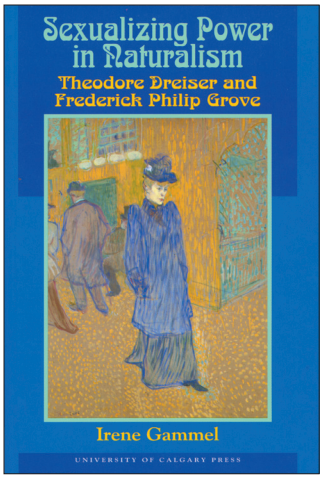

SEXUALIZING POWER IN NATURALISM: THEODORE DREISER AND FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE

by Irene Gammel

ISBN 978-1-55238-631-6

7

Fanny's Sexual Confession

Baroness Elsa's memoirs, written in the mid-twenties (when she was living in abject poverty in Berlin), highlight how much Grove was indebted to her for providing the raw material for his naturalist exploration of female sexuality twenty years earlier. "He had written two novels. They were dedicated to me in so far as material was concerned, it was *my life* and persons out of my life. He did the executive part of the business, giving the thing the conventional shape and dress," writes Elsa (*A* 34–35).[1] Since the female sexual confession had established itself at the turn of the century as a highly marketable, even best-selling, genre (as Margarete Böhme's work illustrates), Grove probably hoped to achieve a financial success by incorporating Elsa's sexual confession into his fiction.[2] That he was prepared to exploit the conventions of this newly

1 Elsa's original manuscript even says that the novels were "dictated by me." Preparing the typescript from Elsa's manuscript, Djuna Barnes probably misread these words; see Spettigue, "Felix, Elsa, André Gide and Others," 12 and 38, n. 5.

2 In a letter to André Gide (September 20, 1905), he claims that he is "certain of its success," quoted in Spettigue, "Felix, Elsa, André Gide and Others," 32.

emerging female genre is reflected in the fact that he even considered omitting his name from the novel. Gaby Divay has noted that Grove toyed with the idea of publishing *Fanny Essler* as an anonymous autobiography,[3] as he explains in a letter to André Gide: "L'un des romans de Mme Essler, qui paraîtra sans nom d'auteur et que M. l'éditeur croit une autobiographie, aura pour titre: *Fanny Essler*."[4] Determined to write a money-making novel, Grove may very well have thought of Laurence Housman's *An Englishwoman's Loveletters* (1900), which was published anonymously and became an immediate success as an "authentic" woman's story, until the author's male identity became known one year after the novel's publication. After all, the absence of the author's name on the book cover of a female confession is a signifier for its sexual content that stimulates the reader's projection of an authenticating female body behind the confessing voice.[5]

It is probably fair to say that *Fanny Essler* grew out of some kind of collaboration with Elsa. Whether she provided a written or an oral account of her life story is not known. With Grove, however, claiming exclusive authorship for the novel by putting his name on the cover, *Fanny Essler* exemplifies the problematic appropriation of the female sexual confession into *fin-de-siècle* naturalist fiction. This is all the more significant as the novel itself is concerned with the power effects of Fanny's confessions within the text. The novel provides a kind of *mise-en-abyme* of "confessor-fathers," with the male author, narrator, and characters all listening to, and exploiting, Elsa's sexual confessions. While Elsa's "collaborative" voice often becomes submerged in the novel's naturalist web, as often it erupts as a voice of protest and resistance against male (and naturalist) versions of truth.

My usage of the term *sexual confession* is borrowed from Michel Foucault, who writes that the "confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex" (*HS* 63). Foucault has theorized this discursive practice in detail, arguing that it is part of a century-old social tradition: "This is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there

---

3 Gaby Divay, "Felix Paul Greve's Fanny Essler Novel and Poems: His or Hers?," unpublished ms, 7.

4 Grove, letter to Gide, October 17, 1904, quoted in Divay, 21, n. 45.

5 I am grateful to Lorraine Kooistra for bringing Laurence Housman's novel to my attention.

has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself" (*HS* 23). The confession, Foucault argues, has become a modern ritual of sexualized power. "Having to tell everything, being able to pose questions about everything, found their justification in the principle that endowed sex with inexhaustible and polymorphous causal power" (*HS* 65). In this confessional spiral, the minutest detail of sexual behaviour, "whether an accident or a deviation, a deficit or an excess," is seen as part of a causal chain that eventually makes sex "cause of any and everything" (*HS* 65). While this causal network continually increases the desire to extract even more truths on sexuality, the sexual confession also gives the agencies of truth (science, medicine, psychoanalysis) a tool with which to "police" the sexual body.

