Embodying Liminality:

Constructions of Exhaustion Across Medical and Literary Texts in Germany and France, 1880–1930

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Le fatigué ne peut plus réaliser, mais l'épuisé ne peut plus possibiliser.

Gilles Deleuze, *L'Épuisé*

Écrire.

Je ne peux pas.

Personne ne peut.

Il faut le dire: on ne peut pas.

Et on écrit.

C'est l'inconnu qu'on porte en soi: écrire, c'est ça qui est atteint.

C'est ça ou rien.

Marguerite Duras, *Écrire*

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century German and French medical texts on exhaustion and exhaustion-related syndromes along with representations of exhaustion in literary texts of the same period. Its aim is to explore medical constructions of exhaustion in both countries, including its aetiologies and metaphorical constructs, and the ways in which these theories have been explored in a range of literary texts. The corpus includes texts written by Heinrich Mann (*Haltlos*, 1890; *In einer Familie*, 1894; *Doktor Biebers Versuchung*, 1898), Thomas Mann (*Schwere Stunde*, 1905; *Der Tod in Venedig*, 1912), Hermann Hesse (*Unterm Rad*, 1906; *Kurgast*, 1925; *Die Nürnberger Reise*, 1927), Joris-Karl Huysmans (*À vau-l'eau*, 1882; *À Rebours*, 1884), Octave Mirbeau (*Dans le ciel*, 1892–1893; *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*, 1901), and Marcel Proust (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913–1927). This project seeks to illuminate the complexity and ambiguity of states of exhaustion, as well as their narrative and metaphorical uses and the tensions between biomedical discourses and subjective experience. On the one hand, this thesis examines how their representations of exhaustion are shaped by cultural and moral values and influenced by dominant medical conceptions of body and mind and constructions of health and disease and the normal and pathological. On the other, it focuses on the various rich aesthetic and creative possibilities the exhaustion trope offers in the literary texts whilst also considering how it allows writers to explore its lived experience and challenge certain medical and social discourses. The thesis pays particular attention to liminality and associated metaphors as a method of capturing exhaustion and its experience. Exhaustion manifests itself as full of paradoxes and a potentially disruptive embodiment that resists and even challenges containment as a liminal condition in-between health and illness, body and mind, disability and ability, visibility and invisibility, absence and presence, limit and limitlessness, stasis and movement, inertia and transformation, and possibility and impossibility. The exhausted find themselves 'on the border' or rather floating in limbo between opposing states, stages, and places. Exhaustion, then, can be conceived as a space of ambiguity and uncertainty. And, in this sense, it can also be envisaged as a locus of resistance or transgression, a creative force, a potential journey towards self-rediscovery and individuation.

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INTRODUCTION

We seem to be living in the age of exhaustion, marked by a dramatic rise in chronic stress, depression, anxiety, and burn-out. As much as these phenomena seem to have invaded our discourse (both public and medical) only recently, interest in and concern about exhaustion has persisted for centuries. Exhaustion has remained a fundamental aspect of our human condition as it involves a relationship to our body, to time and space, to death and being. Exhaustion is commonly presumed to be the result of a certain level of effort resulting in physical or nervous expenditure, on the one hand, and of mental, emotional or spiritual strain on the other. However, the way in which different societies have named and explained the experience of exhaustion over time is variable. Indeed, this physical and mental phenomenon has been the subject of different discourses, that is, different literal and metaphorical constructions – each reflecting aspects of the intellectual, social, and moral state of the society of its time. Consecutive constructions of exhaustion-related syndromes, namely late antiquity's acedia or monks' malady, the aristocratic and artistic melancholy of the eighteenth century, nineteenth-century neurasthenia, and today's well-known burnout, attest to the existence of a discursive transformation, that is to say, to a change in the language and imagery in the representation of exhaustion (see Schaffner 2016).

German- and French-speaking societies, particularly in the context of nineteenth-century industrialisation, urbanisation, and expanding biomedicine, witnessed a proliferation of attempts to measure, delineate, explain, and control manifestations of exhaustion in new medical frameworks and sets of metaphors illustrating the body and its mechanisms. The expansion in medical knowledge, in physiology, physics, chemistry, and the greater advance in instruments for observation went hand in hand with the search for precision. It is important to highlight that the quantitative and qualitative study of the organic movement of the body and its diseases 'by the laws of mechanics, statics, and hydraulics' already dates back to the eighteenth century (see King 1978: 97). In this pivotal moment in the history of modern medicine, at a time when *L'Homme machine* was being published in 1748 by Julien Offroy de La Mettrie (1709–1751), emerged the iatromechanist and iatrochemical medical currents challenging Galenic humour theory and its focus on balancing blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These emerging currents brought to the fore the physical and chemical properties of

fluids in the body and the concepts of motion, pressure, fermentation, and ebullition in the formulation of the workings of the body and its diseases. With the nineteenth century and new developments in scientific and medical theories and practices came new and more systematic observations and classification systems for diseases. Progress also entailed the development of different schools of medical thought. The opposition lay not only between iatromechanical and iatrochemical, but also between vitalist and materialist approaches to the body and diseases (see Weckowicz and Liebel-Weckowicz 1990).

Some physicians, predominantly in Germany of the Wilhelmine period (1890–1914), were further grounded in a purely somatic perception of the organism and its illnesses (see Gilman et al. 1993: 236–237). For instance, Hermann von Helmholtz, Emil du Bois-Reymond, and Wilhelm Ostwald – each representing different aspects of German scientific thought characterised by materialism in the service of industrial modernity – adopted the industrial machine as their model of the universe and developed an understanding of exhaustion founded on the principle of 'Kraft', thus reducing the body to a machine (see Rabinbach 1992: 49). Whilst, under the lead of Jean-Martin Charcot and his experiments in hypnosis and clinical demonstrations at La Salpêtrière, the French scientific school of thought was more determined to break down the underlying psychological mechanisms at work within the body. It may safely be said that the concurrence of several partially or totally antagonistic theories, the lack of precision and coherence in the interpretation of nervous disorders confirms the presence of uncertainties in this age of modern medicine (see Oppenheim 1991: 14, 96). Medical perceptions were still shifting, grappling to define the boundaries between the psyche and the soma.

In this new era of biomedical knowledge founded on observation and innovative experimentation, despite divergent cultural and theoretical perspectives, a prevalent common interest in exhaustion and exhaustion-related syndromes is noticeable in both countries' medical community. In influential German and French medical works, such as Wilhelm Erb's *Über die wachsende Nervosität unserer Zeit* (1893), Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Nervosität und Neurasthenische Zustände* (1895), Adrien Proust and Gilbert Ballet's *L'hygiène du neurasthénique* (1897) and Leon Bouveret's *La neurasthénie: épuisement nerveux* (1891), nervous exhaustion became a central object of study. These works, among others, speak of a nervous age, the exhausted self, a fatigued and overburdened society. Crucially, exhaustion was not solely perceived as an individual experience of

bodily and mental decline, but also as a globally experienced condition caused by modern civilisation and its acceleration of progress.

The so-called 'age of nervousness' (1860–1930), as coined by Joachim Radkau (2000) and Edward Shorter (1993) and which stood at the turning point of a new century, was characterised by an individual and social identity crisis. This identity crisis can be understood as a result of a faster pace of life and increased social and economic demands. Owing to new means of transportation and communication, rapidly growing cities, the emergence of habits of mass-consumption with the development of department stores and the obsessive pursuit of economic and labour efficiency (developed with Taylorism), individuals in Western society (primarily in advanced industrialised countries, such as Germany and France) were subjected to various new stimuli. Outside of the economic and technological sphere, this new era of rapid progress is also distinguishable by a rise of individualism, shifting social structures, secularisation, a growing nationalism and antisemitism, the development of socialist ideas, the progressive downfall of the Habsburg monarchy, military defeats (namely the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, 1870–1871), and a growing cultural pessimism (see Pick 1989; Radkau 2000; Sarasin 2001; Killen 2006).

These various social, political, economic, and industrial transformations were understood by physicians, hygienists, psychologists, and the public as deleterious external forces, challenging the psychosomatic constitution (particularly disrupting the nervous system and will power) and identity of individuals and the body politic in general. The effects of these transformations of modern society were listed in the medical and public discourses under the popular notion of 'nervousness' as they were believed to irritate and weaken the nervous system (see Schaffner 2016: 90–91). The nervousness heightened by these external disrupters became an issue of national concern due to its status as a condition of passivity, inertia, regression, and weakness, which were seen as challenging the idea of progress and productivity and, notably, the construction of masculinity (Cowan 2008: 8). In the German Empire, the motto 'Kampf ums Dasein' emerged as a common expression amongst intellectuals, which explicitly disclosed the anxieties and concerns of this time (see Radkau 2000: 21). The idea of exogenous forces draining out the individual body and mind, not to mention the body politic, is for instance neatly captured in Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Über gesunde und kranke Nerven* in which nervousness is

described as '[d]er Wurm, der an der Frucht des Kulturlebens nagt und Lebensfreude und Lebensenergie unzähliger Menschen vergiftet' (Krafft-Ebing 1885: 3).

Exhaustion constituted not just a major object of concern examined in medical texts of the period. A range of German and French literary texts from the 1880s to the 1920s also focus on the exhausted individual. In both medical and literary discourses, exhaustion seems to appear as a physiological and a metaphorical concept. Protagonists such as Des Esseintes (*À Rebours,* 1884), Hans Giebenrath (*Unterm Rad*, 1906), Gustav von Aschenbach (*Der Tod in Venedig,* 1912), and Marcel (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913) appear to be mirroring through their bodily and mental experiences of exhaustion a certain reality of this era: its predominant ideologies, fears, concerns, and, above all, its representations of the body and relationship to the mind. Furthermore, what makes the selected corpus of texts intriguing is its rupture with the realistic and naturalistic genre and its exploration of subjective 'realities' through performative and embodied narratives by way of reflexive inner dialogues, fluid and flexible sequences, repetitions, ellipses or fragmented structure and speech (see Heavey 2015).To a certain extent, literature and medicine seem to be sharing a common concern in attempting to articulate this disease of the century, that is, exhaustion and its related syndromes (such as neurasthenia). However, as much as the literary and medical fields were known to be engaged in discursive cross-traffic, for instance through the use of common metaphors, the inclusion of doctors and subjective-experiential accounts by patients in narratives, the motif of the exhausted characters could be embodying very different meanings – which are worth being scrutinised in more detail (see Carlino and Wenger 2007; Kennedy 2013).

It is worthwhile to note that there is already a growing body of criticism that discusses the historical, sociocultural, and biomedical changes in representations of nervousness, exhaustion and its notable exhaustion-related syndrome known as neurasthenia. Research has been done on neurasthenia in Germany (including Radkau 2000; Bergengruen et al. 2010; Roelcke 2001; Killen 2006; Kaufmann 2010) and in France (Huguet 1984; Loriol 2000; Forth 2001). As numerous research articles and books dedicated to mid-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary and medical texts have demonstrated, this seemingly decadent and entropic period and its vision of the nervous, irritable, and declining body has remained a substantial topic of interest. Philipp Sarasin's *Reizbare Maschine* (2001), for example, examines the evolution of the hygiene discourse during the long nineteenth century and the mechanics at work behind the irritable machine that constitutes the modern body. In

The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity (1992), Anson Rabinbach sheds light on the modern metaphors and theories of the economy of the body, focusing in particular on the notion of the 'human motor' and its fallout. By concentrating on the discourse of the body in relation to labour (Marxist theories, Taylorism), he explores the ubiquitous metaphor of the working body as a machine and nineteenth-century society's obsession with the consumption and limitation of the body's physical energy. Besides, critical works engaging with the modernist or fin-de-siècle period have previously examined the question of pathology and normality (including Roelcke 1999; O'Connor 2000; Wood 2001; Karschay 2015; Cryle and Stephens 2017), the relationship of illness and gender (Showalter 1987; Wood 2001; Appignanesi 2008; Archimedes 2012; Arnaud 2015; Hewitt 2020; Moore 2022), and the transdisciplinary exchanges between the medical and literary field (Morton 1984; Rothfield 1992; Shorter 1993; Danou 1993; Vrettos 1995; Grauby 2001; Carlino and Wenger 2007; Dames 2007; Kennedy 2013; Dixon et al. 2020; Lawlor and Mangham 2021).

The original contribution of this thesis, then, lies in its comparative and interdisciplinary approach. Nobody has yet written a comparative cross-cultural analysis of the representations of exhaustion in Germany and France, nor has anybody explored in detail the transdisciplinary exchanges on exhaustion and its imageries between medical and literary discourses. Both are the focus of this study, as medical concepts travelled across borders and disciplines and came to be subjected to distinctive interpretations in different socio-cultural and political context. My research adds to the existing literature by engaging in a comparative study of the discourses of exhaustion in German and French medical and literary texts. Analysing the representation of a complex mental and physical state such as exhaustion in literary and scientific discourses is vital for understanding prevailing anxieties, preoccupations, and ideological assumptions of the period of the turn of the century. While this thesis critically engages with existing research on nervousness, neurasthenia, and fin-de-siècle medicine, it also seeks to expand the existing canon by reappraising forgotten and understudied medical works and literary texts engaging with these topics. For instance, certain texts written by Heinrich Mann, Hermann Hesse, and Octave Mirbeau remain greatly under-represented in most exhaustion research, in stark contrast to works written by Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust.

Background: Questions of Definition

To study the subject of exhaustion, it is important to start with its etymology. Something that is not often emphasised is the difficulty to differentiate exhaustion from fatigue or tiredness. The subjective and seemingly unquantifiable nature of exhaustion has made it problematic to define or conceptualise the term. Like pain, it remains a bodily and mental phenomenon, and its evaluation (and categorisation) remains highly complex. Before examining the specific significance of exhaustion in the medical and literary discourses of the mid-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century period, a wider understanding of its origin is necessary. In the broadest sense of the word, exhaustion can be defined as an extreme and persistent manifestation of mental and physical tiredness or weakness. In *Exhaustion: A History* (2016), Anna Katharina Schaffner traces exhaustion-related conditions from antiquity until the present day, proposing the following definition of exhaustion:

> Exhaustion can be understood not only as an individual physical, mental, or spiritual state but also as a broader cultural phenomenon. Physically, exhaustion manifests itself as fatigue, lassitude, lethargy, and weakness. It can be a temporary state (for example, as the result of exertion) or a chronic condition. […] On an affective, emotional, and spiritual level, we can describe the symptoms of exhaustion as weariness, disillusionment, apathy, hopelessness, and lack of motivation. Exhaustion can also result in restlessness and irritability. (Schaffner 2016: 5)

Schaffner goes to show through its medical history that exhaustion is rarely encountered in its 'pure form' in scientific literature. It has continuously remained part of a constellation of other symptoms. We can see throughout history how exhaustion is related to various syndromes, such as acedia, melancholia, aboulia, nervousness, neurasthenia, depression, and burnout. Embedded in these clusters of multiple symptoms, exhaustion ambiguously constitutes a consequence of another symptom or the cause of it.

In this study, too, exhaustion will broadly be understood as a physical, mental, and spiritual state as well as a broader cultural phenomenon marked by a range of distinctive symptoms. The study focuses on instances of exhaustion which cannot be explained by mere strenuous effort or physical illness, nor can they simply be alleviated by rest. The weakness of the exhausted body and mind under investigation in this thesis results from deeper and more complex causes, which are difficult to identify, define, and quantify. On an experiential level, the exhausted body feels weighed down, powerless; the mind is affected by a feeling of inertia, of detachment and a sense of heaviness. Moving one's limbs and concentrating seem impossible chores. The impression one

has when afflicted with exhaustion is to feel cut off from one's own body, disconnected, even empty. Exhaustion is a sign signalling the limits of the body and its mental capacities, yet at the same time it cannot be reduced to the idea of a 'limit-state'.

With its multifaceted and paradoxical nature, exhaustion prevails as a very rich metaphoric concept. The imagery emanating from the word 'exhaustion' or the related verb 'to exhaust' is highly evocative. It has helped us shape the way we picture this bodily and mental phenomenon. Exhaustion-related terms such as 'burned out', 'drained', 'spent', and 'consumed' embody through their imagery and linguistic representations a feeling of irretrievably lost resource. When thinking about the meaning of exhaustion, one pictures an internal *loss* of energy, force, and strength, but also a lived body subjected to a form of *over*-solicitation, weighed down and immobilised by a burden or pressure. Both images – that is, of a lack of resource and an excess of external demands – threaten inner imbalance, the loss of which is continuously present in the construction of exhausted-related syndromes, such as acedia, melancholia, and neurasthenia. They all share that they conceive of human energy as a limited resource that can be depleted either by external or internal factors.

Looking at its etymological roots in different languages, the meanings seem to less ambiguously intersect on the idea of a lack and loss rather than a pressure or excess. Deriving from the Latin verb *exhaurire* meaning 'drain out', exhaustion refers to the act of drawing out or draining off (Online Etymology Dictionary). The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of exhaustion discloses several meanings, which reflect the idea of a substance, or force being emptied out (see Schaffner 2016: 7):

> 1. The action or process: a. of drawing out or forth, *esp.* air; b. of emptying of contents; the condition of being emptied; […] 2. The action or process of consuming or using up completely. 3. a. The state of being exhausted of strength, energy, etc.; extreme loss of strength; b. The draining (anything) of valuable properties; the condition of being so drained. (*OED* Online)

The language used to define exhaustion repeatedly and explicitly refers to a resource being extracted from the body, or removed from a vessel leaving it empty. One can envision imagery related to liquids and air. The notion of energy in the conception of exhaustion only comes later. In all three *OED* definitions, the emphasis remains

on the idea that the holder subjected to a state of being ‘exhausted’ is left with a limited capacity of a substance, because too much of it has been spent.

Looking at definitions of exhaustion in their pure forms in German and French, similar imagery depicting a resource (air or liquid) being drawn out of a receptacle is implied in the words ‘Erschöpfung’ and ‘épuisement’. According to the German dictionary (*Duden*), ‘Erschöpfung’ derives from the verb ‘erschöpfen’, meaning first of all ‘vollständig verbrauchen, aufbrauchen, restlos nutzen’, and ‘bis ans Ende der Kräfte ermüden, anstrengen’. The second meaning refers to a state of fatigue caused by excessive effort. Again, akin to the English meaning of exhaustion, the emphasis is on the loss of resource resulting from an act of overexertion, an overuse of vital resources. The resulting state, which constitutes exhaustion, is slightly more amplified with the use of emphatic words, such as ‘vollständig’, ‘restlos’, and ‘bis ans Ende’. These terms point to an extreme and absolute phenomenon of finitude. The French equivalent ‘épuisement’ echoes the English and German definition through its references to an action of emptying out, of using something to its end, of entirely consuming something. According to the French dictionary *Larousse*, this word primarily signifies ‘[une] [a]ction d’épuiser, de mettre à sec, de stériliser, d’user jusqu'au bout ou de s’épuiser; fait d'être épuisé, tari’. Only its following second meaning alludes to a state of physiological weakness, to a state in which someone’s nutritional reserves have been fully consumed or someone’s nervous tone is very low. Both definitions entail that a material container (whether organic or non-organic), experiencing a state of exhaustion, is exposed to a shortage of resource and thus the object of an original limitation in resource quantity.

As much as the English word ‘exhaustion’ evokes imagery related to the drainage of a container, there is a particularity to the German and French expression. The German and French words seem rather to focus on the imagery of a drained vessel that formerly contained a liquid resource, whereas the English equivalent conjures to a greater extent the image of air, even of a last breath, being drawn out. The words ‘Erschöpfung’ and ‘épuisement’ distinctly evoke in their metaphoric conception a well from which a substance is being scooped out, or pumped out, resulting in its consequential drainage. This imagery is more explicit in the French language as the word derives from ‘puiser’, meaning to draw (mostly water from a well), which in turn extends from the noun ‘puits’, or well. The German word for exhaustion derives primarily from a verb of action, that is to say from ‘schöpfen’. It first suggests the action of a substance being extracted from a vessel, with the latter ending up

emptied out, dried up. Exhaustion indicates finiteness. But the meaning of exhaustion is not exhausted in this pure negativity. The German word 'Erschöpfung' points more clearly than the English 'exhaustion' or the French 'épuisement' to the fact that exhaustion also contains creation ('Schöpfung'), that something new can emerge from the end of availability. Contrary to first appearances, this pair of terms – exhaustion ('Erschöpfung') and creation ('Schöpfung') – is not a mere contradiction. Rather, one is dealing with a complementary phenomenon. It is thus important to include in this preliminary attempt of definition that exhaustion is also a productive force without which there can be no creation.

And here it may be then necessary to recall the difference Gilles Deleuze points out between tiredness and exhaustion. In his essay 'L'Épuisé' (1992), Deleuze begins his reading of Samuel Beckett's works with the all-important distinction between both concepts. In tiredness the possible is realised (one action is preferred to another), whilst exhaustion entails that the possible itself is rendered impossible.

> L'épuisé, c'est beaucoup plus que le fatigué. 'Ce n'est pas de la simple fatigue, je ne suis pas simplement fatigué, malgré l'ascension'. Le fatigué ne dispose plus d'aucune possibilité (subjective): il ne peut donc réaliser la moindre possibilité (objective). Mais celle-ci demeure, parce qu'on ne réalise jamais tout le possible, on en fait même naître à mesure qu'on en réalise. Le fatigué a seulement épuisé la réalisation, tandis que l'épuisé épuise tout le possible. Le fatigué ne peut plus réaliser, mais l'épuisé ne peut plus possibiliser. (Deleuze 1992: 57)

Yet, in exhaustion, the impossible coexists with potentiality. Deleuze suggests that it can also be inflected towards creation and be a productive force. As can be observed with the example of the Beckettian subject, the exhausted has used up 'all logical investments of the space they occupy' and their potentialities (see Bahroun 2022). Far from just meaning finitude, exhaustion can be present from the start of the narrative and constitute the catalyst of the character's journey. In Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, it is the double impossibility of the protagonist, to continue and to stay put, that starts the story: 'Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't any more, I couldn't go on. Someone said, You can't stay here. I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go on' (Beckett 1995: 100). This first paradox: 'I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go on' perfectly sums up the situation of any Beckettian character or narrator, caught in a double impossibility. Yet, it is the impossibility of continuing but also the impossibility of staying put that makes the journey (physical and discursive) possible. The character's state of exhaustion

becomes the engine of the story. Not being able to continue, not being able to go back: it is these different experiences of the impasse that motivate a narrative and writing conditions that gradually detach themselves from traditional modes of narration and create new ones. Deleuze here does not deny the very strong negativity that marks Beckett's work, but he also simultaneously considers it a dynamic force of creation. The notion of exhaustion offers a complex picture – a grey area – full of paradoxes. In evoking exhaustion (rather than fatigue or tiredness), this thesis engages with an ambiguous concept. The heterogeneity of the definition allows the possibility, then, of several different meanings and the development of metaphors.

A Short History of Exhaustion Narratives and Metaphors

What needs to be recognised is that exhaustion is not only a physiological and mental state marked by fatigue, weakness, and inertia, it is also a rich and multi-faceted metaphor that is infused with cultural norms and values. Throughout history, the aetiological theories of exhaustion, meaning the study of its causes, have been variously linked with sin (sloth, temptation), processes of modernity (industrialisation, urbanisation), biological and moral degeneration (e.g., alcoholism, sexual deviance, murderous criminality), and with a maladjustment of the self (see Schaffner 2012; Vigarello 2020). The discursive evolution from monk's acedia, aristocratic and artistic melancholy of the eighteenth century, nineteenth-century neurasthenia, to the contemporaneous burnout syndrome proves the existence of different constructions of exhaustion. These constructions are not devoid of scientific theoretical foundations, but the biomedical knowledge surrounding this phenomenon has continuously remained anchored in a very particular socio-cultural and historical context, and thus presumably been coloured by distinct cultural biases. These historical syndromes of exhaustion were, at least for a time, part of a specific social reality and biomedical perception of the workings of physiological and mental processes.

The focus on the metaphorical connotations of exhaustion (such as the body as a machine, empty-battery imagery, bankruptcy, and vampirism) is crucial for understanding inasmuch its experience and depiction as the social reality in which it was constructed. Figurative language is a vehicle for conceptualisation and categorisation. It also bridges translational gaps between physician and patients. Metaphors shape the way we perceive what is happening inside the body and regulate the experience of bodily and mental phenomena by

drawing a parallel between something difficult to describe with a basic, universal concept. Metaphor also offers a range of possibilities for verbal expression, to explain felt experiences that remain difficult to describe, and can be interpreted in various ways. They *signify* the body of individuals with cultural values and shared beliefs, thoughts, and experiences. And, while they are revelatory of the understandings of the working of the body and mind at a certain given historical and social context, they also shed light on the individual-society interaction and provide understandings of the relationship between the individual and physical and social environmental factors.

In her widely known studies *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *Aids and Its Metaphors* (1989), Susan Sontag shows how metaphoric language to describe illness is intertwined with cultural, political, and medical responses to it. She explores the case of the history of cancer representations, which evolved from an understanding invoking the notion of consumption to that of military invasion with the ill body becoming a battlefield (Sontag 1978: 5, 9–10). Thus, the meaning of cancer became assimilated with the need to fight an invisible illness at the risk of 'losing' and 'succumbing' to it. She also notes how Aids has come to take the insidious connotations of a plague spreading by way of 'sexual excesses' and 'perversity' (Sontag 1989: 114). Sontag shows how injurious these metaphors can be to patients and pleads for an ethically-based rejection of understanding disease in metaphorical terms. The different metaphorical constructions differently impact the experience of illness, but altogether they all induce fear and stigmatise the affected individuals. For Sontag, there is a true, concretely experienced reality in which illness is empirical, and there is a metaphorical world of illness that builds on this, but which loses its connection to real illness and veils, romanticises and covers it with its constructions. Sontag questions the relationship between illness and metaphor as an unjustifiable aesthetic treatment of the reality and lived experience of illness. The same may also apply to metaphorical representations of exhaustion.

Although exhaustion has remained a ubiquitous and timeless human condition and societal concern, representations, meanings and experiences of exhaustion have shifted according to time and space. This proteiform phenomenon has perpetually evolved and developed through its interaction in a given social and cultural context and includes social and cultural-historical codifications. In the longer history of exhaustion, one will be able to observe the constant debate and shift between the mind and the body as the seat of the condition and between the individual and the environment as causal factors. We can find the earliest discussions of

exhaustion in the framework of humoral theory by the physician Galen (AD 129 –200). At that time, diseases were explained in terms of imbalance of the four humours – blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile. The symptoms of exhaustion, namely weariness, sluggishness, lethargy, torpor, and lack of energy, were first discussed as indicators of melancholia. In *On the Affected Parts* (composed after AD 192), Galen explains that melancholia is provoked or rather produced by a surplus of black bile. Either, it was believed that a surplus of black bile slowed the blood circulation, rendering the body lethargic and slow. Or, a surplus of black bile was accumulated in the stomach, causing symptoms such as inflammation, indigestion, heartburn in the stomach. It prompted the body to burn this excess black bile, culminating in a rise of dust imagined to cloud the brain and the sufferer's feelings and judgment (Galen 1976: 92–93). Galen's humoral theory conceived the soul as 'embodied' – a 'slave to the mixture of the body' and particularly to the digestive system – and affected by bodily processes and by its deprivation of energy. Galen's humoral theory remained an influential and dominant medical paradigm in the history of biomedical knowledge – until the rise of modern medicine (see Schaffner 2016: 16; Neckel et al. 2017: 30, 31).

A new theoretical model for exhaustion then emerged in medieval times under the name of 'acedia', also known as the 'sin of sloth', or monk's malady. The word 'acedia' derives from the Ancient Greek *ἀκηδία* meaning indifference, languor, or apathy. The condition was marked by 'exhaustion, listlessness, sadness or dejection, restlessness, aversion to the cell and the ascetic life, and yearning for family and former life' (Jackson 1981: 173). Evagrius Ponticus (AD 324–399), an anchorite monk of the fourth century, made the following observation: '[l]e moine en proie à l'acédie est nonchalant dans la prière et parfois il ne dira même pas du tout les mots de la prière. Car, comme le malade ne se charge pas de fardeaux pesants, ainsi, l'acédiaque ne fait pas avec application l'œuvre de Dieu. L'un, en effet, est privée de la force du corps, et l'autre a les ressorts de l'âme détendus' (quoted in Loriol 2000: 22). As a theological version (or faith-based conception) of melancholia, acedia was mainly associated with the monastic lifestyle and threatened monks. This pathology was only extended to lay people in the tenth and eleventh centuries (see Wenzel 1967; Jackson 1981). Acedia was then initially not understood as an organic disease but as a moral and mainly spiritual affliction, a demonic force which played with the monks' passions and tempted them to leave their community and even abandon their faith. Through the Middle Ages,

writers on acedia tended to emphasise the phenomena of idleness-indolence-neglect and sorrow-dejection-despair (Jackson 1981: 179).

Religious and astrological explanations, such as Saturnian energies as a cause of melancholic exhaustion (as suggested by the fifteenth-century Humanist scholar Marsilio Ficino in *Three Books on Life* (1489)), were frequently still anchored in the humoral theories that continued to abound until the birth of modern medicine during the eighteenth century (Schaffner 2016: 52–70). Then, a new chapter in medical history was introduced by George Cheyne's *The English Malady* (1733) in which Cheyne points to the physiological defects of the nervous system and diverges from past theories of invisible diabolical forces or abstract humours. A new explanatory model revolving around nerves became the preponderant conception in the medical field. The success of this new theory of the nerves emerged with the study of 'animal electricity', under the direction of Italian physician Luigi Galvani (1737–1798), which demonstrated the existence of an intrinsic form of electricity in the body. A life force, a form of energy capable of animating the body, was believed to circulate through the nerves. These experiences of reanimation conducted on animals resulted in the development of an image of the body as an organic entity made of fibrous conductors of energy (see Oppenheim 1991: 80). This conception of a body animated by electric life force was imbedded in a context of discoveries in the fields of electricity, magnetism, light, and heat, and came to be continuously elaborated throughout the nineteenth century, such as in Emil du Bois-Reymond's 'Über die Lebenskraft' (1848) and Hermann von Helmholtz's 'Über die Erhaltung der Kraft' (1862–1863) (see Rabinbach 1992: 65–66).

The modern era subsequently engaged with the disordered body in a different approach and brought new understandings of exhaustion. With modernisation, secularisation, and rationalisation came a new conceptual framework for exhaustion. At a time when the rising notion of individualism questioned the mode of relationship with the group (and translated a search for an emancipatory autonomy), the relationship to the body also changed. Immersed in the styles of modern life that compelled it to adapt to the new forms of the world, the body's senses and particularly its nerves were constantly under threat of becoming strained and worn by overstimulation and over-solicitation. If the body and the metaphors of exhaustion seem to hold a preponderant place in the understanding of modernity, it is insofar as they make it possible to grasp in depth the transformation that the

individual underwent and the tensions with oneself, the social norms and values, and the environment that people experienced.

Modern medicine came up with a new exhaustion-related syndrome. Neurasthenia was then what might be called a fashionable disease, and became an emblematic term for the disease that had come to pervade modern civilisation and threatened its backbone: the educated, the 'brain-workers', bourgeois men. Neurasthenia encompassed a whole bundle of complaints (mostly only vaguely described by those affected and uncategorisable for doctors), such as constant exhaustion and fatigue, diffuse pain, anxiety, dizziness, nervousness, and even sexual dysfunction. At the time, it was commonly attributed to a weakness of the nervous system, caused by repeated and intense pressures induced by the rapid pace and stimulations of modern civilisation and modern life. George M. Beard's theories on nervous exhaustion widely influenced medical perspectives in Europe, but renowned European physicians and psychiatrists were incorporating additional ideas about their nation's cultural, political, and social developments in their medical theories on nervous exhaustion (see Drinka 1985: 212–220; Schaffner 2016: 108–109). This affliction mobilised scientists as much as the mainstream press, public opinion, and artists and writers, and constituted a response to the ambivalent feeling directed toward modernisation. The social factor was at the forefront of this affliction's aetiology.

Examining the 'Medical Gaze' and the Physician-Patient Relationship

With its emergence during the eighteenth century, modern medicine was revolutionised by epistemological breakthroughs including the concept of specific aetiology (diseases have a specific set of causes), the doctrine of cellular pathology (diseases are caused by structural and molecular alterations in cells), and germ theory (diseases are caused by microorganisms known as germs). And with these changes came new ways for physicians to observe and accumulate knowledge about the patient. In *La naissance de la clinique* (1963), which explores the epistemological turn that modern medicine took in France, Michel Foucault argues that at this point in history the practice of medicine shifted from religious discourses (faith-based truths) to a secular, practical, and specialised knowledge, applied in the form of what he terms the 'medical gaze' or 'observational gaze'. Under the medical gaze, the constitution of an individual (meaning, the structural body and its functional features)

became a cluster of signs that could be penetrated by a physician's eye and analysed and classified by his knowledge of an array of visible or 'telling signs' (Foucault 1967/2017: 162).

Technical progress transformed the perception of the healthy and pathological body as the invisible was rendered observable to the naked eye. The microscope and photographic and radiographic instruments enabled physicians to probe the optical depths of the body, to observe germs, and to see and dissect the body in motion. For instance, the French physiologist and chrono-photographer Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) was working on a 'fusil photographique' that shot multiple photos at a high speed. In photographing sequences of movement, and thus dissecting the body in motion, Marey was able to capture and investigate the energetic 'machinery' that was the body. He saw the opportunity to map the body to get a better understanding of the different forces at work. Marey's invention for observation fits into a wider framework in nineteenth-century medicine: the will to measure the body and its life processes and to render medicine an exact, objective science. Resorting to statistics, clinical tables of diseases, that is to a supposedly more objective and concrete notion of disease, the conceptual models of biomedicine strove to divide the organism into smaller and smaller sub-units, thereby defying the essential integrity of human beings. The modern medical spirit turned into an epistemological reorganisation of diseases where the limits of the visible and the invisible followed new patterns and new classifications.

The modern mode of medical perception made visible and decipherable the innermost depths of the diseased body, thus 'authorising' the transformation of symptoms into signs and patients into disease names. The sociologist Nicholas Jewson (1976), who like Foucault studied the dynamics of medical practice, also argues that the 'medical gaze' reflected and created altered power relations between physicians and patient. Foucault already offers an analysis of what biomedical knowledge and perspective meant. The conversation with a physician began not with 'Qu'avez-vous?', but rather, 'Où avez-vous mal?' – which completely reorganised the relationship between the doctor and his patient (1963/2017: 17). In his article on the disappearance of the 'sick man', Jewson similarly exposes a shift in the 'dominant mode of production of medical knowledge', or in the 'locus of epistemological authority' (see Jewson 1976: 225; Nicolson 2009: 640). Rather than the patient telling a doctor what was wrong and showing how they held the knowledge of their own bodies, the doctor simply asked where, in the body, the problem could be located and made the observation with an objective eye. Paris particularly

became the scene of this mode of perception with the rise of hospital medicine and innovative clinic-anatomical methods applied by Pinel, Bichat, Laennec, and later, Charcot and Janet (see Weiner and Sauter 2003).

By rendering it an object for observation, deduction and, ultimately, dissection, the medical gaze *disembodied* the patient from their body and disarticulated the disease from the patient. The pathological body was not constructed around the patient's experience, but around the physician's knowledge. This change had several important implications. It was less the case that a patient was ill, but rather that the patient had a disease. By focusing on symptoms and disease classification systems based on similar developments in botany with plant species, the medical gaze had this objectifying and biologically reductive aspect to it, as it subtracted the individual in an attempt to view disease in its purest form (Foucault 1963/2017: 21, 170–171). This perception followed a specific number of steps: a symptom was located within a disease, a disease within a specific nosological category, and this category in a general hierarchical organisation of pathologies. To read the disease, the doctor had to disregard the patient to know the disease, because its truth was stated on the nosological chart and not on the patient's body. The human body and its manifestations were read as a collective phenomenon rather than an individual one as medicine transferred its gaze from the individual case study to the study of a wider population or class of individuals in its classification of diseases.

Foucault does not mention the German medical scene, yet it makes for an interesting contrast to the Paris School. Laboratory medicine, established in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, precipitated the application of the concepts and methods of natural science (with the Berlin School of thermodynamics founded by Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894) and Rudolf Clausius (1822–1888)) and their principles of conservation of energy to the solution of medical problems (see Mendelsohn 1965; Galaty 1974; Tuchman, 1994). Yet, leading to the turn of the twentieth century, German physicians adopted a more holistic and synthesising gaze. One Michael Hau (2003) describes as 'intuitive' and less scientific, as physicians further approached the body as a whole (not fragmented and disunited) and relied on an outward aestheticisation of health and disease (41). Precisely, the gaze of the physician became analogous to the gaze of the artist in the construction of ideal morphological physical ideal types. Through intuitive contemplation and by judging the outer appearance of the body, one could see and rank a body as healthy or diseased. What propelled this change in medical approach was the decline of the German 'Kultur' and the realities of a democratic mass society. Health reform movements,

which sprung at the beginning of the twentieth century, became defenders of the traditional aesthetics that informed German 'Kultur'. Physicians and hygienists urged their contemporaries to cultivate their body, its beauty and vigour, in accordance with a classical ideal: that of the stereotyped representation of the perfectly sculpted Greek athlete or gods. Norms of health thereby equated aesthetic norms.

In these contrasting theoretical and ideological contexts, exhaustion with the absence of organic lesions became difficult to grasp and a tricky condition for physicians to study, define, categorise. In each of these cultural contexts, German and French medical men resorted to different ways of understanding and conceptualising body mechanisms and diseases. Whereas German physicians were more inclined towards an outward gaze, taking mostly the body, its posture and its demonstration of strength and vitality as a framework to understand exhaustion, the French looked inward and resorted to a psychological symptomatology with the concept of volition, attention and other aspects of consciousness absent or weakened in states of exhaustion. Still, on a shared basis, as will be mostly depicted in the analyses of literary texts, there prevailed in both countries a criticised disconnect and tensions between the physician's gaze and knowledge and the patient's experience and self-perception.

