they encounter during a tour of Norway. The erotic triangle ends in Frank killing Bertie in a fit of rage. In *Monsieur Antinoüs et Madame Sapho* (2012 [1899]) published by Louis Didier (1875-1902) under the pseudonym Luis d'Herdy, Jacques, the last duke of the dilapidated house of Mortheure, marries Marthe Barnède, the daughter of a rich banker, in a marriage of convenience. Jacques and Marthe both surreptitiously take same-sex lovers, each living in separate apartments in

◊ Per Esben Svelstad, NTNU in Trondheim.

[1] Texts are quoted in English translation in the main text, while the original is provided in footnotes. I quote Clara Bell's English translation of *Noodlot*; all other translations are my own.

their luxurious Parisian *hôtel*. Both lose their love interests to premature death, Marthe's partner Colette turning fatally ill in Norway. In the end, Marthe convinces her husband to join her in living in defiance of societal norms.

Finally, the short story "Freitod" ["Suicide"], published by an unknown author under the pseudonym "L. Omen" in a 1924 issue of the German gay journal *Freundschaft* [*Friendship*] provides an interesting point of comparison to the other works. Here, the young boy Friedrich pursues his friend Hanns to Nordkapp, where the latter has decided to commit suicide, after his boyfriend, Fritz, has passed away from pneumonia. Friedrich feels the urge to follow his friend into death but decides against it in the last moment. Instead, he chooses to make use of his sexual drives to work for the improvement of society.

The choice of texts is intended to showcase a variety in how the trope of the sublime northern landscape is gendered and sexualized.[2] The questions this article sets out to explore are: How can we interpret the trope of the exotic and sublime North in narratives exploring same-sex desire from the period 1890-1924? What do the uses of this trope tell us about the ways in which same-sex desire and northern nature are conceptualized? I will first position the article in the context of existing scholarship, before undertaking a close reading of the three texts.

The Ambiguity of Norwegian Nature

I combine a queer reading with an ecocritical awareness of the role played by nonhuman nature—environment, weather, and landscape—in culture. The relationship between these theoretical schools has traditionally been rather thorny. While queer theory builds on the linguistic turn, insisting on the cultural constructedness and discursive historicity of concepts of sexuality, ecocriticism initially emphasized the existence of a supposed prediscursive, material reality. Kate Soper's succinct remark that "it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer" is often quoted (1995: 151) in this context. Soper, however, also argues for exploring how the associations between nature and traditionally pejorative terms such as the *corporeal* and the *feminine* "function as a register or narrative of human self-projections" (*ibid.*: 10). Thus, an acknowledgment of non-human nature does not preclude a critical attitude to its discursive deployment.

Arguing furthermore that "'nature' is the idea through which we conceptualize what is 'other' to ourselves" (1995: 15-16), Soper points to another reason for the mutual skepticism between queer and ecocritical

[2] I am grateful to Ben Sinclair for bringing Couperus to my attention; to Melanie Hawthorne for mentioning d'Herdy in a talk given at the conference *States of Decadence* in 2014; and to Max Fassnacht for sharing with me a digital scan of "Freitod," a story I discovered by reading his 2021 article (cf. bibliography).

theorists. Serving as the "other" to heterosexuality, homosexuality has consistently been considered "unnatural," in contrast to the "nature-endorsed" procreative impulse at the base of opposite-sex eroticism.[3] However, same-sex desire has not simply been conceived as the "other" of nature in a nature/culture opposition. In medical discourse, it has been imagined simultaneously as a perversion due to too much culture—a result of human estrangement from the natural world—*and* as a "natural" drive inherent in all people which civilization must "tame." To late 19th century theorists of degeneration, for example, modern man grew increasingly incapable of controlling his physical desire and thus of governing his behavior in keeping with moral standards (Oosterhuis 2000: 54). Thus, as noted by Greta Gaard, queer sexualities are paradoxically imagined as against nature and against civilization at the same time (2004: 26). Studying the interplay between historical understandings of homosexuality and nature hence demonstrates how neither concept is stable but under constant renegotiation.

The following analyses start from the assumption that we may talk of "Norwegian nature" as a concept with a specific semiotic power. While there is a growing field of research combining queer theory and ecocriticism (see Azzarello 2012; Seymour 2013; Svelstad 2024), this mostly addresses North-American literature, indicating a knowledge gap when it comes to European and Scandinavian culture.[4] Moreover, existing research on cultural constructions of Norwegian landscapes mainly discusses how wilderness and the Arctic have served as locations for masculine discipline and education (see Gurholt 2008; Aarekol 2016), paying less attention to nonnormative concepts of gender. Cultural historian Nina Witoszek describes the continental conception of Norway in the following way:

> The end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century signalled a breakthrough in geographical fashions and passions. Suddenly the existing moral geography was turned on its head: what was once regarded as a realm of 'ice tongues, foul air and miasmas' was now elevated into a region of the sublime: of power, vastness, infinity and magnificence. The Seven Hills of Rome were replaced by soaring peaks and bottomless fjords. (2011: 29-30)

This shift is reflected in *Noodlot* as Eve, upon seeing a Norwegian landscape for the first time, exclaims: "It is almost like Italy!"[5] (Couperus 2013: 35). The conception of the north as a location of the sublime and of moral profundity was likely strengthened by the increasing importance of the once provincial Nordic countries in European cultural life at the end of the 19th century, as

[3] On this topic, cf. e.g. Donoghue 1995 and Azzarello 2012.

[4] Gregory Woods devotes a chapter on "The Northern Exotic" in his thorough historical study on homosexual culture as a phenomenon transcending national borders (2016). However, the chapter mainly addresses the lives of Russian intellectuals and artists and does not treat depictions of Scandinavian landscapes.