If the male confession has had a centuries-long history, the female confession, in contrast, appears to be a relatively young phenomenon. It was the late-nineteenth-century psychoanalytic and sexological desire to map out the unexplored territory of women's sexuality that led to an increased effort to make women "speak" about their sexualities in confessional texts in order to capture women's "authentic" sexualities, to find out "what women really want," and to solve their sexual problems, such as anesthesia, or frigidity. These problematic areas of female sexuality are the very motifs that naturalist fiction had embraced as its favourite concerns. Foucault and poststructuralist feminists warn us that the confession is fraught with dangers for the confessing person. Where Foucault has discussed the confession in gender-neutral terms, contemporary feminists have emphasized that it is, above all, women who find themselves caught in confessional traps. To quote Rosalind Coward: "The pressure to confess does not, however, affect the sexes equally. Women bear the burden of speech in this area. ... Women are required to make sense of sexual relationships, they are meant to negotiate, explain, confess, keep the relationship in circulation."[6] Also, Rita Felski has noted that much of twentieth-century women's writing takes a confessional form, often drawing on the conventions of the diary or the autobiography. Skeptically questioning whether the female confession constitutes a "liberating step" for women, Felski has proposed to examine "the value and limitations of this trend toward self-disclosure."[7]

---

6 Coward 138–39.

7 Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 86.

As Grove's use of Elsa's life story suggests, one danger of the confession is that it can be easily appropriated and recolonized by a male discourse. Given this danger of recontainment, the differences between Grove's naturalism and Elsa's memoirs deserve some close attention. If we follow the Baroness's memoirs, she had performed in very successful roles at the Central Theatre in Berlin, the "most fashionable stage." Grove's Fanny Essler, in contrast, never moves seriously beyond the amateur stage because she lacks the money to buy the expensive wardrobe necessary for a successful acting career. Also, while Elsa started posing for "Marble Figures" before she had any formal training at all, the "Marble Figure" episode in Grove's novel, significantly, follows rather than precedes Fanny's formal training and thus shows a (naturalistic) social fall and entrapment rather than an artistic development. Not only does Grove's naturalist transformation diminish Elsa's status as a serious artist, but the fictionalized Fanny Essler is also more strongly victimized compared to the young woman who emerges in the Baroness's memoirs of her Berlin years.

Fanny Essler has to be given credit for exposing the very confessional power play that the novel exploits. The novel draws attention to the confession as a ritual of sexualized power, in which "the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing" (*HS* 62). To quote Foucault:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; ... [a ritual that] produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation. (*HS* 61–62)

Fanny Essler is saturated with such rituals of sexual confession. The confessional question/answer pattern is what gives Fanny's first lover in Berlin access to her body: "Tell me the whole story," Axel Dahl says, and "Fanny started to tell him everything" (*FE* 1:74–75). She lays open how much money she has, gives him insight into her past, her desires, her seduction by the Baron in Kolberg, while her new acquaintance gazes deeper and deeper into the "secrets" of her life and prompts her revelations with further questions: "What sort of a baron is this?", "And what did he want?", "You didn't actually ...?" (*FE* 1:75). According to Foucault, there is a curious link of power and pleasure in the sexual confession; the

person confessing is seduced by "all this careful attention, this caressing extortion of the most intimate details, these pressing explorations."[8]

How much this sexual confession is tied into the power relationship is revealed when, after the confession, Axel claims Fanny for sexual intercourse because, he argues, she had done it with the Baron as well. He has become the interpreter of her secret confession, imposing his own and society's view on her, namely, that once virginity has been renounced, the woman loses the right to decide over her body. Here, his language rapidly switches from questions to imperatives: "Now don't be stupid," Axel says, after which "she let him do with her as he pleased" (*FE* 1:81). The fact that Fanny accepts Axel's logic and dominance so quickly makes one wonder how much Fanny has really distanced herself from what she earlier dismissed as the old bourgeois ideas about seduction and dishonour.[9]