An Exploration of Exhaustion as Embodied Liminality

Exhaustion is a complex and multivalent concept. Exhaustion is fundamentally concomitant with the idea of a quantitative loss and finitude. This articulation renders the 'edges' of this highly subjective and obscure condition tangible. However, in the subjective experience of exhaustion, it cannot be just limited to a finite state, as it harbours a complex conjuncture of ruptures and shifts that are difficult to put into single and generalised words. It is important then to underline in this multilingual comparative study that exhaustion manifests itself as full of paradoxes and a potentially disruptive embodiment that resists and challenges categorical containment as a liminal condition situated in-between health/illness, mind/body, dis/ability, in/visibility, absence/presence, limit/limitlessness, stasis/movement, and possibility/impossibility. The exhausted find themselves 'on the border' or rather stuck in limbo in regions of the between. Far from just being a state of depletion, this study will not only show that exhaustion is a struggle, a tense experience, a feeling of restlessness characterised by disorientation, a

loss of control, and uncertainty, but also a locus of resistance or transgression, a stimulating force for creation or regeneration, a self-reflective process, a journey to individuation.

As a highly subjective, structurally invisible, and inherently blurry and uncertain experience, this thesis ascertains the utility of liminality (or in-betweenness) as a framework for understanding experiences of exhaustion. There has been an increasing interest among scholars across diverse disciplines to introduce the concept of liminality as an analytical tool and applying it to research states of illness, such as cancer or chronic pain (see, for instance, Squier 2004; Jackson 2005; Thompson 2007; Little et al 2022; Mueller-Greene 2022). Reason for its trending and growing use within that context is that it facilitates the discussion of these conditions in non-static terms. Its dynamic model highlights the nature of phenomena that go along with change and transition and encapsulates the experience of uncertainty and ambiguity that characterises invisible, unstable, and contested conditions. Liminality marks the uncanniness and instability of the experience. Being in a liminal state can be formulated as an intense disruption of one's sense of self, one's embodied experience, and one's being in the world. Essentially, the term 'liminality', derived from the Latin *limen* meaning 'border', 'margin', or 'threshold', describes a transient or in-between space, moment or position in which individuals find themselves between fixed positions: between healthy and ill, alive and dead, stasis and dynamism, etc. (see Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman 2014: 33–40). The theory of liminality originally emerged from a desire to capture and understand the sense of fluctuation, transition, and transformation, rather than stasis, that structured rites of passage in different cultures and communities. The theory was first explored in the early twentieth century by French folklorist Arnold van Gennep in *Rites de Passage* (1909) and later developed and broadened by British anthropologist Victor Turner.

In his pioneering anthropological study, *The Forest of Symbols* (1964), Turner describes liminality as a move from one state, status, and/or space to another (for instance, from childhood to adulthood or sickness to health). Turner continues by asserting that society stands as a 'structure of positions', where the liminal stage signifies a transition, a state of limbo, between two socially fixed positions. The liminal persona is 'betwixt and between' positions assigned and set out by law, customs, and ceremonials (Turner 1967: 93, 95). 'Liminality', Turner advances, 'is a movement between fixed points and is essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling' to order (Turner 1974: 274). The structural 'invisibility' of the liminal individual involves two characteristics.

They are at once no longer part of a classification system and not yet reintegrated into one. Their condition is then one of obscurity, uncertainty, and contradiction, a 'confusion of all the customary categories' and uncontainable by any fixed category (1967: 95–97). Yet, for the individual, initiating this transformative ritual constitutes a potential site the temporary dissolution of their past self and rebirth into a new one. Indeed, Turner also asserts that liminality can be considered then as a 'a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (1967: 97).

Based on Turner's definition, the broad concept that is liminality can be experienced when social, psychological, organic or physical processes, that usually compose and maintain one's life, are suspended, disrupted, or transformed. Liminality then entails an experiential and dynamic space within which the individual is in tension with their sense of self and the environment they live in. Liminal experiences have then a double function: at first instance, they are precisely about dissolving the individual's social ties to a fixed and stable position and, secondly, these experiences are about the inner transformation of the individual and their creation of new ties. Liminal occasions have the potential to take on any value. Although rituals are the main concepts theorised in liminal experiences, it can be found in many experiences. As a matter of fact, Arpad Szakolczai claims in 'Liminality and Experience. Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events' (2009) that the 'applicability of the term is wide [and] potentially "unlimited"' (165).

Exhaustion can be crafted as a condition that in some ways is conceptually and functionally equivalent to liminality. On a subjective, individual level, this thesis will explore vulnerable bodies and how exhaustion manifests itself as a disruptive experience or moment of suspension marked by disorientation, uncertainty, and a sense of loss of self and particularly a loss of control over the body. It will also examine how the uncertain, inconsistent, and ambiguous embodied experiences of exhaustion might equally disrupt in the public sphere seemingly fixed and stable biomedical, social, and cultural categories. In a context in which the scientific and particularly the medical field was determined to classify symptoms and causes for each disease and label the strange and unknown as pathological, exhaustion not only transgressed the categorical division of body and mind, but also confounded the social and moral codes surrounding health and disease as an uncertain, unpredictable, undefined, and contested subjective condition. The fluctuating nature of its signs (either difficult to see or classify) only served to make the condition for medical professionals more difficult to delineate and for lay people

more difficult to comprehend and acknowledge, as they did not conform to standard notions of normality and pathology, ability and disability, or health and disease.

Furthermore, this thesis highlights how subjective accounts of exhaustion in literary texts present it more than a condition of stasis and finitude but also as a transitional and transformative state, unsettling norms and challenging stereotypes of the healthy, normal body and the diseased, deviant body. In this regard, despite exhaustion being also presented in literary texts as a disorder, a modern affliction, writings also show that it is not necessarily a condition of closure or decomposition. Literary instances of exhaustion can be identified as a dynamic move into the liminal space, a conscious or unconscious process of resting, waiting, wandering, creating, and a form of resistance to culture or a system. In this thesis then, the discourses of exhaustion are not only signified as weakness, incapacity, and impossibility. The selected literary case studies of exhaustion challenge hierarchy and binary categories by being agents of recognition and generators of criticism, self-reflection, and creativity. Literature, in that sense, has the opportunity to experiment with sensory depictions, explore the depths of human psychology, engage with socio-medical debates about the nature and causes of exhaustion, challenge assumptions about health and ability, and explore unknown terrain through language and narrative form. Where the medical texts are limited to a certain ideological approach, or even in terms of scientific language, literature bears more possibilities to reveal particular and complex internal realities.

Methodology: A Comparative and Transdisciplinary Approach

This thesis combines medical historical, medical humanities, and comparative literary critical approaches to analyse a range of case studies from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century medical and literary discourses in German and French that engage explicitly with the topic of exhaustion. Regarding my primary literary sources, I have selected German and French novels, short stories, and novellas in which a central preoccupation with the physical, psychological, and behavioural manifestations of exhaustion and medical influences are evident. Notable instances and representations can be found in Thomas Mann (*Schwere Stunde*, 1905; *Der Tod in Venedig*, 1912), Heinrich Mann (*Haltlos*, 1890; *In einer Familie*, 1894; *Doktor Biebers Versuchung*, 1898), Hermann Hesse (*Unterm Rad*, 1906; *Kurgast*, 1925; *Die Nürnberger Reise*, 1927), Joris-Karl Huysmans (*À vau-l'eau*,

1882; *À Rebours*, 1884), Octave Mirbeau (*Dans le ciel*, 1892–1893; *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*, 1901), and Marcel Proust (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913–1927).

It aims to examine through the subject of exhaustion the exchange of models, methods, and motives between scientific and literary discourses. Based on Allen Thiher's claim, literature and medicine (or science in general) can be advanced as conciliable domains, sharing a 'cultural matrix setting forth presuppositions, axioms, and constraints for all endeavours to make sense of the world (2005: 1). At the same time, it is not a question either of striving for a fusion or homogenisation of these disciplines and their discourses, but rather to compare and underline the influences, the relationship between both fields including their conflict points. This thesis then seeks to contribute to the comparative and historical research of cultural affinities, points of encounter and conflict, knowledge that is both particular and shared in literary and scientific discourses. Studying the intertwining of scientific and literary discourses can help us study the idea of disciplinary cross-traffic and how for instance medical concepts can take on different meanings in literary settings and can be interrogated and problematised.

By adopting a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, one can learn to appreciate the 'decompartmentalisation' of disciplines, but also the exchanges and tensions between two cultural settings (see Darbellay et al. 2014; Mani 2021). As the first comparative study of German and French medical and literary texts of this chosen period, this thesis interrogates the historical and cross-cultural dimensions to the social and medical construction of exhaustion by studying the influences and differences between two countries geographically close to one another and divided at that time by a history of conflicts. Following the upheaval of the Napoleonic wars, the Congress of Vienna in 1815, and the Franco-Prussian war in 1870–1871, maps were being reassessed, borders redrawn, and national identities became the centre of cultural and political discourses. In an age that is paradoxically typified by its rising nationalistic beliefs and wars, a retreat into monoculturalism, pointing out the similarities and influences travelling across two countries with a long-standing conflictual relationship offers an interesting and enriching dialogue. This will not only contribute to the subject of cultural exchanges between two influential countries by cross-examining a corpus of medical theorists and literary authors. It will also provide insight into different individual lived experiences and medical perceptions on a subject as human and universal as exhaustion.

That being said, it is important to point out that this approach also bears its set of limitations. First of all, as much as the notion of liminality offers an attractive versatile means to explore the exhaustion phenomena, the gaps in research framing theoretical framework under this concept could also potentially be limiting the scope of research of exhaustion. Also, the thesis engages with a narrow set of exhaustion case studies as I elaborate more on the figure of the bourgeois, the aristocrat, the white collar, the artist and the intellectual. This implies that the research does not touch on proletarian, lower-class representations of exhaustion; nor does it engage with female representations. Yet, by restricting the case studies to the study of male characters written by male authors, it also contributes to the visibility of men's studies. One may question the lack of systematic study of 'pathological' male bodies in literary and medical works (see O'Connor 2000; Wood 2001; Archimedes 2012). It is usually the case that the male body is taken as a referent point for comparing and studying the female body. Thus, measuring the gaps between male ideals and their application, highlighting divergences and deviant behaviours in relation to imposed norms constitute themes worth exploring when examining exhaustion discourses. What renders male exhaustion a fascinating topic to research during the turn of the century is that it embodied several anxieties of its time as the exhausted male body failed to perform and be productive in a capitalistic society and constituted a catalyst for a growing crisis of masculinity and degeneration of modern civilisation.

Examining the language and narrative form will also reveal different individual 'realities' of this physical and psychological condition and the intensity of the experience. A complex and highly subjective illness like exhaustion is a fertile ground for self-reflection but also reflection on the state of society as a whole. Studying male characters in literary texts and clinical studies of the male body in medical texts can help us address broader questions: In what ways do specific cultural constructs shape medicine? How are the concepts of health and disease structured? How, and why, do specific medical discourses privilege the biological, the psychological, or the social environment as explanation models? What do constructions of the male body and representations of exhaustion reveal about their respective socio-cultural contexts? Drawing on fictional and autobiographical narratives and medical texts from two Western cultures, representations of exhaustion will be comparatively examined. The aim is not to produce a comprehensive study of representations of exhaustion and influences across German and French literary and medical texts, but rather to explore several paradigmatic cases from these two linguistic and cultural backgrounds, to analyse conceptual patterns, similar metaphorical models, shared

concerns and dominant socio-medical conceptions, but also to emphasise medical, cultural, and individual disparities.

The study of multiple discourses will enlarge the view on exhaustion and shed light on the exchanges between culture, literature, and medicine. This examination will mainly be conducted through the study of metaphors and the way they shape the abstract and highly subjective experience that is exhaustion. What renders this approach interesting is that metaphorical thinking and language shift the attention from what we see to the means by which we see. And, metaphors in illness narratives are particularly revelatory of complex and particular bodily processes, for they provide unique insights through their visual depiction and imaginative projection. Keeping in mind the subjective account of illness, culture must not be forgotten as an influence in shaping metaphors employed to convey one's emotions, thoughts, and sensations about illness (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1988; Kirmayer 1992; Gibbs 2006). Metaphorical thinking and language are situated within social, cultural, and ideological contexts, in which the individual's identity, sense of self is also deeply rooted. Yet metaphors may also act as a process of rupture with cultural discourses. Individuals can also create metaphorical understandings or counter-metaphors via conscious or unconscious embodied simulations to make sense of their ongoing existence (Raymond Gibbs offers the example of the woman imagining her cancer experience as a dance) (see Gibbs 2020: 3–6). These processes involve individuals projecting themselves and their experiences into different world and situations, such as liminal spaces or threshold experiences. These processes of visualisation of the lived-experience not only present an awareness of the self, or body-consciousness emerging from bodily sensations, they also help to reassess agency over the estranged body. One instance of visualisation could be to shape illness as a journey to evoke the possibility for self-exploration, transformation, and self-realisation. And, in this study, reading and analysing these individual realities will raise the following questions: How does the literary body speak through its exhausted condition and how does it tell the experience? Is there then a fine line between scientific forms of thoughts and the literary narrative? Does the narrative offer an alternative approach and theory put forth by dominant scientific paradigms?

The idea of exploring the subjectification of the experience of exhaustion makes all the more sense by the fact that the corpus of texts shares a list of authors, who have themselves experienced debilitating forms of exhaustion curbing their creative process, but also, who belong to a family circle or are in touch with influential

figures close to the medical community. Moreover, the selected literary texts particularly fall outside of the scope of the realist and naturalist genre and tend towards a representation of reality through the prism of a subjective mental structure. The reader accesses a phenomenal world, a world perceived and felt by the protagonist. Analysis then also naturally shifts from the 'told' (the events to which language and metaphors refer) to dive into the 'telling', specifically the structural choices and their function as components for meaning-making (see Mishler 1995; Riessmann 2003). To put it another way, this thesis will suggest that we can think of certain texts as not only engaging with the motif of exhaustion and including references to certain medical theories but also meaningfully embodying through the body of the text the experience of exhaustion.

With this in mind, the narratives embodying the illness experience through a so-called 'body-text' are then a performative revelation of the self, a reconstruction of the subject's illness and experience of it (Hawkins 1999: 15). The texts can create a means to resist the appropriation of one's personal illness narrative by the medical professional. And it can also alter the experience, by giving it a distinct shape and organising events into a certain order (whether linear or non-linear). Exhaustion is then not only being told through metaphors but also embodied by the text. And one way of understanding exhaustion, I propose, is through the embodiment of liminality within the form and content of these literary texts by way of non-linear narratives with their deconstructed, fragmented or empty plot structures, indigestible sentences, sterile repetitions, etc. The text might perform the impossibility of the character to act or want, yet as a creative medium it is paradoxically also full of possibilities: it can generate self-exploration, give body to fears and anxieties, and express a certain cultural disenchantment, be critical of their time by offering an introspective and reflective creative space. Writing can become for some a method to dominate the void, the abyss of exhaustion.

Structure and Content

In PART ONE, on medicine, I lay the groundwork for theoretical understandings of exhaustion by exploring several influential texts and defining the key concepts and theories on exhaustion and its related syndromes. The four chapters in PART ONE on discourses of exhaustion in medical texts trace the history of exhaustion theories, with a specific focus on neurasthenia and its gradual and diffused development into sub-categories: the diseases

of the will (or aboulia), melancholia, and psychasthenia. In each chapter, I map how exhaustion is being represented in each cultural context and different school of thought (symptomatology, aetiology), what language and imagery is being used, and what its ideological foundation constitutes. CHAPTER ONE sets the cultural, political, and ideological background in both countries and their perspectives on modernity, its 'age of nervousness' and growing degeneration as well as introduces the founding father of neurasthenia, namely the American neurologist George M. Beard. His studies (*A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion* 1880; *American Nervousness* 1881) constitute the first attempt to establish a modern aetiology of exhaustion. CHAPTER TWO explores German theories of exhaustion, focusing primarily on texts by Wilhelm Erb, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Leopold Löwenfeld, yet also intersects these with the study of Max Nordau's *Entartung* and sociological texts by Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Werner Sombart to address the predominant cultural phenomena of cultural pessimism and the biologisation of the social ('social hygiene', eugenics or 'Rassenhygiene', and bacteriaology). CHAPTER THREE turns to the French medical community and its shift from biological to psychological explanatory models, with studies written by Jean-Martin Charcot, Adrien Proust and Gilbert Ballet, Léon Bouveret, Pierre Janet, and Théodule Ribot. A point of discussion that will also be addressed in this chapter is the porous divide between the neurasthenia syndrome and other medically theorised conditions such as aboulia (or the diseases of the will), melancholia, psychasthenia in French discourses.

PART TWO focuses on German literary representations of exhaustion. The chapters follow a chronological order. Each chapter will systematically introduce the reader to the relationship of the author to the medical field, influences on their work, and also how their own history of illness may have affected the structure and content of the narrative. CHAPTER ONE introduces an almost forgotten influential author of his time, Heinrich Mann. With the focus on dilettantism and the influence of French novelist and critic Paul Bourget, Heinrich Mann offers an interesting counter-discourse to his more widely known younger brother's perspective. Also, in contrast to the convictions held by the youth of his time, his texts bear a more conservative perspective with the character's state of 'Haltlosigkeit' – which connotes ambiguity, rootlessness, instability, aimlessness, and lack of principles – only being 'curable' by the institutions of family and marriage. Then, follows a chapter on Thomas Mann and his much-studied text *Der Tod in Venedig* along with his lesser-known novella *Schwere Stunde* in CHAPTER TWO. Both texts explore the typus of the 'Leistungsethiker' and the costly consequences of a repressed and ascetic lifestyle. Thomas Mann particularly evokes Max Weber's theory of the Protestant ethos

and his concept of the 'iron cage' and the protagonist's quest to break out of it. The motif of secluded and liminal spaces and their effects on creative performativity are particularly telling in Thomas Mann's fiction. And last but not least, I turn to another great name in early twentieth-century literature in CHAPTER THREE with Hermann Hesse and his Bildungsroman *Unterm Rad* – an influential and disruptive text, which explicitly engages with what we may now understand as student 'burnout' within the inhibiting and restraining apparatus that constitutes the school institution. Each in their own way, the narratives engage with the topic of liminality as a possible escape and liberating process or as a catalyst heightening one's loss of sense of self, aimlessness, and rootlessness.

PART THREE turns to the French literature and its central 'existentialist' motif of the protagonist stuck in a liminal space and time. Confined within a circular narrative, the protagonists experience exhaustion as a state of emptiness and meaninglessness. CHAPTER ONE starts with a study of Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À vau-l'eau* and *À rebours* and examines how Huysmans engages with the topic of (in)digestion and the exhausting labour of having to live and assimilate the reality of a nauseating existence. Boredom, monotony, and repetitions of events embody the liminal aspect of exhaustion experienced by both the character of the solitary and bored clerk and aristocratic aesthete. CHAPTER TWO presents Octave Mirbeau's *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique* and the congesting, narrow-minded effect a spa setting enclosed by mountains has on its residents. I demonstrate how the suffocating environment, as also exemplified in Joris-Karl Huysmans' narratives, heightens the characters' state of restlessness, loss of sense of self and existential dread. Yet, the space is also a projection of the character's inner life. Setting on engaging with the subject of anxiety-provoking confinement in a sickly and inescapable milieu, this chapter also includes another Mirbellian text: *Dans le ciel*. Comparable with Thomas Mann's works, Mirbeau brings forth the struggle of the artist to find inspiration and elevate his art in a sterile society, which does not feed in a way his desires. The infernal circle of repetitions and confinement both set in the narrative content and form, is finally epitomised in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* which is the subject of CHAPTER THREE. Yet, in contrast to the previous studied authors, this thesis argues that Proust's voluminous work transforms the content and form of the literature of exhaustion into a matrix of infinite variations, a creation full of possibilities.

PART ONE

DISCOURSES OF EXHAUSTION IN MEDICAL TEXTS

CHAPTER ONE

(Dis)Enchanting Modernity:

The Age of Nervousness in the German and French 'Electro-polis'

To Be Modern and in the Liminal

The decades framing the turn of the century in 1900 – the so-called 'Aufbruch in die Moderne' – marked an important transition into modernity, even a temporal rupture from the past (see August et al. 1990; Fureix and Jarrige 2019). Modernity is a concept with a wide range of meanings. The French poet and essayist Charles Baudelaire initially introduced and defined this neologism in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1863/1885) from an artistic perspective as that which is always in transition and changing. Its meaning then gradually evolved with the integration of specific socio-political changes, shifting mores, and spatial transformations (see Vadé 1994: 10, 51; Charle 2011: 6). Thereon, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2020 Online) associates modernity specifically 'with individual subjectivity, scientific explanation and rationalisation, a decline in emphasis on religious worldviews, the emergence of bureaucracy, rapid urbanisation, the rise of nation-states, and accelerated financial exchange and communication'. To put it in another way, modernity is intricately linked with progress, which includes a radically new relation to time and space and an awareness of a progressive evolution of techniques and technologies aiming to bring about the improvement of the human condition (Charle 2011: 30–31). These components of modernity denote something distinctly different from what is taken to precede it, an 'archaic' past. It suggests a temporal schism in the timeline of human civilisation.

The French sociologist of science, Bruno Latour (1993:10) also advances in his essay *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* that the concept of modernity designates a shift, a rupture, a revolution in the temporal continuum. From his perspective, modernity implies not only a disconnect with the past, but also a time of crises abounding in tensions and conflicts. The end-of-the-century period, also known as the 'fin de siècle', was predominantly referred to as a turning point and moment of crisis. There were important tensions and contradictions in modern social formations. The spirit of the fin de siècle can be envisioned as twofold: characterised by a search for individual liberation from the weight of social and biological determinism, anticipation for the new century, new beginning, and new possibilities to come, but also by a pessimistic and nihilistic outlook, a belief in the degenerative process of culture and civilisation, and instability. Modern life was captured through progress, individuation, stability on the one hand, and through fragmentation and disintegration on the other.

Marshall Berman, who has insightfully written on modernism, delineates the ambiguous nature of modernity as a dynamic, fragmentary, and unstructured movement, and as a process of rationalisation which seeks the regulation of movement.

> To be modern, I said, is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual *disintegration* and *renewal*, *trouble* and *anguish*, *ambiguity* and *contradiction*: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows. (Berman 1982/2009: 345–346, emphasis added)

Berman is not alone in emphasising modernity's innate paradoxical process mobilising both progress and decline, creation and rupture, unlimited freedom and anxiety, secularisation and meaninglessness, activity and paralysis, excess and void. Some scholars have argued that modernity could be analysed as a moment and space of transition or a threshold moment. In *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (2014) and *Permanent Liminality and Modernity: Analysing the Sacrificial Carnival through Novels* (2017), Bjørn Thomassen and Arpad Szakolczai respectively develop the idea that modernity constitutes a kind of permanent liminality: meaning, as Thomassen lists, 'a continuous testing, a constant search for self-overcoming, an incessant breaking

down of traditional boundaries, and an existential sense of alienation and loss of being-at-home' (Thomassen 2015: 55). With one accord, modernity as a process involves a deep-rooted sense of ambivalence, uncertainty, and even disruption.

With this in mind, critics at that time already pronounced these ambivalent views. Many identified the central features of the modern age as being the transformations of modes of circulation, consumption, and production, the growing metropolis and the changes in social relations, and the end or decline of civilisation and culture. The social and political thinker Karl Marx (1818–1883) analysed modernity through the lens of capitalism, with its endless movement of production and its simultaneously dynamic and destructive features (see Frisby 1985: 20–27; 2004: 7–8). At the same time, one of the most renowned critics of modernity and particularly of modern culture, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), saw modernity as a pervasive process of degeneration, decay, impotence, a process shattering all foundations, disintegrating society and culture. Nietzsche promoted the idea of nihilism as inherent to modernity, that is to say, the idea that God was dead and that the existence of a free-willed modern man was only an illusion. Modern man was, in Nietzsche's argument, but an alienated, passive spectator (see Soms-Laubach 2012: 107–110).

In parallel, the numerous and rapid infrastructural, socio-economic, and technical changes led to a growing anxiety about the unknown, the unrestrained, and the marginal. Modernity can be described in general terms as an epoch in which the establishment of normality was becoming ever stricter, and in which the need to classify the normal and pathological intensified. Nervousness, deviancy, and degeneration were one of the prisms through which the 'crisis of modernity' was understood in the popular imagination. Notably, modernity had been interpreted as a process of acceleration threatening to surpass the capacities of the individual body and mind. Being modern meant to be nervous, to live in a more fast-paced society laden with various new stimuli such as intensified flows of mass information, new forms of organisation and production, and notably facilitated accesses to pleasure. Capitalist modes of production and economic organisation, bureaucratisation, the growing rationalisation of society and culture, the spirit of science, and the 'normalisation' of the everyday lives of the masses became crucial components of modernity (see Crew 1997: 319–344).

Feeling Differently at the End of the Century

To some observers, modernity had improved the material conditions of some portions of the population, yet it had also manifested itself in the growth of pathologies. To the extent that talk of nervous degeneration served as a moralising and ideological tool and a means of criticising certain aspects of modernity, the spectre of degeneration became a way to scientise, objectify, and rationalise political and social anxieties. Paris and Berlin loomed most prominently in the cultural imagination both as industrialised metropolises but also as symbols of cultural decline and incubators of perverted, overstimulated, and exhausted individuals. The German and French capitals offered a spectacle of degeneration and decadence: that of the rush of the human crowd seeking all kinds of pleasures and practicing vice.[1] The urban setting became a place of overworked nerves, circulating automobiles and fiacres, illuminated shop windows, and an incubator of threatening, immoral outsiders, such as effeminate dandy-flâneurs, homosexuals, emancipated women, Jews, and marginals.

The French context of the fin de siècle and its fear of 'dégénérescence', which spread rapidly following the French defeat by Germany in 1871, was mainly fuelled by three phenomena. The first was the political uncertainty that lasted from 1871 to 1878, and which was engendered by the hostility of a large fraction of intellectuals loyal to the Empire towards the advent of the new regime of the French Republic (established in September 1870). The second factor contributing to this declinist tendency was the general economic climate weakened by the stock market crash of 1882, the agricultural difficulties, and a concern regarding the French demographic weakness in view of the growth of the German population and of other countries. The stock market crash affected all of Europe, but France was further subjected to a pressing economic decline compared to Germany or England (see Charle 1998: 7–18). The third central and most prominent motif of this fin-de-siècle theme was that of a moral crisis. One critical determining factor of physical and moral degeneration of the French nation was related to the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) (see Pick 1989: 41; Forth 2004). On the one hand, a significant number of intellectuals and part of the population fed into antisemitic conspiracy theories and perceived Judaism, like homosexuality, as a sign of national degeneration – a belief which had long permeated

[1] Degeneration, being a medicalised term, and decadence, a term used by artists, were both often confused and used interchangeably. Decadence meant a form of sensibility, having refined nerves and senses. As a site onto which medical men projected deep anxieties about diseased manhood and the degradation of moral standards, degeneration became a manifestation of biological decay, caused by social conditions and illnesses, and stigmatised by irritable weakness, exhaustion, and sterility (see Mosse 1996: 77–83).

the Western cultural imagination. The moral decline of the Christian civilisation was in their belief caused by a Jewish plot for world power and domination. On the other, a body of intellectuals, which included the author of the notorious pamphlet 'J'accuse' (1898), Emile Zola, observed the rising influence of anti-Semitism and the Dreyfus Affair as a sign of the aging and degeneration of French political parties and of national institutions, such as the Army and the Justice department.

To this, Berlin offers an interesting contrast as a burgeoning rival capital to the 'city of lights' because of Germany's later but accelerated process of industrialisation. During the Wilhelmine period (1890–1918), public discourse in the German Empire came to be increasingly laden with discontent and anxiety due to rapid urbanisation, intermittent economic crisis, the growing woman's movement, the lifting of anti-Socialist laws, the Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's resignation in 1890 after a nineteen-year long rule, and the emergence of political anti-Semitism (see Crew 1997: 46–51, 181, 221, 477; Radkau 2000: 292–296; also Doerry 1986; Becker 1990; Ullrich 1997). The pace of industrial development and cultural change became fervent. The new German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, who gave his name to the Wilhelmine era, seemed in many respects to symbolise the impulsive energies of the nation's development, including its contradictions. Indeed, like its French neighbour, German society was also seized by a climate of widespread anxiety about the health and vigour of the empire and its culture which had emerged with the growing concern over an epidemic of nervous exhaustion and propensity towards biological degeneration (see Volker 1997; Radkau 1994, 2000).

Many scholars argue that German society grew every more pessimistic as a consequence of its rapid ascent into industrialisation and its economic triumph after 1895 (see, for example, Rabinbach 1992: 22; Doering-Manteuffel 2019; Schnurr and Mohr 2019). Andreas Killen's *Berlin Electropolis. Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity* (2006) introduces the social crisis faced by Germany at that time, a crisis which increasingly manifested itself in a widespread 'Kulturpessimismus'. The accelerated progress in the technical-industrial field, the revolution in means of transport and communication, the emergence of a mass culture – all of this brought not only relief and attractions, but also new demands and stresses that strained the nerves and irritated the mind. Friedrich Nietzsche observes in his 1878 *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*: 'Die Summe der Empfindungen, Kenntnisse, Erfahrungen, also die ganze Last der Kultur, ist so groß geworden, daß eine Überreizung der Nerven- und Denkkräfte die allgemeine Gefahr ist, ja daß die kultivierten Klassen der europäischen Länder durchweg

neurotisch sind und fast jede ihrer größeren Familien in einem Gliede dem Irrsinn nahe gerückt ist' [2] (Nietzsche 1878/1954a: 244). Nietzsche expresses a fear that this nervous degeneration will come to pervade and hereditarily contaminate even old family lines and the cultivated classes, thus throwing the entire nation into a state of degeneration and decline.

One of the first authors to diagnose degeneration and decadence very concisely and effectively was the Hungarian medically trained writer and Zionist Max Nordau (1849–1923). In his bestseller published in 1892, entitled *Entartung*, Nordau describes the productions of modern visual art and poetry by those corrupted and enfeebled by modern life as either degenerate or neurotic. He not only diagnoses the stylistic peculiarities of contemporary art and music (brought by artistic geniuses as Wagner and Verlaine) as pathological, but also equates the search for sensations and fascination with all possible forms of irrationality. Before its exposition under the Nazi regime, 'degenerate art' was already being stigmatised in the same vein by conservator thinkers, traditionalists, moralists, and physicians (specifically Max Nordau). It was believed to be an engine prompting the spectators into moral decline and nervousness. In his critical view, modern men and women of the cultured classes especially strove to search for new stimulating experiences, rendering them nervously excited but also exhausted. Extending degeneration as a disease beyond the artists and their art, Nordau pathologises the audience who was interested in modern art as well and rendered them either hysteric or neurasthenic (see Nordau 1892/1895; also, Drinka 1985: 246; Schulte, 1997; Roelcke 2002: 105).

Next to these elements of moral degeneration, 'Tempo', as an agent of nervous irritation, became a particularly significant concept in the German cultural and medical discourses. Given this new awareness of temporal and spatial acceleration, there was a reason why 'rastlos' and 'unentwegt' belonged to the fashionable adjectives of the time. Willy Hellpach, for example, writes about his experiences as a nervous city dweller:

> Ich trete aus dem Hause und gerade fährt die elektrische Bahn fort. Ich muss mich quer übers Trottoir winden; ein paar Kleinstädter hemmen den Menschenstrom; eine Droschke kommt in *rasendem Tempo* um die Ecke. Ich muss auf die nächste Straßenbahn warten; kaum finde ich oben einen Stehplatz; mein Nebenmann raucht eine fürchterliche Zigarre; Ruß fliegt mir an den frischen Leinenkragen; der Wagen

[2] I have retained the spelling and format used in the cited editions when quoting primary sources in German.

> fährt bald rasend, so daß alles gegeneinander taumelt, bald hält er, weil ein Lastwagen die Geleise versperrt. (1902: 28, emphasis added)

The word 'Tempo', which in colloquial language referred to speed of motion or activity, now turned into a call for maximum acceleration, for high speed, and, implicitly, for time optimisation (see Radkau 2000: 204). The notion of speed, acceleration, and mobility constituted the imaginary core of the representation of modernity by then-contemporary commentators, such as Georg Simmel (1858–1918) and later Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) (see Rosa and Scheuerman 2008: 18–21). The experience of time and space had changed. On the one hand, mass production, the fast circulation of commodities, new means of communication had compressed time; on the other, the rapid growth of metropolises and the progress towards a hyper-connected world had expanded the spatial experience. The experience of acceleration extended to all areas of life – from high politics to everyday work. The rapid social changes in the political and economic field as well as in the educational and artistic field gave way to a 'modern' relation to time, to a new temporal structure of everyday life promoting time optimisation. These factors played a crucial role in rendering this world more alienating as time was no longer readily available to individuals in a high-speed society (quoted in Rosa and Scheuerman 2008: 18). The testimonies about 'Hetzen und Jagen' (literally 'rush and hunt') came not only from sensitive writers, but also from robust technicians. This feeling of acceleration and its effects of overstimulation on the nerves sustained a new precept at the end of the nineteenth century, that of the 'Kampf ums Dasein' – a Darwinist 'struggle for existence' – in a world dictated by the rhythm of machines (see Krafft-Ebing 1895: 16; Rabinbach 1992: 185; Radkau 1996: 309).

Interwoven with the threat of degeneration and the inability to adapt to a new temporal and spatial structure were the fears of 'perversions', which, in both countries, were perceived as obstacles to the welfare of the individual body and the body politic. So-called sexual perversions such as masturbation, homosexuality, and sado-masochism – following the etymology of 'perversion' as a deviation from or subversion of the norm, turning the social order upside down – amplified the anxieties surrounding a diseased and declining state of society (see Roudinesco 2007; Moore 2009; Schaffner 2012). Masturbation, formally known as onanism, was perceived as particularly threatening to the thriving of nations and was high on the list of concerns for hygienists. Initially, the famous Swiss doctor Samuel Auguste André David Tissot (1728–1797) refers in the preface to his treatise on *Onanism* (1760) to 'les ravages d'une maladie meurtrière, [...] une corruption plus ravageante peut-être que la

petite vérole' (1775/1905: vii). Under Tissot's pen and that of physicians following and developing his ideas during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, masturbation became a catalyst of many diseases (hemiplegia, tumours, paralysis, fever, delirium...). One of the most influential theorists of the nineteenth century, the German psychiatrist and sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing did not escape the influence of Tissot's work as his infamous catalogue on perversions, titled *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886), equally pathologises the act of masturbation as well as homosexuality and sado-masochism.

Within the discourses of exhaustion, masturbation particularly provoked unease in the nineteenth-century mind, those of the conservative medical science and the bourgeois milieu, as it was conceived an individualistic, sinful pleasure, a deliberate self-incapacitation, and a cause of effeminacy in men. Individuals who were diagnosed with this self-abusive so-called perversion were depicted as mentally and physically sick, as this sexual stimulation and solitary pursuit was believed to result in a waste of 'procreative' vital energy. The physiological weakness, sexual impotence, and sterility that it was believed to provoke opposed the imperatives of vigour and productivity (on the historical account of masturbation as a moral issue and cultural taboo, see Laqueur 2003). A fear of degenerative and perverse transformation resulted in an upheaval of hygienist manuals to counteract the risk of the individual to suffer from debilitating weakness, increased excitability and irritability, excessive strain, impotence, and exhaustion (see Shorter 1993: 215). The dissemination of school and work hygiene instructions, the importance of physical training and gymnastics to discipline the body, the development of quiet zones and local recreational areas, and the constructions of sanatoriums (or specialised hospitals set in the countryside) formed a number of preventative solutions.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, sanatoriums boomed across Europe, notably in the Swiss Alps and around Berlin. Joachim Radkau writes in *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität* of a veritable 'Heilstättenbewegung' (2000: 115), which took root and spread with the Germanic 'Lebensreform' movements and their significant interest in natural therapeutics. These therapeutic facilities, which formerly operated as secluded and walled off water cure institutions for tuberculosis patients, were converted into popular and widely publicised nerve healing facilities and retreats cut off from the bustling city atmosphere (see Bernhardt 2013: 31). Particularly in Germanic regions, the construction of various clinics and sanatoriums in and around major cities and in the mountains emerged as a solution to the new mass nervousness. These institutions were advertised as idyllic settings in which

patients with enervated, exhausted bodies could learn to regulate and manage their energies through various healing practices such as rest cure, air cure, and heliotherapy (see Berger 1892; Shorter 1993: 214). On the flip side, particularly in the eyes of social critics and writers, they became symbolic of a decaying bourgeois and upper-class society, normalising these institutions as touristic destinations and the consumption of health facilities for pleasure and as a sign of conformism.

The Cult of Nervousness and Neurasthenia

The juxtaposition of 'modernity' and 'nervousness' occurred in many forms and in different discursive contexts at the turn of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not only sociologist and cultural critics contributed to the understanding of modern society as a space of nervous unrest. Looking at Sigmund Freud's much-quoted essay from 1908 on 'Die "kulturelle" Sexualmoral und die moderne Nervosität', it begins with an evocative blend of statements about 'den Zusammenhang der "wachsenden Nervosität" mit dem modernen Kulturleben', as it was predominantly described and theorised by several eminent neurologists (Freud 1908: 141). With modern medicine, nerves became a passe-partout concept to delineate non-lesional pathologies. Influential nerve scientists, namely Wilhelm Erb, Leopold Löwenfeld, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing amongst others, saw a direct interaction between the acceleration of modern existence and the increase in nervousness and nervous diseases. The opening line of the preface of Löwenfeld's *Die moderne Behandlung der Nervenschwäche (Neurasthenie), der Hysterie und verwandter Leiden* lends legitimacy to the argument that nervousness marked the Zeitgeist:

> Die socialen und Culturverhältnisse einer Zeit spiegeln sich auch in den vorherrschenden körperlichen Leiden ab. Was man als Modekrankheit bezeichnet, ist wesentlich die traurige Consequenz von Verhältnissen, deren gesundheitszerrüttenden Einflusse breite Volksmassen sich nicht zu entziehen vermögen. In der Gegenwart spielen die Rolle einer Modekrankheit in diesem Sinne jene Affectionen des Nervensystems, die vom grossen Publikum als Nervenschwäche oder Nervosität gewöhnlich bezeichnet werden und in der Wissenschaft unter den Hauptsignaturen Neurasthenie und Hysterie als Neurosen figuriren. (1889: 1).