[5] "Het is bijna Italië!" (Couperus 1990: 22).

exemplified by the Modern Breakthrough (see Barton 2007: 33). During this time, tourism also expanded, influencing continental perceptions of "*sporting Norway*, a paradise for prime fishing, hunting, hiking, and mountain climbing" (Barton 2007: 30). The status of Norway as a privileged location for wildlife tourism resonates in all three texts studied below.

As Witoszek and Peter Fjågesund both emphasize, the sublime and the uncultivated are linked: the sublime is "beyond the pale, […] it is outside the sphere of man's control" (Fjågesund 2014: 26). From the 1850s on, due to the countless expeditions to find the North-East passage or to reach the North Pole, along with the growing fishing and whaling industry in the Northern Sea, continental Europe witnessed a great popular demand for news about the North (*ibid.*: 353). Such endeavors, of course, were gendered, as the Arctic formed an arena for demonstrating masculine strength and industriousness (*ibid.*: 465). Like all idealized images, however, the sublime and morally uplifting North relies on a countertype. Even in Norway, many naturalist and neo-romantic authors show a tendency to counteract the romanticized images of Norwegian scenery. In the works of, e.g., Hans Aanrud and Ragnhild Jølsen, the darkness, melancholia and general spookiness of tall crags and rainy fjords work in tandem with a renewed interest in popular superstition, occultism, and the opacity of the human psyche. This ambiguity forms a final important backdrop for the three texts to be compared.

The *Uncontrollable Gay* Decadent

In *Noodlot*, Bertie is depicted as both a decadent aesthete removed from the vitalizing, healthy nature, and as a parallel to the melancholic weather, a threatening, non-human presence. The events leading up to the murder are triggered by Bertie's suggestion that he and Frank go to Norway, as a break with their creeping dissatisfaction with London's upper-class social life. However, as if to underline their inability to escape the urban decadence of England, Frank and Bertie stay at the "*Brittania*" hotel in Trondheim.[6] During their hike up to the local mountain Geitfjellet, the two friends encounter Eve and her father, Sir Archibald.

Having become acquainted, the party of four heads for the smaller town of Molde at the Western coast. On a rainy day, the fatigued Bertie decides to stay in the hotel while the others go hiking to the mountain of "Moldehöi".[7]

[6] The hotel *Britannia*—misspelt by Couperus—was known as the most luxurious hotel in the central Norwegian city in the late 19th century (Christiansen 2009: 45). In the summer of 1889, Couperus had visited Sweden and Norway, including Trondheim and Molde (Bastet 1987: 124-125).

[7] This name ["The Molde Height"] is likely a misspelling for "Moldeheia" ["The Molde Heath"], a popular trekking area with a view to the town as well as the mountains which the locals affectionately call the "Romsdal Alps".

Bertie's absence might be read as an allusion to the common conception of the homosexual as an aesthete striving to avoid nature (see Shuttleton 2000: 128). Interestingly, the surroundings of Molde only present decay and sadness in the eyes of the tourists:

> A ghostly chill rose up from the gulf to where the trio stood, mingling with the tangible clamminess of the mist, which seemed to weigh on their eyelids. It was not raining, but the moisture seemed to distil on them from the black unbroken rack of clouds; and to the westwards, between two cliffs which parted to show a gleaming strip of ocean, a streak was visible of pale gold and faint rose-colour—hardly more than a touch of pink, a sparkle of gold—a stinted alms of the setting sun. They scarcely said another word, oppressed by the superhuman sadness which enwrapped them like a shroud. When Eva at last spoke her clear voice sounded far away—through a curtain (Couperus 2013: 45).[8]

This *topographia* realistically reflects the state of Norwegian climate at the time, as the 1880s were a period of many cold summers (Dybdahl 2016: 170). It is sublime in the Romantic sense of representing "the natural force that dwarf[s] the individual human figure" (Preminger and Brogan 1993: 1231). The mist is described through the metaphor of the "curtain," or in Dutch: "gaas," meaning "gauze." Its lightness suggests an upper-class sophistication and an "unnatural" intrusion into the landscape. At the same time, everything else is also light, feeble, and ghostly: the moisture, the barely perceptible ocean, the "pale" and "faint" hints of sunlight. The Dutch and British tourists are far from the life-giving, robust landscape of Norwegian wilderness.

This sense of emptiness and decay is strengthened by the fact that the hut they are visiting proves to be uninhabited. Here, an important intertext is introduced in the words of Eve: "How well I understand Oswald's cry in Ibsen's 'Ghosts' when he is going mad: 'The sun, the sun!' Men might pray for sunshine here and get no more than that distant gleam. Oh, I am perished!"[9] (Couperus 2013: 45). Ibsen's naturalistic play (1890 [1881]) revolves around

[8] "… eene spectrale kilheid rees uit de kom van het fjord op naar die drie menschen in de hoogte, niets, verloren in het tastbare waas van den nevel, die zwaar op hunne oogleden zonk. De regen viel niet neêr, maar scheen slechts als vocht af te sijpelen uit het zwarte floers der wolken, die nog niet scheurden en in het westen tusschen twee bergen, die zich openden om een streepje van den oceaan te laten doorschemeren, trilde iets bleekgouds en vaalrozigs, nauwelijks een paar lijntjes roze en een tikje goud: de aalmoes van een zonsondergang…. Zij wisselden nauwelijks één woord, gedrukt door die bovenmenschelijke treurigheid, die als mist om hen heen weende. Toen Eve eindelijk sprak, scheen haar anders zoo helder geluid als van verre te komen, door een gaas" (Couperus 1990: 30).