In *Fanny Essler*, female pleasure continually shifts from the sexual act to its transformation into discourse, a confessional pleasure that Grove's narrative exposes and satirizes as *ersatz*-pleasure that feeds on and reproduces hierarchical gender relations. Like her earlier sexual contacts with men, Fanny's sexual contact with her husband Eduard Barrel leads to frustration: "'But I don't feel anything,' she sobbed" on her wedding night (*FE* 2:121). As a result, Fanny and Eduard spend whole nights talking and analyzing her frustration: "So it came to pass that this couple who could not achieve a physical union found themselves in such a state, an almost feverish logic, as a result of their nightly theorizing, that Fanny was requiring her husband to scout around and find her the lover who would help her" (*FE* 2:141). As Eduard "suchte sie zu trösten, zu vertrösten" (*FE* 424),[10] this discursive pleasure feeds her desire but eternally defers satisfaction, and thus perpetuates her sexual confessions. She feels privileged to have a husband to whom she can confess her sexual problems, fantasies, and infatuations: "It really was very nice of Eduard to let her tell him all these things! How would other men have reacted!" (*FE* 2:171). Despite the torture of their lives together, Fanny and Eduard share a sensual pleasure in discussing their relationship and her "secret" sexual passion for Eduard's friend Reelen, a passion that

---

8 Dreyfus and Rabinow 173.

9 See *FE* 1:46–47. Right after her sexual initiation with Baron von Langen, Fanny realizes that "she had done something that 'dishonoured' her," but "she did not feel sullied," which suggests that she rejects the verdict of her society.

10 While *trösten* means "to comfort her, to console her" (*FE* 2: 121), *vertrösten* means putting off (even with empty promises).

Eduard does not suppress. On the contrary, he fuels and channels it to his own advantage, because it allows him to maintain his relationship both with Fanny and with his friend Reelen.

Foucault has analyzed such discursive sensualizations as "the pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open – the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure" (*HS* 71). Fanny's sexual truth-telling, of course, is not an isolated practice, but belongs to the larger social dissemination of procedures of confession at the turn of the century: "Campe, Salzmann, and especially Kaan, Krafft-Ebing, Tardieu, Moll, and Havelock Ellis carefully assembled this whole pitiful, lyrical outpouring from the sexual mosaic. Western societies thus began to keep an indefinite record of these people's pleasures" (*HS* 63-64). Indeed, many of the new studies were concerned with female sexuality, reflected in Krafft-Ebing's *Psycho-pathia sexualis* (1886), Albert Moll's *Das nervöse Weib* (1898), and August Forel's *Die sexuelle Frage* (1905), often promising "liberation" through sexual truth-telling. Foucault takes pleasure in parodying this liberationist logic: "Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy, which a 'political history of truth' would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free – nor error servile – but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power" (*HS* 60). Theorizing the sexual confession as a modern ritual of power, Foucault inverts this psychoanalytic logic of sexuality and truth-telling, arguing that the "repressive hypothesis" itself is part of the larger proliferation of sexualized power.

Foucault's point is illustrated in the power relationships that emerge through Fanny's confessions. Listening to Fanny's sexual life story and interweaving it with the contemporary discourses on sexuality, Eduard, in fact, finds the perfect tool to define Fanny's identity. By adopting a psychoanalytic discourse Eduard convinces Fanny of his telling the truth about her state: "She believed him when he told her that she was sick" (*FE* 2:141), which in turn gives him the power to suggest methods for a cure. In his analysis she becomes a psychopathological creature who has to be sent to the sanatorium in order to be treated for her "disorder" by having her uterus massaged. While Fanny secretly accuses Eduard of her sexual problems, and later imposes her own psychoanalytic argument, namely, that Eduard is a "half-man" because he has given all his energy to his art, she nevertheless accepts the fact that it is she who needs treatment. Here Grove's text is very evocative of Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), in which a doctor-husband analyzes his wife and orders a rest cure that ultimately drives her into madness. But while Gilman's text criticizes the doctor's analysis as a complete misreading of the state of mind of his wife, Grove's is only in part critique, as the narrator is in "secret communion" or at least partially complicitous with the amateur psychoanalyst and husband Eduard when he imposes his interpretation on Fanny.