Whilst the French neurologists at that time, namely Jean-Martin Charcot, Adrien Proust and Gilbert Ballet and Fernand Levillain, adopted the same arguments linking 'nervosité' with the experience of the modern urban setting, they were less inclined to exclusively focus on modernity as a factor of nervousness and coining 'neurasthenia' a disease of modern civilisation. In contrast, German medical texts on nervous diseases testify to the common conception of economic and industrialist-technological, political and social factors as stresses on the nervous system. Among other things, the struggle for existence, the big cities, the expansion of trade and transport, the telegraph and telephone, financial crises, lust for luxury, hedonism, and travel were listed among these stress factors. International events, such as the 1900 International Exhibition in Paris and the 1896 World Fair in Berlin, which epitomised and ultimately celebrated progress by displaying the latest inventions, the newest machines and devices fuelled by electric currents, became actors contributing to a widespread epidemic of nervousness (see Killen 2006: 15–16; Rabinow 1989: 229ff). The Berlin-based neurologist Albert Eulenburg (1840–1917) concludes in his article 'Die Nervosität unserer Zeit' (1896) that, medically speaking, the exhibition of 1896 was a 'temple to the cult of nervousness', a place immersing the visitor in the torrent of modern life, and an example of the deleterious effects of modernity on the body, as it strained, tired, and exhausted the nerves (quoted in Killen 2006: 16).

In the past, nerves had already enticed the cultural imagination; their shape, structure and functions have been subjected to variable interpretations throughout history. Etymologically, 'nerve' derives from the Latin *nervus* meaning 'sinew, tendon; fibrous connection conveying sensation' and, as a secondary sense, vigour, force, or strength (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* Online). Both the French word 'nervosité' and the German equivalent 'Nervosität' derive from this Latin root. The study of physical nerves and their affections began in the eighteenth century with physicians, such as George Cheyne, John Brown, and William Cullen (see Schaffner 2017: 86–90). Looking back to the eighteenth century, nerves have continually stood in the medical imagination as conductors of a force, a vital energy (which evolved from a liquid to an electric conception) that kept the body and the mind's vivacity running. Energy had already become increasingly synonymous with good health in the popular and medical literature at that time. The role of electricity in later nineteenth-century experiments on nerves gave way to an increasing belief in the nerves' irritability, fragility, hypersensitivity, resulting in the word 'nervous' to denote a sense of heightened receptiveness, a susceptibility to overstrain (see

Schaffner 2017: 87). The term ‘nervousness’ then continued to undergo rapid proliferation as a social phenomenon starting in the mid-eighteenth century and to preoccupy the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Zeitgeist. With the exponential growth and development of neurological research and scientific apparatuses to observe and calculate the activity of the nervous system, it became characteristic at that time to perceive and represent the experience of modernity through the body’s nerves and its ensuing susceptibility to external stimuli.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, nervousness and its parallel term, neurasthenia, became linguistic pass-par touts, ciphers whose achievement consisted in being able to express a whole range of (mainly negative) affective states without having to specify them in more detail. The correlative between nervousness and neurasthenia was first drawn and popularised outside of the scope of German and French scientific spheres. When the American neurologist George Miller Beard (1839–1883) discovered ‘American nervousness’, for which he coined the evocative name ‘neurasthenia’ (‘nervous exhaustion’), it quickly spread in the medical and cultural imagination in both France and Germany. The nosographic definition of neurasthenia was first established by Beard in 1868 during a conference at the New York Medical Association. Then, popularised by him in the 1869 issue of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, the term neurasthenia bundled together a large group of mystifying complains – notably that of chronic fatigue – which were tormenting the lives of numerous Americans in this time of accelerated modernisation (1869: 217–221). In 1880 and 1881, he developed his new concept in more detail in two works entitled *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia*): *Its Symptoms, Nature, Sequences, Treatment* (1880), addressed to health professionals, and *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences* (1881) to a lay-readership.

For this new modern disease, Beard combined the Greek terms *neuro,* meaning nerve, the prefix *a,* meaning ‘not’, and *stenia,* meaning strength or force (Beard 1869: 217). Neurasthenia was then simply understood as an absence of nerve-force, and nervousness as ‘nervelessness’ (Beard 1881: vi, 5). From the beginning, despite the lack of empirical evidence, the concept of neurasthenia was believed to be a ‘mechanical’ weakness – a material ‘deficiency’ in energy quantity. In *American Nervousness,* Beard begins by defining this condition of energetic scarcity as a ‘strictly deficiency or lack of nerve-force’ and that it ‘is to be distinguished rigidly and systematically from simple excess of emotion and from organic disease’ (vi). He clearly reiterates

that '[n]ervousness is a physical not a mental state, and its phenomena do not come from emotional excess or excitability' (17). His 1881 study also provides a rich clinical description of neurasthenia, which includes approximately fifty symptoms, amongst which are: general physical exhaustion accompanied by tiredness and heaviness in the legs, mental exhaustion with difficulty concentrating, but also irritability, indigestion, insomnia, drowsiness, indifference and lack of interest, morbid fears ('fear of everything' and 'fear of fears'), and impotence (7). Despite the heterogeneity and vagueness of its symptomatology, the comprehensiveness of Beard's diagnosis heightened its attractivity amongst physicians and patients. Beard's definition was so broad that anyone could integrate at will any more or less trivial symptoms. Ultimately, anyone could be neurasthenic.

Regarding the aetiology, Beard claims the first and essential cause of nervousness to be modern civilisation and the circumstances that accompanied it. Indeed, he ascribes the main cause of this so-called American nervousness to '*modern civilisation*' and its five main characteristics: 'steam-power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women' (vi). For Beard, there is no doubt that solely the late nineteenth century and the advent of the Second Industrial Revolution could have given rise to states of nervous exhaustion. He contends that there had been no nervous exhaustion in the heyday of Greece or Rome (96). Only contemporary civilisation and the ensuing progress of this modern age could produce the deleterious causative agents to nerve-force. Neurasthenia's main cause remains in Beard's words a broad concept defined not only by technological innovations (as he quotes, steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, and the sciences) but by social transformations as well, such as the 'mental activity' of women (their access to higher education and positions) (vi). Yet his focus remains on technological progress, as he predominantly alludes to the increased spread of production, the accelerated dissemination of information with the periodical press and the telegraph, and a speeding up of means of transportation with the steam-engine (99, 115–116, 133–135, 224, 304).

As a disease of modern civilisation, neurasthenia accordingly affected most severely those who were part of the leading, educated classes. As Roy Porter (2001: 42) concisely puts it: 'American nervousness was a disease of labour', specifically that performed by college-educated city dwellers and 'brain-workers', – those who constituted the epitome of refinement of American civilisation and contributed to the production of the nation's wealth (Beard 1881: 96–97). Workers of the lower classes did not have the capacity and possibility to be neurasthenic. Despite living in American society and being subjected to some of the pressures of American

civilisation, their inferior social status and their condition as 'muscle-workers' made them unqualifiable bodies for this new disease. Within the context of this widespread socio-pathological nervous weakness affecting a certain group of individuals, neurasthenia became a succinct symbol of modern life, as it aligned with the economic and social reality of turn-of-the-century America. And, as Tom Lutz specifies in his study on *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History*, neurasthenia allowed patients simultaneously to adopt an un-stigmatised term to label and make sense of their condition (Lutz 1991: 23).

Beard's construction of neurasthenia was based on a nationalistic discourse and his rhetoric sought to define what America was and what it meant to be American in this modern era. To be neurasthenic not simply meant to be nervously weak and exhausted; it meant to be white, wealthy, educated, industrious, sensitive, and refined, whether man or woman. And these fine neurasthenic sufferers were believed to be the 'motors' meant to secure the country's international dominance (Beard 1881: 129). The nervous exhaustion experienced by brain-workers did not bring the country to a halt, neither did it contribute to society's decline or degeneracy, nor did it sap the energy out of the body politic. Rather, brain-workers were driving American progress through their labour and their spent energy. In a sense, the energy of the individual was seen to be injected into the body of the nation to strengthen it. Modern America, in other words, was 'paid for by nervousness' (76). Neurasthenia became in a certain way a medium to promote 'Americanisation', patriotism, and productivity. It constituted an index of the nation's glory. It was a sign of modernity and progress, an energy pumped into the motor that which constituted the American empire.

To render his explanations understandable to a general readership, Beard consistently employs in *American Nervousness* (1881) metaphors rooted in the discourse of his time and referring to items inherent to his time. Drawing on the fields of economics, engineering and physics, he compares the human body to a battery (42), a bank account (9–10), or a steam engine (99). The homology between the language of nervousness and the language of finance, electricity, and mechanics underscores their comparable 'modernity'. To a certain extent, the human organism represented a power reservoir, of capital, electric current, and steam power, with constant inflow and outflow. All these metaphors were commonly built on the assumption that the body and its nervous system constituted an economic and mechanic model with an in-and-out ledger of income and expenditure. Influenced by European scientific theories, Beard's metaphorical language was imbued with the conceptual

understanding of thermodynamics, as formulated by the pioneering German physician Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894) – who contributed in his 1847 essay 'Über die Erhaltung der Kraft' to the idea of a universal law regarding the conservation of energy in the human body (see Beard and Rockwell 1871: 90–91; Beard 1881: 232).

By aligning it with sensitivity, refinement, and progress, moreover, alongside other desirable characteristics such as middle- and upper-class professions, patriotism, elitism, and a positive vision of modernity, Beard turned the diagnosis into one with powerfully positive associations, into an articulation combining race, nation, modernity and neurosis which generated a model of national identity. It is therefore not surprising that neurasthenia became a highly fashionable diagnosis, a 'disease of civilisation' that could be proudly worn by its sufferer as a badge of honour and a sign of evolutionary superiority. The birth of the neurasthenia diagnosis in America paved the way for a new discourse in the Western world on nervous exhaustion at the turn of the century. The popularity of the diagnosis relied partly on the fact that it was a protean and amorphous syndrome, encompassing and unifying a wide range of vague complaints into a recognisable nosological entity. Yet even more importantly, its conception in German and French socio-medical discourses also rested on its peculiar status as a condition of its time and as an organic, somatic response to a broader socio-cultural crisis. In its European reception, the diagnosis firmly placed the cause of nervousness and exhaustion into the wider cultural environment, thereby freeing sufferers from personal responsibility and any stigma attached to their condition. Between 1880 and the beginning of the first World War, in a time of accelerated change during which individuals had difficulties adapting to technological innovations and social transformations, neurasthenia constituted an answer to many problems.

Charcot's Salpêtrière School versus the Berlin School

The spread of Beard's neurasthenia and ensuing medicalisation of modern society became a major issue and led to the emergence of a wide range of hygienist manuals and a growing concern for public health. New medical practices emerged to combat age-old diseases along with more recent ones related to factors of modernisation. Medicine began to rely ever more on experimental research of the structure and functions of principal parts of

the human anatomy and on newly improved instruments (microscope, chrono-photography) to render bacteria as well as the phases and the dynamic of the body in motion visible to the naked eye. At the same time, a range of new techniques of human improvement and engineering – for instance, time-and-motion studies and the science of gymnastics – emerged in accordance with a new attitude towards work, performance, and health (see Killen 2015: 51). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, three revolutionary concepts distinctly changed the face of biomedical knowledge and the perception of the workings of the body. In both France and Germany, germ theory, or modern bacteriology, introduced by the microbiologists Louis Pasteur (1822–1895) and Robert Koch (1843–1910), the theory of biological evolution, and lastly, the discovery of new anatomical and physiological models of the nervous system propelled medicine into a new revolutionary age.

These advancements were in part induced by the establishment of distinct levels of medical specialisation, such as neurology, bacteriology and physiology (see Drinka 1985: 60–62). In France, a key centre of research on nervous diseases was the internationally renowned clinic of the Salpêtrière. One of its famous instructors and researchers was Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), founder of modern neurology and the first to describe and classify many neurological diseases. Charcot laid bare the difference between organic and functional disorders (hysteria, hypochondria, epilepsy). What was meant by functional disorder at that time was that there was no clear indication of organic origin, no anatomical changes. In 1882, the world's first chair for a 'clinique des maladies du système nerveux' was created at the Salpêtrière (see Lehmann et al. 2004: 190). Charcot transformed the classification and perception of neuroses or diseases of the nerves, particularly of hysteria with his demonstrations of hysterics through hypnosis during the 'Leçons du mardi' at the Salpêtrière. The invention of photographic iconography, one of the key symbols of modernity, facilitated the study of the body subjected to hysteria, by enabling the capture of the involuntary and compulsive motions of the hysterics (see Didi-Huberman 1982; Bacopoulos-Viau 2012).

Regarding the medical exchanges between France and Germany, it is crucial to recall that the relationship between Charcot and German physicians and medical researchers came to be influenced by the political circumstances in the second half of the nineteenth century. In particular, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, which led to the establishment of the German Empire and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, created a 'fosse culturelle' – a deep rupture in the cultural and scientific relations between these two neighbouring countries (see

Gelfand 1994: 517–523). In a period shaped by growing nationalism across Europe, German and French physicians and scientists stood as servants of their countries, which implanted after 1871 the idea of a 'revanche scientifique' between Germany and France (see Lehmann et al. 2004: 187). The 'Société de médecine de Paris', for example, decided to exclude all German members. In this climate of political tension, Wilhelm Erb, Ernst von Leyden, Max Nonne, and a number of other German-speaking neurologists nevertheless maintained personal contact with Charcot. However, the more Charcot moved away from neurology to work on hysteria, the more German neurology slowly evaded Charcot's formative influence – but not without denying its importance for the development of neurology in Germany (see Lehmann et al. 2004: 189–191).

In addition to the theoretical influences and exchanges between both countries' medical fields, it is also important to bear in mind existing differences in these countries' schools of medical thought. Medical research in France was primarily based on the method of clinical observation (and experimental medicine). With Charcot and later Pierre Janet, the clinic moved towards psychopathologies. In contrast, at the Berliner clinic of the Charité, Germany's leading research and teaching medical institution, the ideology was rather marked by a dedication to materialist medicine and to the study of manifestations of physiological pathology at a microscopic, cellular level (see Lehmann et al. 2004; Killen 2006: 54). In addition, the German medical outlook was further driven by the desire to create a new science dedicated to the welfare of the body politic via the conscious training and discipline of the body and the integration of specific aesthetic motifs. Opposite from Charcot and his experimental technique of hypnosis, Germany's leading research was focused on developing a science behind the 'Körperkultur'. Health could only be achieved and/or maintained through the body.

With the idea of strengthening the body through a cult of gymnastics, controlling the consumption of food, alcohol, and other sources of excesses, German hygienists installed a kind of preventative approach to nervous exhaustion and aimed to build, even strengthen, individual resilience. The French medical field also delved into the therapeutic benefits of gymnastics (see Nye 1982; Fauché 1999: 299–305).[3] Yet, German medical institutions were notably more preoccupied with the body than the mind and developed a keen interest in the benefits of movement, more holistic therapeutics, and an approach to health focused on cleansing and disciplining

[3] See Fernand Lagrange's *Physiologie des exercices du corps* (1888) and *La Médication par l'exercice* (1894); also Philippe Tissié's *Un cas d'instabilité mentale avec impulsions morbides traité par la gymnastique médicale* (1894).

the body. The essence of health was a whole body encompassing the principles of 'Schönheit', 'Gesundheit', and 'Natürlichkeit'. The attention of the physicians and hygienists lay particularly on the study of the Greek athletic body, the epitome of 'Kraft und Schönheit', and the development of sports medicine, notably that of gymnastics – postulated as a field of science contributing to the nation's vitality – to regenerate the German individual and social body (see Killen 2015: 57; Pfister 2006). Whereas the French medical community was intended on deciphering the workings of the mind and experimenting with the abstract power of suggestion of the physician over the patient, rhythmicity, bodily discipline, and the construction of an aesthetic ideal of health became distinctive features of the German medical and social health culture.

Furthermore, in contrast to the Charcot school at the Salpêtrière and its emphasis on functional disorders as disorders of 'ideas' and the 'imagination', German doctors, especially neurologists and nerve doctors, were oriented toward a doctrine of organicity dominated by a somatic and biological perspective (see Shorter 1993: 219). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the German medical tradition was subjected to a theoretical reorientation towards the laboratory sciences (chemical, microscopic, bacteriological diagnostic analyses). The medical focus remained on the brain rather than the mind. German physicians were more inclined to talk about physiological mechanisms (see Pewzner 2002: 188–193). During that time, the eminent German psychiatrist and neurologist Wilhelm Griesinger had stressed that mental disorders were brain-based, organic: 'Zeigen uns physiologische und pathologische Thatsachen, daß dieses Organ nur das Gehirn sein kann, so haben wir vor Allem in psychischen Krankheiten jedesmal Erkrankungen des Gehirns zu erkennen' (1845: 1). The presentation of diseases, particularly of a nervous nature, consisted of specific 'biomarkers'; meaning, they were based on anatomical anomalies, such as the nerves, or physiological lesions in the brain. This perspective led to assumptions in medical theories that nervous disorders consisted in 'real' material, organic alterations of the physical nervous structure threatening the normal functioning of physical and mental processes (see Drinka 1985: 132–133; Shorter 1993: 209–210, 219–221).

To conclude, Germany and France both held lively but distinctive debates about nervousness, which overlapped with a large number of other major topics of discussion of the time related to modern civilisation and its discontents, and which included nerve hygiene, life in the modern metropolis, sexual perversions, degeneration theories, and exhaustion as a prevalent condition of modern life. Indeed, the plasticity of the subject of

nervousness lent itself for bringing in various critical considerations. Discourses on nervous exhaustion were often blended with cultural criticism and ideologically motivated. However, despite the presence of a prominent exchange between both countries' medical fields (especially neurology, bacteriology, physiology, psychiatry), France and Germany still held distinctive medical doctrines and perceptions regarding nervous afflictions. Whereas the French school further oriented its research towards the study of hysteria and the theatrics of the mind, the Berlin medical school was primarily driven by a more organic and material conception of physiological and mental pathologies. The latter school's interest lay in the study of the 'mechanic structure' of the body to understand how it could be strengthened and disciplined to resist exhaustion and nervous depletion. Its focus on somatic symptoms and on nervous afflictions as manifestations of material alterations of the nervous system shaped the various discourses of exhaustion. Also, both countries' different cultural and socio-political contexts – their distinctive economic and political crises, the experience of war defeat, a reconditioned relation to time and space, and a growing fear of cultural decline – resulted in culturally specific discussions and in different conceptions and interpretations of one of this period's pre-eminent syndrome of modernity, known as neurasthenia or nervous exhaustion.

CHAPTER TWO

The Cult of the Natural German Body:

'Kulturkritik' and the Rise of Practices of Bio-Politics

George Miller Beard's *A Practical Treatise of Nervous Exhaustion* (1880) was translated into German in 1881 as *Die Nervenschwäche (Neurasthenie). Ihre Symptome, Natur, Folgezustände und Behandlung* (translated by Moritz Neisser). Beard's famous monograph on neurasthenia went through three German editions until 1889. His treatise was very positively received by the German scientific community. One of the key protagonists who shaped the early German reception of Beard's neurasthenia was the renowned Heidelberg neurologist Wilhelm Erb – world-widely known for his research in the emerging field of neurology and electrotherapy. Beard had also visited Erb in 1879 and appreciated his 'scientific and suggestive' chapter on 'Neurasthenia' in Ziemssen's *Cyclopedia of Medicine* in which Erb references and credits Beard for coming up with the concept of neurasthenia (quoted in Beard 1881: 11; see also Ziemssen and Schröder 1878: 369; Erb 1875). Beforehand, the German physicians had made use of the term 'Nervosität' as an umbrella term encompassing symptoms that could not otherwise be classed under hysteria or hypochondria (see Löwenfeld 1889: 14–15). Thereafter, Beard's concept, which in turn had been heavily infused with German theories on thermodynamics and the electrical impulse and blended in as an all-encompassing term, spread considerably in Germany and was quickly incorporated within the discourse on nervousness and exhaustion (see Roelcke 1999: 122; 2001: 182).

As they were immediately translated into German, Beard's studies occupied a predominant influence in the early 1880s. His theories had fallen on particularly fertile ground as the state of medicals sciences in Germany, especially electrotherapy, cohered with Beard's discovery and understanding of this disorder as of an 'electrical' nature (see Erb 1882: 201–203, 572; Killen 1999: 131–141). Alongside Erb, another important physician who disseminated Beard's theories on neurasthenia was Richard von Krafft-Ebing. This American disease appeared to Krafft-Ebing 'wie eine Offenbarung' (quoted in Krafft-Ebing 1895: 35). Neurasthenia seemed to be a revelatory diagnosis for clinical cases which had beforehand remained unexplainable. This conviction still

remained apparent in the early twentieth century. 'Überall fanden sich in grosser Zahl die seiner Schilderung entsprechenden Krankheitsbilder', wrote Otto Dornblüth, the author of the last major study on neurasthenia in Germany, 'es war gerade, als ob die Welt auf den Namen und die Abgrenzung der Krankheit gewartet hätte' (1911: 10). Some recalled that, even before Beard, Eugène Bouchut, a professor of medicine at the Sorbonne in Paris, had laid the groundwork for the theory of nervousness in his study, *De l'état nerveux aigu et chronique ou nervosisme* (1860). But Bouchut's study, despite being published by the top French medical press Baillière and being a successful book in France, had not been translated and remained rather unknown in Germany. What in turn rendered Beard's concept above all attractive was its construction as a disease of modern civilisation, and thus its inclusion of external factors related to modernity. But also, Beard's theory of neurasthenia was based on a materialistic conception and precepts heavily influenced by German physicians, such as Hermann von Helmholtz and Emil du Bois-Reymond.

A Threat to German 'Kultur'

The nerves, as tendons that were visible under the skin, were primarily the holders of strength, energy, and will power and thus conceived as the driving mechanism of the body. In Carl Ernst Bock's *Das Buch vom gesunden und vom kranken Menschen* (1898), it is said that the corporeal agency that assembles and guarantees 'the whole' is not the 'I', the will or consciousness, not a spiritual, immaterial principle, but rather a corporeal and material system on which the subject's consciousness and overall good functioning depends. In Germany, the organicist and materialist approach dominated over the end-of-the-nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-twentieth-century period. Even the psychiatric tradition developed later in the twentieth century remained strongly influenced by the thought of Wilhelm Griesinger and his studies on 'Gehirnpathology' and Hermann von Helmholtz's second law of thermodynamics (see Griesinger 1845; Pewzner 2002: 188).

These theoretical foundations were also at the common core of Beard's theory. Thus, in a similar manner as Beard, Krafft-Ebing makes use of economic metaphors to illustrate his theories of 'Nervkraft'. He refers in *Über gesunde und kranke Nerven* (1885) to the differing amounts of 'Arbeitskapital' (17), 'Spannkräfte' (17), and 'geistiges Kapital' (95) in people, – which I fact amounted to male brain-workers. In Krafft-Ebing's views, some individuals were blessed with a richer while others had a more limited amount of nervous capital. In his

nerve manual, he advises against the overspending or wasting of vital resources, which could lead to ‘physischen und geistigen Bankerott’ (1885: 22).

> Die Erscheinungen der Nervschwäche gehen ohne scharfe trennende Schranke hervor aus temporären Ermüdungs- und Ueberreizungsphänomenen, die jedem geistigen Berufsarbeiter in unserem modernen Culturdaseins genugsam bekannt sind. Sie sind nichts anderes als andauernde Erscheinungen eines Nervenlebens, das die Bilanz zwischen *Produktion* und *Verbrauch* von Nervenkraft nicht mehr herzustellen vermag. (109–110, emphasis added)

Exhaustion signified a lack of material nerve-force, an imbalance in the body’s vital reservoir as more had been consumed than produced. The notion of a quantifiable, material nervous energy, and the mechanic model of production and consumption which was assimilate to the workings of a bank account, battery or steam-machine, strongly permeated German writings during this early stage of reception.

Krafft-Ebing’s materialistic conception was inscribed in a German medical tendence in which the brain and the nerves were presented as an electric or mechanical system. For instance, Paul Julius Möbius (1853–1907), a student of the Leipzig internist and neurologist Adolf Strümpel (1853–1925), compared in *Nervosität* (1882) the human nerve power with the electric current and nervousness with a flickering incandescent lamp in an overloaded power network (see Möbius 1882: 86). And, already before the German reception of Beard’s works, the nervous system had been described by way of a technical metaphor. It had been constructed by the German physician and anatomist Carl Ernst Bock in *Das Buch vom gesunden und vom kranken Menschen* as a system of ‘Telegraphendrähten’, a telegraphic network from which ‘jetzt fast alle civilisirten Länder durchzogen werden’ (1872/1876: 137). The brain as well as consciousness became an electric apparatus, a machine among others. The subject itself was presented as completely subservient and dependent on the ‘mechanical’ functioning of the nerves’ transmissions of information, which worked according to rules of energy consumption and production and thus outside of the realm of the conscious mind and his will (see Bock 1876: 139; Sarasin 2001: 352).

Despite the similarities between Beard’s texts and the German ones in the mechanistic conception of neurasthenia, Germany’s socio-cultural context and reaction to modernity differed to that of Beard’s representation. In contrast to the latter’s positive and idealistic depiction of modernity and neurasthenia as an

honourable sign, Germany as seen through the writings of multiple social critics and especially of medical scientists was facing a cultural crisis marked by the threat of degeneration. German society was particularly threatened by a 'Krise des bürgerlichen Selbstbewusstseins' – which, according to Volker Roelcke, can be divided into two phases (see Roelcke 2002: 100–104, 106). In the first one, the stressful, straining consequences of a rapid and massive process of urbanisation and industrialisation on the body and mind favoured the development of this pathological state. In this phase, the disease of civilisation was due to innovations that had changed the urban landscape, and mostly affected the body on an individual level. In a second phase, the pressure of degeneration loomed over German civilisation and notably its culture. In this critical period of moral and cultural decline, neurasthenic states were believed to progress and worsen from generation to generation, thus spreading almost epidemically through biological transmission throughout the entire body of the German nation. This disease of civilisation gradually extended from an individual to a collective dimension, threatening the wellbeing and unity of the body politic.

Beard had originally introduced the notion 'disease of civilisation' in his 1880 study on nervous exhaustion. The concept suggested that modern civilisation, the demands of the outside world, favoured or caused the development of nervous diseases (see Beard 1880: 189). Neurasthenia gained ground as individuals were becoming more sedentary, more intellectually active, and consequentially suffered from mental overwork and physiological weakness. Beard's expression came to be reproduced by some German medical men – in analogous and distant ways. The concept of 'Zivilisationskrankheit' (disease of civilisation) particularly resonated with the German medical community. However, some German physicians preferred to use the term 'Kulturkrankheit' (disease of culture) and thus incorporated into the aetiology the deleterious effects of certain cultural elements. The works of Erb and Krafft-Ebing, above all, infused the German field neurology and the entire medical field with cultural criticism. At this point in time, a reoccurring motif in medical texts was the degeneration of civilisation, but above all of its culture.

The term 'culture' is distinct from 'civilisation'. In German, 'culture' is the older term and corresponds to the Latin form *cultura.* The term 'civilisation' (Latin *civis*) appeared later in eighteenth-century France (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2020). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2020), 'culture' etymologically means an 'intellectual and artistic conditions of a society or the (perceived) state of development of those conditions,

also the ideas, customs, etc. of a society or group'. The meaning of 'state of intellectual development' transformed in the German language from an individual to the whole of a society in the mid-eighteenth century. Also, the German philosopher Thorsten Botz-Bornstein draws a relatively distinctive line between the concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture' by declaring that the former generally refers to material (technical/industrial, social, economic) aspects, while the latter refers to immaterial (spiritual, intellectual, artistic) aspects. Thus, and quoting here Thorsten Botz-Bernstein's definition, the German usage of 'Zivilisation' seems to allude to a 'utilitarian, outer aspect of human existence' that can be subordinated to 'Kultur', which embodies the real essence of a group of individuals, of a specific society (see Botz-Bornstein 2012: 10–28).

The German 'Kulturkritik', with its problematisation of the destruction of traditional social ties (mobilisation and atomisation of society, urbanisation), the bureaucratisation, the secularisation, the rationalisation, technicisation, industrialisation, became a preponderant symptom of the pathologisation of modernity and a factor in the aetiology of neurasthenia. Crisis awareness was a common European phenomenon around 1900. The idea and concept of the crisis of culture were particularly an integral part of the German mentality, spreading even within the medical field. The development of cultural criticism in Germany can be objectively attributed to a modernisation process that happened particularly quickly and with aggressive force. Nowhere else had the technical, economic, social and cultural upheavals and innovations been so rapid and so profound. This is shown very clearly in the discrepancy that characterises Wilhelminism: on the one hand, on the side of technical progress, but also in political and cultural terms, a 'late' unified and developing nation that despite structural weaknesses (the crisis of the Empire and the dismissal of Bismarck) also experienced a flow of ideas and innovation in the cultural-scientific area; on the other hand, this period was permeated by a spirit of cultural decline, mainly articulated by an educated middle class that feared for its material and social status and was therefore particularly sensitive to the progress and constraints the modernisation process had brought forth.

The founding fathers of German sociology – namely Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Werner Sombart – fundamentally inherited the themes and pessimistic tone of the 'Kulturkritik' (see Berlan 2006). We must see in the pessimistic approach shared by Max Weber with his principle of the 'iron cage',[4]

[4] The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) establishes in his infamous *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1905) the modern way of existence and that of efficiency under the sign of the 'iron cage' ('stahlharte

Georg Simmel, and Werner Sombart, the result of disappointment in the face of the collapse of traditional values and the advent of an individualistic and technical society in which the reign of frenzied competition continuously corroded the social bond. In his major work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887), Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) expresses his concerns about the future of modern society by tying in the development of civilisation and the expansion of the metropolis with the loss of community culture and forms of sociality, which he places on the side of the villages, the small traditional town, the family, the craft industry. By becoming a metropolis, the city witnessed the disappearance of more organic forms of social ties, primary community ties (neighbourhood, blood ties, kinship, craftsmanship) in favour of an urban and massified form of civilisation in which these ties had been dissolved. The process of metropolisation can be thought of as a double movement of alienation. First, because the city caused the individual to be isolated and uprooted once cut off from his original community; secondly, because the development of the big city was responsible for the disintegration of the community bond. Tönnies thus places his vision of the metropolisation of Western civilisation under the sign of disenchantment.

Medical discourses were also seized by the Zeitgeist and demonstrated a will to problematise and pathologise certain factors related to modernisation. As mentioned earlier, Wilhelm Erb and Richard von Krafft-Ebing included 'kulturkritische' elements in neurasthenia's aetiology. In his public lecture transcribed in *Über die wachsende Nervosität unserer Zeit,* Erb lists 'die Religionslosigkeit', 'die moderne Literatur', 'aufdringlich[e] und lärmend[e] Musik', 'aufregenen [Theater] Darstellungen' and 'die bildenden Künste […] mit Vorliebe dem Abstossenden, Hässlichen und Aufregenden' (Erb 1893: 23–24). Erb also points to the emergence of new political socialist and revolutionary ideas, which threaten to throw off the balance the existing social order and confuse the population. But, above all, these changes threatened the nation's cultural emblem: the Kaiser himself (1893: 5, 7). Erb sees the authority of the nation state and of the Kaiser destabilised and weakened by 'die ausserordentlichen Errungenschaften der Neuzeit' (1893: 23). The term 'Kulturkrankheit' is not explicitly mentioned to define neurasthenia; still, Erb regroups these factors under the construct of modern cultural

Gehäuse') – meaning, framed by rationalistic behavioural demands. The 'iron cage' traps individuals in a system, an oppressing and paralysing bureaucratic system, built on control, efficiency, and rational and practical calculation (see Weber 1920: 203–204).

development: 'So zeigt dies allgemeine Bild schon eine Reihe von Gefahren in unserer *modernen Culturentwicklung'* (1893: 24, emphasis added).

The word 'Kultur' and, even more explicitly, that of 'Kulturkrankheit', is also essential in Krafft-Ebing's writings. He describes neurasthenia as 'eine moderne und Culturkrankheit' (1885: 108). Krafft-Ebing was a declinist thinker, a pessimist, and a moralist, who focused on the dangerous effects of morally deviant and over-stimulating distractions offered by big cities and their night life (1885: 8). Seeing in Beard's conception that the term 'civilisation' embraces the idea that a society has reached an advanced stage of social and cultural development, the term 'culture' here encompasses the social behaviours, values and norms, and the artistic achievements intrinsic to a particular nation or community. In a sense, the notion of 'Kulturkrankheit' stigmatised the nation's identity, the essence of its people. What made people sick came far from beyond the superficial external changes brought by urbanisation and industrialisation. The manifestation of neurasthenia as a disease of culture, disintegrating its roots, was a much deeper expression of a fundamental national identity crisis.

Higher, Faster, Further: 'Kampf ums Dasein' as Metaphor

The discomfort in and about the culture expressed itself in a general nervousness or in neurasthenic symptoms. In the early German reception of neurasthenia, in Wilhelm Erb's *Über die wachsende Nervosität unserer Zeit* (1893) or Paul Julius Möbius' *Nervosität* (1882), the sociological interpretation of the cause of the disease was in the foreground, the aspect of heredity remained marginal. The state of German 'culture', threatened by a rapid urbanisation, mechanisation, new consumeristic practices, and a fast-paced tempo, was therefore the primary cause of the disease, which then triggered a cascade of pathophysiological processes in the nervous system (Möbius 1882; Erb 1893). Nervous weakness did not constitute a sign of refinement and progress, as in Beard's case; rather, on another extreme, it was a sign of a dangerous exuberance of ambition, an affliction of the modern businessman in pursuit of money, the illness of overworked students cramming knowledge in their brains to succeed. This class of individuals was in a state of constant sensory overload and excitement. And this compulsive activity and over-excitement was draining their energies, leaving them weak, and unable to keep up with the pace.

The idea of individuals struggling and fighting against external forces predominated in numerous medical works and became an emblematic metaphor for their exhaustion. In this context of cultural pessimism, the social-Darwinian terms 'Kampf ums Dasein' became the catchword of modern civilisation, a kind of master metaphor within the turn-of-the-century Zeitgeist. The vital forces flowing through the body needed to constantly face either the overstimulation brought along by technological innovations or social transformations. Regardless of which causes were mainly emphasised by medical authors, the pressure on the individual came from multiple 'war fronts': from within oneself (the need to rise higher than one's ancestors and to fight against hereditary biological predisposition), from the outside environment (traffic and rapid urbanisation, noise and air pollution, mass industrialisation), and from society with its growing capitalist ethos of unbridled competition and its injunctions to succeed and remain productive.

Erb, for instance, mentions the inability of the individual to act or think and a heightened receptiveness to the smallest of stimuli. The living conditions of the bourgeois class, notably those of the brain-workers, had been rapidly transformed in a short timeframe by urban transformations and technical innovations, which brought new daily pressures and led to symptoms for some vaguer than others, like 'geistiger Ermüdung, Denkunfähigkeit, Willenserschlaffung, verbunden mit Druck und Schmerz im Kopfe' (1893: 11). It is interesting to note that, despite the apparent materialism employed by German physicians at that time, the appearance of notions such as 'Willenserschlaffung' (relaxation of the will) adds to the general ambiguity of the purely somatic condition and the mechanical conception at work behind the state of exhaustion. Fixated on the idea of exogenous causes, Erb did not consider like his colleagues in France hereditary predisposition ('erbliche Belastung') as a relevant factor. Rather, the high demands generated by modern 'culture', as he formulates it, mainly put individuals at risk (1893: 31). As he targets the hectic and overstimulating life in the metropolis, Erb enumerates the 'Hast und Unruhe', 'die Jagd nach Reichthum und Gewinn', 'die rasch wechselnden Conjuncturen' as generators of nervous exhaustion (1893: 27–28). Mirroring Beard's primary broad set of causes listed in *American Nervousness* (1880), the German neurologist also mentions railway traffic, steam-power, telegraph and telephone exchanges amongst the foremost causes of the condition. Both individual drive and environmental causes merge in neurasthenia's German aetiology.

Comparable arguments can also be found, in a moderate form, in the first volume of the series *Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie* first published by the psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in 1879. Krafft-Ebing mentions progress as having undoubtedly played a role in the development of diseases. Amongst these, he counts the rapid growth of the metropolitan population, which has resulted in the propagation of infectious diseases (for instance, tuberculosis) and the expansion of a mentally and physically degenerate proletariat, pauperism, unchecked labour conditions, celibacy, and most importantly, the intellectually exhausting and morally deteriorating addiction to wealth and luxury. Larger cities bustling with all kinds of people has increased the struggle for existence, which mentally has led to the propensity of cases of strained and worn-out nerves and ultimately of exhaustion (Krafft-Ebing 1879: 134–135).

As individuals wanted to acquire more and faster prestige, wealth, and enjoyment, they were willing to sacrifice, as Krafft-Ebing formulates it, their health, family, and character. Critical of his neighbours' lifestyle, he comments in his 1885 study: 'Der Franzose hat für diese aufreibende und moralisch schädigende Sucht nach Ansehen, Reichthum, Wohlleben und Genuss ein bezeichnendes Wort. Es heist *Carrière* machen' (1885: 13, emphasis added). Like many studies on neurasthenia in Germany and in France at that time, the aetiological factors were mostly embedded with a brain-working environment. Krafft-Ebing unfavourably paints this lifestyle as being pernicious and morally depraving the individual. Yet, as he sees it, the French did not seem to disapprove this lifestyle and rather embraced it. Krafft-Ebing's discourse on nervous weakness is explicitly imbued with a culturally conservative and declinist perception.

The stressful and morally damaging drive and struggle for success set forth in this modern age contributed to a state of nervous weakness on an individual level, but also to a collective moral decline on a national level. Krafft-Ebing's 1895 text, *Nervosität und neurasthenische Zustände*, more acerbly looks into the decline of the German population and the hereditary predisposition factor. He describes how the exhausted brain-workers, representing a large contingent of neurasthenic cases, became more nervous and less resistant 'Generation um Generation' (1895: 62). Krafft-Ebing strictly critiques the modern businessman's 'Gier möglichst viel Besitz zusammenzuraffen', his 'Jagd nach Geld', his 'Bedürfniss nach Genuss- und Reizmitteln (Kaffee, Thee, Alkohol, Tabak)' (1895: 12–13). Because of such a hurried and consequentially draining lifestyle, men were eventually left with a modest amount of 'Manneskraft', a weakened state of strength and accordingly of virility, which only

enabled them to father sensitive, weak, nervous children (1895: 13). Modern civilisation was, in his view, not heading towards progress but rather towards apparent decline.