[9] "Wat kan ik me goed Oswalds klacht begrijpen in 'Gespenster', als hij krankzinnig wordt: De zon! De zon! Men zoû hier bidden om wat zon en men krijgt niets dan dat glansje daar in de verte.... O, ik ril!" (Couperus 1990: 30).

Helene Alving, the widow of Lord Chamberlain Alving, and her efforts to rebuild a harmonious family life for herself and her grown-up son, Osvald. An artist indulging in a libertine lifestyle in Paris, Osvald has returned home in time for the official opening of Mrs. Alving's orphanage. This project is meant to make amends for her late husband's life of debauchery. However, as the title of the play implies, nobody can escape their past. To the great dismay of his mother, Osvald sexually assaults the maid Regine. Unbeknownst to him she is his half-sister, a result of his father's rape of the previous maid. In the end, Osvald reveals he has contracted syphilis. Cognitively impaired by his illness, he can only sit idly in a chair while asking his mother to give him "the sun" (Ibsen 1890: 103).[10] That is, Osvald wishes that his mother help him commit suicide.

The description of weather in *Noodlot* is reminiscent of *Ghosts*, where "the lack of sunshine, the classic emblem of melancholia, is both concrete and abstract," and the North comes across as "the 'natural' realm of the *soleil noir*" (Rossi 2019: 10). Moreover, the inescapability of fate is at stake in both works. According to Couperus scholar Luk Dirikx, one trope is common to all of his novels: that of fate as a destructive force (Dirikx 1993: 14). In this regard, Bertie seems a prime example of what Dirikx calls a *Corruptor* or *Personification of Fate* in Couperus' work: "independent characters who through their damaging influence awaken the potential defect present in their victim".[11] In this light, Bertie brings out a potential for nonheteronormative sexuality which Frank takes extreme measures to fight, killing Bertie in the end.

Furthermore, Bertie is characterized in a way close to cataloguing typical elements in "discreet" depictions of gay men at the end of the 19th century. His many travels could allude to a common idea of the homosexual as homeless (see Couperus 1990: 28). Due to his slender frame and womanly face, he comes across as effeminate to both Frank and Eve (*ibid.*: 12, 19, 53, 78). Furthermore, as Jan Konst underlines (2017: 226), the theater is a rich source of metaphors in *Noodlot*. By taking great care of his appearance and speaking English with an exaggerated accent, Bertie makes his homelessness into an asset; as a Dutchman in England, he stands out as different in a positive, interesting way. Rather than showing his authentic self, Bertie performs the role of a dandy, as concisely defined by Ellen Moers: "a creature perfect in externals and careless of anything below the surface, a man solely dedicated to his own perfection through a ritual of taste" (Moers 1960: 13). The trope of theatricality creates an overdetermined relationship between decadence and homosexuality, invoking the tendency of the fin-de-siècle subject to go *against nature*, while also alluding to the homosexual need for role-playing and hiding one's true self.

---

[10] The play was extremely controversial at the time of its publication—a fact reflected in Frank's tacit opinion that it is unsuitable for Eve (Couperus 1990: 32; 2013: 49-50).

[11] "… autonome personages die door hun funeste invloed het in hun slachtoffer aanwezige kwaad doen ontwaken" (Dirikx 1993: 57-58).

In addition, Bertie often goes away for days at a time, coming home in rags, taking part in a sinful world which Frank is not allowed to be "initiated" ["ingelicht"] into (Couperus 1990: 18; 2013: 29). Bertie's life, then, carries a hint of mystery, of being familiar with practices outside of the conventional bourgeois lifestyle. Thus, he surpasses both the "natural" and the "civilizational"; indeed, he is associated with that which cannot be controlled. At several points in the narrative, he is described as a *parasitic*, with terms like "*freeloader*" ["*klaplooper*"] and "*weed*" ["*woekerplant*"] (Couperus 1990: 50, 90; 2013: 54, 74). This entails a "naturalization" of the homosexual which nevertheless makes him into something inexplicable and unmanageable. In Molde, the melancholy Norwegian weather both describes and shapes Bertie's jealousy towards Frank and Eve:

> And he stood once more lost in thought; the grey, wet atmosphere without cast a gloom on the scene within; and in his soul, too, reigned the deepest gloom. What was the use of fostering warm feelings when a few days of sympathetic companionship could only end in parting? This was always the case with friendly travelling-acquaintance, and was it not so throughout life, with every one—everything—we love? Was it worth while to care for anything? Was not all love a great delusion, by which men blinded themselves to their disgust at life?[12] (Couperus 2013: 50-51)

Bertie's feelings of disgust ["walging"] strengthen his role as a decadent character. For as Riikka Rossi points out, the assemblage of disgust-melancholia in naturalist texts such as Ibsen's *Ghosts* can function as "an aesthetics of negation, to voice dissatisfaction with the condition of modernity" (2019: 2). Bertie's melancholic disgust thus holds critical potential, but it is critique without any positive vision.[13] Furthermore, naturalism sets the stage for a particular conception of fate where mythical ideas of divine predetermination are replaced by scientific concepts of heredity and the influence of the environment (Rossi 2019: 10). In *Noodlot*, both the weather and sexuality come across as fatal natural forces, determining individual lives.