Throughout the novel, the narrator appears to play the role of amateur psychoanalyst himself, who sets the stage so that Fanny can speak her (sexual) self into being. The novel starts out with a focus on Fanny's daydreams which she experiences seemingly in free association on her *chaise longue* in her bedroom, with the narrator as an apparently impartial and objective analyst looking over her shoulder and "listening" to her sexual fantasies as they pass Fanny's half-conscious mind in free indirect discourse. The scene of Fanny's sexual initiation with Baron von Langen is related in confessional language, brought to the surface through Fanny's *Erinnerung* (*FE* 14; remembrance, memory). In *Fanny Essler*, the confession always comes "from below, as an obligatory act of speech, under some imperious compulsion [that] breaks the bonds of discretion or forgetfulness" (*HS* 62).

"It is through sex," Foucault writes in his discussion of the Freudian conception of sexuality, "that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his intelligibility" (*HS* 155). We look for our identities in our sexualities, so that sexuality "has become more important than our soul" (*HS* 156). Similarly, Fanny Essler participates in the sexualization imposed by the male "confessor-fathers" by locating the search for her identity into the sexual realm. The free indirect discourse that describes her sexual initiation is very telling:

> Sie hatte nur gewußt, wenn ich jetzt gehe, so tue ich etwas Entscheidendes, etwas was mich von allem abtrennt, das ich bisher war, und dann kommt, kommt es, das Ungeheure, das Geheimnisvolle, das, was alles in ihr lösen mußte, was alles erlösen mußte; das Geheimnis des Daseins würde ihr offenbart. (*FE* 13)[11]

In Fanny's language ("erlösen" and "offenbaren"), the sexual act takes on a religious, even an apocalyptic quality, an inflated language that has

---

11 "She had only known: if I go to him now, I'll be doing something crucial, something that will separate me from all that has gone before, that I previously was, and then it'll happen, it'll happen, that immense something, that mystical something that would have to release everything within her, which would save her: the mystery of being would be revealed to her" (*FE* 1:26).

a parodic effect, especially in light of the frustration she experiences in the sexual act itself. At the same time, the decision to be sexually active is a decision through which Fanny consciously defines, creates, and proudly affirms herself as an active subject ("wenn *ich* jetzt gehe, so tue *ich*"). And yet, in the middle of the same sentence, the grammatical, speaking subject ("ich") is displaced by the gender-neutral "es" (it), the "Other," the subconscious, which disrupts her sense of (a unified) self: the "ich" of Fanny's sentence turns into a thing of the past before the sentence is even complete ("das *ich* bisher *war*"). "Es" is unnamed and unnameable in Fanny's confession, but it is personified as "das Ungeheure," a word that accompanies her like an epithet throughout the novel.

In contrast to Fanny, Grove's real-life model Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven presents irreverent neologisms in her memoirs that simultaneously express her sexual pleasure and parody the Freudian obsession with sex, as when she calls one lover her "sexsun" or insists on her "sex rights" when faced with an impotent husband. In fact, Baroness Elsa identifies her younger self with her "sexattraction" and confesses that the "enlargement of experience – knowledge – personality – was with me reachable only through sex" (*A* 148). Like Elsa, Fanny perceives her own subjectivity as inextricably interwoven with her sexuality. This connection between self-knowledge and identity is not surprising, since sexuality has become, as Foucault has shown, the paradigmatic domain of truth in Western culture. Knowing one's sexuality has become equivalent with knowing oneself; finding the key to one's sexual secret means finding the key to self-knowledge and personal identity: "We demand that sex speak the truth ... and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness" (*HS* 69). For both Fanny and Baroness Elsa, sex appears to be the (illusory) key to self-knowledge and liberation.

While male seduction is a predominant motif in Dreiser's sexualized world, Fanny, in contrast, rejects the idea that she has been seduced, deliberately assuming responsibility for her sexual desire: "Seducer! She hadn't needed a seducer!" (*FE* 1:47). Nevertheless, *Fanny Essler* also draws critical attention to the fact that the "normal" form of sexuality she experiences is a male mastery over the female body. Fanny actively seeks the sexual initiation with Baron von Langen but in the act itself stops being an active subject and acquiesces to becoming a masochistic object: "her whole body had cried out for him. And she had had the feeling: now he can take me and do with me as he pleases. Whatever he wishes, that's what I'll do; and even if he beats me, even if he murders me – he

can do all that, and I'll sink down in front of him and still be his" (*FE* 1:27–28). The reader witnesses these events after they have taken place, as they pass Fanny's consciousness, a narrative technique that reaffirms the impression of a strange female passivity, because when reminiscing, Fanny finds herself in a state of "weariness," exhaustion, and semi-sleep.