His argumentation on the sombre degenerative development of modern civilisation is further reinforced in a chapter on the causes of nervous disorders in which he explains how the factor of inherited nervous weakness is acquired through an ancestor's debauched lifestyle. He writes:

> Das gewaltige biologische Gesetz der Vererbung […] hat eine eminente Bedeutung auf dem Gebiet des Nervenlebens. Nicht blos Vorzüge und Tüchtigkeit, sondern auch Fehler und Gebrechen werden durch daßelbe auf die Nachkommenschaft übertragen, eine schreckliche Wahrheit der Naturforschung und eine Bestätigung des Satzes der heiligen Schrift: 'Ich werde die Sünden Eurer Väter an Euch rächen bis ins dritte und vierte Glied.' […] Jene erblich veranlagte Nervenschwäche, erscheint überaus häufig als die Folge einer übermässigem Genuss und übermässiger Arbeit. (Krafft-Ebing 1885: 24–25)

The sinful pursuit of professional success and social enjoyment – of hedonistic, materialistic, egotistic forms of self-satisfaction –, which were deemed to be generated by the urban scene of this modern age, was spreading like a curse from generation to generation. Whereas Erb clearly blames modern urbanisation and technologisation for nervous disorders, Krafft-Ebing's explanation of nervous exhaustion cites two main culprits: on one side, the urban setting and with it the inclination towards unhealthy habits and, on the other, a degenerative form of evolution caused by hereditary transmission.

While Erb's and Möbius' writings echo Beard's mechanical model of the nervous system, Krafft-Ebing's two major publications on neurasthenia show a turning away from the electricity paradigm in favour of the theory of degeneration as an organising matrix of nervousness. Notwithstanding that Krafft-Ebing makes mention of Beard's name and emulates some of his arguments, his version differs in various aspects. As Krafft-Ebing points out, drastic changes had taken place in the political and social spheres, especially with the transformation of the industrial, commercial, and agricultural conditions of the civilised nations, – and that at the expense of the nervous system. Unable to recover and keep up with the fast-paced civilisation, individuals were hardly able to meet the increased social and economic requirements which meant an increased spending of nerve force. Krafft-Ebing mentions the fact that countless modern people claimed their lives to be rhythmed by feverish excitements, dictated by an incessant hunting for money and possessions, hasty cultural developments in the form of railways,

post, telegraph, and increased needs for enjoyment (coffee, tea, alcohol, tobacco), etc. – causes which exposed them to nervous overstrain and exhaustion (1895: 12–13).

The multiple demands generated by a competitive and growing consumer society had become too high for the individual to be able to counter them and recuperate from them afterwards. Krafft-Ebing paints a picture of a vicious circle in which modern men have been caught. In a society where the notions of 'more' and 'faster' have become the norm, the body is forced to battle against pressures of the outside world, against his own needs, and most importantly, against time.

> So entsteht ein falscher Cirkel – die Überreizung der Nerven im *Kampfe* um ein geschraubtes, verfeinertes Dasein schafft das Bedürfniss nach immer pikanteren und damit kostspieligeren Genüssen und damit diese zum Bedürfniss gewordenen Genüsse möglich werden, muss das Nervensystem vermehrte Arbeit leisten. […] Den Tag über äusserte Anstrengung im Beruf – kaum Zeit zum Essen – Zeit ist ja Geld – beständiger *Kampf* mit der Concurrenz, grosse Verantwortung und Anforderungen im Beruf – Abends dringendes Bedürfniss nach Erholung, Genuss um jeden Preis! Aber die überreizten Nerven bedürfen ausserordentlicher Reizmittel. (1895: 10, emphasis added)

Krafft-Ebing goes to show the perverse vicious cycle created by a capitalistic thirsty society. The constant 'Kampf' for existence with the simultaneous loss of a sense of stability in everyday life went hand in hand with restlessness and increasing dissatisfaction. The beginning of globalisation assuredly opened up numerous opportunities, but it also often led to the problematic 'Hetzen und Jagen', having to chase after these opportunities with the maxim 'höher, schneller, weiter' and a 'time is money'-mentality in which rest and regeneration phases no longer seemed desirable or even possible.

The 'Kulturkritik' acquired an awareness of the crisis of the German cultural identity, stronger than in any other Western country. The anxiety of a disintegration and loss of German identity during the Wilhelmine period became the foundation for the developing nationalist ideology of the Third Reich and its design to build a unified and healthy Germany (see Mosse 1981; Stern 1986; Weindling 1993). Hitler later spoke in *Mein Kampf* (1925/1926) of the 'Massenverseuchung' of the metropolitan population and the 'Unrat unserer sittlichen Verpestung der großstädtischen Kultur', thus including fragments of the pessimistic fin-de-siècle period (Hitler 1925/1926/1938: 270, 279). Prior to Hitler's manifesto, Oswald Spengler also writes in *Der Untergang des*

Abendlandes. Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte (1918) about '[die] Tatsache, daß das Dasein immer *wurzelloser,* das Wachsein immer an gespannter wird' and that modern civilisation was once again – or one might say, still – heading towards 'Unfruchtbarkeit' (Spengler 1923/1995: 676, 679, emphasis added). From the end of the nineteenth century onto the new century, materialism, egoism, mammonism, and depravation prevailed as much in the cultural discourses, as it did in the medical texts. The 'Kampf ums Dasein' motto signified a struggle to survive in an environment encouraging uprootedness, the atomisation of the masses, cosmopolitanism. Individuals had become nomads with no sense of attachment, traditional values and beliefs to be grounded in. And those factors had played a role in Germany's epidemic nervous exhaustion phenomenon.

Building a New Body: Gymnastics to Discipline a Nervous Nation

At the turn of the century, from the 1900s to the 1930s, alternative life reform ('Lebensreform') movements emerged as a reaction to physical and moral restlessness and fear of decline and as a result of the biologisation and medicalisation of German culture that had taken place in the nineteenth century. Overlapping the private dimension (the body) with community-forming and regeneration principles, the discourses conducted in these reform movements can be interpreted as a biopolitically motivated search for identity foundation: with discussions about naturalness, purity, and health as the highest self-imposed value alongside independence and personal responsibility. An important focus of the life reform movement was the emphasis on the body and its health. A key catchphrase was the reform of the 'Körperkultur'. Purity, simplicity, beauty, strength, discipline, and naturalness became the guiding principles of the 'Lebensreform' and the foundation on which individuals could rebuild their strength and counter exhaustion. It had extremely diverse ramifications in Germany, ranging from vegetarianism to nudism, air and sun bathing, the anti-alcohol movement, reformed pedagogy, reformed clothing (more comfortable and breathable), or even the practice of gymnastics aimed to shape a new body ideal in the twentieth century (see Rothschuh 1983; Kerbs and Reulecke 1998; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2004). The life-reform movements promised in a way self-improvement and self-empowerment through alternative lifestyle habits.

It was not only about breaking unhealthy habits, such as smoking, drinking (alcohol) or lack of exercise, but also about liberating the body of habits holding it back through breathing and stretching exercises as well hypnosis and will-strengthening exercises. Vitality, rhythmicity, disciplining the body became the driving concepts of a healthy and natural counter-culture as opposed to the degenerate, diseased, and artificial modern culture (see Bollenbeck 2001: 205). Health implied cultivating an ideal body-image and realising specific standards of womanly and manly beauty. Physical beauty acquired a special meaning in the discourses around 1900. On this foundational aspect of the 'Lebensreform'-ideology, Klaus Wolbert writes: "'Schönheit' […] war das Erlösungswort der Zeit. [Es] war das Gegenbegriff gegen eine Welt, die in den Augen der Reformer vor allem durch die Ausbreitung des Hässlichen, Kranken, Verkommenen, Deformierten und Widerwärtigen gekennzeichnet war' (Wolbert 2001: 215). The idea of the body as a work of art, with the canonisation of ideal standards and stereotypes, went hand in hand with an objectification of the body, so to speak. Based upon the scientific belief that visual perception could construct a human typology, the body became a readable cipher and could easily be classified as healthy or diseased.

Alongside these precepts cultivated by life reformers, the rediscovery of ancient Greece also strongly contributed to putting the concept of rhythm at the centre of the debates. The life-reforming ideal of health then took up ideas and ideals that had been valid in the Western world since the eighteenth century (especially through the work of the art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768)).[5] This ideal was seen in the model of ancient Greek statues, preferably young gods or athletes, who embodied strength and virility due to their physique and posture, but also harmony, proportion, discipline, and self-control (see Mosse 1996: 29ff; Nisbet 1985; Parhammer 2022). In this sense, many authors of hygienist manuals saw in practices in ancient Greece and the aesthetic ideal embodied by these ancient statues the model of a healthy and vigorous culture in which the body was worthily maintained and constituted a unity with the soul and the spirit. In line with these ideas, with his widely read study *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (1909), Karl Bücher spread the idea that rhythm

[5] As an unconditional defender of Greek art, Winckelmann sees in it the absolute characteristics of beauty. In his views, the body of the Greek, immortalised in statues, equated perfection in the field of anatomy and proportions. In *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755), Winckelmann notes how '[die] Körper erhielten durch diese Übungen den großen und männlichen Kontur, welchen die griechischen Meister ihren Bildsäulen gegeben, ohne Dunst und überflüssigen Ansatz' (Winckelmann 1885: 10).

constituted a vital educational principle and exercised a structuring and beneficial influence on temperaments, society and the nation.

Actively involved in the construction of the myth of the 'Neue Mensch', said to be united in body and mind, was not only the connoted stereotypical imagery of the body of the Greek athlete and the science of physical education. The emerging abstract entity of the will in the medical discourse became indicative of self-governance, a sense of control, and a resistance to one's pathological tendencies. As Radkau notes in his study *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität*, nervous diseases and the will were closely intertwined concepts following 1900 (2000: 399f). The condition of nervous exhaustion now more precisely denoted a *psychic* inability to resist the nervous forces emanating from the external world or from the depths of the body. The nervous individual appeared to be more determined from the inside, powerlessly subjected to the body's limited energy quantity and unable to impose their will power, and thus powerless to resist outside and internal forces. The mechanism of exhaustion shifted from an over expenditure of nerve force to an inability of the will to curb external or internal stimuli and resist responses. The heightened receptiveness of neurasthenic patients (as their will could not act as a braking mechanism), as Leopold Löwenfeld already writes in 1889, led successively to increased mental irritability ('psychische Erregungen'), stronger reactions, increased exhaustion, an inability to resist bodily responses and finally to increased sensitivity ('Empfindlichkeit') (Löwenfeld 1889: 4). Löwenfeld depicts an infernal circle of repeated overreactions and rapid changes in states alternating between irritability and exhaustion. Only by way of self-control, self-discipline, and reinforcing its resistance aptitudes could the body overcome all signs of weakness, apathy, impotence. Will theories at the turn of the century set in motion the importance of the power of control and inhibition of the will in a world in constant movement and change. The so-called 'psychic energy' of the will stood as the driving and directing force of the body.

To equip the individual for the 'Kampf ums Dasein' in modern society, the essence of will therapy was based on physical and mental strengthening exercises and resistance training. This new 'culture of the will' and its ensuing programs of will therapy that emerged around 1900 promised what seemed to be a sense of control over this nervous, insecure world fed by cultural anxieties of unmanageable nervousness and degeneration. As a reaction to nineteenth-century materialism, and particularly doctrines of heredity and degeneration, which had objectified and biologically determined the individual, the adherents of this new 'culture of the will' sought to

rehabilitate the priority of the spirit and individual agency over the body. The effort to overcome 'the age of nervousness', according to Rudolf Winterry (1914) and his contemporaries (Marcinowki 1910; Hiller 1916; Münster 1912; Fassbender 1911), was believed to be possible through a new age of stronger will ('Zeitalter des stärkeren Willens').

In *Cult of the Will: Nervousness and German Modernity* (2008), Michael A. Cowan explains how the concept of gymnastics of the will became one of the new found focus of hygienists and physicians at the turn of the century. Specialised and self-help manuals, such as Reinhold Gerling's *Die Gymnastik des Willens* (1905), Wilhelm Gerhardt's *Wie werde ich energisch?* (1912), Johannes Marcinowski's *Im Kampfe um gesunde Nerven* (1911), and Rudolf Winterry's *Im Zeitalter des stärkeren Willens* (1914), testify to the existence of a predominant hygienic literature on the training of the will. It was highly probable that German theorists on will therapy were influenced by the research previously conducted in late nineteenth-century France. These authors had agreed to and adopted the ideas, thus notably of will training through autosuggestion, that had been founded by French theorists Paul Emile Lévy, Théodule Ribot and his student Jules Payot (see Cowan 2008: 93–94). Yet, it diverged from the French theories on the will, as its principle was firmly rooted in the body and its tangibility, and made abstraction of the mind and its complex and highly subjective processes. As Gerling confidently proclaims: 'Wer seine Muskeln kräftigt, stärkt seinen Willen und damit zugleich seine Lebensenergie!' (1905/1906: 129).

All in all, these texts were saturated with a sense that the strengthening of the will was the key to survival in a modern world in the process of industrialisation and economic and social developments. 'Widerstand weckt Willenskraft' was the motto that Gerling proclaimed in his *Gymnastik des Willens* (1905: 178, 183). The concept employed by the adherents of this new paradigm, and the faculty that was supposed to equip the individual to survive in this modern world, was primarily the will and its power of inhibition, self-control and resistance. Concurrently with past nineteenth-century theorists on neurasthenia (to cite but a few, Erb 1893; Krafft-Ebing 1885, 1895; Möbius 1882), the twentieth-century supporters of will therapy attributed the modern will disease to an increasing and excruciating concern that was caused by the new view of social life as a merciless 'Kampf ums Dasein'. The critics Willy Hellpach and Karl Lamprecht both stressed the entrepreneur's unbearable sense of responsibility and the endless chain of worries, having to tighten every muscle in his body and above all concentrate all his mental energies (Hellpach 1902: 56, 63; Lamprecht 1922: 242–252). Nervousness and

specifically the lack of will power in states of nervous exhaustion were still predominantly believed to be a bourgeois and mostly male entrepreneurial disease, characterised by an incessant drive to work. To that, only a disciplining of the body and its will could be prescribed to 'resist', build up resilience, or recover from exhaustion (see Cowan 2013: 76).

In theory, manuals on will training emphasised the control of one's thought, the capacity to 'concentrate' (that is to say, to gather one's own thoughts so as to reach the highest degree of power) in order to regain control over the body itself – and most specifically to regain control over the nervous, exhausted or excited body (see Winterry 1914: 82). Examples of 'Willensgymnastik' could be images of abstract patterns designed to focus the viewer's attention and, these could hold at their centre suggestive words being, for instance, 'Energie', 'Thatkraft', 'Erfolg', 'Arbeitsfreudigkeit' (see fig. 5 *Der Willensstärker* from Hansen 1906; as seen in Cowan 2008: 98). These mental exercises were supposed to enhance the control of the subject over the body. The author of an article published in 1905 in *Der Kulturmensch* explained: 'Wir haben […] in der Machtfülle des Geistes eine Handhabe, durch *festen Entschluss* oder, wie man es auch nennen kann, durch *Autosuggestion* das Sinnesleben unseres Körpers zu lenken und leiten' (quoted in Seelmann 1904–1905: 191). Ultimately, these texts abounded with promises to teach their readers how to use their vague psychosomatic power of suggestion to control involuntary bodily reactions (see Gebhardt 1912: 234; Gerling 1905: 168).

With individuals having to fight for the existence in this modern world, therapeutic efforts to overcome nervousness and thus a weak will were less in line with the paradigm of a rest cure. Rather, they promoted the new reinvigoration of the will (see Radkau 2000: 399–400; Cowan 2008: 72–73). Where initial receptors of neurasthenia, like Krafft-Ebing, had prescribed rest and sleep as a cure to neurasthenia, the proponents of will training contested the therapeutic value of resting and believed that the pathological addiction to rest was rather the actual cause of neurasthenia (see Krafft-Ebing 1885: 93). For instance, as Gerling sought to persuade his readers in *Gymnastik des Willens* (1920), a longing for rest equalled a longing for death (61). According to Gebhardt, the act of resting remained impossible for a living (energetic) being anyway: 'Absolute Ruhe gibt es ja nur im Tode; so lange wir leben, sind wir thätig, und es kommt nur darauf an, wie' (1912: 75). Health now meant the ability to participate in the restless flow of energies that modern life had triggered rather than withdrawing from it. Also, in his text *Wie werde ich energisch?* (1912), Gebhardt construes the desire to rest

among neurasthenics not only as a symptom of the weak will, but also as a dangerous effect, which could only make the problem worse: '[D]as unaufhörliche Ruhebedürfnis ist geradezu characteristisch für die Nervenschwäche. Und wie wirkt dieser Stimmungsuntergrund auf Geist und Willen zurück!' (46).

What can be memorised from this study of the discourses of exhaustion in Germany is the preponderant role of the body weakened and threatened by its 'unnatural' environment. The studies of pathological states, like nervous diseases, intersected with the social reflection on urbanisation, mechanisation, and the tempo of modern life. These factors were believed to have a negative impact on the individual body as well as on the body politic as a whole. Medical discourses, along with sociologists and life reformers, particularly lamented a loss of roots, traditions, community ties and values. The dissolution of structures within society and the ensuing growing feeling of instability rendered the body vulnerable and not resistant enough to fight off the forces of the extreme environment it was living in. It became as much a medical as a political issue. The concern for the dissolution of cultural and national roots ('Wurzellosigkeit') accelerated the growing 'Blut und Boden' ideology later on vindicated by the National Socialist Party under Hitler. Yet, prior to this chapter in German history, regarding its response to the entropic vision of the exhausted modern body alien to its environment, the 'Lebensreform' movements were not a manifestation of anti-modernism. They rather strove for a different modernity, one in which the body was synchronised with its environment, in rhythmic tune with it. The regeneration of the exhausted body could only be achieved through physical and mental education and its reinforcement of self-discipline and self-improvement. Yet, as the prerequisite of health became that of strength, naturalness, and beauty as exemplified by an ideal such as the ancient Greece athlete or its deities, medicine only further drifted away from truly 'seeing' the individual body, its reality, and the particularities of illnesses.

CHAPTER THREE

The Psychological Turn in Fin-de-Siècle France:

Turning the Medical Gaze Inward

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century in France, the success of an entity like neurasthenia, with its protean symptomatology straddling the categories of hypochondriac and depressive states, seems somewhat paradoxical. In point of fact, during the 1860s and 1870s, clinical manifestations, distinct both from melancholia and from what would later be called somatoform disorders (as in hysteria and hypochondria), began to be individualised and distinctly categorised under different names. Then, in the 1880s, Beard's novel concept of neurasthenia materialised in French medical treatises as an umbrella term encompassing these mutliple nervous conditions. Under 'neurasthénie' in *La Grande Encyclopédie* (1886), Dr Potel indicates that the medical term constituted a new label for an ancient disease with multiple names: 'le névrose était connue de Franck qui la décrivait sous le nom *d'irritation spinale*, de Bouchut pour lequel elle etait le *nervosisme*, de Krishaber qui la considérait comme une *névropathie cerebro-cardiaque*' (quoted in Potel 1886: 986). Léon Bouveret in his manual *La Neurasthénie: Épuisement nerveux* also lists 'le *névrospasme* de Brachet, *l'état nerveux* de Sandras, la *névralgie protéiforme* de Cerise, la *névralgie Générale* de Valleix' as diagnostic labels foregoing Beard's neurasthenia (Bouveret 1891: 8).

Following the publication of Beard's work, one could argue that it was a peculiar shift for the French medical community to quickly acknowledge Beard's broad, vague, and Americanised conception of exhaustion and integrate his concept and theories within the field of nerve sciences. Because an abundant literature on neurasthenia intended for doctors and patients was produced in France during the final two decades of the century. For example, the list includes the publication of Fernand Levillain's *La neurasthénie. Maladie de Beard* (1891), Léon Bouveret *La Neurasthénie: Épuisement nerveux* (1891), Adrien Proust and Gilbert Ballet's *L'hygiène du neurasthénique* (1897), and Jean-Martin Charcot's lectures. The eminent French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot

(1825–1893) introduced this syndrome of nervous exhaustion to the French medical community and public at least by 1887, notably in his demonstrative 'leçon du mardi' lectures at the Parisian clinic of La Salpêtrière (see Shorter 1993: 221). Charcot's specific contribution to the claimed American founded syndrome was the subdivision of the innumerable clinical signs of the disease into 'stigma'. Under the first group of observable signs he regrouped 'la céphalée en casque' (headache), dyspepsia (digestive problems), neuromuscular asthenia, rachialgia (painful aches), insomnia and intellectual disorders (attention and memory deficit). To the second group belonged vertigo, palpitations, cardialgia, faintness and paresthesia.

This shift from having tantamount medical terms to coin nervous states of irritability and instability to regrouping their symptoms under a superordinate such as neurasthenia was undoubtedly due to several factors: the conception of a disorder pathologising factors of modernity, the unification of heterogeneous symptoms by a common causality (overworked nerves through excessive intellectual work), the opportunity to simplify the classification of neuroses, and a functional syndrome corporealising complaints previously considered unfounded or imaginary. Neurasthenia became a term which subsequently encompassed all functional disorders and states of nervousness that did not fit in the category of hysteria or hypochondria. Whilst these points may have been approved and integrated by most physicians in their studies on the subject, the grotesque and nebulous form neurasthenia bore was also subjected to some criticism. Fernand Levillain (1837–1905), a student of Charcot critically asserts in 1891: 'Il faut bien reconnaître que la symptomatologie de ce traité n'est qu'un amas plus ou moins confus de tous les désordres neurasthéniques, jetés là pêle-mêle et sans ordre apparent les uns à la suite des autres. C'est une sorte d'énumération faite au hasard' (Levillain 1891: 67).

Still, at the outset, the success of theories on neurasthenia in French cultured circles was predominantly linked to the development of intellectual work and the rise of a capitalist ethos of productivity and unbridled competition amongst these professions. In point of fact, the era was marked by the rise of so-called 'non-manual work': with the development of the 'employee' status (from 126,000 'white collars' to 352,000 from 1866 to 1901 in Paris), the increase in the number of civil servants (doubling of the number of civil servants between 1860 and 1900) and above all of intellectuals (the number of journalists and men of letters also doubled between 1872 and 1901 as well as of academics between 1881 and the beginning of the century) (see Charle 1991: 188, 195). To this must be added the rising number of students attending school and pursuing longer studies (as a

consequence of Jules Ferry's establishment of mandatory schooling and free education in 1881/1882 and the development of secondary and upper education, etc.). Thereby, intellectual or mental overwork also became a worrying issue and closely tied to the syndrome of nervous exhaustion. In his article on neurasthenia, Dr Potel writes: 'la neurasthénie a besoin pour se produire d'agents révélateurs. Le plus commun est le surmenage, […] les excès de travail intellectuel, surtout lorsqu'il s'y joint le surmenage moral' (Potel 1886: 986). The very representation of neurasthenia as a consequence of intellectual overwork was logically linked to the social aetiology that had been given of it, this having been initiated by Beard's definition of neurasthenia as a syndrome proliferating amongst 'brain-workers'.

Intellectual 'Surmenage': A Pressure from the Brain to the Gut

The initial positive reception of Beard's book and the success of neurasthenia in France was also a result of concerns by some prominent French physicians about factors overworking the nervous system. They were not so much interested in the physical exhaustion that affected the manual labour classes, but rather the intellectual and mental exhaustion threatening the higher classes. Studies on intellectual overwork mentioned that those greatly affected were students, officers, professors and teachers, office clerks, merchants, intellectuals, and artists. Beard had previously unified these professions under 'brain-work'. The French concept of 'surmenage', a technical term for exhaustion and meaning literally 'overwork' or 'overexertion' pushing fatigue to the extreme, became the subject of numerous French medical studies starting in the 1880s and associated with brain-working professions and activities. Out of the 17 references from the 'fatigue et asthénie' file in the Henri Ey library listed between 1888 and 1939, 10 relate to intellectual overwork and mental exhaustion (including four specifically on school work) and 6 to neurasthenia, psychasthenia and exhaustion of psychic origin (see Loriol 2000: 40). Some of the references listed are: *Le surmenage scolaire* by Charles Féré in 1887, *Le surmenage intellectuel et les exercices physiques* by Aimé Riant in 1889, *Physiologie et hygiène du cerveau et des fonctions intellectuelles: mémoire, raisonnement, calcul, enchaînement des idées, le travail cérébral, l'éducation, la fatigue mentale, le surmenage* by Guyot-Daubès in 1890, *La fatigue intellectuelle* by Alfred Binet and V. Henri in 1898, or even *Travail et surmenage* by M. Pierrot in 1911.

The study of intellectual overwork and mental exhaustion was nonetheless not a new medical subject, considering that these writings were influenced by eighteenth and early nineteenth-century theories on 'l'hygiène' or 'physiologie de la pensée' of men of letters, which included writers, philosophers, lawyers and notaries (see Tissot 1768; Brunaud 1819; Réveillé-Parise 1834; Deschanel 1864). By also examining the eighteenth-century medical discourses of mental exhaustion, one learns that the continuous working of the mind produced a result similar to the violent exercise of the muscles. The Swiss physician Samuel-Auguste Tissot, whose writings on the subject were influential at that time and continued to be in the long nineteenth century, confirmed the hypothesis in his treatise *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1768) that people who devoted themselves to studying and to physical inactivity dissipated their spirits by overexerting their brain fibres (16). In the medical imagination, spirits were assimilated to an impalpable, ethereal and subtle fluid, elaborated in the brain and which had the power to diffuse vitality in the body. But by retaining nerve fluid in the brain, through prolonged cerebral work, the spirits acted like a ligature on the nerves and left all bodily functions in abeyance (Tissot 1768: 36; 1772: 208).

The physiology of cerebral work continued to be the subject of medical studies with the arrival of the concept of neurasthenia in the last decades of the nineteenth century. But the fin-de-siècle clinical approach to nervous diseases and particularly to 'surmenage' widened the scope of patients (beyond the category of writers, geniuses, and artists) with the inclusion of administrative workers, professors, students, industrialists, journalists, etc., as well as the inclusion of a few key characteristics that had emerged in this modern, capitalistic era: the need for productivity, ambition and the spirit of competition. The hygienist and epidemiologist Adrien Proust (1834–1903), father of novelist Marcel Proust, and Gilbert Ballet, a student of Charcot, claim in L'hygiène du neurasthénique that they did not believe that intellectual work per se accounted for neurasthenia (see Proust and Ballet 1897: 7). They rather attributed the evil to moral pressure and the need to adapt quickly: 'Ce travail cérébral qui surmène et épuise est celui qu'accompagnent le souci du lendemain, la préoccupation vive d'un but à atteindre, la crainte d'un insuccès ou d'un échec, qu'il s'agisse d'affaires industrielles ou commerciales où est engagé la fortune, d'un examen ou d'un concours d'où dépend l'avenir' (1897: 23). The strain and anxiety caused by having to constantly conform to societal expectations and being in a situation of uncertainty were essentially pathologised.

Also, the terms ‘maladie de civilisation’ denoting the neurasthenia syndrome did not bear the same meaning as in Beard’s texts. Alongside Proust and Ballet’s text, other theorists connected the causes of exhaustion to the living conditions of urban-bourgeois elites, to the competitive environment, the performance-seeking mentality, and the consumption of material and artistic pleasures (see Proust and Ballet 1897: 10, 32; Dejerine 1886: 235; Levillain 1891: 17–35). High levels of responsibility, fear of failure, and of the unknown future constituted key factors – one could almost say – of ‘stress’ that negatively impacted the mental wellbeing of the modern brain-working man. In theory, overwork was intrinsically linked to professional constraints (competitive environment, heavy work load), causing a feeling of pressure, overflow, and exhaustion, physiologically explained as ‘un sumènement des centres nerveux supérieurs’ (Proust and Ballet 1897: 2). In quantitative terms, it was an invading rate of stimulation, creating an overflow that oversaturated the psychic life and its threshold of assimilation.

With the emphasis on intellectual overwork as the cause of exhaustion, the stigma of ‘céphalée en casque’, meaning the headaches, became a notable sign. In his Tuesday lecture of November 22 in 1887, Charcot presents a case of neurasthenia. In this transcribed consultation between Charcot and his patient, one can note that the condition is being described by the present patient as a ‘ramollissement cérébral’, which Charcot forthwith interprets as a pressured sensation or a feeling of heaviness in the head (see Charcot and Blin 1892: 26). There is no allusion to a quantitative energy deficit or a metaphoric construction of the body as machine. In his exploration of a metaphoric language for the symptomatic headaches, Charcot makes use of the figurative expression ‘se cass[er] la tête’ (to break one’s head) when talking about anxious young people graduating from prestigious schools and stressed men working in positions of high responsibility (Charcot and Blin 1892: 28). This latter expression – which is apt in this context of neurasthenia and its association with the moral and intellectual pressures of modernity – visually shows the effects on the body of a situation in which an individual goes to considerable trouble, gets worked up about something, and mentally overstrains his nervous systems (his brain, spinal cords and nerves).

Charcot with other physicians recurringly observe and pinpoint the feeling of heaviness and pressure in the head: ‘Il leur semble […] qu’ils portent sur la tête une masse pesante ou bien une coiffure trop lourde et trop serrée’ (quoted both in Proust and Ballet 1897: 50 and Bouveret 1891: 54). The reiterated use of the words

'pesanteur', 'constriction', 'pression' and 'lourdeur' across Proust and Ballet's, Bouveret's and Charcot's text project a different image of neurasthenia than the one produced by Beard's metaphoric conceptions and even by early German theorists (see Proust and Ballet 1897: 50–51, 52; Charcot and Blin 1892: 26; Bouveret 1891: 54–55). The aim seems to not have been to physiologically characterise neurasthenia, but rather to explain the mental sensation experienced by neurasthenics. Here, there is no image of a used battery with deficient conductors, no empty bank account, or overstrained electric circuit. No substance of energy is imaged as being drained outside the body. Rather the focus is on the sensation of something pressing and weighing down on the head, slowing down the motricity of the body and the intellectual capacities, which explains the state of lassitude and exhaustion felt by neurasthenics.

This heaviness is also expressed by another sign in the neurasthenic's symptomatology: that of dyspepsia, which can be translated from the medical as abdominal pain and a feeling of fullness (see Bouveret 1891: 27–28; Levillain 1891: 94–97; Proust and Ballet 1897: 59–74; see also Lillestøl 2018). The atony of the stomach and intestines, meaning the lack of normal tension in these organs, constituted another noticeable physiological marker of neurasthenia. It is interesting to note the presence of a brain-gut axis, underlying again the presence of a somatic experience. As dyspepsia became at the end of the century symptomatic of nervous exhaustion and prominent among 'brain-workers', leading medical men to explore the brain-gut axis, it is worth to note (and I refer here to Manon Matthias and Alison M. Moores' interdisciplinary collaborative study on nineteenth-century gut feeling and digestive health) that it had, again, already been the subject of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century medical literature (see Matthias and Moore 2018: 112, 135–141). Namely, Tissot points to the painful and slow digestion of the intellectually exhausted: 'L'homme qui pense le plus, est celui qui digère le plus mal; toutes choses égales d'ailleurs, celui qui pense le moins, est celui qui digère le mieux' (1768 : 25).

Influenced by Tissot's theories, another prominent physician and theorist Maurice de Fleury (1860–1931) expressed interest in the case of dyspeptic artists. For they are the ones who complain about the state of their nerves and stomach:

> [I]l suffit d'avoir fréquenté quelques artistes contemporains pour être frappé de la quantité de plaintes qu'ils émettent sans cesse sur l'état de leurs nerfs ou de leur estomac. […] Votre romancier favori, Madame, digère déplorablement. Après chacun de ses repas, il devient rouge, il a sommeil, il se sent

> alourdi; son estomac se gonfle et son gilet le gêne: soyez sûre qu'il le déboutonne s'il dîne en famille; s'il dîne en ville il se contente d'en desserrer furtivement la boucle. (Fleury 1897: 123)

With the emphasis on the symptomatic headaches and indigestion, theorists drew a corelation between a sedentary and excessive cerebral work lifestyle and the increasing preoccupation, anxiety, and mental and physical exhaustion. The link between brain-work, (in)digestion, and exhaustion was part of a wider question on the relationship between modern civilisation and individual health as new ways of living had emerged and become customary.

Modern Disease of Civilisation or Individual Pathology?

But as these writings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on dyspepsia and exhaustion disorders in 'brain-workers' testify, exhaustion with its noticeable signs of headaches and dyspepsia were not symptoms exclusively caused by modern times. The condition which particularly stigmatised writers had already endured for a few decades and even for almost a century. Despite stressing the correlation between neurasthenia and mentally straining factors of the modern age, notably related to the pressures of brain-work, Charcot, Dejerine, Proust, and Ballet amongst others point out that neurasthenia had not appeared as a newly-formed disease and argue against its status as a disease only peculiar to modern civilisation (see Potel 1886: 986; Proust and Ballet 1897: 7–8). In the 1894 *Traité de médecine*, cowritten by numerous eminent French physicians (Charcot, Eduard Brissaud, Charles Bouchard, Gilbert Ballet, Joseph Babinski, and many others), neurasthenia is presented as a timeless diagnosis, which transcends all forms of civilisation:

> Si la formule nosographique de la neurasthénie est de date récente, cette névrose n'est pas pour cela, comme le croyait Beard, un mal nouveau engendré par le surmenage physique et intellectuel inhérents à la civilisation et à la vie sociale de notre époque. Elle n'est pas non plus un 'mal spécial aux Américains'. Elle est certes de tous les pays, et il est vraisemblable qu'elle a existé de tout temps, comme il résulte d'un passage du livre II des Maladies d'Hippocrate. (Charcot et al. 1894: 1281)

Overall, when compared to American and even German discourses, the idea of modern civilisation as a cause of neurasthenia received only little attention in the French medical literature. The relationship between neurasthenia, nervous disease and civilisation seemed difficult to establish scientifically. This is a criticism that can be

addressed specially towards Beard and German neurologist Wilhelm Erb as their conception of neurasthenia mainly relied on the presumed effects of technical innovations on the body. In contrast, physicians like Charcot eventually managed to break the link between neurosis and civilisation and detach their studies from social ideologies with their clinical observations and the emergence of the psychological approach (see Huguet 1984: 169–203).

In that sense, one factor to which French medical theorists remained strongly attached to and which differentiates their approach from other countries is that of heredity and thus a focus on a vertical transmission and individual pathology. In the discourses of exhaustion, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, heredity acted as a vehicle for scientific explanation (see Coffin 1994: 70–80). Whereas Beard and German followers of his theories had placed the triggers of neurasthenia firmly in the outside world, in France, neurasthenia was considered a disorder that could be provoked by a blend of hereditary predisposition and exposure to even minor stimuli. Compared to Germany's late fin-de-siècle reception and integration of the hereditary and degeneration precepts in the conception of neurasthenia, France had been one step ahead. When in 1844 Jules Baillarger (1809–1890) published an article on heredity, he was one of the first to consider this subject alone. He studied the place of heredity in mental illnesses with the help of statistics. Then followed Bénédicte Augustin Morel (1809–1873), a theorist of degeneration and its application to the field of mental illness, who between the late 1850s and 1860s published a series of books and articles in which heredity stood as one of the essential elements of his thinking.

Morel's system formulated in his *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives* (1857) constituted an attempt to establish an aetiology of mental pathologies. The treatise outlines a veritable system of causes (and not symptoms) of degenerative diseases (e.g., alcohol, drugs, altered diet, crime, suicide, race). But far from describing the mechanisms by which heredity operates, Morel solely limits himself to underlining the inevitable and inescapable character of heredity through biological transmission. It is important to note that the hereditary mechanism as theorised by Morel goes beyond a simple role of transmission of the same disease from one individual to their offspring: 'Nous n'entendons pas exclusivement par hérédité la maladie même des parents transmise à l'enfant […] nous comprenons sous le mot hérédité la transmission des dispositions organiques des parents aux enfants' (Morel 1857: 565). Firstly, one who had inherited certain traits was predisposed to certain diseases. Secondly,

heredity led to an aggravation of these traits in their offspring. Degeneration was therefore conceived as a process of regression, a return to an earlier stage. Once the disease had developed, these individuals tainted by hereditary predisposition became in turn degenerate. In *De l'hérédité morbide progressive ou des types dissemblables et disparates dans la famille* (1867), Morel sets up a law of 'hérédité progressive': as nervousness had afflicted the first generation, the second generation would suffer from neurosis, the third from psychosis, and the fourth from idiocy (see Coddens 2016).

In consideration of the foregoing, the theories of nervous diseases and particularly neurasthenia in French medical works were influenced, if not directly under the spell, of the question of heredity. Emulating Morel's theories, Charcot generalised heredity as an aetiological factor to all diseases of the nervous system. His lectures reveal that Charcot habitually inquired about the patients' family histories, because in the end, as Charcot himself argues, '[l]'hérédité est intéressante, car elle nous ramène toujours au même principe, elle prouve que [la maladie] ne vient pas seule, comme un champignon' (Charcot and Blin 1892: 101). Fernand Levillain also made clear that heredity was a very active factor in nervous diseases and could spawn over several generations: it first predisposed the descendants of nervous people to become neurasthenic much more quickly and much more easily under the stimulation of even minor stimuli (Levillain 1891: 17–18). And, Proust and Ballet devote an entire chapter to the impact of heredity. According to them, heredity prepared the ground on which a mild or serious accidental cause would precipitate the condition of neurasthenia (Proust and Ballet 1897: 17).

Last but not least, another of Charcot's student, Charles Féré, published in 1888 *Dégénérescence et criminalité, essai physiologique*. Like Charcot, Féré did not research the mechanisms at work in heredity and rather restricted himself to observing stigmata of degeneration, physiological anomalies, and malformations being passed down through generations. With the publication in 1894 of *La famille névroprathique, théorie tératologique de l'hérédité, de la prédisposition morbide et de la dégénérescence* expanding on the subject, Féré became a leading proponent of the link between hereditary neuropathy (inherited disorders affecting the peripheral nervous system) and its propensity to generate neurasthenia. Neurasthenia could thus originate from a collateral branch, which included arthritis, obesity, and diabetes (Féré 1898: 81–82). Féré claimed in his thesis that a family could bear a susceptibility to neurological disorders that had the potential to develop, in the sense of a gradual degeneration. The development depended on the lifestyle and environment. In the case of an

individual leading a healthy, protected, and quiet life, they could potentially avoid these hereditary neurological disorders. On the other hand, pathological neurological manifestations could be triggered by the patient's unhealthy lifestyle and/or environment. This persistent enthusiasm for heredity until the end of the nineteenth century was in no way due to discoveries that had been made about its underlying mechanism; rather, the continuous vague use of the concept testified to the attachment of medical discourses to a biological, visible, and traceable sign, which individualised the disorder and denied the idea of a process of degeneration of the whole social body.