It is thus only fitting that a heavy rainstorm goes on outside Frank's house when he murders his friend. Bertie desperately tries to explain his actions, declaring his love for Frank:

---

[12] "En hij verzonk weêr in zijn stilzwijgen, terwijl de natgrijze lucht daarbuiten eene schemering van melancholie naar binnen wierp, terwijl ook melancholie diep in zijne ziel viel […] Waartoe genegenheid te koesteren als men scheiden moest na enkele dagen van sympathiek samenzijn! Het was zoo op reis met lieve reisgenooten; was het ook niet zoo in het leven met alles wat men liefhad, was het wel de moeite waard iets lief te hebben en was alle liefde niet één groot zelfbedrog, waarmeê men zich verblindde in de walging der wereld ..." (Couperus 1990: 34).

[13] Cf. Toril Moi's discussion of how naturalism emerged as a type of realism that refused the positive vision demanded by idealism—as exemplified by *Ghosts* (Moi 2006: 139-147).

> I am as God made me, and I cannot help it; I would have been different if I could—and I only did what I could not help doing. Indeed, I could not help it; I was driven to it by a power outside me. […] Oh believe me, I beseech you, I am not wholly selfish. I love you with all my soul, so truly as one man hardly ever loves another, because you were so good to me[14] (Couperus 2013, 169).

Hence, Bertie is fated to let his love find expression in unethical, jealous schemes.[15] Here, too, male same-sex desire is "naturalized," the concept of nature being saturated with negativity in this context.

The scene of the murder ends with Frank leaving the room apparently to fetch help—while Eve remains, too afraid to walk out into the rainstorm: "Molde, Molde! she exclaimed, icy-cold with terrible remembrance. 'It is the sky of Molde, the fjord of Molde! That was where I first felt it. Oh, God! Help, help!' And she fell senseless on the floor"[16] (Couperus 2013: 176). In *Noodlot*, then, the Western Norwegian rainfall can be read as expressing how fate inevitably impacts human life but at the same time is completely cut off from human control. By the same token, same-sex desire is imagined as an equally threatening and uncontrollable force.

The catastrophic relationship between Frank and Bertie makes sense in the context of the naturalism/decadence intersection, and conceptions of same-sex desire at the time. From the mid-1800s, there was a widespread idea that hereditary degeneracy was at the root of sexual "perversion": "sexual disorders showed that natural processes could also move backward in a process of devolution; nature was capable of producing monsters or 'stepchildren of nature,' […]" (Oosterhuis 2000: 53). Couperus, then, seems to accept the fatalist assumptions of degeneration theory, and his novel represents them by using an ambiguous imagery of nature. If "nature" is defined as subjectable to human governance and admiration, "the homosexual," in this novel, represents an element in nature which surpasses such control and must be removed.

---

[14] "… ik ben zooals ik ben, ik kan het niet helpen, dat ik zoo ben, ik zoû gaarne anders willen zijn […] En ik heb gehandeld, zooals ik handelen moest, ik kon er niets aan doen, ik werd er toe gedwongen, door machten buiten me. […] gelóof toch, dat niet alles egoïsme in me is, en dat ik veel, zielsveel van je hoû, zooveel als een man bijna nooit van een anderen man houdt, omdat je zoo goed voor me was" (Couperus 1990: 117-118).

[15] Konst (2017: 223) also identifies the Norwegian thunderstorm as a symbol of fate but addresses this only in the context of Eve and Frank's ill-fated relationship, not the equally catastrophic friendship between Bertie and Frank.

[16] "Molde! Molde! stamelde zij in eene ontzetting, die haar ijskoud maakte. De lucht van Molde! Het fjord van Molde! Toen ik het voor het eerst gevoeld heb!…! O God, help, help […] En zij stortte neêr op den grond, flauw" (Couperus 1990: 124).

A Queer Defiance of Heteronormative Death

Like *Noodlot*, *Monsieur Antinoüs et Madame Sapho* illustrates how the emergent category of "the homosexual" was perceived as affecting the heterosexual institution of marriage. As Manon Raffard notes, all d'Herdy's novels contain a scene of confusion, followed by either a recognition, comedy, or didacticism (Raffard 2020: 41). In *Monsieur Antinoüs et Madame Sapho*, the mutual recognition of the cross-dressed protagonists alludes to the sexological prejudice of the homosexual as invert while at the same time suggesting that neither sex, gender identity, nor sexual attraction is readily decodable on a person's external appearance. Here, theatricality fools even the homosexuals themselves who are thus arguably caught in a society built on stereotypical gender norms rather than being able to deconstruct such norms. This type of "mariage blanc" was not uncommon in French aristocracy and was largely accepted, provided that the sexual orientation of the parties remained an open secret (Murat 2023: 136). Instead of offering a crude reiteration of the trope of sexual inversion, then, the novel questions the homophobic assumptions that homosexuals work consciously and in secret to deconstruct respectable society (see Murat 2006: 42-43).

An interest in the occult is fundamental to Jacques' queer upbringing: at the ghostly castle, where he feels his soul unify with the walls, his uncle has long studied "occult sciences, philosophizing, reading and rereading ancient authors, true spell books only comprehensible to himself …".[17] Marthe, raised in an all-girls convent school, is just as devoted to Christian worship: "Her heart had a need to give itself away, to spread out. She thirsted for sacrifice and devotion, she thirsted for suffering, suffering for an ideal. And people close to her were convinced that she would be a nun".[18] These conceptions of same-sex sexuality as spiritually charged are further underlined by Jacques' idea that in order to obey his inner nature, he needs to be initiated (d'Herdy 2012: 58). Regarding the sexual invert as someone endowed with spiritual ability due to his or her assumed mixture of a masculine and feminine psyche was a common trope in homosexual self-understanding from the 1880s onwards (Cocks 2003: 166). As historian of religion Joy Dixon notes, spirituality formed an "alternative or oppositional discourse of subjectivity and sexuality, one in which homosexuality was neither pathologized nor necessarily represented as deviant" (1997: 432-433). While Couperus arguably reproduces a homophobic idea of the "initiated" homosexual as homewrecker, d'Herdy depicts spirituality as a positive source of self-discovery.