Thus the unrelenting search for the truth of sexuality is a double-edged sword because sex becomes the anchorage point for the female's continued imprisonment. While Fanny Essler hopes for sexual enlightenment, Grove reveals the protagonist's lack of self-awareness and self-knowledge in her confessional voice, which is inevitably self-contradictory: "Had she loved him? Oh yes, she still loved him – or, no – she really didn't know" (*FE* 1:29). The confessional yearning for a single truth deconstructs itself, revealing Fanny's entrapment in the confusion of her feelings, while readers are invited to draw their own (psychoanalytic) conclusions. Fanny is, as Freud would have it, tied to her father, and hence compulsively rejects every lover as an insufficient *Ersatzmann* (who is unable to satisfy her sexually).[12] While Fanny is incapable of drawing these conclusions herself, the reader is invited to take an ironic perspective on this character – the typical perspective offered to the reader in the traditional naturalist novel – and simultaneously to participate with the author-narrator and the (male) characters in the (psychoanalytic) search for the key to Fanny's sexuality.

Like many naturalist females, Fanny is represented not only as hypersexual but also as hysterical – defined on the basis of her reproductive organs. Discussing the historical "hysterization of women," Foucault reminds us that "one of the first to be 'sexualized' was the 'idle' woman": "Thus there emerged the 'nervous' woman, the woman afflicted with 'vapors'; in this figure, the hysterization of woman found its anchorage point" (*HS* 121). Though the eighteenth-century French *Encylopédie* had revived the Greek conception of the womb as "the source, cause, and seat of an infinite number of diseases,"[13] Sigmund Freud's twentieth-century "achievement" lies in showing that hysteria is not a physiological but a psychological disease. Continuing the hysterization of women by claiming the unconscious as a new site and source of hysteria, Freud argued that this typically female neurosis is caused by the repression of incompatible wishes. Brilliant though Freud's insights into Victorian sexuality may have been, they largely glossed over the gen-

---

12 See Freud, "Das Tabu der Virginität," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 12, 174.

13 Quoted in Terry Smiley Dock, *Women in the "Encyclopédie": A Compendium* (Maryland: José Porrúa Turanzas, 1983) 17.

eral mental and social repression of women in patriarchal society, as Susan Bordo has observed. In *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), for instance, Freud describes nearly all of the female subjects as unusually intelligent, creative, energetic, independent, and often as highly educated, yet "Freud never makes the connection (which Breuer had begun to develop) between the monotonous domestic lives these women were expected to lead after their schooling was completed, and the emergence of compulsive day-dreaming, hallucinations, and hysterical conversions."[14] Also, as Foucault notes in his critique of Freud, the hysterization of women in the course of history has entailed women's subjugation and social docility, since the danger of this "psychological disease" requires that she be placed under the supervision of a husband, a doctor, or a psychiatrist. In the Western history of sexuality, the potential pathology of sex created "the urgent need to keep it under close watch and to devise a rational technology of correction" (*HS* 120).

Indeed, it is the psychoanalytic discourse of the idle and hysterical woman that allows the men to define Fanny. According to Eduard Barrel, his wife "was hysterical, that is to say, she had an incredibly exaggerated sensual need that remained unfulfilled for fear of not being able to fulfill that need, which in turn engendered her nervousness. This sensual need was nothing else than a secret longing for motherhood" (*FE* 2:140) – "ein verborgenes Verlangen nach Mutterschaft" (*FE* 449). Eduard's claim for the naturality of motherhood, without which a woman becomes hysterical or psychologically sick, is an argument that is diametrically opposed to Fanny's own conscious rejection of domesticity and her desire for independence, as it glosses over her own desire to be an artist. This "scientific" discourse furthermore glosses over the fact that Eduard, like every other male in the novel, directs, criticizes and ultimately suppresses Fanny's creative impulse (as it detracts from Eduard's own problems with sexual impotence). At the same time, *Fanny Essler* exposes that in each case, male analyses and "cures" are linked to intense relationships of sexualized power in which Fanny is dominated and defined on the basis of her problematic sexuality. When Ehrhard Stein hits her and pours water over her in order to stop her hysterical crying fits,[15] Fanny's reaction is that "his brutality was a comfort to her.