A Conceptual Shift: From Neurasthenia to Melancholia, Aboulia, and Psychasthenia

The end of the century witnessed the peak of neurasthenia studies, but also the rapid dismemberment of this broad and relatively vague syndrome. The French medical profession quickly turned away from an overly somatic perception of exhaustion as theorised by Beard. Also opposing the mechano-materialist perception of the medical discourse of their German neighbours (Krafft-Ebing, Erb), the French studies which had gradually mixed past theories on nervous disorders with concepts like depression, diseases of the will, anxiety neuroses had given rise to a psychopathological approach in French medicine. Paul Emile Lévy refers to the role will power holds within neurasthenic states: 'la neurasthénie n'a-t-elle pas, de l'avis de tous, pour caractère essential, une diminution de la volonté?' (1898: 121). As the leading theorists of the French school, Charcot had already wanted to partly free himself from the materialistic, organic dimension in nervous disorders, and demonstrate the power of the psyche especially through his experiences of hypnotism. At that time, French scientists knew well that mental effort was transmitted by the nerve impulse to contract the muscles, but the fact remained that these 'fluides sont les supports anatomique et physiologique d'un *acte psychologique*', as Charcot affirms (1894: 10, emphasis added). The argument was also supported by Proust and Ballet, who note: 'L'aboulie, autrement dit l'affaiblissement de la volonté, est un des traits les plus communs de *l'état mental des neurasthéniques*. […] [elle] entraîne la perte ou la diminution du pouvoir d'attention' (1897: 75–76, emphasis added).

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, texts just like Théodule Ribot's *Les maladies de la volonté* (1884), Albert Deschamps' *Les maladies de l'énergie, therapeutique generale* 1908), Jules Payot's *L'éducation de la volonté* (1895), and Paul Emile Lévy's *L'éducation rationnelle de la volonté* (1898) had gradually placed

will impairment at the forefront of nervous disorders and specifically nervous exhaustion. The will became a kind of steering mechanism in the psychic world. Théodule Ribot (1839–1916), the first holder of a chair in experimental and comparative psychology at the Collège de France, appears as the most eminent representative of the new psychology movement. Ribot placed at the centre of his studies this psychomotor disorder of motivation, also known as 'aboulie' or 'disorder of the will'. He writes in the opening line of his article on 'L'anéantissement de la volonté' (1883): 'Vouloir, c'est choisir pour agir: telle est pour nous la volonté normale' (135). At this stage, neurasthenics were then thought to suffer from a diminished will, that is to say, of a pathology inhibiting the action of 'vouloir' and thus naturally the capacity of 'pouvoir'. For the science of the faculties of the mind – another name the field of psychology gave itself at that time – the existence of a psychic energy brought into play by the will was no longer being disputed.

Where Ribot initially focuses on the case of irresolution, the situations where action is lacking, the impulse ('je veux') to act is too weak, or even non-existent, he also insists on the will being a faculty of self-control, functioning as a gatekeeper, a kind of braking mechanism or 'mechanism of inhibition' designed to prevent certain reactions of the body from taking place (Ribot 1883/1888: 35–38). The aboulic individual is then too sensitive and weak to resist to the external environment, to the appeal of the various opinions, objects, circumstances which present themselves to them. A diseased will power then implies the presence of an inner chaos from which no voluntary motor tendency can emerge. At this point, one can draw a significant parallel with Leopold Löwenfeld's mentioning of the inhibition of the will in 1889. Most likely, Löwenfeld as well as early twentieth-century German authors of self-help manuals on will strengthening and autosuggestion had been influenced by Ribot's seminal study *Les maladies de la volonté.* Ribot's text embodied a perception which also spoke to the German theorists and their mechano-materialistic approach. Indeed, Ribot does not take the volitional effort out of the physiological domain: it remains nonetheless an expenditure of energy just like the effort muscle or more. Instances in which individuals have to make a choice mobilise their nervous forces. Ultimately, agency was set in a complex psychophysiological mechanism.

In due course, Ribot's chapter 'Les affaiblissements de la volonté' (1909) further focuses on the case of the weak-willed, the 'aboulic' (derived from Ancient Greek: from *ἀ-*, 'without' and *βουλή*, meaning 'will'), which he defines as an individual's inability to transform a conscious wish into action, to go beyond the stage of desire,

or even as an inability to form these wishes. In this exhaustion-related syndrome, Ribot had previously listed symptoms such as attention deficit, motor speech disorder, reduced initiative, indifference, decreased interest, slow blood pressure and heart beat, and physical inertia (Ribot 1883/1888: 53–54). Ribot's 1909 article develops on these symptoms based on a clinical case study of the English writer Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859). De Quincey was an opium addict known for his talents as a writer as much as for his addiction, and who describes with great finesse 'cette paralysie de la volonté', 'de débilité volitionnelle, mais non intellectuelle' into which the drug plunges him (Ribot 1909: 40–41). As this example testifies, Ribot does not hesitate to refer to authors and their literary works in which protagonists remarkably embody the aboulia and indecision described by Ribot from the angle of experimental psychology. Literature and medical knowledge in this instance openly intersect.

When it comes to describing the anxiety that sometimes comes on top of the general lack of motivation, Thomas de Quincey is a recurring illustration in Ribot's texts (mentioned in 1883/1888: 40). Literature constitutes a reference support for Ribot's experimental psychology not only in the sense that the introspective accounts of the writers themselves formed enlightening testimonies, but also insofar as the intellectuals formed a group of individuals whose aboulic tendency and awareness of it seemed to be prevalent. In a way, Ribot's study attests to the fact that literature made up for the paucity of scientific and clinical research on affective life. And in this case, the writer Thomas de Quincey was particularly attentive to the subtle variations of his sensitivity, to the mobility of his emotions – not only in the mode of the romantic universalisation of feeling, but also in the perspective of recording and transcribing the oscillations and alternations in his life.

In *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), Thomas de Quincey presents a striking case of aboulia: the emotional numbness is sometimes such that the patient feels nothing but indifference, which inhibits all desire and all projection into the future. For some aboulics, their impotence becomes the source of an anxiety-inducing self-depreciation. De Quincey recounts how:

> He wishes and longs as earnestly as ever to realise what he believes possible, and feels to be exacted by duty; but his intellectual apprehension of what is possible infinitely outruns his power, not of execution only, but even of power to attempt. He lies *under the weight of incubus and nightmare*; […] [and] is *powerless as an infant,* and cannot even attempt to rise. (De Quincey 1886, emphasis added)

Oppression, torment, remorse, bitterness, appear as so many symptoms of a veritable inner torture arising here in the aboulic condition. These signs voice the individual's powerlessness to take action, to move the body as much as he desires it. It is the awareness of this very contradiction that makes De Quincey suffer. The lexical field of bewitchment translates well this incomprehensible impotence. The author, under the effect of a 'spell', feels possessed by an 'incubus', an inner demon weighing on him to the point of dispossessing him of all autonomy and agency. This spell torturing the writer from the inside and weighing on his body incarnates a form of depressive state, a particularly painful melancholia, a feeling of some sorts dispossessing the individual of himself. He no longer recognises himself, no longer knows himself since he is unable to identify himself with what he wants, or rather what he desires to want. This melancholia, far from encouraging action, in turn accentuates the paralysis of the will.

The rising psychopathological reflection, interrelating body and mind, continues its trajectory in the publication of *La mélancolie* (1897) by psychiatrists Edouard Toulouse (1865–1947) and Jacques Roubinovitch (1862–1950). Melancholia quickly found itself in a more extensive semiological category. And with time, it became more and more difficult to distinguish it from other neuroses – such as neurasthenia –, as it shared similar physiological mechanisms and mental signs. At the psychic level, Toulouse and Roubinovitch describe a state of unmotivated sadness, of which moral pain is the fundamental symptom (1897: 39). Between the melancholic and the outside world there is a veritable wall against which all hope is being shattered. Nothing moves them or tenses them up. Toulouse and Roubinovitch also record in their work how patients describe an experience of intellectual slowness and vacuity as if 'la tête paraissait vide' (60).

Similarly to the aboulic, this state of moral pain and intellectual slowness can be summed up as a vague feeling of dejection or sadness, which is caused on the one hand by a difficulty of ideation (as in a difficulty to fix the attention, group ideas, manifesting uncertainty and memory loss) and on the other hand by motor aboulia (with more visible signs like apathy, irresolution or reduced initiation, slowness of movement and speech, insomnia, headaches, disturbed digestive functions as in a lack of appetite, constipation and auto-intoxication phenomena of gastrointestinal origin) (1897: 20–21). Many of these latter symptoms are reminiscent of the brain-gut axis present in neurasthenia's symptomatology and even points back to the Galenic conception of the cause of melancholia as an excess of black bile blocking the digestive system. At the level of the organic state, the

symptoms are assimilated to negative quantitative reports. The disagreement of a representation with the usual representations of the patient, and the dissociation of the ideas which follows, exhausts the brain by causing at the same time the functional shutdown of the intellectual capacities, the vaso-constriction of the cerebral arterioles and anemia tissues. At the same time, as a result of the psychic arrest, breathing decreases in its magnitude and slows down in its rhythm. Cerebral hypoactivity affects the heart, it beats less strongly, less quickly, and blood pressure decreases (1897: 48).

We find in this image the similar decrease in energy and vital capacities as in the neurasthenic. Except that, compared to the case of the neurasthenic, Toulouse and Roubinovitch go further by speaking of the 'difficulty of ideation' (1897: 61). Their theory on melancholia diverts from the somatoform conception of neurasthenia with the idea of a dissociation of ideas causing a moral pain, sadness, anxiety, and an inner void feeling. It is therefore no longer the nervous flow, but the flow of negative thoughts and emotions that hinder the metabolism of the organism and empty it of its energy. The explanatory model remains anchored in a dynamic approach. In the sense that the 'mechanics' at work in melancholia operate like a suction pump, in that it empties the body of its energy but also paradoxically feeds on its inner emptiness. The exhausted body is therefore no longer depicted like a machine being emptied out of its fuel from an excess of stimulation. The psychic vessel, seat of emotions, desires, and reasons, is in the case of melancholic already empty and negative thinking and feeling feed like a suction pump on this inner void, creating an anaesthetic effect: a state of exhaustion (1897: 58). Toulouse and Roubinovitch use the imagery of an empty head being asphyxiated or the sensation of an empty stomach even though it is being fed (1897: 195). Like under a vacuum bell, the body and its will power are paralysed from the absence of oxygen which signifies the absence of desire and motivation in the melancholic. It is a paradoxical struggle that consciousness, the subject, leads with itself.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, it still remained difficult to agree on a classification and a clear breakdown of the symptoms and causes of exhaustion. Some authors remained on a very broad conception of its syndrome, neurasthenia. Charcot's successor at La Salpêtrière, Fulgence Raymond, noted in 1911: 'Ce géant n'est pas seulement démesuré, il est informe' (Raymond 1911: 13). It had begun to be dismembered with aboulia (or more generally the diseases of the will) and then melancholia. Then, with Pierre Janet, a new syndrome appeared: namely, psychasthenia. Pierre Janet (1859–1947), director of the psychology laboratory at La

Salpêtrière, who began his scientific career as philosopher, psychologist, and psychotherapist, also made the will as an important driving agent the focus of his studies and narrowed the concept of 'neurasthenia' to that of 'psychasthenia'. He popularised the concept in 1903 in his work *Les obsessions et la psychasthénie*.

In this text, Janet unites under the term 'psychasthenia' signs and disorders like obsessions, tics, phobias, anxieties, neurasthenia, depersonalisation. He insists, in spite of this nosography mixing at the same time symptoms and morbid entities, on the idea of weakness, deficit, insufficiency of psychic force or tension. In *Les névroses* (1909), he defines psychasthenia as:

> [U]ne forme de *dépression mentale*, caractérisé par *l'abaissement de la tension psychologique*, par la diminution des fonctions qui permettent d'agir sur la réalité et de percevoir le réel, par la substitution d'opérations inférieures et exagérées, sous la forme de doutes, d'agitations, d'angoisses et par des idées obsédantes qui expriment les troubles précédents et qui présentent, elles-mêmes, les mêmes caractères. (1909: 367, emphasis added)

In the psychasthenic personality, Janet lists moral incompleteness (with emotional symptoms such as helplessness, anxiety, negative thoughts and feelings, anhedonia or inability to feel pleasure, reduced initiation, attention deficit, disorientation, social retreat, emotional indifference, boredom or decreased interest, depersonalisation, feeling of an inner void), which includes the signs of disorders of the will and disorders of the intellect. Then there is the loss of the function of the real, meaning a feeling of absence of reality (a feeling that the soul is separated from the body, feeling half dead and alive, feeling of strangeness to things) and the physiological insufficiencies causing the exhaustion, which one finds in neurasthenia, with the disorders of the nervous functions (insomnia, back pain, headache), digestive disorders, low blood pressure and heart rate, and sexual and reproductive disorders (Janet 1903: 264–442).

Although certain stigmas refer to the old neurasthenia, Janet clearly specifies that he wants to study these disorders of feelings of helplessness, unreality, incompleteness, – which neurasthenia had overlooked or simplified as a mechanical loss of energy and with easy to summarise symptoms (head pain, digestive disorders, heart weakness, etc.). With his work, Janet set the goal of interpreting these complex and invisible psychological signs. In this regard, his work revolves around the notions of psychic force and tension. Like the previously used

entity of 'volitional' power, the 'psychic force' (or strength of tendencies) corresponds to the energy potential of a person. It refers to the capacity to accomplish many, prolonged psychological acts. For Janet, psychic tension means the capacity to create order and synthesis, meaning the act of concentrating and unifying psychological phenomena. Tension requires force to translate thinking or desire into action, and tension is essential in the faculty to use one's will. A lack of psychic tension results in feelings of incompleteness, weakness of decision (aboulie), doubt, lack of adaptation and other symptoms listed under 'psychasthenia' (Janet 1903: 496–499). The individual experiences a state of exhaustion similarly to that of the melancholic and his experience of an inner void. Likewise, with their deficit in will power or 'psychic tension', the psychasthenic – like Ribot's aboulic – was deemed incapable of acting in the world, particularly in the presence of others.

To illustrate his theories on psychasthenia, Janet refers to literature with the case of Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821–1881) (Janet 1903: 300, 354, 370, 378, 435). Amiel was a Swiss writer and philosopher, who kept a monumental introspective diary of 17,000 pages, spanning over the years 1839–1881 and which he entitled *Les Fragments d'un journal intime* (1882). With his academic background in both medicine and philosophy, Janet found in Amiel's work a remarkable testimony of the psychasthenic condition, which – again – was believed to primarily affect intellectuals. In these fragments, the fatal repetition of the failure to act is accompanied and maintained by an intellectual rumination, a meticulous search of the self, by which the individual is grieved to discover only an alarming emptiness. Indeed, we are here faced with a vicious circle similar to that already observed in De Quincey's diary in which inactivity causes anxiety, and anxiety in turn paralyses him. The feeling resulting from the effort to overcome his inertia in order to act is such that it becomes impossible for Amiel to get out of the weak-willed laziness that is so repugnant to him. Despite his desire to act, his impaired will or imbalanced psychic tension cannot propel his body to move.

To conclude, other than the initial works on neurasthenia, which are in some minor way modelled on Beard's writing, the French medical school quickly distracted itself from an overly somatic perception of the workings of exhaustion and turned the medical gaze deeper inwards. With a psychophysiological and experimental approach, their aim was to examine the body's interiority, what compelled the body to not act, what disunited and fragmented the sense of self. By the end of the nineteenth century, theorists on nervousness and neurasthenia had already turned away from materialist physiology and degenerate theories and evolved towards

a nosology, which included aboulia, a loss of psychic tension and the experience of inner emptiness. The medical discourse was no longer imbued with an anxiety that individuals were passively subjected to modernity or that society rendered them sick. The individual became an agent and casual factor in his exhaustion. It also gave a sense of hope in contrast to a more pessimistic German outlook as the development of the insistence on subjective autonomy and the freedom of the will helped to overcome the sense of passive exposure to the nervous influence of modern life and the stigma of heredity. Individuals could, with a strong will and a healthy lifestyle, counterweight the influences exerted by the environment as well as that of the body upon the mind. However, what medicine failed to express and what literature in turn sought to explore was the existential crisis and the absence of desire, which propelled individuals to experience these manifestations of exhaustion.

With all these observations here encapsulated, one can note similarities and interesting disparities between the German and French reception of Beard's concept of neurasthenia. The discourses of neurasthenia in Germany and France were both discourses which included the idea of a 'crisis of modernity' and offered insights into anxieties related to cultural, political, and social developments. Beard had promoted a positive perception of neurasthenia, as it stood as a sign of national progress, elevated sensibility, and refinement. By contrast, German and French medical dignitaries, namely Krafft-Ebing, Erb, Proust, Ballet and Charcot, constructed a much more morally and socially pessimistic critical approach to the condition. On the one hand, society was widely thought to make individuals sick with its social, infrastructural, technological transformations; on the other, the shadow of biological degeneration was thought to loom over both the German and French nations. However, German discourses on modernity and the nerves were much more permeated with a cultural pessimism, a fear of a national degeneration, and fear of dependency on uncontrollable forces than in France. This sense of powerlessness explained the pessimism hanging over the German culture and its Zeitgeist.

Although one can note the early turn by French physicians to a psychopathological dimension in nervous diseases, Germany closely followed in France's steps. With the turn of the century, the German medical imagination progressively lent more importance to the self and the workings of the will, with the difference in German discourses that they were rooted within a preventative rather than theoretical approach. The motto 'Kampf ums Dasein', which at the end of the nineteenth century had constituted a fight against the outside world, its overly stimulating new technologies, its multiple demands of productivity, efficiency, and its spirit of

competitivity, followed by a fight against the power of heredity and degeneration, now constituted a fight for the individual to reassert self-control over their own body. The main objective of German physicians was in fact to reassert human agency, movement, and subjectivity through various physical and mental exercises. In this cultural and medical context of 'seeing' implying 'knowing', the language of the German medical discourses necessarily pathologised what was devoid of form, discipline, and control. And, their approach was all the more pro-active and preventative in the case of the exhausted, whose body was free-floating, undisciplined, uncontrollable, with no footing in a set routine. With the insistence on rehabilitating self-control, the aim was to render the individual, their self, master of their own house again, and end all passive deterministic inclinations to exhaustion. In comparison, the French discourses do not really focus on the treatment; they rather underline the symptomatic emptiness, the loss of drive, the lack of vital psychic tension, the disconnect afflicting the will-less, the apathetic, the exhausted. So, one can note two distinct approaches surrounding the question of will power in the condition of the exhausted. Yet, with the absence of a tangible organic cause, these are also two diagnostic processes imbued with and limited by cultural (and moral) beliefs and norms and unable to provide a clear or detailed scientific picture of exhaustion and its syndromes.

PART TWO

GERMAN LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF EXHAUSTION

Bound and Boundless Bodies: Stories of Exhaustion and Failed Individuation

'[R]ettet sich der Mensch in den Segen … nein! nein! …in den *Fluch* der Arbeit und Arbeitsteilung. Alles wird "bezüglich". Der Mensch lebt nicht mehr. Er denkt, er rechnet. Man kann seine Wesenheit nur noch durch Tätigkeitsworte erfassen. Er weckt, schafft, verfertigt, schuftet, kann, leistet. Das sind seine Ehren' (quoted in Lessing 1921: 29). With these words quoted from *Die verfluchte Kultur* (1921), the German philosopher Theodor Lessing presents a profound critique of modernity. His observations attest to the dominance of the imperatives of movement, production, and discipline, burning out the modern worker and alienating the individual from their own self. To Lessing, modern man was enslaved to these action verbs stated in the above quotation. And his subsequent verdict is univocal: 'Der Mensch lebt nicht mehr'. The modern individual, living in a so-called 'age of nervousness' around 1900, had to keep up with a fast-paced, over-stimulating, and – according to Lessing – alienating environment. 'Aus Mangel an Ruhe', Friedrich Nietzsche similarly writes in his reflections published in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1878), 'läuft unsere Zivilisation in eine neue Barbarei aus' (1878/1954a: 620–621). Then in his 1882 text *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft,* Nietzsche complains about the 'atemlose Hast der Arbeit – das eigentliche Laster der Neuen Welt', which has infected the European continent (Nietzsche 1882/1954: 190). Both philosophers perfectly express the cultural unease of this era, the presence of a 'moderne Unruhe'. Many intellectuals saw society threatened by an eminent societal and biological decline, produced by a 'Hetzen und Jagen' after activity, productivity, and professional and social achievement.

Together with restlessness, the other threat was instability, the loss of principles, values, and self-control. According to the writings of social critics and socio-medical theorists Max Nordau (1892), Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1907), and Paul Julius Möbius (1900), those who did not conform to the role, behaviour, and body axioms tied to masculinity, normality, and health were categorised as deviant, degenerate, decadent, effeminate, sick

men, classified under homosexuality, neurasthenia, dandyism, and dilettantism (Schuhen 2014: 9). The production of these abnormal, anti-types, stigmatised by exhaustion, impotence, and sterility, threatened hegemonic masculinity. This type of weak person, the neurasthenic, was often perceived by cultural critics as exemplifying the failure of the patriarchal family and gender order. What Yahya Elsaghe concludes about male characters and the construction of masculinity in her analysis of Thomas Mann's earlier works is that: 'Die Familien sterben aus. Die Ehen sind unfruchtbar oder arm an potenziellen Stammhaltern. Diese sind kümmerlich und unfähig, ihr Geschlecht als Ehemänner und Familienväter zu verwirklichen' (2007: 168).

As seen in Part One, neurasthenia was constructed as threatening to the health and potency of the male body, the socially constructed image of manhood and conservative family values, and the competitiveness and performativity of the body politic at large. In the literatures of the turn of the century, however, many narratives of exhaustion put in tension 'unmanly', unproductive, sensitive, and uncertain male character with a hostile environment, rigid normative structures, and pressuring societal injunctions. These are novels staging failures of characters: the male characters are struggling and unmotivated artists, lost and indecisive dilettante figures, and adolescent men failing at school and in life. Many of the literary works shed light on the difficulties faced by male individuals in meeting expected societal demands and the continuation of a tradition coded as the norm, and distinctively narrate their tales of resistance. But the stories told by Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse are also imbued with a certain ambiguity as the authors were sufferers themselves, consumers of therapeutic treatments, and thus pressured to not be tempted to transgress the societal norms and values and their attachment to achievement and productivity.

CHAPTER ONE

Boundless, Rootless, and Restless:

Heinrich Mann and the Disruptive Potentialities of 'Haltlosigkeit'

Heinrich Mann: 'Ohne Halt und Heimat'

In March 1891, a young Heinrich Mann confesses in a letter to his childhood friend Ludwig Ewers: 'Vieles anderes später in noch unbestimmter Ferne. Ich versuche viel in dieser Zeit, um "anzukommen" […]. Man muss den Nacken steifhalten' (Mann 1980: 218). What did he mean by 'anzukommen'? What was the aim or the destination? Like many of his peers, Heinrich experienced as a young adult the last decades of the nineteenth century as a time of possibilities and as an uncertain time that inspired an often-desperate search for meaning. His words suggest that he was striving for something in a distant future while also struggling to find his way. The necessity to withstand inner or outer forces, reinforced by an image of a stiff neck, can be further anchored in an epochal discourse of 'Kampf ums Dasein'. Heinrich Mann was twenty years old at that time, a young adult experiencing the fin-de-siècle period and effectively affected by its spirit of decline and the discourses of cultural pessimism, degeneration, and decadence. The 1890s were a pivotal time in Heinrich's life, as they mark his entry into adulthood, his struggle to fight for self-determination and escape his father's inheritance, and during which he was also drained by a life-threatening illness: 'meine Geisteskräfte [sind] noch zu geschwächt […] durch starken Blutverlust' (269).

Based on his correspondence with his childhood friend, Ludwig Ewers, it is known that Heinrich Mann suffered in his youth from physical and mental weakness (269, 284). After a serious haemorrhage, he had to be interned in several sanatoriums. From 1892, he repeatedly was a patient in the famous sanatorium in Riva on Lake Garda, the 'Seelenkurort der Moderne', in which Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse later sought refuge and rest in order to cure their neurasthenic condition (see Dierks 1994: 151). As described in his letters to Ludwig Ewers, Heinrich Mann's exhausted mental and physical state had left him incapable to work. 'Ich bin

noch nicht ruhig und mutig genug, irgend etwas Dauerhaftes zu beginnen', he writes at the beginning of February 1892 from Dr Oppenheimer's sanatorium (Mann 1980: 273). Even so, prior to his sickness in 1892, Heinrich Mann portrayed himself as an artistic modern spirit with weak nerves. For instance, the process of writing his first novella in 1890 worsened his already weak disposition. His body as much as his words show nervousness: 'Aber in einiger Entfernung schon fangen meine verdammten modernen Nerven an zu zittern, bald in daktylischen, bald trochäischen, bald in anakrusisch-katalektischen (oder epileptischen, meinst Du?) Zuckungen' (176). Heinrich Mann's anger and frustration with his nerves and the resulting exhaustion on the writing process transpire here as well.

On the one hand, Heinrich's weakened condition put an abrupt end to his exuberant hustle and bustle through southern European cities. On the other hand, he was forced to move from one sanatorium to another and lead a restless existence 'ohne Halt und Heimat' (see Stein 2002: 168). Heinrich Mann acutely felt the effects of this restlessness as evident in the poem 'Wohin' (1892) written in a sanatorium in the Black Forest (see Rüther 2020). Still, after his recovery, then taken by sudden 'travel nerves' and a desire to pursue a 'haltlose', boundless existence, he continued to commute back and forth for years between Lausanne, Florence, Viareggio, Bologna, Verona, Riva on Lake Garda, etc. This longing for a boundless life of travels was probably also a reaction or a way to fight against his serious sickness and its weakening effects on his body.

Heinrich Mann assigns the attribute of weak nerves to several of his protagonists: Herr Sägemüller in *Doktor Biebers Versuchung* (1898) says of himself 'Ich bin Neurastheniker. Dies ist meine Profession und mein Schicksal' (Mann 1995: 502–503) and allows his weak nerves to be cured in the sanatorium; the nameless dilettante protagonist in *Haltlos* (1890) manifests a 'nervöse[n] Zustand' (Mann 1995: 24) and is overwhelmed by a 'sittlichen Schwäche der erbärmlichsten Haltlosigkeit' (41); and Erich Wellkamp's dilettante character in *In eine Familie* (1894) suffers from a diseased will, a 'schwächlicherer Verfeinerung' and 'Unentschlossenheit' (Mann 2000: 150–151, 163). Ahead of his time, Heinrich Mann introduces these topics without working with scientific mechanistic body constructs. With the focus on the abstract notion of will power, the narratives also offer insightful perspective into human thinking processes and behaviour. As seen in Part One of this thesis, psychological studies and theories of the will appeared in the German medical discourses at the turn of the century and during the decades following it. Seemingly more influenced by late nineteenth-century French texts, Heinrich

Mann already questions and analyses in his literature of the 1890s the inner workings of the psyche and particularly that of the 'Krankheit des Willens' – a mental disorder reducing the reasonable tension of volitional power.

In Heinrich Mann's literary realm, what binds the topic of neurasthenia, nervousness, and the diseases of the will is the concept of dilettantism. In principle, the terms 'dilettante' and 'dilettantism' can have both positive and negative connotations, depending on the underlying concepts they refer to. The word derives from the Italian verb *dilettare*, which in turn comes from the Latin *delectare*, and can be roughly translated as 'to delight', 'to amuse'. This verb also further derives from *delicere*, meaning 'to lure, to entice' (*OED* Online). The pleasure of something is connected with a potential lure or seduction – this is how the etymology could be interpreted. A dilettante is literally someone who is attracted to something, who enjoys something. Originally without negative connotation, the Italian definition of 'dilettante' became by 1681 a general term to distinguish an amateur from a professional. It then gradually took on a more pejorative connotation as it meant in the late eighteenth century 'superficial and affected dabbler'. The combination of pleasure, culture, and convivial excess that had made the reputation of the dilettante developed into a moral stigma, a sign of frivolity (see Hibbitt 2006: 6–8). In the early 1890s, the term continued to undergo a change in meaning with the Zeitgeist of the fin de siècle, in that it entered into a connection with the related concepts of decadence, aestheticism, and dandyism in the German and French literary world with the publication of essays by Austrian critic and writer Hermann Bahr (1863–1934) and French novelist and critic Paul Bourget (Theodorsen 2001: 49).

Bengt Algot Sørensen so far confirms in his article 'Der Dilettantismus des Fin de Siècle und der junge Heinrich Mann' (1969) that the young author was especially interested in this phenomenon and the influence of Paul Bourget on the German writer (260). The relevance of dilettantism, not only to Heinrich Mann but to his younger brother Thomas Mann as well, has also been discussed by Michael Wieler's *Dilettantismus – Wesen und Geschichten: am Beispiel von Heinrich und Thomas Mann* (1996) and by Richard Hibbitt in his monograph *Dilettantism and Its Values: From Weimar Classicism to the fin de siècle* (2006). Unlike around 1800, fin-de-siècle dilettantism was no longer tied to the aesthetic paradigm with its parameters of 'sensitivity' and 'sensibility', but rather (implicitly) to the medical paradigm with the parameters of 'nervousness' and 'neurasthenia'. As Richard Hibbit points out, Bourget considered dilettantism to be tied with 'uncertainty, moral

inertia, a weaking of the will, nervous hyperacuity, unhealthy aestheticism, and eventual exhaustion' (Hibbitt 2006: 105). The pathological phenomenon corresponding to dilettantism was no longer being constructed as hypertrophic imagination, but rather as overexcited nerves. In addition, dilettantism was no longer exclusive to the artistic sphere, but understood as a general epoch signature, as an expression of the mentality of an entire culture (Kerscher 2016: 384). The dilettantism discourse around 1900 also specified the dilettante's game: an oscillation between different alternatives without ever committing to one of these alternatives. In this period when everything was, as the Austrian novelist Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929) declares, 'in ein einziges System bodenloser Speculation zusammen [ge]braut', 'da dilettierte man auch auf allen Gebieten, freute sich, die Resultate tausendjähriger Culturarbeit in sich aufzunehmen, und spielte daßelbe gefährliche Spiel mit seiner Elasticität, wie wir es spielen' (Hofmannsthal 1891: 75f.). The underlying danger of the dilettante's attitude amounted to the large disconnect and the lack of set of boundaries, hence his characterisation as a boundless, anchorless, flexible, and easily exhausted individual.

According to Joëlle Stoupy (1987: 237), Bourget, who was one of the most widely read authors at the turn of the century and who largely shaped the literary trend of his time, must be regarded as the initiator of the modern understanding of dilettantism. Bourget, a self-proclaimed 'psychologist-writer,' is to this day still acknowledged as a precursor for his 'modern' attention to the analysis of the human mind. Pushed by an interest in medicine and science in general to improve his knowledge, he acquired the rudiments of fundamental anatomy and physiology (see Mansuy 1960: 139). The desire to explore psychology was further prompted by a personal and generational inner crisis and a need to reflect on it. As part of a young fin-de-siècle generation, Bourget felt uprooted, condemned to a feeling of emptiness and decline (see Castelletto 2019). The generation of 1880 was aware that it was facing an aging, deteriorating era causing discontent, a pessimistic outlook, a feeling of inner void and exhaustion. In his essay, Bourget diagnoses it as 'épuisement civilisationnel' (1885: 144). He argues that the idea of civilisational decline began to manifest itself with a growing discrepancy between the aspirations of a youth on the verge of blooming and the limited horizons offered to it. In this fin de siècle, with its loss of influence of religion and ties with tradition, the new challenge faced by a young generation, particularly of men, was too much freedom made possible by a process of social democratisation as well as a loss of ground references and guidance (see Bordes 2019: 17).

In *Le Disciple* (1889), Bourget addresses directly the young generation by 'le jeune homme de 1889'. He begs the youth to work for the uplifting of the once degraded nation and not to fall into one of these two characters:

> L'un est cynique et volontiers jovial. Il a, des vingt ans, fait le décompte de la vie, et sa religion tient dans un seul mot: jouir, – qui se traduit par cet autre: réussir. […] Alphonse Daudet, qui a su merveilleusement le voir et le définir, ce jeune homme moderne, l'a baptisé le *struggle for lifer* […]. Il n'estime que le succès, – et dans le succès que l'argent. […] Je le redoute moins cependant pour toi que cet autre qui a, lui, toutes les aristocraties des nerfs, toutes celles de l'esprit, et qui est un épicurien intellectuel et raffiné […]. C'est un égoïste subtil et raffiné dont toute l'ambition […] consiste à 'adorer son moi,' à le parer de sensations nouvelles. […] [Et] le beau nom de dilettantisme dont il la pare dissimule la férocité froide, la sécheresse affreuse. (1889: vii–x)

In the first subject can be seen a performance ethicist fighting at all cost for achievement. The second, the dilettante, is a 'flâneur', a stroller, an almost superficial individual with no aim in life and no ethical dimension. The danger lies in his tendencies to seek all sorts of sensations and immediate pleasure. Bourget charges dilettantism with symptoms regrouped under nervousness, such as increased sensitivity and weakness of the will.

Still according to Bourget, the dilettante particularly incarnates with his 'disposition d'esprit' the disease of his century, that of a weakened will power. Bourget mentions the dilettante's ability to transform himself without being constrained by limitations. This particular kind of individual is accordingly a sensible and intellectual sceptic (or nihilist), who analyses both himself and life without taking a position (Bourget 1883/1885: 59). He is a metamorphic artist who experiments with different roles, a cosmopolitan without a so-called 'footing' in life. The other side of the coin is that of a weak-willed soul and a self-aware individual burdened by the threat of boredom and emptiness.

> Au lieu de canaliser sa force dans le travail quotidien d'une carrière stricte, il stagnera jusqu'à en croupir dans une douloureuse oisiveté. […] et il vit […] roulé comme un galet par la marée de ses heures, de plus en plus incapable d'une volonté qui triomphe de la pression énorme des menus faits, de plus en plus incapable, s'il en triomphait, d'égaler ses désirs par ses jouissances. (143–144)

Bourget reminisces about an older world, a golden age of faith and untamed energy, which has now been replaced with frivolous consumption, weakened will power, and energetic bankruptcy as illustrated by the metaphor of the

passive pebble being swept by the tide. What is striking is the pathologisation of characteristics of modern civilisation. The dilettante's propensity to idleness and overexposure to pleasurable stimuli is described as a product of modernity and its injection of passivity and a lack of self-determination. An easy-to-access and heightened consumption of pleasure and elevated pressure to satisfy these desires have a null effect and led to sterility. The dilettante longs for personal emancipation, but at the same time suffers from stagnation and an inner unsatisfiable void (102).

Where the neurasthenic was believed to be passively subjected to these factors of overstimulation, Bourget paints the dilettante as a culprit in his own condition of exhaustion by way of his desire to experience multiple pleasures and sample different modes of life. This is further affirmed by Bourget's metaphorical representation of decadence as a process of decomposition of an organism (1883/1885: 25–31). According to Bourget, the law of organic decomposition could be applied to the social body with subjects constituting individual cells. The dilettante, with his chameleon identity, lack of steady viewpoints, and its acute sense of analysis, was to be understood as an impetus working against the unity of his own self and the cohesion of the social body:

> Si l'énergie des cellules devient indépendante, les organismes qui composent l'organisme total cessent pareillement de subordonner leur énergie à l'énergie totale, et l'anarchie qui s'établit constitue la décadence de l'ensemble. […] Un style de décadence est celui où l'unité du livre se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la page. (25)

The idea carried by the metaphor of the body and the cells is reinforced by another metaphor, that of a book made of individual pages. The decomposition of society, in order words its descent into decadence, are caused by a disaggregation of an organism into individual entities. Nothing binds these entities together as much as nothing holds in the case of the dilettante his body and mind (or self) harmoniously together.

Regarding Bourget's reception in Wilhelmine Germany, Nietzsche – who became Bourget's decisive mediator in Germany and whose theories came to be shaped by his writings (see Le Rider 1992: 85–86) – characterises it as 'den frechen Dilettantismus' and describes it as a manifestation of decadence with: 'jedes Mal Anarchie der Atome, Disagregation des Willens, "Freiheit des Individuums"' (Nietzsche 1888: §7). Interestingly

enough, in a revealing passage from his *Unzeitgemäßen Betrachtung, Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* (1875), Nietzsche coins the neologism 'Dilettantisieren' in order to characterise the restless desire to experiment known to Richard Wagner. Nietzsche regards the most famous composer of the nineteenth century as the prototype of the modern dilettante, as the artist of decomposition and sufferer of neurasthenia. In that sense, Nietzsche also anticipates Bourget's words and metaphor of the fragmented organism in his presentation of Wagner and his music as a figure of systematic dissolution: 'Das Wort wird souverain und springt aus dem Satz hinaus der Satz greift über und verdunkelt den Sinn der Seite, die Seite gewinnt Leben auf Unkosten des Ganzen – das Ganze ist kein Ganzes mehr' (Nietzsche 1888: §7). The German philosopher describes the artist's subsequent state marked by the spirit of restlessness and irritability. He notices in the composer a 'nervöse Hast im Erfassen von hundert Dingen, ein leidenschaftliches Behagen an beinahe krankhaften hochgespannten Stimmungen, ein unvermitteltes Umschlagen aus Augenblicken seelenvollster Gemüthsstille in das Gewaltsame und Lärmende' and finally writes that 'die gefährliche Lust an geistigen Anschmecken' pulls young Wagner under its spell (Nietzsche 1875/1876: 9). With that being said, Nietzsche emphasises the dilettante's own participation in his fragmented self, restlessness, and nervous irritability.

In a context in which the anxiety surrounding the degeneration and disintegration of the individual and social body permeated cultural discourses, Heinrich Mann takes on the figure of the dilettante and the experience of his various states in his early writings. As a subject in a state of continual limbo, boundlessly wandering through the city's streets, the dilettante epitomises liminality and the anxiety-inducing spirit of uncertainty and rootlessness (or boundlessness) prevalent to the fin de siècle cosmopolitan scene. He is neither a marginal figure, nor is he fully integrated with the mass. Similarly, as a young lost and rootless man of the fin de siècle, Heinrich Mann came to be shaped and influenced by the discourses on decadence and dilettantism, particularly upheld by the French conservative intellectual Paul Bourget. This chapter then explores Bourget's influence and similarities in Heinrich Mann's fin-de-siècle novels and novellas (*Haltlos*, 1890; *In einer Familie*, 1894; *Doktor Biebers Versuchung*, 1898) as well as Heinrich Mann's ambivalences regarding dilettantism. The issue of whether the dilettante with his distinctive boundless nature, or 'Haltlosigkeit', constitutes a figure of resistance against normative structures will be raised. Also, the question will also regard his experience of exhaustion, what effects dilettantism has on his body, and what his exhaustion reveals about social and cultural issues. In line with these

questions, my aim will also be to critically raise some of the limitations on the subject, particularly in regards to Heinrich Mann's conservative views on family and fatherhood and his dubious advocacy for the potentiality of matrimony and the family sphere as a resting and regenerative space.