[17] " […] l'étude de sciences occultes, philosophant, lisant et relisant d'anciens auteurs, véritables grimoires pour lui seul compréhensibles" (d'Herdy 2012: 23).

[18] "Son cœur avait besoin de se donner, de se répandre. Elle avait soif de sacrifice et de dévouement, soif de souffrir, de souffrir pour un idéal. Et, dans son entourage, on était persuadé qu'elle se ferait religieuse" (d'Herdy 2012: 39).

Furthermore, the novel depicts the complexity of homosexuals in contrast to the simplicity of heterosexuals. As Jacques goes back to Mortheure, he surreptitiously observes a young man and a woman of the working-class having sex in the forest. He considers them fortunate:

> They didn't have complicated souls. They did not reason, they did not analyze themselves. They did not seek the *Impossible*. They obeyed their instinct, just like an animal. And in their naïve and completely primordial sensuality, the spiritual aspect interested them little. Love, for them, consisted exclusively in physical pleasure. And that sufficed for their happiness.[19]

Here, heterosexuality is "natural," not in the sense of "normatively right," but as unproblematic and primitive. This is in contrast to the intellectual and spiritual striving of the invert who also stands out by representing a noble, although decadent, social class.

At the same time as Jacques goes back to Mortheure, Marthe leaves for Norway with Colette. These simultaneous travels constitute a turning point in the plot. Until now, Jacques has taken numerous mistresses, but his primary interest has been dressing them like puppets in expensive gowns and jewelry. His return to Mortheure, where he fleetingly meets his former love interest Jean the sailor, is motivated by a nascent awareness of his erotic drives towards other men. Corporeal pleasures are insufficient, however, "for his passion remained noble and denied itself inferior and purely physical kinds of satisfaction".[20] Jacques' search for a more spiritually fulfilling kind of desire in his childhood home is thus paralleled in Marthe's and Colette's Scandinavian journey.

In Norway, the relationship between the two women ends in Colette's tragic death most likely caused by tuberculosis. The narration of the several months of events spanning the two women's journey, Colette's death, and Marthe's return to Paris with the corpse is condensed into one intense chapter of little more than two pages. It starts with a description of the white, swan-like yacht plowing the beautiful, blue Mediterranean, its bridge filled with heaps of roses, before describing the rows of burning candles, their wax dripping like tears, surrounding the diseased Colette (d'Herdy 2012: 65). The southern sublime of the Mediterranean creates expectations of sexual liberty, expectations that will only be disappointed.[21] The journey to the Mediterranean constitutes Marthe's final, futile attempt to cure her lover. However, no exotic environment offers

---

[19] "Ils n'avaient pas des âmes compliquées. Ils ne raisonnaient pas, ils ne s'analysaient pas. Ils ne cherchaient pas l'*Impossible*. Ils obéissaient à leur instinct, de même que la bête. Et, dans leur sensualité naïve et toute primordiale, le côté spirituel les préoccupait peu. Tout l'amour, pour eux, se résumait dans la jouissance physique. Et cela suffisait à leur bonheur" (d'Herdy 2012: 57).

[20] " […] car sa passion demeurait noble et se refusait à des satisfactions inférieures et purement physiques" (d'Herdy 2012: 52).

[21] On the stereotype of the "South" as a haven for (especially male) homosexuality, see Patanè 2006.

the liberty these women are looking for. This casts the classical Western trope of the beautiful, deceased young woman being worshiped by her grieving lover into a queer narrative style.[22] The vital beauty of the Mediterranean is described before it is revealed to the reader that Colette is dead due to the illness caught in Norway. Thus, even the chronology is reversed—it is "inverted," as it were.

The description of Colette's death revolves around the affective properties of the environment rather than the travel itself:

> In Norway, at the edge of a frozen pond where the Northern moonshine colored the dream-like surface subtly blue, for the first time, the disease that would take her away, revealed itself. It was a light and sudden feeling of suffocation, followed by what seemed a weak strike to the heart, before a momentary stop to the blood flow. But all at once, wanting to avoid self-delusion, she understood that the malady from which her mother died lived anew in herself and that her days of happiness were numbered. Oh! The tomb did not frighten her. She would descend into it at the top of her youth, at the top of her dreams, at the top of her bliss, unaware of downfalls and sorrowful awakenings. And to the incredulous Marthe, she talked ceaselessly of their inevitable separation and of her coming death which she desired to be very white, very bright, very flowery…[23]

As in *Noodlot*, the Norwegian environment proves fatal. In contrast to Couperus' novel, though, the location of Colette's attack of illness remains unspecified. Nor is the Norwegian landscape described in any detail at first. It is only later, when Jacques and Marthe talk about losing their loved ones, that Marthe is stirred by a clear memory of it:

> the majestic whiteness of its absurdly clean plains, the pallor of its seas with their steel-colored swells as of molten opals, the strangeness of its heavens of unknown stars, the gloom of its sleeping lakes in the mystery of sinister valleys, the deathly pale of its glaciers bluish like moonlight […].[24]

---

[22] In Colette's death, Raffard notices intertextual elements of authors such as Jean Lorrain ("Narkiss"), Emile Zola (*La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*), as well as John Everett Millais' famous painting *Ophelia* (Raffard 2020: 47).