---

14 Susan Bordo, "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture," *The Philosophical Forum* 17 (1985–86): 89.

15 This act of humiliation is figuratively repeated in her relationship with Reelen, who stops her laughter by telling her, "Das darf man nicht," which prompts the following reaction: "Fanny war wie von Wasser übergossen" (*FE* 521).

All of a sudden her behaviour did seem like theatrics" (*FE* 2:70). Although Grove's narrative criticizes Ehrhard Stein as insensitive and even brutal (*Stein*, stone, as well as *hard* underscore his brutality; *Ehre*, honour, is his *idée fixe*), the fact remains that the narrator also projects Fanny in the role of a hysterical woman whose symptoms are correctly analyzed by the male characters and who is brought back to her senses by her male partners.

Though it continues the problematic "hysterization" of the sexualized female in twentieth-century naturalism, *Fanny Essler* nonetheless has to be credited for making a direct connection between the suppression of female creativity and a woman's dissatisfaction, frustration, growing tyranny, and hysteria, a connection that feminist critics often accused Freud of not making. Subjected to degrading working conditions as a chorus girl in the theatre, Fanny responds with hysterical crying fits and has to be sent to a doctor for treatment. Once married to Barrel, Fanny adopts the role of the idle and sexually frustrated bourgeois housewife, whose husband has no time for her. Grove demonstrates that this role turns her inevitably into a tyrant figure who becomes obsessed with monitoring, supervising, criticizing, and discharging her various maids. As a household tyrant, Fanny becomes another Mrs. Hurstwood, but while *Sister Carrie* criticizes Mrs. Hurstwood as a "castrating" character, Grove's sympathies lie with Fanny. Her obsession with household cleanliness and her growing tyranny are juxtaposed to scenes that describe her sexual frustration. Despite the hysterization of the protagonist, *Fanny Essler* does not continue the literary cult and glorification of female invalidism that is so prominent in nineteenth-century writing.[16] Ultimately, the novel exposes that Fanny's frustrations and psychological problems are created by degrading living and working conditions and by the male refusal to acknowledge and take seriously a woman's intellectual and artistic creative energies.

Striving for sexual liberation, Fanny Essler ultimately remains entrapped in her sexuality, whereby naturalism's genetic determinism is replaced by a Freudian *Wiederholungszwang*, the compulsion of repetition. Drawing critical attention to the sado-masochism of Fanny's sexual life – not only are many of her sexual relationships a repetition of the first sado-masochistic act with Baron von Langen, but the protagonist remains unsatisfied and tortured in her sex life – Grove's satire of such

16 See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 37.

male sexual dominance culminates in a very pessimistic view. Unable to break out of a circle of giving herself to "rapist" (or impotent) lovers, Fanny is finally "cured" of her sexual frustration by the ultimate sexual dominator, Friedrich Karl Reelen, ironically the author's double, whose eyes are "like frozen lakes"[17] and who claims that "You have to have something to hit, or to tame" (*FE* 2:146–47). "Was he a sadist?", Fanny indeed asks herself about Reelen, before she experiences a new "ecstasy" by being sexually "mastered" by him (*FE* 2:160, 195). Given the novel's Freudian subtext, it should come as no surprise that it is an archaeologist who manages to "unlock" the secret of her sexuality, thus providing a release of sexual tension. But Fanny's sexual experience also echoes French feminist Luce Irigaray's point that in patriarchal society women are often forced to mimic male desires if they want to experience any desire at all:

> Elles [les femmes] s'y retrouvent, proverbialement, *dans la mascarade*. Les psychanalystes disent que la mascarade correspond au désir de la femme. Cela ne me paraît pas juste. Je pense qu'il faut l'entendre comme ce que les femmes font pour récupérer quelque chose du désir, pour participer au désir de l'homme, mais au prix de renoncer au leur. Dans la mascarade elles se soumettent à l'économie dominante du désir. (*CS* 131)

By the end of the novel, Fanny finally becomes adapted to a sexuality which completely subjugates her as a woman and that is seen as "normal" by almost every character (including the narrator) in the novel. Irigaray, however, warns us not to misread such orgasmic satisfactions for a transcendence of hierarchically structured gender relations. She reminds us that often, "[les] orgasmes [de la femme] sont nécessaires comme démonstration de la puissance masculine. Ils signifient la réussite – pensent-ils – de la domination sexuelle de la femme par l'homme" (*CS* 198).