The Unstable Boundaries of the Dilettante in *Haltlos*

Heinrich Mann's first ever published work *Haltlos* can be contextualised at a time in Heinrich Mann's life when he felt dissatisfied with his prospects. Heinrich Mann had just decided in 1889 to shorten his academic career by leaving the Gymnasium. His father, Senator Thomas Johann Heinrich Mann, expected him to continue the family business in Lübeck (owner of the J.S Mann, Grain Merchants, Commission and Shipping Agents). Despite that, he agreed to his son's desire to pursue a career in the field of literature – under the condition that it would be as a bookseller (see Haupt 1980: 15). Although it gave him a chance to leave the constraints of Lübeck, Heinrich Mann detested his bookseller apprenticeship in Dresden. Like many of his 'artistic' and 'sensitive' contemporaries around 1890, he looked with contempt at modern industrial society and expressed his youthful disgust with and accusation of the world around him (see Gunnemann 2002: 15–16). His disdain for a career path set by his father transpires in his letters to Ludwig Ewers: 'Nanu, mein Jung, wie geht es Dir? Du bist natürlich glückselig in Deinem "selbstgewählten" Berufe – usw. […] ich sehe Dich vor mir, wie Du mittags und abends einigermaßen zerschlagen und ruiniert nach Hause wandelst' (Mann 1980: 112). This kind of manifested sarcasm, lingering in his letters, is revelatory of his views regarding the limited life choices offered by fathers to young men of a higher upbringing. In another correspondence with Ewers, one of his closing statements is also quite revelatory of his frustration: 'Und meine herzlichen Wünsche für den Kampf ums Dasein!' (217). Heinrich Mann and Ludwig Ewers ached for a sense of freedom and a heightened existence outside of the constraints of a banal, monotonous, normatively dictated life.

His novella published in 1890 offers an insight into the psychology of the young fin-de-siècle man and, especially, an example of the dilettante condition, the possibilities it offers as well as collisions against the rigid structures held by societal norms and values. This novella which is rather neglected by critics, remains a far more complex and introspective study of dilettantism and its inclination to nervousness and exhaustion. As will be

shown, his text correlates with this 'Psychologie à la Bourget' and his characters frequently exemplify the kind of dilettantism discussed above (Mann 1980: 234). In Heinrich Mann's story, it is the reference to the character's nervousness (Mann 1995: 33), unsteadiness (37), self-critical perception (37), wandering tendencies (41), and superficial reading of various authors that establishes a link with Paul Bourget's conception of dilettantism. The one passage which invites comparison is found towards the beginning, when the dilettante character describes his self as an atom integrally part of a general whole (13). The reference to Bourget's metaphor of the individual cell and its dissolution from an organism is rather coincidental given that Heinrich Mann officially reported having read Bourget in January 1891. In his address to Ewers, he shares his stupor as he learns of the likeness of his narrative's content with Bourget's theories in *Le Disciple* (Mann 1980: 205).

The inspiration for the title *Haltlos* finds its source in a poem by Viennese social critical writer Ada Christen in which the verses evoke the 'Moderne Zigeuner', 'Wüste Gesellen' and 'Vagabunden des Lebens', which seem adventurous on the outside but are disrupted on the inside, as they wander aimlessly with no ultimate fixed desire or direction in life (Mann 1995: 34–35). As will be shown, the modern striving for freedom and individuality and the dabbling in multiple activities and views, in other words the condition of 'Haltlosigkeit', bear problematic consequences. This is what characterises the main character in Heinrich Mann's novella. He is presented as a young man without a name who determines the perspective for most of the text. We learn that his social status as an apprentice bookseller gives him no security. He is bound to work at the bookshop every day despite being like his author the son of a noble house (19). This can be seen in the fact that he has sufficient pocket money to dine in restaurants and pay prostitutes. *Haltlos* is also the story of this young dilettante man who, out of boredom, pursues a young girl. She, completely impoverished, makes use of the money offered to her by the young man. After a night of love, she sends the money back to the young man and confesses that she rather gave herself for money to her landlord to whom she owed the rent. The story ends unresolved with the dilettante young man reading with frustration the woman's letter of rejection and thinking: 'Sie wollte ihn ja, schien's, förmlich – reformieren. Was bildet sie sich ein!' (64).

The story of the young man of a higher social status and his clashing encounter with a poor girl has been told dozens of times during this time. Thomas Mann presents a similar scenario in *Gefallen* (1894). Under the influence of his older brother, as Hans Rudolf Vaget points out, Thomas Mann's novella also coincidentally deals

with the topic of dilettantism. In *Gefallen*, the character, Selten, similarly experiences life under 'künstlerische, nervöse Reize' and embodies the characteristics of 'Introspektion, Ästhetizismus, innere Haltlosigkeit und Willensschwäche' known to the turn-of-the-century dilettante (Vaget 1975: 246–248; see also Wysling 1995: xxii–xxiii). But *Haltlos* does not really focus on the apparent love story. The subject of the novella is the narrator himself and the exploration of his turbulent inner life: 'Er hatte früh angefangen, sich selbst in Beobachtung zu nehmen, über seine Gefühle und Gedanken sich zu befragen. Er hatte, um die Richtigkeit seiner Wahrnehmungen festzustellen, frühzeitig zur Lektüre ihm teils noch unverständlicher Bücher gegriffen' (Mann 1995: 13).

The reader discovers through a narratorial perspective exclusively focalised on the young man his inner restlessness. He is plagued by self-doubt and he cannot get rid of his burdensome feelings and thoughts. His lack of stability in life and sense of direction renders him maladjusted in society's eyes as well as in his own: '[er] verstand sich nicht mehr, Er, der immer mit sich selbst so intim gewesen, bemerkte mit Schrecken, wie fremd er sich ward in dieser Zeit' (16). Heinrich Mann studies and partially problematises in his novella the dilettante's interiority and specifically his tendencies of 'Haltlosigkeit'. Based on the protagonist's distinguishable traits, the term 'Haltlosigkeit' designates a personality which, on the outside, does not hold or cannot hold on to the position it is assigned to in the community or does not strive for and does not reach this position. On the inside, the multiplicity of views and wavering personality, innate to dilettantism, result in a perpetuating detachment, indifference, and naïve idealism. Thereby, dilettante 'Haltlosigkeit' may be conceived as an existential condition marked by instability, inner restlessness, and a lack of principles. The eventual means of overcoming this condition may constitute achieving stability in life or a successful accomplishment.

On this condition within the medical discourse, Emil Kraepelin, who wrote in the early decades of the twentieth century on diseases of the will, studies in a chapter in *Psychiatrie: ein Lehrbuch für Studierende und Ärzte* (1915) the phenomenon of 'Haltlosigkeit'. The basic features of the will-less, or weak-willed, correspond to the type of the 'Haltlose' described by Kraepelin. These are people who can be determined in an 'abnormal' way by external influences. The lack of stability usually results from the fact that the subject lacks the will power that would be required to seriously pursue a goal. There is a lack of tenacity and strength of will.

> Es leuchtet an, daß die *Haltlosigkeit* alle möglichen Schattierungen zeigen kann. Leichtere Grade, Weichheit und Beeinflussbarkeit des Willens, Mangel an Widerstandsfähigkeit gegenüber Druck und Lockung, sind natürlich überaus häufig; sie finden sich vielfach vereint mit Lebhaftigkeit der Einbildungskraft, hoher gemütlicher Ansprechbarkeit und künstlerischer Empfänglichkeit. (Kraepelin 1915: 2016, emphasis added)

Kraepelin lists as reverberations of 'Haltlosigkeit' a powerlessness to resist pressure and a loss of self-control. For unstable people are characterised by a lack of determinability and loss of will power, his nosology mentions their complete inability to work persistently and thoroughly (1915: 1995, 2000). Kraepelin explains how a lack of stability can lead to idleness and, worse, to foregoing a sphere of activity (1915: 2017–2018).

In pioneeringly displaying these facets of the dilettante and offering an inside perception into his thought and emotional processes, Heinrich Mann can be regarded as a precursor of psychological novels, an avant-garde writer on the internal difficulties experienced by the fin-de-siècle dilettante. His first novella testifies to the restless and unstable interiority of the dilettante, to his 'Haltlosigkeit' – but also of its author. Heinrich Mann's letters to Ludwig Ewers explicitly attest to the presence of personal elements in the story: 'meine[] Novelle "haltlos", deren Anfang […] ganz subjektiv und persönlich ist' (Mann 1980: 164). The dilettante protagonist of the novella seems to transcribe in his thoughts and actions the author's own reflections, questionings, and doubts. Torn and stressed by his over-sensitivity, nervousness ('innerlich zerrissenes' (Mann 1995: 29), 'ein Zittern ging durch den kranken Leib' (17), 'zuckte sein ganzes Gesicht vor innerer Gereiztheit' (33)), he almost desperately asks like the author the aim of his existence: 'Wo war das Ziel? Und welches Ziel?' (23). By calling into question the nature of his Dasein (or being-in-the-world), he is also faced with the constant awareness of his precarious lifestyle, for he is not one to have 'ein bestimmtes Ziel längere Zeit im Auge' (19).

In this situation, Heinrich Mann's main concern was to reveal the psychological processes burdening someone like himself, meaning a lost, boundless young adult of the fin de siècle. For *Haltlos* is a psychological study, specifically on 'der Ärger des fin-de-siècle Menschen, meines Helden' (Mann 1980: 203). In the style of Gustave Flaubert, this unveiling takes place in the mode of indirect discourse. The reader can thus sense Heinrich Mann's own interrogations, anxieties, preoccupations as a young graduate at that time. As expressed in his letters, his narrative is not simply based on his own story. It is a scientific or experimental case study of himself: 'Ich

bin mir selbst ein Rätsel, auf das ich viel Studium verwende. Die gemachten Entdeckungen […] lege ich zur Zeit in einer Novelle nieder, die nach dem Adaschen Gedichte 'Haltlos' (s. Bern), an das sie sich anlehnt, benannt ist' (Mann 1980: 158). Considering Klaus Schröter's study in which he describes Heinrich Mann's personal endeavours, we get to understand that his attitude as a twenty-year old was a mixture of defiance, rebellion, and resignation – with which he met his father and the bourgeois society around him (see Schröter 1965: 23). It was also an arduous period filled with self-questioning.

Through the performativity of the text, Heinrich Mann ventures in the psychological reality of his condition, mainly affirmed as a 'gekränkte Selbstbewusstsein' (Mann 1995: 37). With the presence of a free indirect discourse, the narrator invites the reader to experience the interiority of the dilettante. Exteriorising at first his inner tensions in prose paragraphs and similarly enclosing them into contained stanzas, disrupting the narrative flow, conveys the unstableness of his condition. Additionally, the rapid break of ellipses in the text performs the context, here the protagonist's dilettante nature and ensuing restlessness. Specifically, the heavily repeatedly use of dots and dashes break the character's thought process and enact his shifting thinking. The constant shift from one thought to another overtly expressed by the narratorial voice performs on a textual level his restless, chaotic, and anxious self:

> So, da saßen sie [die lästigen Gefühle und Gedanken], und er war sie los, ein für allemal. […] … *da brachen sie wieder herein*, die alten Gedanken; nicht Vers- noch Zahlewälle mochten sie dämmern. – Also es half nichts, *wieder eine Frage*: Warum, trotz aller Vernunftgrunde, die es als blöde und unsinnig bewiesen, dieses fortwahrende An-sie-Denkenmüssen, dieses Hasten nach einem ihrer spöttisch springenden oder schwermütig gleitenden Blick … Er verstand sich nicht mehr. (15–16, emphasis added)

Bearing in mind Bourget's metaphor of the dissolution of a united organism and Nietzsche's paraphrased metaphor of the dissolution of the text into individual words, Heinrich Mann performs in the textual form the dilettante's inner dissolution by use of ellipses, words and phrases invading the character's thoughts. As the character experiences the intrusion of thoughts and feelings in his head, the text becomes also the subject of invasive sentences punctuated by three-dot ellipses and dashes. With these rhetorical devices, the reader experiences the dilettante's exhausting process of self-reflection, self-doubt, and self-questioning and state of uncertainty and suspension.

Both in form/style and in content/metaphors, the text engages with the inherent liminal nature of the dilettante. The inner processes experienced by the dilettante are transferred through the body, communicated and reinforced by reoccurring fluid metaphors (subsuming both liquid and gas) around the body. His body is repeatedly described with terms referring to an object being afloat, either drifting aimlessly in the streets or forcing his way against the flow of machine-like programmed 'Others' belonging to the mass crowd: 'Er […] der sich stets vom leben hatte durch das Leben treiben lassen' (27), '[er] steuerte wieder hinaus in den Nebeln' (55), 'Heute schwamm er mit wahrer Wollust in dem fragwürdigen "Vergnügen" umher' (38). Fluids can metamorphose. They can change course and when travelling fast become points of resistance. They can have both negative and positive effects. These fluid images of the body reinforce the dilettante's flexibility and all-roundedness, his autonomy, and non-stagnancy. Through the plasticity of his self, he stands as a point of resistance in the social body. He swims against the tide of other individuals, resisting to follow their patterned life (20). Detaching himself from them, the protagonist declares, 'ich bin frei, ganz frei; ich kann tun, was immer ich will…' (54). The three final dots indicate that the question of the potentiality of his boundless existence, of his capacity to do what he wants, remains disputable. With no well-defined boundary, no sense of direction in life, no fixed anchorage, he can enjoy a wide latitude of freedom to continuously move and redefine himself.

His dilettante nature predicated on uncertainty contrasts with the bordered and determined existence led by the 'Others'. Whether or not the narrator condemns dilettantism remains unclear due to his critical assessment of those who conform within society. The antipodes, the ones fitting into a socially normative existence are repeatedly referred to as 'die andern' (20, 44), 'Andere' (56), 'denen da draussen' (36), 'die Menge' (21), or even '[der] Haufen der heimkehrenden Arbeiter' (20). Alienating himself from them, the narrator describes how they, with their 'maschinenhafter Pünktlichkeit' (11), go to work every morning and return from work with the other homogenous flux of individuals with the same monotony and weariness.

> Alle diese jungen Leute, die eine Anstellung in irgendeinem in der Nähe befindlichen Geschäft hatten und mit maschinenhafter Pünktlichkeit morgens um halb acht an den verhassten Ort ihrer Tätigkeit wanderten, um ihn nach genau zwölf Stunden aufatmend zu verlassen, kannten sich – wenigstens vom Ansehen, oder auch genauer. (11)

Their slow pace, the heaviness of their repetitive dreary existence resonating on the pavement, the burden of these young people of having to fit in and contain themselves, are facets of a routine the protagonist battles against (20). By means of the portrait of the outsider-dilettante, the narrator seems to partly criticise the Others' social formatting and adherence to an imperative to turn work and capital growth into their prime obligation and aim in life.

It is made significant that by capitalism is assumed the necessity of discipline, regulated spending and saving, and the prudent limitation of desire. These imperatives do not harmonise well with the dilettante's prerogatives. Yet the image is not a Manichean presentation of dilettantism as an ideal and social conformism as enslavement. The dilettante is threatened by precariousness, a lack of sense of accomplishment and, on top of that, disruptive thoughts and feelings about these anxiety-inducing topics. Also, burdened by a consistent need to seek new pleasures and forms of stimulations, the state of exhaustion is of another nature. The threat of ordinariness and boredom lurks at every corner of his daily existence (11, 53, 55). He is ironically not bound by a 'Arbeitspflicht' but by a need to perpetually seek three elements throughout the city, worded in the following order: 'Bis zum Mittagessen trieb er sich in den Strassen umher. Bald ging er einem Mädchen nach, immer spähend nach *Neuem*, *Fesselnden*, *Besonderen*; oder er blieb vor einer Anschlagsäule stehen' (54, emphasis added). These three stimulants – something new, captivating, and special – can only vitalise his body and animate his mind. That said, the relentless search for them also has its limitations and short-term effects, as he is quickly overcome with exhaustion and a feeling of boredom.

With no fixed star, no aim driving his existence, except that of striving for new temporarily exciting stimulants, the fluid metaphors also come to reinforce the liminal state, in the sense of transient and instable, the protagonist finds himself in. First, the drifting movement of his body, swimming and rushing through the streets (20, 24, 54), can be perceived as a sign of weakness of the body losing its weight and substance and its aptitude to exercise will power. In another case, the narrator externalises the protagonist's vulnerability by way of the metaphor of the fog. Its hazy nature repeatedly spread throughout the city's streets and the protagonist's mind. The body becomes porous to this outside element and shows a certain vulnerability, as it becomes invaded by a dim, ungraspable substance. By way of its vaporous, obscure substance, the image of the fog enveloping his body and mind points to a growing threat. The vaporousness of the substance, its lack of solidity emphasises what

Hans Rudolf Vaget names a characteristic and at the same time a serious deficiency of the modern dilettante – the lack of a 'fulfilled life' (Vaget 1970: 158).

Walking 'ziellos' (Mann 1995: 41), 'kreuz und quer' (41, 54), and 'zwecklos' (61), he is continuously threatened by the resurgence of 'das Gefühl der Langeweile' and to be faced with the reality of an unstimulating and unsatisfying life (43, 53, 55). The lack of solidity in his life, by which is meant a lack of routine, of set beliefs, of a strong will, all in all elements believed to ground existence and ensure a healthy lifestyle, has left him boundless, vulnerable to outside forces, and exhausted. His disaggregation from the rest of the social body, in this case depicted as a homogenous flow of productive and disciplined people, has left him paradoxically chained to his vital need to seek individual forms of pleasure and also burdened by a constant self-questioning as to what is his goal in life. His state of exhaustion is clearly correlated with his dilettante nature. Yet, in the end, he remains unchanged, unreformed so to speak, unwilling in a way to cure himself by ripping out the essence of dilettantism out of his self and committing to a stable relationship.

In the end, even the capacity for introspection bears its limitation. He does not he want to improve his self nor does he want to be 'reformed'. Turner states that liminality can exist on its own and can thus also become a permanent condition (Turner 1969: 107; see also Thomassen 2009: 5–28). One can presume that the dilettante remains caught in a state of permanent limbo, strolling through the streets aimlessly and with no sense of fixed desire, doomed to remain weak-willed and exhausted by his relentless search for new pleasures. In its form, with the numerous ellipses, and in its content, with an unresolved narrative left hanging, the text performs to the end the dilettante's character. One could say the ending is voluntary, it is just like the character. As a weak-willed dilettante, unable to choose a fix position, who refuses to be formatted within normative structures, the ending of the narrative is a reflection of the dilettante's image: unresolved but not restricted. It is however difficult for the reader to empathise with the character's condition, as he remains disengaged and unwilling to change. As much as the contrast with the monotonous and homogenous mass described at the beginning stimulates the reader and his critical outlook on modern society, so much the lack of evolution of the character, of positioning, makes the character sterile and shallow. The author camps the dilettante in a posture of rigidity and immobility that contradicts his fluid and flexible nature. Stuck in a state of in-betweenness, th**e** frustration that results from this story left hanging in the end renders the understanding of the novella's stance ambiguous.

Finding 'Hafenruhe' and Health in Enclosed Institutions?

Heinrich Mann not only explores the figure of the dilettante and his problematic condition of 'Haltlosigkeit' in *Haltlos,* he goes even further in his first novel *In einer Familie.* Little known in its original version, this work is meant to be an application of the psychological theories of Paul Bourget, as they appear at least in *Le Disciple* (1889). Whereas Bourget's influence remains unproved in *Haltlos* and the resembling ideas speculative, his first novel *In einer Familie* with its topos of the 'Familienroman' explicitly engages with the motif of the dilettante's diseased will power. The influence of Paul Bourget, to whom Heinrich Mann visibly dedicated this first novel has often been referred to in the limited range of critical literature on Heinrich Mann (see Dittberner 1974: 78ff; Winter 1994: 88). The fact that with this early text Heinrich Mann critically writes about dilettantism and studies its 'Krankheit des Willens' has also already been noticed in previous critical studies and biographical books (Mann 2000: 150) (see, for instance, Schröter 1965: 22ff; Sørensen 1969; Werner 1972: 28ff; Winter 1994; Banuls 1996; Wieler 1996; Hibbit 2006: 160–161). With this novel 'à la Bourget', Heinrich Mann takes a different and more conservative discursive path. In this case, he delves into the realm of traditional values and hegemonial masculine principles with the possibility of conjugality and fatherhood as regenerative sources for the weak-willed dilettante and his state of masculinity. His novel desperately clings to the family and patriarchy as an institution that sustains structure, order, and meaning.

The main protagonist, a wealthy and idle young man going by the name of Wellkamp, has received his maternal inheritance and used it to travel across Europe. The young man is the archetype of the cosmopolitan dilettante, as Heinrich Mann has often portrayed him in his short stories (in 'Auf Reisen' or 'Das Wunderbare') (see Mann 1995: 128–178, 224–256). After years of travelling, the 32-year-old dilettante ultimately saves himself from a subservient erotic relationship in Berlin by wanting to settle in life. The story begins when Wellkamp meets in a boarding house Anna von Grubeck, a young woman accompanied by her father on a sightseeing trip through Europe. After having experienced a transient life of travels and brief love affairs, Wellkamp wishes to enter the safe 'haven' of matrimony. The narrator mentions Wellkamp's bachelor dreams of 'Hafenruhe', in other words 'zur Rast in einen stillen Hafen' (Mann 2000: 85). The narrator uses a symbolically filled word, meaning literally 'harbour calmness', to express Wellkamp's longing for a tranquil, anchored existence in the still waters,

which contrasts the dilettante's boundless, rootless, and restless existence. The narrative then comes to take place behind closed doors, in the appartements of Anna's father, the Mayor of Dresden. As the story unfolds, this private, protected space reveals itself to be anything but tension-free. The agreeable relationship between Wellkamp and Anna comes to be disrupted when Wellkamp is seduced by his father-in-law's young second wife, Dora von Grubeck. Surpringly, the novel is given an unbelievably happy ending as the mother-in-law in question abruptly dies of a heart attack. And, Wellkamp's young wife forgives him for the misstep. The 'Hafenruhe' that Wellkamp dreamt of has been achieved.

The recounted sequence of events is once more not original in nature, as it has been recounted multiple times in the literary sphere. It seems that the young author does not seek to be innovative on this point. It is, however, the introspective accounts of the character's psychological processes which render the narrative distinct and interesting for this study. For the reader is confronted with long monologues of the characters in the mode of free indirect discourse or even with comments from the narrator who, like that of Bourget in *Le Disciple* judges and comments on the evolution of the character's feelings. Additionally, three of the four main characters are ailed with Bourget's 'maladie de la volonté', – a condition widely popularised by Théodule Ribot in 1883 (Bourget 1883/1885: 167). As Helga Winter (1994) has indicated, the protagonists Wellkamp, Dora von Grubeck and her father Major von Grubeck are all affected by a weakness of the will. Yet, Winter argues that their state is not to be understood as a disease in the strict sense, but as a literary motif following Bourget's definition of 'dilettantism' (1994: 32). Their condition is explicitly yet also vaguely typified by the narrator as 'der ewig schwankende Dilettantismus' (Mann 2000: 119).

Yet, far from just being a literary motif, the narrator constructs the characters' condition as a mental illness, marked by degenerate sensibility, weakening refinement, and a paralysis of the ability to regulate one's actions. The condition is clearly depicted as disabling and rendering the diseased powerless to act. The narrator explicitly describes the physiological and psychological conditions of the diseases of the will as a deleterious phenomenon, and provides its aetiology, its symptoms, its variants and the possibilities and consequences of dealing with this disease:

> Bei weicheren […] und zum *Empfindungsdilettantismus* bestimmten Naturen pflegt die *Krankheit des Willens* zu einem vollständigen Aufgeben der Initiative zu führen; die Selbstkritik nimmt eine so virtuose Vielseitigkeit an, dass: die einfachste Entscheidung nach einer bestimmten Seite hin dem Betroffenen unmöglich wird und sein Leben sich in einer ewig schwankenden Ratlosigkeit verliert. (Mann 2000: 150–151, emphasis added)

By 'Empfindungsdilettantismus' is meant the possibility of enjoying an array of sensations without fully giving in to any. The ensuing half-detachment and indifference characterising a dilettante behaviour exacerbates the wavering of the will. The end result is an irritating restlessness for the nerves and a state of exhaustion. In contrast to the characterisation in *Haltlos*, which remains an ambiguous tale of mental affliction, anti-conformism and resistance, dilettantism in *In einer Familie* is explicitly pathologised as manifestation of a diseased will and described as a symptom of 'unserer unfruchtbar kritischen und zu schlichten Handlungen unfähigen Zeit' (Mann 2000: 150). Additionally, whereas in *Haltlos* the disposition remains constructed as a state of mind of heightened self-consciousness, self-criticism, vacillating perspectives resulting in restlessness, here dilettantism is explicitly pathologised as threatening the individual's sense of identity and inner balance.

For this reason, Heinrich Mann's first novel is entirely determined by the contrast between the initial restless travel existence of the dilettante Wellkamp and his journey to reach 'Hafenruhe' in marriage and upcoming fatherhood. His desire for rest can be perceived as adapted to the contingencies of the time. The plot is clearly delineated as a culturally conservative piece promoting the family structure, which the young Heinrich Mann also propagated in numerous articles in the magazine *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert* in 1895/1896 (Schröter 1965: 22ff; Banuls 1970: 37ff; Werner 1972: 34ff). The family as an institution with its set of fixed and timeless values oppose the excesses of individualism, the striving for dilettante ways of life, and its 'Haltlosigkeit' or inner restlessness. In these articles, the young writer drafts a culture-critical program against the 'Zerstörung der Familie' (Mann 1895: 257). And thereof, his essays take part in a larger cultural discussion where these troubling and heedless behaviours by men suddenly emerged as a primary threat to the paradigm of masculinity, the myths of virility, and as a catalyst of cultural degeneration.

In a sense, the decadence of the dilettante in his writings can be resumed as a lack of masculinity. As Walter Erhart points out, '[n]icht die Familie ist in erster Linie bedroht, sondern der sich seiner Geschlechter-Grenzen nicht mehr sichere Mann' (2001: 235). Having to enter matrimony and father children is shown as a

means to re-masculinise the individual and as a countermeasure to his exhaustion. The retreat into the tranquil harbour of the family nest stands as the ultimate regenerative space for the wandering dilettante and his unsteady, exhausting lifestyle. Wellkamp sees the marriage with Anna von Grubeck as '[den] letzten Ausweg aus den bisherigen Irrungen seiner Existenz', as a remedy to his dilettantism and his tendencies of 'Allesgeltenlassen' and effeminate 'geistigen Seiltanzerei' (Mann 2000: 26, 130). Rendered unsteady and exhausted by a life of restless travels and brief encounters, Wellkamp now seeks solid ground. His sudden resolution to marry Anna is referred to as a 'Bruch' in his story (6, 14). By that one could understand a crossing of the threshold joining his past dilettante lifestyle and his future rebirth as a married man and father. The narrator seems to show the reader that Wellkamp is past the point of liminality and has been reinstated within a structure of set norms and values.

Nonetheless, the family structure bears also its paradoxes, which again render the narrative's outlook ambiguous. The narrator repeatedly depicts it as a normative, protective yet also oppressive space with the reoccurring expression 'den geschlossenen Kreise' (213, 225). It bears another facet as an incubator of decomposition and disintegration: 'Es war das Haus, der geschlossene Kreis der Familie, in dem wie in einem Treibhaus, alles unnatürlich früh reif geworden war, schneller als unter anderen Umständen, und eher er zur Besinnung zu gelangen vermochte' (225). Contradicting Erich Wellkamp's initial pursuit for 'Hafenruhe', the narrative voice depicts family as a machine that harms its members psychologically, producing weak-willed, neurasthenic men and hysterical women. Despite the novel presenting marriage and the family structure as salvific institutions in its closing figure, it is concurrently featured as a source of irritation, restlessness, and exhaustion. After all the family has been described up to this point as the 'Treibhaus[]' (225) in which all these problems only thrive. Still, the novel ends with a conciliatory final image. Obviously, the text has a problem getting to an end in which the entanglements that have been drafted up to that point are convincingly resolved. The debuting author chooses overcompensation through a series of improbabilities and coincidences. With Dora's death of a heart attack, chaos seems to be finally contained and happiness can be found in the 'echte[n], stetig-geordnete[n], eintrachtige[n] und in seinem unscheinbaren Frieden so inhaltsreiche[n] Leben in einer Familie' (298).

In the same like manner, another instance of ambiguous representation of enclosed, regenerative space is the sanatorium used as a setting in Heinrich Mann's 1898 novella *Doktor Biebers Versuchung*. An important

element that can be drawn from this narrative is the reason bringing the character Sägemüller to the Sanatorium. He needed to flee from the threatening elements of the city, which he describes as follows:

> [Die rauhe Wirklichkeit] bedrängt uns zu Hause und draußen. Die elektrische Straßenbahn, die, während ich nichts ahne, unhörbar auf mich zu gleitet, greift geradeso unverschämt in mein Leben ein wie Telefondrähte, die des Nachts vor meinem Schlafstubenfenster surren. Reklamen an den Straßenecken und das Geheul der Geschäftsleute und der Presse, Geklingel überall, Fahrräder und automobile Fuhrwerke, von alledem muss ich meine Sinne *vergewaltigen* lassen, ich bin wehrlos dagegen. (Mann 1995: 522, emphasis added)

Sägemüller mentions how external elements of modernity attributed to the metropolis, namely the electric tram, the telephone network, the merchants and newspaper sellers, 'rape' his senses. Sägemüller's body becomes porous to their over-stimulating powers and their high demands in attention on his part. The origin of sensory overstimulation is clearly exogenous to the character and, as he states, does not know any boundaries due to its invasion and permeation of private spaces including the body. The enumeration of technological apparatuses and the mentioning of the noisy flux of people congesting the streets as causes for nervousness and neurasthenia is a clear reference to the discourses held by contemporary medical theorists and practitioners, such as Wilhelm Erb (1893), Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1885, 1895), Leopold Löwenfeld (1889) and Willy Hellpach (1902). As a man living in the city, Sägemüller has self-proclaimed himself a 'professional' neurasthenic (Mann 1995: 502).

As a neurasthenic, he is not able to integrate himself into everyday bourgeois life and to conform to the required performance ethic. The sanatorium therefore appears to him 'wie in ein Kloster', like a welcomed 'Zufluchtsort, wo ich der Beschäftigung mit dem körperlichen Dasein endlich enthoben bin' (522). The homologised spaces of the monastery and sanatorium offer a safe haven from the outside world, here particularly from responsibility, pressure, and stress, and a space able to regulate or re-balance the patient's nervousness. This sanatorium under the care of physician Dr Bieber, whose power essentially render him a saviour in his patients' eyes, is transformed in Sägemüller's eyes into a refuge from the strains of the modern world. He seeks the renunciation of all initiative of his body and of his will. Sägemüller presents the key element alleviating the exhausted modern individual as a surrender of his body and his will into the authoritative hands of the physician. His statement that he has given '[s]einen Willen in die Hand des Arztes' and therefore has nothing more to want

already poses a problematic question (522). Sägemüller attests that this place gives him repose and constitutes a safe haven in which he can disunite himself from his exhausted body and surrender his will to the doctors. He no longer needs to be the driving force of his self. Rest is tacitly equated with dependency.

Yet this other instance of search for 'Hafenruhe' is found for Sägemüller more or less. The sanatorium novella is not a one-sided narrative promoting the benefits of sanatoriums for exhausted modern individuals. Despite his search for a space of retreat from society and the hustle and bustle of the city, Sägemüller is not oblivious to the façade the sanatorium embodies. As the narrative mostly contains dialogues in direct speech, the reader experiences Sägemüller's unconcealed reactions to the events unfolding around him. In contrast to the previous texts, Heinrich Mann here chooses to narrate the story mostly through dialogues and less through introspection, producing an uninhibited criticism of the sanatorium-culture. Sägemüller then stands out as a sceptical observer, pinpointing all the dubious aspects of the sanatorium life and its inhabitants. For instance, he draws attention to the women's hysteric fits (497), their pathologised 'Koketterie' (512), their 'seelischer und körperlicher Unzufriedenheit' (513), their blind belief in Dr Bieber's healing powers (509), as well as to Dr Bieber's suggestive influence (501).

Heinrich Mann invites the reader into a world of charlatanism, deceit, and farce. The socio-critical moment of this novella poses the question of dependency and the power and influence physicians hold over patients. Dr Bieber's power lies in his art of deception. According to Sägemüller, he leads patients, especially women suffering from nervous disorders, to believe in his inexplicably powers, including telekinesis and clairvoyance. He is not simply an ordinary physician, he is also a hypnotist and spiritualist, integrating the occult into his practice. With a mystical physician leading the sanatorium, the narrative points to the aberrant conception of sanatorium as medical and healing centres and rather constructs it as a space manufacturing neurasthenics and hysterics. As much as the superficial conception of the family structure as a harmonious, protective womb in *In einer Familie*, the narrative here plays on tensions unfolding within a health institution. Sägemüller endorses the space as one of repose and security. Yet he also undermines Dr Bieber's manipulative demeanour and power to encourage the consumption of treatments. It creates a certain contradictory discourse as both divergences and conformist inclinations are in effect here. In the end, neither the family nest nor the sanatorium represents an absolute place of rest and health regeneration.

The stories of *Haltlos, In einer Familie,* and *Doktor Biebers Versuchung* mirror the personal experiences of the young Heinrich Mann, and are revelatory of the anxieties and concerns of a young man and artist in a world set on imposing order, control, and homogeneity. Heinrich Mann places more importance on the inner workings of a vulnerable, disoriented, and uncertain mind, epitomised by weak-willed young protagonists in an identity crisis. Placing them in conflictual situations, he conveys the confusion and burden inwardly felt by a young generation having to fight for existence against inner and outer forces, yet not knowing what to fight for. Influenced by his readings of French literary, critical, psychological texts of the fin de siècle, especially of Bourget, Heinrich Mann succeeds in capturing a darker aspect of modernity: the scepticism and pessimism of a lost, rootless, and burdened young generation of the dawn of the nineteenth century. Notwithstanding his young age, he shows great lucidity and a sophisticated perception of the psychology of individuals exhausted by life.

The discourse used by this author is not intended to be scientific or materialist. No economy of the body, metaphor of the body-machine or nerve capital are at work here. The discourse rather focuses on the inner sensations, the psychology, the experience of the interiority of weak-willed dilettantes, of indecisive individuals exhausted by a heightened consciousness, oversensitivity, a lack of will power and struggling as much with the imposition of rigid boundaries as with the suspension of structuring boundaries. The storyline of *Haltlos*, followed by the more elaborate *In einer Familie*, can be conceived as a testimony to the theoretical developments in the rising field of psychology and anti-materialistic approaches. Through the protagonist's constant self-reflection, dismantling his own inner being, Heinrich Mann proposes an alternative perception of civilisational exhaustion and a counter-discourse to the German medical texts at that time. Writing on the inner experiences, sensations, and thoughts of a young dilettante, affected by existential 'Haltlosigkeit', Heinrich Mann questions the bourgeois values of achievement, the capitalistic imperatives of productivity and growth, and the identity crisis of a lost youth.

The so-called 'mal du siècle' of the end of the nineteenth century is particularly caused in Heinrich Mann's work by a discrepancy between the desire for individuation of a young generation and the few horizons that are offered to it. As a young aspiring author of the fin-de-siècle period, Heinrich Mann establishes the social diagnosis of civilisational exhaustion, especially of a disenchanted youth, hungry for possibility and desires, and finding comfort in a dilettante, boundless, and anchorless existence seeking multiple possibilities in life. This

experiential state of limbo also includes its downsides: weakness of the will, restlessness, exhaustion are key symptoms in his narratives. This author, despite not having been explored in depth by critics, remains crucial in the analysis of the discourses of exhaustion in this period. Despite its seductive offer of infinite possibilities, Heinrich Mann shows an interesting ambivalence by way of pointing out the darker side to dilettantism. It is problematised both in *Haltlos* and *In einer Familie* with young men not finding any footing in life and exhausting their energies in travels, superfluous and quickly-consumed pleasures. Not only their actions, but also their crippling consciousness brimming with self-reflection, self-doubt, self-questioning and a lack of decisiveness lead to mental and physical exhaustion. Through the character of the dilettante, a restless and adrift modern individual, Heinrich Mann explores another side of exhaustion: its cause being stuck in a liminal phase lacking solid ground ('Wurzellosigkeit'), attachment to principles, and a sense of unity with the social body. Influenced by Bourget's work, Heinrich Mann then promotes in a way a return to conservative family values as a way for modern men to find an equilibrium in this context of rapid changes and instability. Yet these allegations, written by a still young Heinrich Mann and in search of his own self, also bear to the end their contradictions and uncertainties.

CHAPTER TWO

In-Between 'Schöpfung' and 'Erschöpfung':

Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* and *Schwere Stunde*

Do More with Less: Thomas Mann on the 'Heroismus der Schwäche'

The conceptual exchanges between literature and medical narratives are particularly visible in Thomas Mann's case. His interest in neurasthenia, hereditary degeneration, and the link between illness and artistic genius have been thoroughly analysed by many critics in the past, particularly in relation to his novel *Buddenbrooks* (1901) (see, for example, Winau 1968: 641–646; Radkau 1996a: 29–53; Dierks 1997: 11–32; Roelcke 2002: 95–130; Dierks 2002: 135–152; Koopmann 2002). By no means, however, can this interest only be found in this family saga chronicling the decline of a wealthy Hanseatic merchant family. Thomas Mann has repeatedly turned to the subject of medicine and used the motif of illness, degeneration, and death in his oeuvre. His 1912 novella *Der Tod in Venedig* (see, for instance, Braverman and Nachman 1970; Springer 1975; Dierks 2002; Kottow 2004: 249–285; Sparenberg 2013) and *Der Zauberberg* from 1924 (see, for instance, Stein 1965; Dierks 1995; Engelhardt 1997; Virchow 1995) occupy a central place in this regard.