[23] "En Norvège, au bord d'un pâle étang gelé dont le clair de lune boréal bleuissait finement l'irréelle surface, se révéla, pour la première fois, la maladie qui devait l'emporter. Ce fut une légère et subite oppression, puis, comme un faible coup porté au cœur, suivi d'un arrêt momentané du sang. Mais, tout de suite, sans vouloir s'illusionner, elle comprit que le mal dont sa mère était morte revivait en elle, et que ses jours de bonheur étaient comptés. Oh ! la tombe ne l'effrayait pas. Elle y descendrait en pleine jeunesse, en plein rêve, en pleine félicité, ignorante des déclins et des lamentables réveils. Et, à Marthe incrédule, elle parlait sans cesse de la séparation inévitable, et de sa mort prochaine qu'elle voulait très blanche, très lumineuse, très fleurie …" (d'Herdy 2012: 65-66).

[24] "[…] la souveraine blancheur des plaines irréellement pures, la pâleur des mers aux flots aciéreux comme d'opales en fusion, l'étrangeté des ciels aux étoiles inconnues, la

Unlike the depressing mood of Couperus' rainy Molde, the strange, incomprehensible beauty of Norway, surpassing human understanding, is not an omen of imminent danger but an example of exquisite, albeit fatal, beauty. As such, d'Herdy's Norway seems to represent what Rita Felski has dubbed the "exotic sublime" in fin-de-siècle fiction, representations of a "mysterious alterity which provides an alibi for the exploration of particular erotic scenarios" (Felski 1995: 137). The North becomes an exotic, fatal sanctuary for "deviants."

In one sense, then, Colette's fate seems to fit with how the transgression of the lesbian in *finiséculaire* novels routinely ends in a punishment, either in the form of marriage or in the form of death or quarantine (see Albert 2005: 192). However, while tragic, the loss of Colette can be understood in terms of how, as Susan S. Lanser remarks, Romantic depictions of female relationships "wed same-sex intimacy to a natural order in ways that recuperate its positivity in some progeny or movement" (2014: 240). *Monsieur Antinoüs et Madame Sapho* follows this tendency by having Colette's death generate a fearless attitude in Marthe. At the end of the novel, she successfully dissuades Jacques from committing suicide with the following grandiose call to arms:

> Our existence is a weft on which we may still, if we want, embroider splendid and unforgettable days. Haughtily draped in the royal purple of an indomitable pride which the sense of our genius gives us, on a cliff of disdain, against which the sterile hatred of those who will never understand us becomes blunted, we will dominate life, the greedy life, from which we will be able to wrestle, until the last, all of its hidden treasures.[25]

Heteronormativity is sterile, while the combined support of the lesbian woman and the gay man for each other will allow them to enjoy all the pleasures of existence, like sucking the juice out of a piece of fruit (d'Herdy 2012: 92). Marthe's vision of the "sterile hatred" of society going blunt on her and Jacques plays on the connotations of the word "mousse"; hatred will "s'émousser," that is, go blunt, but also turn into "mousse," i.e., sea foam. To Marthe, heteronormativity represents a threat coming from everywhere against which one can still stand firm. In my view, Raffard (2020: 40) is thus mistaken in implying that when Marthe and Jacques decide to continue their marriage of convenience, this is a reunion of the two poles of a desexualized androgyne. Rather, their cohabitation is a chance to fulfil their erotic desires

---

sombreté des lacs endormis dans le mystère de sinistres vallées, la lividité des glaciers bleuis de clair de lune, […]" (d'Herdy 2012: 88).

[25] "L'existence est une trame sur laquelle nous pouvons encore, si nous le voulons, broder des jours éblouissants et inoubliables. Altièrement drapés dans la pourpre royale d'un indomptable orgueil que nous donne le sentiment de notre génie, sur un roc de mépris, contre lequel s'émousse la haine stérile de ceux qui ne nous comprendront jamais, nous dominons la vie, l'avare vie, à laquelle nous saurons bien arracher, jusqu'au dernier, tous ses trésors cachés" (d'Herdy 2012: 92).

in full knowledge and acceptance of its risks. The city into which they walk is a location removed from the threatening, external nature, in which Jacques and Marthe may live in accordance with an inner nature, conquering life itself.

A Gay Vitalist Rebuilding of Society

The short story "Freitod" serves as a contrasting example to the novels published three decades earlier. Its background is the *Wandervogel* movement, a German association reminiscent of boy scouts. Its homoerotic basis was well-known within the gay emancipation movement in the Weimar Republic, and "Freitod" is only one of many "Wandervogel stories" printed in gay journals (see Fassnacht 2021).

When young Friedrich discovers that his love interest Hanns has left for "Nordkap," his first impulse is to think of the Arctic Ocean as a location for a sublime suicide: "What a wonderful death it would be to fall from the peak of the northernmost point of Europe into the surging flood of the unending sea…"[26] Friedrich rushes north to find him, but only discovers a suicide note left for him at one of the boarding houses at Magerøya on which the cape is located. Deciding to follow his friend in death, Friedrich wanders out to the cape, but changes his mind. He considers it his duty to guide those smitten by Eros in how to make constructive use of their passions. Friedrich himself could be said to "sublimate" his death drive in deciding to go back to his duties:

> And then I stood up from the ground, threw my head back, and, in holy joy of God, I greeted the remote light of the awakening morning. I ripped Hanns' letter to pieces and let the white snippets, solitary witnesses of a truly tragical destiny, be carried away by the wind and the flood. […] meanwhile, a thought of a later monumental building and monument ripened in me […] the thought of a temple of friendship.[27]

Friedrich's goal, then, is to build a stronger male community by enhancing the bonds of friendship. Male same-sex attraction here comes across as a sacred, constructive force. Thus, the story allegorically presents the key tenets of the Wandervogel movement. According to its founder and theorist Hans Blüher, the male subject was able to combine Eros and Logos (Bruns 2005: 108). The idea was that erotic bonds between men were fundamental for the creation of

[26] "Was für ein wunderbarer Tod müßte es sein, sich von dem Gipfel des nördlichsten Punktes Europas hinunter in die brandenden Fluten des unendlichen Meeres zu stürzen…" (Omen 1924: 175).