Thus Fanny's orgasm is not a mark of her female liberation but of a more subtle form of subjugation. Sexual *jouissance* does not really challenge the boundaries of naturalism but recontains the female body within the genre's traditional conventions. After all, Fanny's orgasm is the ultimate triumph of a normalized sexuality of male mastery, and it should come as no surprise that Fanny reflects about it in a strange fascist language. She realizes that the sexual act did not work with her former

---

17 If we see *Fanny Essler* as a *roman à clef*, Reelen is Grove himself and thus a satire of himself: Reelen is a satanic creature, whose eyes evoke the frozen lakes that immobilize Satan in Dante's *Inferno*.

lovers because they "*had* no race" (*FE* 2:195). *Fanny Essler* exposes that the controlled, mechanical, goal-oriented, masculine form of love-making not only negates pleasure but also ritually reinscribes the binary oppositions between self/Other, active/passive, masculine/feminine, racially superior/racially inferior. To be sure, even as she acknowledges these binary divisions, Fanny identifies herself with the second category and also finds in this position the impetus to resist Reelen and recognize him for what he is. Thus, the experience of orgasmic satisfaction does not end Fanny's quest; she is as disillusioned as ever and yearns for her mother, turning her attention (back) to women.[18]

Grove signals Fanny's lack of true liberation in the circles of repetition that characterize this novel. He satirizes Fanny's relationship with Reelen by constructing this character as a double of the sadistic *Neuromantik* Ehrhard Stein. Also, Fanny's act of leaving Barrel for Reelen is a repetition of her earlier leaving of Nepomuk Bolle for Ehrhard Stein. And Reelen is also a double of Fanny's father. Not only does Fanny become "Mein liebes Kind" in Friederich Karl's discourse,[19] but both men are *Kerkermeister* in her life who impose the constraints (*Zwang*) of bourgeois conventions. In both relationships, Fanny's rebellion is rooted in the memory of a mother–daughter alliance against the father-lover. The relationship of the nineteen-year-old Fanny with her father has explicitly Oedipal overtones: Fanny understood "that one could fall in love with Papa. He was strong, incredibly strong, and so blond and – yes, in fact, he was truly handsome" (*FE* 1:25). This language is echoed in her later description of Reelen. Not only does she emphasize how much other women desire Friederich Karl, but she also sees him as blond, blue-eyed, and incredibly strong. It is through these doubling devices that Grove reinforces the satire of Reelen by indicating that in Fanny's life this man is not the ultimate "saviour" but just another circle of repetition and another twist in the spiral of power. Like Foucault and de Beauvoir, Grove draws attention to the fact that the construction of the hysterical woman is tied into relationships that are inevitably saturated with power.

By the end of the novel Fanny turns emotionally away from Reelen and yearns for female rather than male companionship. And yet, Grove

---

18 *Fanny Essler* thus satirizes the "maschinenmäßige Liebe" ("machine-like love-making") celebrated by some *fin-de-siècle* writers, among them Hermann Bahr; see Jens Malte Fischer, *Fin-de-siècle: Kommentar zu einer Epoche* (München: Winkler Verlag, 1978) 111; also 53–65.

19 See *FE*, 518, 522, 523, 531, 532, 533.

chose to link this feminine, maternal alternative to her "peaceful" death rather than to a new beginning, with the last sentence of the novel emphasizing that if the end of desire means pleasurable peace, it also means death: "*Thus a calm death saved Fanny Essler from the greatest disappointment of her life*" (*FE* 2:232). The italics should be seen as a warning signal not to take this sentence at face value. Considering that Fanny spent her whole life in search of a "saviour," it is ironic that she should be "saved" in death. It is Grove himself who becomes here the "authorized" saviour and gives his protagonist peace by putting an end to her desire and "allowing" her to die. Here, the saviour-author, freezing Fanny's life forces into the absolute stasis of death, becomes the last in a series of male artists all of whom try to appropriate, to channel, and to neutralize Fanny's creative energies. The parody thus turns full circle back to the author who has succeeded where his character Reelen has failed: he has finally tamed Fanny's desire by containing her voice, body, and sexuality within naturalist conventions.