About Thomas Mann's medical sources, one can safely assume that they consisted of a mixture of traditional educational material and contemporary biomedical knowledge. Based on archival finds by several critics, we know that he read an extensive amount of medical literature. [6] He may have also acquired knowledge through conversations with medical advisors in his close and wider circle of acquaintances, but also through personal experience, self-observation and diligent reading of relevant books and articles. This assumption can be partly based on the fact that, during his time in Munich, Thomas Mann was a member of the Deutsche Herrenklub, which was based in the Palais Preysing and which mainly included as its members doctors, lawyers, university professors, writers, and artists, – which must have in a way further facilitated Thomas Mann's access to biomedical knowledges (see Schaller 2003: 334–335). Knowledge on cholera in *Der Tod in Venedig*, tuberculosis

[6] Research in the Thomas Mann-Archive in Zurich reveals that Thomas Mann's personal book collection includes general reference works such as the encyclopaedias of 'Meyer' and 'Brockhaus' (see Dierks 2002: 143; Schaller 2003: 335).

in *Der Zauberberg*, and syphilis in *Doktor Faustus* also partly stem from lifelong correspondence with a few physician acquaintances (see Humphreys 1989: 155–156; Christian Virchow 1995: 117–171). For instance, for his novel *Der Zauberberg* (1924), the author sought advice from doctors and used specialist literature including the textbook on physiology by Ludimar Hermann (1910) (see Wormer 2016: 60).[7]

Thomas Mann was also personally acquainted with the world of sanatoriums, which features prominently in *Der Zauberberg*. His personal experiences were undoubtedly important for writing this novel. His wife Katia stayed in the Davos sanatorium in 1912. Later, he himself became a guest there, and also attended other sanatoriums. It is then with no surprise that he describes himself as 'ein armer neurastheniker' in a letter to his childhood friend Otto von Grautoff in 1898 (Mann 2002: 102). Also, in his correspondence with his brother Heinrich, the topic of neurasthenia comes up several times, for instance in a letter written by Thomas Mann on February 18, 1905 from Zurich and on January 17, 1906 and June 7, 1906 from Munich (Mann 1995: 105, 117, 121). Plagued by somatic symptoms manifesting as gastrointestinal symptoms (abdominal pain, constipation), Thomas Mann experimented with a whole series of therapeutic measures (see Winston 1990: 146; Prater 1995: 39). In 1901, he undertook a cure together with his brother Heinrich. Later, he was a visitor at the sanatorium in Riva on Lake Garda and at the Lahmann sanatorium. And he undertook a more severe cure at the Bircher-Benner sanatorium in Zurich (see Martynkewicz 2013: 30). For Thomas Mann, life in the sanatorium was assimilated to 'ein hygienisches Zuchthaus' (Mann 2002: 417). This is evidenced by a letter from 1909 to Walter Opitz, after a stay in the sanatorium of Dr Bircher-Benner in Zurich to treat gastric problems.[8] That being said, he still remained a fervent consumer of sanatoriums and their hydrotherapy ('Wasserkur'), rest treatment ('Liegekur'), sunbathing, and gardening activities (Mann 2002: 420; see also Bedenig 2010: 54). Thomas Mann was, one could say, a product and a critic of his time. And this ambivalence of his is exemplified in his sanatorium novel *Der Zauberberg* in which he rewrites his personal sanatorial experiences into a caricatural portrait of a medical practice geared more to profit than to the cure of patients.

[7] Thomas Sprecher has listed the following physicians in his article for the Thomas Mann-Archive in Zurich: Professor von Arch who worked with Kraepelin in Heidelberg, Dr Ludwig Hammerschlag, Dr Klopstock, Dr Bluth, and Dr Knoche (see Sprecher 2001: 1235).

[8] Maximilian Oskar Bircher-Benner (1867–1939) was a Swiss physician and a pioneer in nutrition research. As a key component in the German-Swiss 'Lebensreformbewegung', his theory postulated that muesli and a raw food diet (also, prohibiting the consumption of alcohol, coffee, tobacco) would detoxify the digestive apparatus and naturally regenerate the body's vital force (see Treitel 2017: 76–79).

During his therapeutical stays to remedy his exhaustion, Thomas Mann recurrently corresponded with his brother, informing him both about the state of his health and the state of his writing process. His numerous letters to Heinrich indicate a state of nervousness with symptoms such as 'Depressionen, Augenschwäche, Unruhe, tiefer Verstimmung' subduing him into a state of restlessness and rendering him 'vollständig kaputt' – broken, out of order like a machine. According to Thomas Mann, his state was far from a 'Normalzustand' (quoted in Dierks 2002: 141). His frustration about his incapacity to do anything is palpable, and we can sense in his words his painful confrontation with the limits of his body and the effects on the progress and quality of his writing. In the month of November 1913, he wrote to his older brother from his farmhouse in Bad Tölz: 'Ich bin oft recht gemütskrank und zerquält. Der Sorgen sind zu viele: die bürgerlich-menschlichen und die geistigen, um mich und meine Arbeit. […] die immer *drohende Erschöpfung*, Skrupel, Müdigkeit, Zweifel, eine Wundheit und Schwäche, dass mich jeder Angriff bis auf den Grund erschüttert' (quoted in Kesting 2003: 36, emphasis added). Thomas Mann mentions an impending exhaustion, a mental incapacity, an inability to orientate himself, and a 'sympathy' with death, perhaps a kind of 'Todessehnsucht'. At fault are the anxieties surrounding him and his work. He is burdened by internal, personal, work-related worries and by external, cultural 'Misere[n] der Zeit'. He mentions the physiological effect of this state as these experiences of weakness and exhaustion leave him shaken to the ground. These critical and weighty 'Angriff[e]' on his body, as he calls them, exacerbate a sentiment of powerlessness. Here and elsewhere, he expresses an inability to possess a sense of agency over his own body and creative capacities.

Joachim Radkau correspondingly draws attention to Thomas Mann's consistent frustration for he wrote at a slower pace than his brother Heinrich Mann. Thomas Mann himself was very impatient and suffered from his slowness. In an article in 'Der Rundschau', Thomas Mann justified his style of work as a great and agonising process, which needed patience and the consumption of a considerable amount of 'Nervenkraft' (see Radkau 1996a: 34). In a letter to his friend Ida Boy-Ed, dating back to February 1906, he mentions his state of restlessness and impatience, as he is constantly set to endure phases of writer's block and exhaustion:

> Sie glauben nicht, mit welchem Gram um mich selbst ich mich herumzuschlagen habe, – natürlich nicht um 'mich', sondern um mein Talent, mein Künstlerthum. Mehr und mehr neige ich zu einer Müdigkeit,

> einem Überdruss, einer Unlust, die verzehrt, weil sie mit rasender Ungeduld verbunden ist; denn ich habe die Leistung nöthig, um mich vor mir selbst zu rechtfertigen. (quoted in Baskakov 2014: 40–41)

He seems to have completely internalised the dictate of achievement and productivity for it confers him a sense of meaning in life. And yet he is also aware of it and seeks to critique and overcome it. He emphasises an inner tension, a fight against his own self, thereof against his exhaustion and reluctance ('Widerwille', 'Unlust') consuming him.

To maintain a certain level of productivity, Thomas Mann obeyed the categorical imperative of 'Durchhalten' – meaning a firmness or tenacity to persist despite pain. In a communication to the 'Bonner Literarhistorische Gesellschaft', in July 1906, he discusses his work method:

> Was mich betrifft, so heißt es, die Zähne zusammenbeißen und langsam Fuß vor Fuß setzen, [...] dazu gehört bei meiner Arbeitsart in der Tat eine Geduld – was sage ich! eine Verbissenheit, ein Starrsinn, eine Zucht und Selbstknechtung des Willens, von der man sich schwer eine Vorstellung macht und unter der die Nerven [...] oft bis zum Schreien gespannt sind. (Mann 1968: 15f)

In these lines, the discipline to which he subjects himself starts with exercises based on patience which, in a sense, echoes the doctrine of the 'Willenskultur' endorsed by Reinhold Gering and Wilhelm Gerhardt in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. This letter by Thomas Mann was written prior to Gering and Gerhardt's texts, but there is an interesting correlation regarding the idea of will-strengthening with his practices of 'Zucht und Selbstknechtung des Willens'. Yet, at the end of the passage, the author returns to a nerve discourse and a physiological conception of his nervousness, when he describes the painful experience of having to stretch the nerves until they scream. Here, as Radkau notes, he uses an old-fashioned nerve metaphor that still equates the nerves with muscles and tendons and the strained nerves with a tense bow (1996: 34). Whereas the will remains too abstract as an entity to explain one's state of nervousness and weakness, the tension he experiences and the need for him to increase his tempo is well conveyed and can be deeply felt through the bow imagery. This metaphor enables him to better convey or rather corporealise his distressing inner experience.

Further in line with the medical discourse of the nerves and the economy of energy at that time, his convictions about healthy living include rigorous hygienist habits and keeping track of them, the notion of wise management, and investment in profuse sources of energy for the body. In his younger years, in a letter to Otto Grautoff, Thomas Mann recommends him to take measures against his sexual desire and nervous states as follows: 'Ich rathe Dir, regelmäßig eine bestimmte Anzahl von Stunden zu schlafen und jeden Morgen den ganzen Körper kalt zu waschen. Letzteres thut mir sehr gut. Außerdem schränke das Cigarettenrauchen ein und verwende Dein Geld lieber für reichliche und kräftige Nahrung' (quoted in Sparenberg 2013: 131). Solely through a careful management of sleep time and the restrictions of sources of pleasure can the body recuperate. Again, we can find here a discourse of body economy and with it a management strategy of investing in a nutritious ('reichliche und kräftige') diet. The achieving individual must maintain an ongoing strict management of personal resources to remain productive, and especially to keep impulses under control ('die Hunde im Souterrain schon an die Kette bringen'). This should increase the efficiency of the human engine. In this dialectic, the body rather than the abstract mind becomes a node where work, energy and economy intersect.

In the service of his artistic production and genius, he asserts that he needed to fight his own body and its weaknesses or limited capacities in the face of his work and impulses, to maintain self-control and keep up with the tempo and demands of modern life. As he explains in his later years in a letter from 1951 addressed to Emil Preetorius:

> Meine Verfassung ist nicht die beste, ein quälender Mangel an Energie beherrschte mich, meine produktiven Kräfte scheinen erschöpft. Am Ende ist das physiologisch, und ich sollte mich drein ergeben, es wie [Hermann] Hesse machen, der sich entschlossen zur Ruhe gesetzt hat […]. Aber ich verstehe mich nicht darauf, weiß nicht, wie ohne Arbeit die Tage verbringen und ringe nach Leistung, ohne die Spannkraft zu finden, die sie ermöglicht. Ein quälender Zustand … (quoted in Sparenberg 2013: 132)

With frustration does he acknowledge his weakened physiological and intellectual capacities. He is faced with the sad reality that despite wanting to work, to perform well in his job, he is unable to do so. Despite acknowledging the idea that rest and a break away from his work would help, he rather remains intent on pushing his limits and striving for self-discipline and the ability to surpass himself. To overcome his own exhaustion, Thomas Mann increased his productivity in a performative act of denial. As pinpointed by several critics, Thomas

Mann praises a certain 'Heroismus der Schwäche', meaning a heroism of achieving more with less (Shookman 2003: 24; Koopmann 2005: 247). He not only presents his inner fight with his body, he also presents himself as heroic as he perseveres, pushes through and fights his own body. In the face of his neurasthenic condition, he continued to produce. He needed to, producing works of literature constituted a way to document his experience of exhaustion, but also proof that he could surpass himself and transcend his bodily and even mental constraints.

We will see how these ideas transpire or are subverted in two texts: a widely known early twentieth-century novella, *Der Tod in Venedig,* and a lesser known one, *Schwere Stunde*. These texts contain a maelstrom of important issues raised in this turn of the century, with the topic of the achievement culture, disease, decadence, or even homosexuality having been explored by numerous critics in the past. My interest is particularly aimed at questioning the constructs and transgression of boundaries between work and leisure, social obligation and individual pleasure, health and disease, masculinity and femininity. Shifting from the containment within an ascetic, protestant work ethos to a sudden 'Reiselust' and transgression of this containment, Thomas Mann weaves a narrative on metaphors of containment, threshold crossing, and liminality. The exhausted body of the artist in *Der Tod in Venedig* and *Schwere Stunde* becomes a site of tension, contestation, and subversion of certain cultural norms and habits of behaviour. In grappling with the question of boundary crossing and liminality, this chapter will bring forth another understanding of the experience of exhaustion and its causes.

The Exhausted 'Leistungsethiker': The Rigid Borders of the Protestant Work Ethic

The same rigid life and work ethos as seen in Thomas Mann's letters features prominently in his fictional works. His earlier novellas offer telling insights into the interiority of sons of businessmen or administrative officers – in other words, 'brain workers'. He portrays them as 'Leistungsethiker', as men subscribing to a disciplined, ascetic, and, as shown below, Protestant work ethic. The type of rational, performance ethicist whom Gustav von Aschenbach in *Der Tod in Venedig* embodies can be linked to *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904–05) by the sociologist plus neurasthenic Max Weber (1864–1920) (see Weber 1920; also, Weiller 1994; Doms 2008; Martynkewics 2013: 149–153). Thomas Mann refers explicitly to Weber's thesis when he claims to have anticipated this in his early novel, *Buddenbrooks*, in which the puritanical-ascetic ethos

and spirit of capitalism are closely intertwined (Mann 1984: 145). The Protestant ethos was a way of living founded on discipline, piety, frugality, devotion to work, and deferred satisfaction and amusement. According to Weber, the rational ascetic concepts realised in Calvinist-Puritan Protestantism, which included monastic asceticism, self-control, and the 'Systematisierung der ethischen Lebensführung', had given birth to capitalism and turned into inner-worldly principles that became particularly decisive in everyday professional life and even extended to the construction of masculinity (quoted in Weber 1920: 111, 123; see also Doms 2008: 109; Holton 1985: 104; Goldman 1988: 19). As noted in Part One about the ideal body image developed around the Greek statues, the stereotypical images of masculinity were formed in connection with Protestantism and Pietism with control over passions, moderation, sexual and spiritual purity becoming integral parts of the ideal image of the man. Asceticism, as a secularised protestant precept emerging in a capitalist society, was perceived necessary by Weber for the welfare and equilibrium of the individual and society.

It is important to note that Max Weber played a special role among the many exhausted of the fin de siècle. By way of his own life crisis and neurasthenic condition diagnosed by the psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, Weber became sensitised to a certain work ethos (see Radkau 2005). He began to be interested in the mechanisms and moral foundations of labour and the performance society. Work was not just constructed as an ascetic means; it was an end in itself. Modern man had become dominated by this idea: in order to be recognised, all activity had to take on the character of work. Initially, Weber had interpreted his bodily and mental suffering as overwork and nervous overstrain. Now, the struggle against the weakness of his body had turned into one of the basic concepts of his sociology. In his theoretical analysis of the Protestant ethos, Weber lists 'Konkurrenzkampf' (1920: 52) and 'ökonomischen Daseinskampf' (56) as the pillars of modern society and progress and the new religious precepts since Nietzsche had proclaimed the death of God. Weber repudiated frivolity, idleness, and relaxation (see Martynkewisz 2013: 145f). rather, one needed to endure hardship and suffering in life to attain salvation. The sociologist came to believe in the benefits of restless activity to avert the decline of his body. In a letter to Marianne Weber from 1894, it is said: '[Die Depression] ist nicht eingetreten, aber ich glaube, weil ich das Nervensystem und das Gehirn durch anhaltendes Arbeiten nicht zur Ruhe kommen ließ. Deshalb u. a. auch […] lasse ich so sehr ungern eine wirkliche Pause in der Arbeit eintreten' (Radkau 2005: 214).

The restless work ethos was not just a preventative method to not succumb to mental illness. It was also a calling in life. Weber's thesis of the linkage between Protestantism and capitalism is effectively articulated around the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. Taking on the role of a priest of the capitalist religion, Weber preaches: 'Arbeite hart in deinem *Beruf*. […] [D]ie Arbeit ist darüber hinaus, und vor allem, von Gott vorgeschriebener Selbstzweck des Lebens überhaupt' (1920: 171, emphasis added). All work was a 'calling' and thus sanctified. Capital accumulation, saving, restraint on consumption was seen as a way to measure one's success in life. Von den Brink (2014: 221) and Graafland (2014: 178) note that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination conceives that a disciplined life is a 'sign of one's being among the elect', worthy of eternal salvation. In the face of this shallow, degenerating, and sceptic epoch, the importance of order, structure, discipline, and faith into the new religion that was work and productivity contributed to the individual's meaning and maintained an 'inner certainty of faith' – a sort of 'secular vocation' (see Ferguson 2000: 156).

All aspects of life had to be subordinated to working life, governed by the idea of 'Berufspflicht' and 'rationale Askese' (Weber 1920: 176). As ascetism and predestination constituted the founding pillars of the spirit of capitalism, Weber suggests that enjoyment of any kind, it being idleness, inactivity, or even excessive sleep, were a waste of time, the latter being 'die erste und prinzipiell schwerste aller Sünde' (167). The individual and its impulsive drives and desires were to be blamed, not modern society. Weber's sociology of the rationalisation of desire is based on the argument that the whole of life was becoming increasingly subjected to scientific management, bureaucratic control, discipline, and regulation (see O'Neill 1986: 43–46). His account of capitalism is one in which desire is denied in the interests of accumulation. Falling under the imperative of wisely managing one's energy reserves, desire was but an impulse futilely to waste nervous energy. This neatly tallies with the medical discourse at that time proclaiming the importance of abstinence and restraint, the control of passions, fasting and regularity to maintain a normative level of health for the body. The aim was to maximise time and space by way of efficiency. Thus, desire needed to be rationalised, men needed to be governed by reason and discipline through his work to fight the threat of degeneration, deviancy, and pleasure looming over civilisation.

With this in mind, the Protestant performance ethos constitutes the central point at which the theories and works of Thomas Mann and Max Weber intersect. As already theorised in depth by Harvey Goldman (1988)

and briefly by Tim Sparenberg (2013), Thomas Mann has given the type of 'performance ethicist' many faces in his work. One of the clearest protagonists of this type is Gustav von Aschenbach in the story *Der Tod in Venedig*, which was written in 1911/1912. This is how the author of *Der Tod in Venedig* describes the conditions in which the novella came about:

> Ich schuf mir einen modernen Helden, einen Helden des zarten Typus, den ich in früheren Werken schon sympathievoll gestaltet hatte, einen Bruder Thomas Buddenbrooks […], einen *Helden der Schwäche* also, der am Rande der Erschöpfung arbeite und sich das Äußerste abgewinnt, kurz: einen Helden vom Schlage das von mir selbst so getauften 'Leistungsethiker'. (Mann 1974: 84)

Gustav von Aschenbach constitutes an essential case study of the 'Leistungsethiker'. He is a moralist driven by achievement and effort, elevated by discipline and self-restraint. Mirroring his creator, Aschenbach is presented as an ageing artist who has built his artistic world and reputation upon the moral imperative of 'Durchhalten' – an inner will power which has maintained his endurance to work despite feeling exhausted (Mann 2017: 21).

Aschenbach's inherited qualities from his father – his ancestors were officers, judges, administrators and protestant preachers (19) – and his youthful socialisation, which forbade any idleness, have led him to internalise a dutiful lifestyle, an ethos of self-controlled tenacity to ward off any mental and physical distraction. The historian George L. Mosse describes in his work on the image of the modern man how the construction of modern masculinity, founded on the values of reason, work, duty, honour, and family, constituted the foundation upon which bourgeois society had built its self-image (see Mosse 1996: 102). Aschenbach's aim to follow these precepts inherited from his father clash with his mother's side of the family and their artistic free-spiritedness. His maternal side is symbolic of an antagonistic inner drive, mainly, the drive for an artistic, sensible, and passionate experience of the world. Aschenbach's attempt to stick to his work ethic involves the intent to continue the lineage of his male ancestors.

Like his predecessors, Aschenbach embodies the qualities of the soldier. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Initially, his work ethic corresponds to his rational mindset and is described in the text with words and phrases such as 'eine höchste Behutsamkeit, Umsicht, Eindringlichkeit und Genauigkeit des Willens' (Mann 2017: 49), 'Verpflichtung zur Produktion', 'Vernunft', 'Selbstzucht'

(15),‘eines starren, kalten, leidenschaftlichen Dienstes’, ‘seinem zähen und stolzen, so oft erprobten Willen’, ‘geduldige Pflege’ (16) ‘das Gefühl gezügelt und erkältet’, ‘geknechtete Empfindung’ (17), ‘Fleiß’ (18). He is, as Benita von Consbruch notes, bound by a ‘Wille zum Schweren’, which is an ascetic self-commitment to the ethos of achievement, a forced productivity, constant creation regardless of physical and psychological obstacles (see Consbruch 2010: 117–118). The writer’s existence relies on pain, suffering, and strict discipline. He assumes that ‘alles Grosse, was dastehe, als ein Trotzdem dastehe, trotz Kummer und Qual, Armut, Verlassenheit, Körperschwäche, Laster, Leidenschaft und tausend Hemmnissen’ (Mann 2017: 23). The narrator’s decision to reference to pain, loss, and restriction manifestly codes the dedication to form and discipline in a negative way. With this ‘Trotzdem’, Aschenbach is presented by the narrator as someone in tension with his own self.

With these qualities, Aschenbach epitomises what the narrator coins ‘Sebastiangestalt’, which incarnates ‘elegante Selbstbeherrschung bis zur inneren Unterhöhlung’ (14). Thomas Mann was inspired by this early Christian saint and martyr, Saint Sebastian, who was notably portrayed in Renaissance paintings with spears and swords piercing his body yet showing self-mastery amidst agonising pain (see Shookman 2003: 55). Everything great stands as an act of ‘Durchhalten’, withstanding pain and battling a worn-out body. This is a direct reference to the author’s own motto of ‘Heroismus der Schwäche’. Yet, for Aschenbach the question arises of the cost of this constraining way of life. Aschenbach’s roving restlessness – driven by an iron will working on bending the body, disciplining it, and suppressing its feelings – has transformed his body into an overworked and consequently weakened machine. The now ageing artist has come to embody his family name, which can be translated as ‘stream or brook of ashes’. It alludes to his burned-out body, and perhaps to his death-bound journey.

As observed by several critics, a conception of the body as a mechanical machine is explicitly established at the beginning of the narrative when Aschenbach’s body is referred to as a ‘Triebwerk’, an engine stimulated by the ‘motus animi continuus’– which can be translated as the constant movement of the mind and conceptualised as a force or vibration of the spirit dictating the body’s rhythm and its impulses (Mann 2017: 9) (see Reed 1994: 128; Sparenberg 2013: 118–119). Thomas Mann draws primarily on nerve imagery in his description of Aschenbach’s overstimulated nerves with the use of the word ‘überreizt’, which clearly echoing the mechanic-physical medical discourse of this time. Aschenbach’s energies are on the wane and unable to keep up with the high-intensity rhythm of the ‘Fortschwingen des produzierenden Triebwerks in seinem Innern’ (Mann

2017: 9). His body as an engine is subjected to strong draughts of energy. The strenuousness of the effort required to maintain his energy levels for this ascetic world of his has exhausted his body – but also his mind. Aschenbach no longer has the capacity to uphold this effort and maintain his concentration. His restraint and self-control over his emotions, his ethos of over-work and tendency to push his limits have transformed him into an artist lacking in vitality. He cannot even find rest and unburden himself from the pressure in his routinely scheduled 'entlastenden Schlummer' and walks in the fresh air (9).

In other words, this character is clearly presented as a case of neurasthenia, who constantly works with a low energy quantity and with the threat of a dried-up reservoir. In his great intellectual and artistic feats, there is a constant risk of his body exceeding his energetic boundaries and burning out. What has kept him from crossing this boundary is prudent management: a strict discipline of his will, maintaining sexual and emotional restrain while eliminating unproductive, idle, empty, and wasted time. All that has kept him in a state of economy of low energy and 'on the edge of exhaustion'.

> Gustav Aschenbach war der Dichter, all derer, die *am Rande der Erschöpfung* arbeiten, der Überbürdeten, schon Aufgeriebenen, sich noch Aufrechthaltenden, all dieser Moralisten der Leistung, die, schmächtig von Wuchs und spröde von Mitteln, durch Willensverzückung und kluge Verwaltung sich wenigstens eine Zeitlang die Wirkungen der Größe abgewinnen. (25, emphasis added)

The narrator draws the portrait of an artist acting like an administrator of his own creativity, or rather, his productivity – who is constantly on the verge of exhaustion and faces daily renewed struggles with his tenacious, proud, and so often tried will. The managerial-economic discourse used here tightens the boundaries of the body and constrains the self.

Nevertheless, Thomas Mann's fictional texts encapsulate some conflicting reactions, beliefs, or feelings towards the work ethic. The lesser-known novella *Schwere Stunde* (1905) seems to put into question the Protestant work ethic and opens the debate on the notion of work norms and the conditions of artistic production. *Schwere Stunde* is the story of a writer fighting an overwhelming feeling of writer's block and struggling to complete his work. It fictionalises the emblematic German Sturm-und-Drang writer Friedrich von Schiller and, through an extended inner monologue, his fight with his own self and the writing process of his *Wallenstein*

trilogy during a said ‘difficult hour’. The scene is set at night in Schiller’s study room in the city of Jena. Like the other transparently autobiographical portraits of the artist in *Der Tod in Venedig*, this story is a description of a moment of crisis experienced by the author. In this work, Thomas Mann emphatically puts in tension the relationship of the individual to work and the workspace with the inclusion of the nocuous effects of spatial and temporal restrictions and of an ascetic self-commitment to the ethos of achievement.

The poetic of exhaustion created by Thomas Mann bears two facets: it is a struggle with the limits of the body, of space and time, and with society’s normative structures. First of all, the protagonist is described as an artist on the edge of exhaustion. This is simultaneously shown by way of the fuel in the stove being almost completely consumed. The ceramic tiles covering the stove are getting cold as is getting the air in the study. Like the fuel in the room’s stove on the brink of exhaustion, Schiller has exceeded himself and gradually exhausted his energetic capacity to work. His narrative intersects medical insights and metaphorical connotations of ‘Kraft’ and exhaustion with a cultural context and the topic of artistic creativity. The connection to the late nineteenth-century medical/neurological discourses of ‘Nervkraft’ and overdraw and expenditure of vital resources is apparent. In Schiller’s case, consumption has exceeded production. He has continuously worked and overworked himself, crossing the border of normal fatigue into exhaustion: ‘Er hatte gesündigt, sich versündigt gegen sich selbst in all den Jahren, gegen das zarte Instrument seines Körpers’ (Mann 2000: 117). What he implicates are those youthful excesses having strained his body, the sleepless nights and the uninterrupted days spent in a closed, suffocating space, which he now comes to realise: ‘das rächte, rächte sich jetzt!’ (117).

Regardless of his critical state, he remains confined within a – physically and conceptually – rigid and restraining spatial, temporal, and moral frameworks. There is an aspect of temporal urgency, which does not allow him to rest. He is timed by the threat of not finishing his work. And the self-inflicted time constraint of one hour renders the execution of the tasks more arduous and enhances the mental workload and propensity to succumb to overwork and exhaustion. Coupled with the time pressure is also the cursed confinement in his study room. Prior to this moment he was already locked in ‘einer Woche der Finsternis und der Lähmung’ (117). The work environment is described as suffocating and oppressive with its ‘tabakrauchiger Stubenluft, übergeistig und des Leibes uneingedenk’ (117). His devotion to self-discipline, the need to surpass himself and to resist his exhaustion paradoxically degrades the quality of his artistic production. His work is described as weighing on

him. Schiller judges his work: ‘Eine Niederlage. Ein verfehltes Unternehmen. Bankerott’ (116). His *Wallenstein* is even personified as an exhausted being: ‘Es schleppte sich, es stockte, es stand – schon wieder, schon wieder!’ (115). Like the stove and Schiller’s body, the work itself is losing in substance and becoming dull. Following an energetic-economic logic, he sees no equivalence between the invested power and the resulting work, which has turned out to be a motionless, ‘ein trockenes und schwungloses Kolleg’ (116). What is being problematised is the fat that the more his work seems to lose in substance and remain far from being completed, the more the protagonist imposes a restrictive mentality on his creative process.

Not only does Schiller’s creation suffer from the consequences of his work habits and conditions, the form of the text comes to reflect the writer’s growing difficulty. The performativity of the text becomes a sign of Schiller’s exhaustion, as it loses structure and unity. As the end of the hour approaches, the character’s thoughts reported by the narrator become vaguer, abruptly jump from one idea to another, and gradually disintegrate into elliptical sentences. The mechanism of leaving gaps after short exclamations after one or more words or mid-sentences enact the effects of a suffocating and oppressing spatial and temporal confinement. The breaks in the text are moments of elapse of an exhausted mind losing focus, unable to complete his task and his sentences. Schiller is both restricted in his aptitude to speak, think, and create. The repetition of ellipses and cut sentences testify to the discontinuity of things, and takes us to the heart of the character’s painful struggle against the limits of his body, his own self, his environment, and capitalistic imperatives of regulated spending, saving, accounting, and discipline. The fractured sentences contribute to poeticise the experience of the character’s exhaustion, at the same time as to convey the impression of not being able to succeed, to move forward, to finish his work.

Despite all these constraining imperatives, Schiller tenaciously holds onto his dictate of achievement and productivity. Only the idealistic, ascetic will to work allows the writer to overcome physical sufferings and artistic worries and doubts and to bring his work to perfection. As an adherent to the doctrine, he follows its demand of bleak discipline. Schiller shows well that this approach is his moral compass and conferring him meaning in life.: ‘Nicht klagen! Nicht prahlen! […] Und wenn nicht ein Tag in der Woche, nicht eine Stunde von Leiden frei war – was weiter? Die Lasten und Leistungen, die Anforderungen, Beschwerden, Strapazen gering achten, klein sehen, das war’s, was groß machte!’ (119). Similarly, he proclaims to himself to the end of the difficult hour:

'Nicht grübeln: Arbeiten! Begrenzen, ausschalten, gestalten, fertig werden…' (122). The words are repeated in a way reflecting a will or mental exercise to imprint tenacity and the drive to work hard on his mind.

With this mindset, he fits into the prototype, who has internalised the conceptually defined, rigid, and essential norms of a performance-oriented society. The regularity of his behaviour proves to be his discipline. He asserts his normalcy by demarcating his way of working from that of the careless, free-floating, boundless dilettante. In contrast to the dilettante's habits of quick and instant satisfaction, he proclaims he has done things in pain yet in order. His moral code reflects Weber's calling of secular capitalism and the struggle and pain to attain one's salvation.

> Und wenn das dort, das unselige Werk, ihn leiden machte, war es nicht in der Ordnung so und fast schon ein gutes Zeichen? Es hatte noch niemals gesprudelt, und sein Misstrauen würde erst eigentlich beginnen, wenn es das täte. Nur bei Stümpern und Dilettanten sprudelt es, bei den Schnellzufriedenenen und Unwissenden, die nicht unter dem Druck und der Zucht des Talentes lebten. (118)

With the word 'ebullient', entailing something that is effervescent, overflowing, and difficult to contain, Schiller marginalises and condemns dilettantism as a perpetual excess, a lack of order and containment. This conception of dilettantism falls in line with Bourget's view about the lack of structure, moral compass, and fixed views. The influence of Bourget's description of dilettantism in Thomas Mann's work has been made evident by several scholars (see Wieler 1996; Stoupy 1996; Hibbitt 2006: 157–163; Alessiato 2017). And his conception of the dilettante can be read as being influenced by Heinrich Mann's quintessential dilettante in *Haltlos* (1890) embodying uncertainty and rootlessness (or 'Wurzellosigkeit'). One can sense the character's anguish to fall into the other category, as he tries to convince himself that his experience of pressure and pain is a good sign and an acceptable behavioural standard. His set of values and norms is contrastingly normalised – 'in der Ordnung' – and demarcated from that of the deviant dilettante.

In *Schwere Stunde*, Thomas Mann weaves a narrative on the struggles with the borders imposed on oneself and imposed by a normalised work ethos. The context is structured by two self-limiting variables: one enclosed study room and one hour to complete his work. The spatiotemporal narrative framework mirrors the work ethic and responds to a society in demand for structure, form and discipline, and a medical discourse of

categorisation and differentiation between the normal and the pathological. Artistic creation is transformed into industrial work, standardised and timely rhythmed. Yet, as much as Thomas Mann and his characters are bound to this work ethic, the ambivalence lies in the blurred boundaries between the normal and the pathological. His novella subtly straddles the boundary between the pathologisation of the individual and that of the system. The individual, subjective experience of Schiller is tied to a widely disseminated work ethic, the latter being depicted as pathogenic as Schiller struggles with the possibility to complete his work as a devoted adherent. In that sense, Schiller's example also demonstrates that merely having the faculty of conscious and particularly of deliberate action to work is insufficient as the body is unable to keep up.

Even if Thomas Mann's novella ultimately does justice to the capitalist production imperative insofar as in the end the protagonist can present a finished product in which the invested force is at least partially reflected, it still remains questionable whether this makes Schiller a suitable role model for Thomas Mann. So, is the story really legible as a justification for a healthy, established bourgeois attitude towards work by Schiller and thus also by Thomas Mann in passing? Schiller's assertions are undoubtedly permeated with uncertainties. The story shows that Schiller's stance is and will remain unstable at its core, that in the medium term the *Wallenstein* product will necessarily be bought at the price of the artist's exhaustion. Seen in this way, the story focuses on the repressed downside and can be read as the disclosure of a capitalist production imperative that actually leaves the individual with only one way out: pushing further the borders of exhaustion through self-discipline for the sake of performance.

On the detrimental effects of abstinence and restraint, Thomas Mann's novella resonates with another eminent theorist put forward ground-breaking observations. Early in twentieth century, Sigmund Freud exerted considerable influence in the psychopathological field and was also known by intellectuals and writers. Later, Thomas Mann admittedly states: 'Was mich betrifft, so ist mindestens eine meiner Arbeiten, die Novelle *Der Tod in Venedig*, unter dem unmittelbaren Einfluss von Freud entstanden ist. Ich hätte ohne Freud niemals daran gedacht, dieses erotische Motiv zu behandeln, oder hatte es gewiss anders gestaltet' (Mann 1962: 150). In Freud's view, modern culture was generally built on the suppression of instincts. The dark side of abstinence, restraint, control, regularity came to be embodied in neuroses, also known as mental disturbances. In 'Die "kulturelle" Sexualmoral und die moderne Nervosität' (1908), published prior to *Der Tod in Venedig*, Freud tackles the

question of neurosis (one being neurasthenia) and sexual morality. In his text, he revisits previous reflections by Wilhelm Erb, Leon Binswanger and Richard von Krafft-Ebing by diving deeper into the harmful effects of suppressing the sexual life of the civilised peoples by a forceful 'cultural' sexual morality (1908: 143–146).

Contrary to Krafft-Ebing's beliefs, Freud argues in his explanatory theory of psychoneuroses that the diseases of individuals were caused exogenously, by dysfunctional social processes and more specifically by an overly repressive sexual morality. Freud contends that any society, to perpetuate itself, has established a social order repressing drives and dedicated to work and reproduction. The needs of the individual have been sacrificed in a way for the needs of the whole (1908: 161). To fulfil its function, this order had to properly channel the sexual energies of individuals. On the one hand, part of the libido energies has to be directed directly towards sexual activity, therefore towards reproduction. On the other hand, via sublimation, which constitutes the capacity to exchange the sexual goal of the drive for another goal, a sufficient part of the sexual drive energy has to be channelled towards the activities necessary for production. 'Sublimated drives', as Freud calls them, feed civilisation with energy. But Freud argues that this economy of drive energies comes at a significant price to the individual (see Schaffner 2016: 151–152). Repression and sublimation of sexual energy cause a plethora of neuroses, which put a strain on the individual's capacities to live healthily and to work, and thus ultimately also hinder the proper functioning of society. In his early works, Freud then perceives the neuroses, amongst them neurasthenia, as social illnesses caused by sexually repressive social norms.

Following a Freudian logic, repression and sublimation can be seen as major causes of Aschenbach's and Schiller's exhaustion. Both discipline their bodies and submit them to long hours of strenuous work. Also, Aschenbach follows the prominent hygienist and disciplining measures at that time, as he pours cold water over his body every morning: 'Mit vierzig, mit fünfzig Jahren wie schon in einem Alter, wo Andere verschwenden, schwärmen, die Ausführung großer Pläne getrost verschieben, begann er seinen Tag beizeiten mit Stürzen kalten Wasser über Brust und Rücken' (Mann 2017: 22). However, as much as this submission to rituals and principles worthy of a contemporary hero, work dedication, devotion to a Protestant ethos typified by the narrator as 'adelige Reinheit, Einfachheit und Ebenmässigkeit' (27) render Aschenbach a morally superior being and a valuable producing actor within society, his journey to Venice triggers inner conflicts and the desire to disrupt his set boundaries.

Into the Realm of Liminality, Transgression, and Death in Venice

The story of Aschenbach takes an abrupt turn from his strict holding onto 'form'. The performance attitude, which remains the only alternative in the Schiller case, is visibly called into question in *Der Tod in Venedig* novella. The omniscient narratorial voice describes Gustav von Aschenbach's stay in Venice as a 'träumerische Entfremdung' (Mann 2017: 35), which pulls him into unprecedented adventures. His voyage triggers a threshold moment, a transformative process, or one might add, a transgression of the boundaries of his previous reasonable principles. This brings us to explore whether the journey will end with a rebirth and the establishment of new structures of identity or whether it will end with a disintegration of the self-structure. This setting auspicious to the dissolution of order becomes a terrain of ambiguity. The whole narrative turns into a story of uncertainty, in-betweenness, blurriness, for it lacks a clear determination as to whether the artist should in the end strive for discipline and order or passion and chaos.

The narrator describes how Aschenbach slowly loses control in his study room in Munich and is overcome with uncertainty and moments of agitated introspection. This threat is alluded in these concentrated phrases: 'zunehmender Abnutzbarkeit seiner Kräfte' (9), 'eine Art schweifende Unruhe', 'ein jugendlich durstiges Verlangen in die Ferne, ein Gefühl, so lebhaft, so neu oder doch so längst entwöhnt und verlernt', 'Begierde' (13), 'Zerstreuung' (15), 'Gedanke einer Weltbummelei [...] schien allzu locker und planwidrig' (15–16), 'Sehnsucht ins Ferne und Neue', 'Begierde nach Befreiung, Entbürdung und Vergessen', 'wachsenden Müdigkeit', 'lebhaft ausbrechendes Bedürfnis', 'Skrupel der Unlust' (16), and 'Freude der genießende Welt' (17). These terms belong to a semantic field that appears diametrically opposed to Aschenbach's world of work. The feeling words 'Verlangen', 'Begierde', and 'Sehnsucht' underline Aschenbach's emerging inner impulses of desire and transgression. The narrator chooses to interpret Aschenbach's inner impulses in a positive light as a need for liberation and a youthful desire. The reader already gets a sense that the narrator does not radically condemn Aschenbach's sudden drive for passion and transgression.