[27] "Und da stand ich auf vom Boden, warf den Kopf in den Nacken und grüßte in heiliger Gottesfreude das ferne Licht des erwachenden Morgens. Den Brief von Hanns zerriß ich und ließ die weißen Fetzen, die einzigen Zeugen eines wahrhaft tragischen Schicksals, vom Wind und den Fluten treiben […] während in mir der Gedanke eines späteren monumentalen Baues und Denkmals reifte […] eines Tempels der Freundschaft" (Omen 1924: 175).

community, and thus he considered male single-sex associations as essential for a successful state (*ibid.*: 101). The stronger the erotic bonds of a man toward other men, the more apt he was as a leader (*ibid.*: 109). Eros, then, is a tremendous force, with both community-building and potentially fatal effects. This is mirrored in the abysmal attraction of Norwegian nature, described as holding a religious, exalted kind of vitality, but also a suicidal attraction. Thus, as in Couperus and d'Herdy, the landscape symbolizes aspects of the sexual nonconformist. What this Wandervogel story demonstrates is how nonhuman nature is a force to be respected, feared and admired—but also conquered. Friedrich's ability to tear himself away from the death drive can be read as symbolic of the masculine mastery of nature, a mastery predicated on the capacity to become one with the sublime without letting it gain the upper hand, in contrast to *Noodlot*. Thus, the human-non-human relation here underlines the masculinist assumptions of the Wandervogel movement.

As Max Fassnacht points out, "nature was used to formulate a kind of homosexuality that could be respectable during the Weimar Republic" (Fassnacht 2021: 436). Building on what we can identify as a larger tradition of nature-worship rhetoric in homoerotic literature (see Shuttleton 2000), "Freitod" harbingers a masculinist-separatist, vitalist conception of male same-sex eroticism, ideologically quite different from the other two narratives discussed above. Importantly, in the Wandervogel movement it was considered completely possible to be a same-sex loving individual without identifying as homosexual (Bruns 2005: 106-107). By showing the potential for resisting the attraction of suicide and how to sublimate loss into action, the short story attempts to make male homoeroticism respectable.

This male-homosexual separatism contains elitist and misogynist aspects which were later to be exploited by fascist ideologies. "Freitod" arguably alludes to the common trope of the wilderness as an arena for masculine conquest (see Cronon 1996: 77). This trope was likely strengthened by the abovementioned fascination with the Arctic; the North is to be conquered by the same-sex desiring man. Moreover, as Stefanie von Schnurbein argues, in the vitalist-influenced life reform movements of the early 20th century, "the North became the location of such desired qualities as light, naturalness, youth and beauty—a fact that linked the life reform movement with equivalent movements in the Scandinavian countries, and allowed the inclusion of racial ideologies of whiteness" (Schnurbein 2016: 33). The entanglements of homoeroticism and an exclusionary masculinist-patriarchal view of society as evidenced in "Freitod," thus provides a striking example of the ideological and aesthetic volatility of "nature" and "sexuality."

Concluding Remarks

The texts in question were published during a period of negotiation of the limits between hetero- and homosexuality, and where efforts were made to explore various ways of thinking about non-normative sexuality and its role in nature and society. In *Noodlot*, the Norwegian landscape sets the stage for a critical examination of the omnipresence of fate. The same-sex desiring man here comes across as a fatal force breaking in from without, much like the irrepressive consequences of past actions in Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Luis d'Herdy, on the other hand, takes a similar conception of the Norwegian environment as a starting point for a more affirmative and radically antihomophobic attitude to non-heteronormative lives. Written almost three decades later, under the influence of what can broadly be called cultural vitalist ideas of masculine youth, strength, and the civilizational force of male same-sex bonding, "Freitod" uses ideas of the Norwegian environment to support an even more differentiated concept of sexuality, pivoting on a distinction between healthy male bonding and surrendering to death. Here, nature is a force to be challenged head-on, with the potential of creating a cathartic moment.

While I have striven to address the naturalist, decadent, and vitalist aesthetics influencing these texts, one might argue that I am eliding important differences between them in terms of the landscapes they purport to depict. The surroundings of Molde and Trondheim in Couperus and the unspecified "frozen lake" and dramatic ocean waves in d'Herdy come across as decadent locations where a stagnant and dreary nature nevertheless carries sublime connotations outside the control of the characters in question. In contrast, Nordkapp, a dramatic cliff as far North as one can go, seems a more vibrant, vitalist environment. Still, I would argue that despite their differences, these texts draw on a conception of the Norwegian landscape as untamable and beyond the limits of human control. The fact that these stories make such diverse use of ideas of Norwegian nature demonstrates the instability—or perhaps one should say the ideological and aesthetical *flexibility*—of concepts of nature and sexuality alike.

References

Aarekol, L., 2016, "Arctic Trophy Hunters, Tourism and Masculinities, 1827-1914," *Acta Borealia*, vol. 33, nº 2, p. 123-139. Doi: 10.1080/08003831.2016.1238173.

Albert, N. G, 2005, *Saphisme et décadence dans Paris Fin-de-siècle*, Paris, Éditions de La Martinière.

Azzarello, R., 2012, *Queer Environmentality: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality in American Literature*, Farnham, Ashgate.

Barton, H. A., 2007, "The Discovery of Norway Abroad, 1760-1905," *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 79, nº 1, p. 25-40.

Bastet, F., 1987, *Louis Couperus: Een biografie*, Amsterdam, E.M. Querido's Uitgeverij.

Bruns, C., 2005, "Der homosexuelle Staatsfreund. Von der Konstruktion des erotischen Männerbunds bei Hans Blüher," in *Homosexualität und Staatsräson. Männlichkeit, Homophobie und Politik in Deutschland 1900-1945*, zur Nieden, S. (ed.), Frankfurt/New York, Campus Verlag, p. 100-117.
Christiansen, P. R., 2009, *Hus med hedersmerke: Historiske bygninger i Trondheim*, Trondheim, Tapir akademisk forlag.
Cocks, H.G., 2003, *Nameless Offences: Speaking of Male Homosexual Desire in Nineteenth-Century England*, London/New York, I.B. Tauris.
Couperus, L, 1990, *Noodlot*, vol. 4, *Volledige Werken Louis Couperus*, Utrecht/Antwerpen, Veen.
Couperus, L., 2013, *Footsteps of Fate*, Bell, C. (trans.), Auckland, The Floating Press.
Cronon, W., 1996, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, Cronon, W. (ed.), New York/London, Norton, p. 69-90.
D'Herdy, L, 2012, *Monsieur Antinoüs et Madame Sapho*, Montpellier, GayKitschCamp.
Dirikx, L, 1993, *Louis Couperus en het decadentisme: Een thematologische confrontatie*, Gent, Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde.
Dixon, J., 1997, "Sexology and the Occult: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Theosophy's New Age," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 7, nº 3, p. 409-433.
Donoghue, E., 1995, *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801*, London, HarperCollins.
Dybdahl, A., 2016, *Klima, uår og kriser i Norge gjennom de siste 1000 år*, Oslo, Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
Eman, G., 1999, "1907: Det homosexuella genombrottet," in *Sympatiens hemlighetsfulla makt. Stockholms homosexuella 1860-1960*, Söderström, G. (ed.), Stockholm, Stockholmia.
Fassnacht, M., 2021, "On the Ground of Nature: Sexuality and Respectability in *Die Freundschaft*'s Wandervogel Stories," *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 68, nº 3, p. 434-460. Doi: 10.1080/00918369.2019.1656030.
Felski, R., 1995, *The Gender of Modernity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
Fjågesund, P., 2014, *The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920*, Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi.
Gurholt, K. P., 2008, "Norwegian *friluftsliv* and ideals of becoming an 'educated man'," *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, vol. 8, nº 1, p. 55-70. Doi: 10.1080/14729670802097619.
Gaard, G., 2004, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," in *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice*, Stein, R. (ed.), New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, p. 21-44.
Ibsen, H., 1890, "Ghosts," in *Ibsen's Prose Dramas. Ghosts: An Enemy of the People: The Wild Duck*, Archer, W. (ed.), London, Walter Scott, p. 7-102.
Konst, J., 2017, "Het was krankzinnigheid den vuist te ballen tegen het fatum: Noodlotsconcepties bij Louis Couperus, Adriaan Roland Holst en Arthur van Schendel," *Internationale neerlandistiek*, vol. 55, nº 3, p. 209-234. Doi: 10.5117/IN2017.3.KONS.
Lanser, S. S., 2014, *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press.
Moers, E., 1960, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, London, Secker & Warburg.
Moi, T., 2006, *Ibsens modernisme*, Øye, A. (trans.), Oslo, Pax.
Murat, L., 2006, *La loi du genre: Une histoire culturelle du 'troisième sexe'*, Paris, Fayard.

Murat, L., 2023, *Proust, roman familial*, Paris, Robert Laffont.
Omen, L., 1924, "Freitod," *Die Freundschaft*, p. 174-175.
Oosterhuis, H., 2000, *Stepchildren of Nature. Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
Patanè, V., 2006, "Homosexuality in the Middle East and North Africa," in *Gay Life and Culture: A World History*, Aldrich, R. (ed.), London, Thames & Hudson, p. 271-301.
Preminger, A. & Brogan, T. V. F., 1993, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
Raffard, M., 2020, "Un mystère emblématique : le cas de Luis d'Herdy (1875-1902)," in *Romanciers fin-de-siècle*, Kociubińska, E. (ed.), Leiden/Boston, Brill-Rodopi, p. 2-49.
Rossi, R., 2019, "Disgust-Melancholia as a Mood of Modernity: Naturalistic Constellations of Melancholia in J.-K. Huysmans' À *vau-l'eau*, Émile Zola's *Nana* and Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*," *Excavatio*, vol. 31.
Schnurbein, S. von., 2016, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*, Boston, Brill.
Seymour, N., 2013, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press.
Shuttleton, D., 2000, "The Queer Politics of Gay Pastoral," in *De-centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, Phillips, R., Watt, D. & Shuttleton, D. (eds.), London/New York, Routledge, p. 123-142.
Soper, K., 1995, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*, Oxford, Blackwell.
Svelstad, P. E., 2024, *Same-Sex Desire and the Environment in Norwegian Literature, 1908-1979*, Cham, Palgrave MacMillan.
Witoszek, N., 2011, *The Origins of the 'Regime of Goodness': Remapping the Cultural History of Norway*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.
Woods, G., 2016, *Homintern: How Gay Culture Liberated the Modern World*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press.