At the same time there remains a certain ambiguity. The ambivalence of the narrator's voice feeding into the narrative's blurriness has been duly noted by Dorrit Cohn in her analysis of *Der Tod in Venedig* as she

pinpoints the ‘increasing distance’ taking place between the narrator and the protagonist (2000: 133f). The narrator punctuates the narrative with fragments of self-questions ambiguously addressed to Aschenbach or the reader, as in ‘[w]ar diese Kündigung nicht überstürzt und irrtümlich, die Handlung eines kranken und unmassgeblichen Zustandes gewesen?’ and ‘[j]edoch war es zu spät?’ (Mann 2017: 69; 89). These instances prove that Aschenbach’s actions are not indisputable. With his pursuit of ‘Chaos’ (124) and ‘de[r] Weisungen des Daemons’ (102), the narrator’s description of Aschenbach also gradually sink into disregard with the placement of generic names: ‘der Reisende’ (44), ‘der Betrachtende’ (82), ‘der Einsame’ (113), ‘der Heimgesuchte’ (137), ‘der Schauende’ (139). The renunciation of Aschenbach’s name and the use of those epithets show a detachment on the narrator’s part. The reader is no longer privy to Aschenbach’s struggle; he is instead presented through the prism of the narrator’s critical judgment. With its paradoxical tendencies, it can be suggested that the narrative represents an experiment, an attempt to test the borders and their edges. The narrative neither fully condemns nor approves Aschenbach’s actions and thoughts. In that sense, Thomas Mann explores the motif and the transgression of the boundaries between normative structures and individual desires, along with the tensions between them.

Being on the threshold moderately opens up new perspectives. Where Aschenbach’s exhaustion in Munich was caused by labouring at the edge of exhaustion and repressing his desires and emotions, his body enters into an equally exhausting liminal and transformative stage upon his arrival in Venice. His body as a model of social and moral order slowly disintegrates with his voyage. He travels from Munich – a place of rigidity, asceticism, tenacity, an environment excluding change, irregularity, and chaos – to Venice, a place of fluidity, dissolution, and transgression. In the German cultural imagination, the city of Venice signified ‘the erotic, the exotic, and the forbidden’ or even ‘the dream-land of the German soul’ (see Koelb 2004: 97; Shookman 2003: 203). The image of the silent, floating gondola, rowing slowly and effortlessly, stand in stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of a big city like Munich and the pollution and noise permeating its streets. Added to the increased heat and humidity penetrating the disorienting, mazy streets characteristic of the Venetian city was the myth of depravity and dissolution. In the literary realm, Venice and its illusory dreamy landscape was often fictionally linked with moral corruption, chaos, and danger. The intention of these literary accounts was also to warn the

German reader against this foreign city and illuminate the mortal threat of 'letting go' of self-control and permitting indulgence in all kinds of pleasures (see Ritter 1992: 90).

Thomas Mann engages with the myths surrounding the city of Venice; yet in this representation, Venice is rendered a space for escape from the pressures and containment of German society. Aschenbach does not find himself marginalised or excluded from, what Victor Turner formulates in his theory on liminal processes as, 'earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions' (Turner 1967: 47). And, Aschenbach has neither yet experienced, what Helmut Koopmann coins (1977), a process of 'Entgrenzung'. This thesis rather argues that Aschenbach finds himself in a liminal state and space allowing for new possibilities and the establishment of a new cohesive self. Venice, as a city afloat in the Adriatic, ultimately embodies and externalises his experience of liminality, precisely his two-fold experience of release or 'letting go' and of unsettling loss of control. At first, the journey by water and his stay in a city surrounded by canals and the sea turns into a threshold experience, a progression from one stage to another. Already on the boat, Aschenbach experiences a floating sensation. The water around him gradually disburdens him of all the nervousness, which has tensed and exhausted his body back in Munich. We can see here the contrast with the purpose of cold-water showers at the beginning of the narrative, which constituted at that time a popular therapeutic practice. This health practice reinforces his submission to an ascetic, disciplined, and restraining lifestyle. Water takes in Venice on renewed importance, signifying a drive towards release, transgression, and rebirth. The effect of water on his body, the sight of it widens his 'inward barriers', appeals to all kinds of unconstrained pleasures, sensuous and sexual experiences.

Yet, on the other hand, the space is unsettling and irritating the protagonist. The emphasis on the muggy and hazy atmosphere mirrors the character's own liminal mental state. The presence of vapours and fluids permeating the city and the protagonist's body stress the porosity of internal-external boundaries, as well as Aschenbach's imminent transcendence of his boundaries.

> Eine widerliche Schwüle lag in den Gassen; die Luft war so dick, dass die Gerüche, die aus Wohnungen, Läden, Garküchen quollen, Öldunst, Wolken von Parfum und viele andere in Schwaden standen, ohne sich zu zerstreuen. Zigarettenrauch hing an seinem Orte und entwich nur langsam. […] Je länger er ging, desto quälender bemächtigte sich seiner der abscheuliche Zustand, den die Seeluft zusammen mit dem Scirocco hervorbringen kann, und der zugleich *Erregung* und *Erschlaffung* ist. Peinlicher Schweiß brach

> ihm aus. Die Augen versagten den Dienst, die Brust war beklommen, er fieberte, das Blut pochte im Kopf. (Mann 2017: 67, emphasis added)

These liquids and gases, evaporating from the city's body excite and wear out Aschenbach's body. The environment, this 'elysisiche Land, an die Grenzen der Erde' and change of air does not cure Aschenbach's state (79). It rather excites and wears him out even more. The need to adapt to a new extreme antithetical to his previous lifestyle further pushes his state into one of decline. Here again, the use of 'Grenze' refers to an imminent overflow and the impending fall of Aschenbach. At first, Aschenbach resists this need to change, to adapt, to recalibrate to this new environment, as he anxiously hesitates on several occasions to return to his country, within the confinement of his home (55, 72–73). His stay in Venice is further justified by his reoccurring attraction to the sea, which metaphorically embodies his 'Hang zum Ungegliederten, Masslosen, Ewigen, zum Nichts' (59–60). Aschenbach's body becomes permeable to the humidity, the scene of excesses, the boundaries between the external and internal becomes more porous.

In addition to the transgression of physical borders with his voyage to Venice, Aschenbach transgresses conceptual borders: his penchant for form, his containment within a Protestant work ethos, and the repression of his desires. In this liminal state he experiences in Venice, he undergoes an identity crisis and begins to change increasingly, not only internally but externally as well. He transgresses all social boundaries – especially the codes of masculinity. His appearance, his 'Uniform der Gesittung', his compliance to the masculine construct of Wilhelmine society, soon collapses and degenerates into travesty (49). He makes use of the possibilities that cosmetics and wardrobes offer him to look younger to an extreme defying societal standards of normality and even health (130). His decadent masquerade signals the complete deconstruction of the former image of the artist, admirer of Greek antiquity and author of moral writings. He even turns away from physical stereotypes He transforms into an individual on the border of gendered identities with both a masculine and feminine disposition, pushing against the visual stereotype of the natural, disciplined, controlled or stable man.

Whereas the medical discourses, particularly held by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, categorised and stigmatised such 'effeminate' behaviour as deviant and pathological, Aschenbach's occupation of a space in-between can be conceived as marking a path to a potentially transformative way of being. Aschenbach leaves the

language of work and finds a new discursive language of transgression, enjoyment, and liberation. In that aspect, Aschenbach distances himself from the ascetic Schiller-figure, who rigidly sticks to a 'Sehnsucht nach Form, Gestalt, Begrenzung' (Mann 2005: 120). The language of transgression, boundlessness, and intoxication evokes Nietzsche's conception of the Dionysian. Several studies of Thomas Mann's novella have treated the Nietzschean idea of the Apollonian and Dionysian, and some have argued that the narrative captures the dilemma between the Apollonian and Dionysian drives (see, for instance, Evans 1986: 105).

In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872), Nietzsche portrays both impulses as antagonistic. The Apollonian concept derives from Apollo, the Greek god of light and the dream world, who rules over the realm of consciousness and is strongly connected to the idea of individuation. Whereas structure and boundaries mark the Apollonian, Nietzsche's keyword for the Dionysian is 'Rausch': intoxication, ecstasy, a standing outside of oneself, out of everyday consciousness (1872: 1–2). In Nietzsche's understanding, the Dionysian state with its 'Vernichtung der gewöhnlichen Schranken und Grenzen des Daseins' embodies a flow of unrestrained energy – which knows no discipline, nor boundaries (35). The Dionysian experience being by definition 'intoxication' and 'formlessness' can be argued to be central to the liminal in its expression of disruption, alienation, chaos, and boundlessness (see Broadhurst 1999: 31–32). Despite their antagonistic aspects, both forces join in a coherent unity: Nietzsche stresses their co-dependent relationship and the need for balance.

As noted by past critics, *Der Tod in Venedig* examines the precarious balance between two forces: between consciousness, clarity, and control, and unconsciousness, sensuous pleasure, and transgression (Evans 1986: 102–115; Mundt 2004: 93). In Aschenbach's case, as Ritchie Robertson makes clear, 'the balance between art and desire soon tips towards physical passion' (2002: 104). The dream sequence towards the end epitomises his fall into the realm of Dionysian intoxication, ecstasy, strangeness, dissolution of boundaries and form. There follows a one-and-a-half-page description of a euphoric, rowdy herd of people and animals, dancing and forming a wallowing mass (Mann 2017: 125). In his dream, Aschenbach experiences the physical detachment from cultural schemata of control and moderation. And as Venice, too, sinks into a deadly epidemic of cholera, as law and order both collapse in Aschenbach's self and the environment around him, new 'dim, unformulated, but exciting possibilities' are opened (see Robertson 2002: 95–106).

However, at what cost? To alleviate his primal exhaustion, he progresses from one stage of initiation to another through his numerous transgressive experiences in Venice: his feverish pursuit of Tadzio, his Dionysian dreams, his inescapable stay in a murky, diseased city. Standing 'an [der] Grenze der Erde' (79), he becomes drawn to the abyss, death, nothingness: 'Was galt ihm noch Kunst und Tugend gegenüber den Vorteilen der Chaos?' (124). Aschenbach longs for something beyond the boundaries of his past self, beyond his 'Leistungsethik' and his devotion to a heroism of weakness. Like many protagonists in Thomas Mann's work, Aschenbach tests these limits, attempts to transcend them, but loses himself in an extreme: the Dionysian impulse. From being in a liminal state, the ageing artist slips over the edge of the border and succumbs to cholera in Venice. Aschenbach perishes because of the failure of his Apollonian self-control, as he has far exceeded the limits of his self: physiologically straining his energy reservoir, psychologically through his dream vision, and ethically by not warning Tadzio's family of the cholera epidemy having infiltrated the city (123–124).

As a suffering case in point of the decline and exhaustion of the German people, Thomas Mann also seems to issue a 'Zeitkritik' of the society of this turn-of-the-century period, particularly of a system operating on efficiency, production, accumulation, profit, and turning individuals into alienated and contained bodies disconnected from their needs and programmed to be productive. Exhaustion becomes one of the symptoms of a body revolting against imperatives of restraint and tenacity. Thomas Mann therefore appears to partially criticise the Protestant work ethic, idealised by Aschenbach and other moralists of achievement like Schiller. His creative capacities are impeded by a taxing body management and prudery disregarding the self's needs, desires, and impulses. Exhaustion is no longer a simple loss of energy in the body, or overly sensitive and strained nerves. It is also a psychological incursion, a feeling of disorder, a feeling of impossibility to go beyond.

In essence, Thomas Mann seems to explore a certain dilemma in his work he also seemed to grapple with. In *Schwere Stunde*, what fuels productivity is the artist's resistance to exhaustion by way of sufficient will power to transcend his worn-out body. Yet, *Der Tod in Venedig* explores the possibilities but also consequences of letting go of these inward barriers. Then, does the act of transgressing one's set of socially constructed borders constitute an act of liberation, or an outbreak prompting further physical and mental decline? His initial impossibility as a writer to create in the confinement of his room is then counterbalanced by a feeling of boundlessness, a release of repressed emotions, leaving him lost in an abyss. Aschenbach's health as well as

creative possibility are not only threatened by his limit-experience in Munich, deskbound in his room and suffering from writer's block. Outside of these constraints, in Venice, ethical and moral ties are being unbound and, consequently, Aschenbach loses all sense of self and cannot emerge as a transformed, cohesive new self. Venice even becomes the outer projection and embodiment of Aschenbach's inner self: chaotic, corrupted, diseased. Like the city submerged by cholera and humidity produced by the sirocco, his situation appears to become unsettling as order and form disappear. The end entails a transformation of the artist into a decaying body lost in permanent liminality.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Nur nicht matt werden, sonst kommt man unters Rad’:

The Impossible Self-Development in Hermann Hesse’s Bildungsroman

Hermann Hesse: A Man Divided

At the turn of the century, not only are adults in the working world burdened by the modern way of life and its exhausting factors, young boys also have to pass the adolescent transitional phase of instability, emotionality and sexual perversions in order to become men. In this liminal state known as adolescence in which one searches for one’s identity, individuals are put to the test. In this context, adolescents or young adults may have had to face these events more intensely as their personal crisis converged at large with a civilisational crisis. For one thing, together with Thomas Mann and Heinrich Mann, Hermann Hesse was a child of the fin de siècle and part of the young generation born within the decade of the Franco-Prussian war and into the rising concern over cultural degeneration, decadence, and a growing neurasthenia epidemic. Hesse, known among many others for *Demian* (1919), *Siddharta* (1922), *Der Steppenwolf* (1927), and *Das Glassperlenspiel* (1943), became to a greater extent a radical voice in the German literary sphere. He is prominently recognisable for his unfiltered criticism and his rebellious and outsider characters serving in a quest to escape what Max Weber calls in *Die Protestantisch Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* the ‘iron cage’ into which society’s institutions and normative structures were confining such lives (1920: 203–204).

This chapter will mainly focus on his lesser-known text, a so-called ‘Adoleszenzroman’ entitled *Unterm Rad* (1906), in which adolescence is thematised as the protagonist’s crisis. As a rule of this literary genre, the young protagonist experiences a personal maturation during this crisis and, in the meantime, receives a greater insight into the complexity and ambivalence of adult life. Carsten Gansel explains the distinction in his genre-oriented essay with the literary representation of adolescence: ‘In den Schülerromanen der Jahrhundertwende funktioniert das Muster der Einpassung [in die Gesellschaft] nicht mehr, vielmehr kommt es zum Bruch mit der

bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. [...] Identitätsbildung und Sinnfindung sind unter den gegebenen Umständen nicht möglich' (2004: 373). Written at the turn of the century, these narratives turn out to be even more compelling as individual crises are further exacerbated by a context of socio-cultural crises.

Hermann Hesse's novel brings a different perspective on exhaustion with it being caused by institutions and their patterns of behaviour and cultural values. For Hesse, the institutions in question, tending to stand for restrictive cultural norms and which happen to be criticised in *Unterm Rad*, is the Wilhelmine school system and Pietism – a religious branch his parents had raised him into. The young Hesse early on recognised within himself a rupture first with his parents' views and beliefs and just in the same way with a rising and drastically changing consumer society. Matthias Hilbert (2005) confirms that: 'Ausgesprochen kritisch steht der junge Hesse allerdings einen bestimmten Typ, einer bestimmten Form von Glaubenspraxis gegenüber, die sozusagen gepalten ist in eine Sphäre persönlich-privater Frömmigkeit einerseits und ein unfrommes, profitorientiertes Geschäftsgebaren andererseits' (69). For Hesse, the limiting and unpermissiveness of the parental home eventually extended itself to the state of society at large – its first instance being his scholarly years at the monastery in Maulbronn. The pressure to fit into socially acceptable and normalised protoypes and imperatives in this school and later into adulthood turned into a radical critical discourse in his writing.

From his letters and non-fictional writings, we learn that Hesse refused to follow the road laid out by his Swabian pietist parents, and neither did he want to comply with the disciplined, rigid values and ways of living set especially by Wilhelmine society. He ardently condemned the normative world of the 'Philistine', the modern man of the masses and his complacent mediocrity. His sought to find his own way towards self-determined development. From an early age, life became a perpetual fight against societal forces and injunctions wanting to 'break', 'defeat' and 'limit' him, as he words the experience in his closely autobiographical novel *Unterm Rad* (Hesse 2007: 48). The pressure to fit in and to follow certain imperatives led him to endure multiple crises, adversely affecting his physical and mental health from a young age. Like his torn and frequently marginalised characters, Hesse suffered continuously from a very young age till his death from depressive states with symptoms of chronic headaches, exhaustion, and anaemia (see Mileck 1977; Freedman 1982; Quilliot 1997; Decker 2012; Martynkewicz 2013: 249–250).

The crises were first triggered by his experiences at the Maulbronn monastery, where he was supposed to train like his ancestors as a theologian. Hesse enrolled at the Maulbronn monastery in 1891 where the instruction followed an extremely disciplined and controlled method (see Tusken 1998: 17). This strict environment caused the young Hesse to experience chronic headaches and insomnia. Next to the physiological symptoms, he also suffered from a lack of independence and from a difficulty to adapt to the disciplinary and repressive approach of the monastery. As he mentions in his 1925 *Kurzgefasster Lebenslauf*, in this early phase of his life Hesse was already driven by a will to go against what was expected of him: he wanted to become 'entweder ein Dichter oder gar nichts' (Hesse 1987: 393–394). The desire to become a poet entailed the rejection of his parents' Pietist faith and their expectations for him to become a seminarist. Barry Stephenson (2009) notes how recurringly the pietist faith of Hesse's family has been pointed out by critics as the primary cause of Hesse's troubles. Pietism is often portrayed in Hesse scholarship as a rigid, regressive, stern, oppressively dogmatic, and self-limiting form of Protestantism (Stephenson 2009: 8, 26–27). Hesse ultimately decided to escape from the pressures of a repressive pietist discipline at school, and did so at night-time in March 1892 (Hesse 1966: 179).

Found and sent back to the monastery, Hesse became more and more enclosed in, what the biographer Gunnar Decker coins, 'die Mühle des Apparates, der alles, was der herrschenden Norm widerspricht, […] ausschließt' (Decker 2012: 72). The harsh and degrading punishment for his flight and his withdrawal from other students triggered a crisis that lasted for several months and left deep wounds in his spirit. He consequently suffered from headaches, and physical and mental exhaustion – a weakened state leaving him increasingly unable to resume his studies. In a letter to his parents he writes: 'Während des Ausflugs selber hatte ich wenig Kopfweh, jetzt aber noch mehr als vorher. Ich bin so müde, so kraft- und willenlos; ich arbeite, soviel ich eben muß […]. […] Ich bin nicht krank, nur eine mir ganz ungewohnte Schwäche fesselt mich' (Hesse 1966: 194). Then, a letter from the school board to Hesse's parents also mentions how he is deemed 'schon seit längerer Zeit […] in einem Zustand größter Erregtheit, in welchem er überschwängliche, zum Teil überspannte Gedichte zu verfassen pflegte' (Hesse 1966: 180). The decision to remove Hesse from the school was made in his own interest, since he lacked the ability to discipline himself, yet also to prevent him from spreading his bad influence onto his classmates (189).

With the expulsion from the monastery and the conflictual relationship with his parents, a time of disorientation and identity crises unfolded for the young Hesse – in which he was plagued by severe nervous crises and repeatedly fell into severe depressive states. In May 1892, Hesse was taken to the Pietist healer Johann Christoph Blumhardt, who ran the sanatorium in Bad Boll. Religious liberals and modernists throughout the region of Württemberg took straight aim at this leading figure of Swabian Pietism; his work of casting out devils was taken as an indication of the backwardness of Pietism (see Stephenson 2009: 28). In this cloistered pietist healing centre, Hesse still increasingly suffered from headaches, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite (see Stephenson 2009: 24–25; Decker 2012: 75). There he even attempted to shoot himself (Freedman 1982: 62–65). After the suicide attempt, Hesse was placed in the mental hospital in Stetten im Remstal near Stuttgart. This sanatorium was a home for the mentally weak and epileptics. Pastor Schall, the administrator of the Stetten sanatorium, diagnosed Hesse's condition as a 'moral weakness', by which he implied a lack of self-control and ultimately will power (Freedman 1982: 72–73).

As his biographer Ralph Freedman emphasises, Hesse continued to complain of constant headaches, dizziness and fever there (Freedman 1982: 72–73). His letters home, especially to his father, attest to his ailments being caused by his 'incarceration' in Stetten. His most famous letter to his father (dated 14 September 1892) is signed with 'Hermann Hesse, Gefangener im Zuchthaus zu Stetten', – 'Zuchthaus' being also a term used by Thomas Mann to define his however less pietistic sanatorium experience. Hesse would often write of the Pietist principle of 'breaking the will' to define his parents' treatment. This principle embodied an unrelenting, psychologically manipulative, harsh willingness to exorcise his soul and impose a dogmatic restraint (Stephenson 2009: 145–160). Again, in his letters to his parents, his words are filled with bitterness and angst, as he refers to his estranging metamorphosis into 'ein andrer […], ein Welthasser, eine Waise, deren "Eltern" leben' (Hesse 1966: 268–269). In contrast, as seen from his parents' perspective, Hesse's state was to be understood as a religious crisis. Their approach was to keep pushing their son into faith – which only worsened his condition.

On that account, self-will would then become the cornerstone in Hesse's moral life and the counterpart to the Pietist principle of 'breaking the will'. Hesse's affirmation of radical individualism throughout his life followed the intellectual legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche, in particular, his sense of cultural decline and concern over the values of the mass or 'herd' society associated with industrialisation, rationalisation and

bureaucratisation (see Hargis 2010: 475–507; Reichert 1972: 38f). It goes without saying that Hesse's radical ideas and strong rejection of mass culture also encompassed the subject of medical treatments. As a child he already had endured a history of sanatorium experiences, which had left him feeling to a greater extent restless and suicidal. His chronic headaches, propensity to exhaustion, and even suicidal wishes came to be exacerbated in this 'wellness-addictive' environment filled with hypochondriacs, neurasthenics, and hysterics. In adulthood, he continuously declined the traditional and predominant curative methods. He felt strongly drawn to less conventional therapeutics, to natural remedies and to a simpler and slower lifestyle.

These alternative therapeutic measures were very different from the alienating, mass-gathering, consumeristic, and over-stimulating sanatoriums. Hesse's program of experimental treatments involved meditation trips to the Swiss mountains, nude climbing, solitary living in the forest, fasting, and vegetarianism. By way of these activities immersed in natural surroundings, he contended for a purely individual, spiritual liberation from social values and norms (see Geist 2016: 194–196; Decker 2012: 256). What can be gathered from these facets of Hesse's life is his belief that his body could only come back to health and stability by remaining removed from modern civilisation. Hesse became a strong German figure advocating a quest for a lifestyle closer to nature, a search for individuation, a repudiation of modernity's mass culture as well as its venerated authoritative institutions, i.e., the school and the church. Hesse was conscious of societal issues and the problems caused by the regimented educational system and approach, the cultural pessimism, and the disregard for nature in this age of mass production and consumption. He saw the possibility for social regeneration in the individual's capacity to take action, resist, and search for his own self.

Having said that, this begs the question of how easy it was to make that choice and to individuate oneself in an achievement-oriented society with a crushing 'wheel of performance'. The central issues of discipline, adolescent sexuality, body discomfort, and suicide place Hermann Hesse's *Unterm Rad* within the context of a literary movement of school fictions around 1900. The exploration of the lived body of one lonely and exhausted young student, unable to keep up with certain imperatives and fit in within set paradigms, will shed light on the struggles faced by young individuals in Wilhelmine society. As a more radical voice compared to Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Hesse challenges the educational system and raises especially in this novel the effects and consequences of the adolescent struggle between 'Gesetz und Geist' (Hesse 2007: 93). As we will see there are

numerous parallels between Hesse's story, particularly his complicated relationship to the educational system and his pietist upbringing, and the stories he wrote. This chapter will also consider how the author not only conceived school as a generator of exhaustion by proceeding with a study of his accounts of life in the city and in sanatoriums.

Crushed by the (Performance) Wheel: A Case Study of Student Exhaustion in *Unterm Rad*

Many of Hesse's contemporaries dealt critically with the school as an institution, namely Thomas Mann in *Buddenbrooks*. *Verfall einer Familie* (1901), Rainer Maria Rilke in *Die Turnstunde* (1902), Heinrich Mann in *Professor Unrat oder Das Ende eines Tyrannen* (1905), Robert Musil in *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* (1906), and Oscar Adolf Hermann Schmitz in *Der Untergang einer Kindheit* (1906). Drawing from personal experience, these authors unanimously argue that school education was conveyed in a problematic manner and with the effect of instilling a 'counter-nature' in the young individuals. These works of fiction criticise a repressive upbringing and an educational discourse implanting in the child the values and ideals of bourgeois morality, namely a spirit of success, competition, saving, piety, a love for tradition, a respect for authority, and self-control. They consistently feature the discrepancy between the rigidly enforced rituals of upbringing or the rigid classical education and the instinctual claims of the youth. The debate regarding the state of the educational system and its physical and mental effects on the students also drew a large number of eminent intellectual figures, pedagogues, and educational theorists and reformers, such as Nietzsche, Ludwig Gurlitt, Paul Geheeb, or Georg Kerschensteiner (see Becker and Kluchert 1993; Cancik and Cancik-Lindemaier 1999). Prussian nationalism and militarism, for instance, were delineated as negatively influencing educational policy and harming the student's development (see Berghahn 1994: 91). The young Nietzsche's critique of 'Bildungsphilistertum' encompasses a critic of the institution implanting a 'second nature' in these young students: 'wir pflanzen eine neue Gewöhnung, einen neuen Instinct, eine zweite Natur an, so daß die erste Natur abdorrt' (Nietzsche 1980: 270). For Nietzsche, there is no doubt that this second nature is 'viel schwächer, viel ruheloser und durch und durch ungesünder ist, als die erste. Der moderne Mensch schläppt zuletzt eine ungeheure Menge von unverdaulichen Wissenssteinen mit sich herum' (1980: 272).

To the same degree, Hesse criticises the authoritarian rule of the Wilhelmine educational institution and pedagogic practices implanting obedience, submission, and humility in students, as well as mercilessly revealing their weaknesses and limits (Mix 2013: 360; Epkenhans and Seggern 2012: 112). In a letter from Hesse to his stepbrother Karl Isenberg dating from November 25, 1904, Hesse affirms that the topic addressed in *Unterm Rad* is 'die einzige moderne Kulturfrage, die ich ernst nehme und die mich gelegentlich aufregt', for 'die Schule [hat an mir] viel kaputt gemacht' (Hesse 1973: 130). In a later comment on his novel, Hesse reaffirms:

> In der Geschichte und Gestalt des kleinen Giebenrath, zu dem als Mit- und Gegenspieler sein Freund Heilner gehört, wollte ich die Krise jener Entwicklungsjahre darstellen und […] [ich] spielte […] ein wenig den Ankläger und Kritiker jenen Mächten gegenüber, denen Giebenrath erliegt und denen einst ich selber beinahe erlegen wäre: der Schule, der Theologie, der Tradition und Autorität. (quoted in Pfeiffer 1990: 106)

Like Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Hesse documents a problematic social environment – overburdening and breaking individuals. Yet he voices more explicitly and more accusatively the physical, psychological, social and spiritual damages the conflict with an institution and its rigid system of norms and values entails. In *Unterm Rad,* the criticism is rendered more impactful with, on the one hand, autobiographical elements tied to the author and, on the other, a critical third-person omniscient narrator disclosing and commenting the thoughts and emotions of a student on the brink of exhaustion. In this account of wilful defilement of his detractors, Hesse howbeit succumbs to cultural pessimism and to the lure of a simplified Manichean perspective with the victim being the individual on one side and the perpetrator being society and the state with its institutions on the other. In giving way to irony and cynicism, his early fiction reflects to a greater extent the attitude of early twentieth-century Germans, who were at odds with the modern, industrial, and united nation-building process and biopolitical way of thinking.

The novel *Unterm Rad*, which contains as mentioned previously strong autobiographical references, starts with the fourteen-year-old student Hans Giebenrath already feeling the pressure generated by the eager expectations set by his educators and his widowed father. The exceptionally talented Hans is the only student in his town, remotely situated in the Swabian Black Forest, who is urged to take the state examination held in the metropolis of Stuttgart. In order to achieve this goal to be admitted to the Maulbronn monastery, Hans has to

study day and night and receive additional tutoring. He has long since sacrificed his leisure time, friendships, and health, all for the higher goal of passing the state exam. Once successfully admitted, Hans starts his semester at the Maulbronn monastery visibly overburdened by his entourage's expectations and exhausted by overwork. Hans' shy and ambitious character immediately sets him apart from the other students. Only after a while does his class comrade Hermann Heilner, a poet and aestheticist, become his friend. Hermann is an outsider, a headstrong and rebellious youth who openly brandishes his unconformity and defies the rigid rules and values of the monastery. While Hans is happy finally to have found a friend, the educators follow the connection between the conscientious Hans and the reckless Hermann with displeasure and try to prevent it. After Hermann's sudden escape from the monastery, Hans begins to sink into a moral depression on top of his intellectual exhaustion. Falling behind in school, he is urged to return home to his father, with no future prospects nor any desire in life. This turn of events ultimately leads to his sudden obscure death.

The reader learns from the start that the scope of the protagonist Hans Giebenrath is limited by psychological and social strains – precisely, an external determination that emanates from his father and external representatives of authority. From the onset, Hans' complaints are the result of the constant pressure to perform, imposed by his father and a few teachers. His exhaustion is alarmingly noticeable from the descriptions of his physiognomy. Regarding external characteristics, the focus is brought to his 'grosse[], überarbeitete[] Augen', which he has to fight to keep them open. Also, 'der blasse Knabenkopf sank auf die hagere Schulter, die dünnen Arme streckten sich müde aus' (Hesse 2007: 18). He transpires as a weak young boy, who drags his exhausted body through the streets and 'mechanically' feeds the fish in the river during his granted downtime (12–13). The narrator notes early on the 'vergeistigt' look on Hans' face, meaning that he is completely lost in his thought and distracted:

> In den letzten acht Tagen war die Vergeistigung eklatant geworden. In dem hübschen, zarten Knabengesicht brannten tief liegende, unruhige Augen mit trüber Glut, auf der Stirn zuckten feine, Geist verratende Falten, und die ohnehin dünnen und hageren Arme und Hände hingen mit einer müden Grazie herab, die an Botticelli erinnerte. (11)

High demands on his mental capacities have rendered him apathetic and nervous. The 'burning' of his restless eyes, the nervous twitches on his forehead, and the 'tired' and unhealthy-looking grace of his lean body testify to this. His entire self is consumed by 'ein hastig triumphierendes Treiben beschleunigter Pulse', 'heftig aufgeregter Kräfte', and the defining power of the imperative statement of 'Vorwärtsbegehren' (46): an impetuous need to move forward.

As a result of this mental coping mechanism, Hans has to endure headaches, which occur on an exceeding number of instances following sequences of strain, overwork, and overstimulation (21, 28, 36, 43, 46, 47, 52, 78, 95, 142, 166). The time during which Hans had not yet experienced 'Kopfweh und keine Sorgen' (16) is not recounted by the narrator. As a leitmotiv running from the beginning of the narrative and an element of Hesse's own experience, the pressure in his head accentuates Hans' feeling of overburdening and heightens his state of exhaustion. The headaches first arise before the state examination. His anxiety to succeed and the mental overload puts pressure on his intellectual capacities. After passing the state exam, Hans dutifully continues to study Greek during his summer break. With not much energy left to assimilate more knowledge, his physical condition deteriorates. He feels the headaches more often. Later, at the Maulbronn monastery, as he studies night and day, not much time passes before his 'alte Kopfweh' plague his ability to concentrate and work (52, 78).

Hans' diagnosis is clear from the first chapter. He suffers from nervous exhaustion by cause of mental overwork and lack of rest. His numerous physical and psychological ailments include headaches, dizziness, weariness, restlessness, anxiety, and an inaptitude to concentrate. Based on this aetiological table, Hans constitutes a perfect example of neurasthenia. Headaches are particularly to be found in neurasthenia's symptomatology. Erb, Kraft-Ebbing, and Löwenfeld mention headaches, a pressure and dizziness in the head, nausea as part of the somatic symptoms of neurasthenia. These attacks centred on the head were thought to be caused by the daily pressures experienced by 'brain-workers' (see Erb 1893: 11; Krafft-Ebing 1895: 103–104; Löwenfeld 1894: 103). Krafft-Ebing's diagnosis of the neurasthenic condition mentions '[den] beständige[n] Kampf mit der Concurrenz' and the cost of over-spending one's energy levels in having to fight to keep up (1895: 10). Furthermore, in a chapter specifically on student exhaustion, Löwenfeld indicates to an excessive mental tension and warns against the student's lack of time to rest his body (1894: 59). Löwenfeld further notes the brain-worker's weak physical constitution decreasing their resistance capacities: 'Die mangelhafte

Körperausbildung bedingt eine verminderte Widerstandsfähigkeit gegen krankmachende Einflüsse jeder Art' (1894: 60). Their causes were then a blend of weak constitution and highly demanding exogenous factors.

Unterm Rad is critical of the educational institution as a generator of exhaustion, but also of the medical community and its lack of comprehension and analysis regarding the physiological and psychological critical state of an altogether lost and disenchanted youth. With his physical and mental exhaustion, his melancholic and suicidal thoughts, his deep disinterest in the end in any professional career or in sexual relationships render him according to socio-medical discourses an 'abnormal' individual, a catalyst for degeneration and devirilisation. Such thinking automatically reduced people to marginalised groups and disregarded the individual person and their personal history. This way of thinking is for instance voiced by the Institution's Ephorus for he equates the youth's tendentious taste for resistance and transgression with 'die Entartung der Jugend' (Hesse 2007: 80, 109). These views are simultaneously dismissed by the narrator as opinions with no scientific proof of a degeneration operating on a physiological level amongst the younger generation. As Hans Giebenrath's father also contends, those traits have neither been inherited: 'In seiner Familie hatte bis jetzt nie jemand Nervenleiden gehabt' (114).

Doubts regarding the certainty of the biomedical knowledge are further elaborated by the narratorial voice in the sections involving the physician's diagnosis of Hans. The physician dealing with his case trivialises the young boy's condition as: '"Das sind kleine Nervengeschichten, Herr Ephorus", kicherte er sanft. "Ein vorübergehender Zustand von Schwäche – eine Art leichter Schwindel. Man muβ sehen, daβ der junge Mann täglich an die Luft kommt. Fürs Kopfweh kann ich ihm ein paar Tropfen verschreiben' (103). According to the physician, Hans' state of exhaustion and chronic headaches do not present themselves as threatening or valid pathological symptoms. The physician clearly relativises the severity of his condition by mocking and belittling Hans' nervous condition, almost as if it were a product of his imagination. On the whole, Hans is treated derogatorily in that his problems are simply accepted as immutable and the real reasons are not searched for at all. The mocking attitude and depreciation of his ailments are counter balanced by the narrator's refutation and ridicule of the physician's inaptitude to understand what ails Hans. Rather than prescribing rest, the treatment consists of 'Tropfen, Lebertran, Eier und kalte Waschungen' on top of promenades (128, 103). These futile hygienist prescriptions remain focused on regenerating the body through movement, a strict diet, and a disciplined routine of cold-water showers.

In the past, some critics have emphasised Hans Giebenrath's characterisation as a weakly constituted person, particularly predisposed to neurasthenia. In 1928, Hans Rudolf Schmid was among the first to critically write: 'Giebenrath suffers from a constitutional weakness of the nerves. The novel does not fulfil what it promises, and the author's secret intention of writing a novel that criticises contemporary schooling practices is invalidated the moment he admits that his hero is neurasthenic' (Schmid 1928: 74, 76). The problem Schmid underlines is Hans Giebenrath's passivity and inherent physical weakness, rendering him far from a rebellious type and cynical voice of the school system. The problem with Schmid's assertion is his reduction of Hans to his condition as a neurasthenic and the belief this notion does not bear any critical impact. Schmid's analysis disregards several elements making the narration an example of school criticism. What he particularly omits in his analysis is the importance of the narratorial voice and its experiences, who conveys the author's point of view.

Schmid is not the only critic drawing this distorted conclusion. Mark Boulby (1967) underlines in his analysis Hans' weaknesses as a melancholic dreamer, who due to his intellectual pride and decadence is unable to adapt or adequately resist the demands of bourgeois society. Boulby adds, '[his] fate is no more than the story of a neurasthenic, a decadent, whose vitality is grossly impaired' (1967: 49). His ambition to rise above his former and current classmates, his desperate desire to pass the 'Landexamen' and to reach a high social position are seen as tangible proof of Hans Giebenrath's not so innocent and victimising character. In a more recent reading of *Unterm Rad,* Andreas Solbach acknowledges these scholars who have interpreted 'the neurasthenic hero as at least partly responsible for his own fate' and relativised his victimhood (see Solbach 2005: 69, 71). Solbach's reading of *Unterm Rad* is not different from theirs, in that he underlines Hesse's presentation of a dramatic situation in which the protagonist plays a predominant role in his own downfall and destruction. In assessing Hans Giebenrath in this light, Solbach writes: '[T]he narrator depicts Hans as someone who strives for academic success out of personal arrogance and a feeling of intellectual superiority. This depiction is designed to influence our assessment of the protagonist in a negative way' (Solbach 2005: 72). To Solbach inasmuch as to Boulby, the narrative appears to present him as a victimised culprit.

What these critics fail to see past the nervous exhaustion Hans' experiences is pinpointed by a more enlightened narrator: 'Es war kein Wunder, dass alles nicht helfen wollte. Jedes gesunde Leben muss einen Inhalt und ein Ziel haben, und das war dem jungen Giebenrath verlorengegangen' (Hesse 2007: 128). Hans is not only

energetically deflated, mentally nothing stimulates or enlivens him. The emphasis on loss permeates the narrative, it being material (fishing rod, pet rabbit) and non-material (desire, life goal). These losses have weakened the young boy's capacities to withstand external pressures and to project into the future, past these difficult formative years. Also, in contrast to what the above-mentioned critics invoke, this all-knowing narrator explicitly informs the reader from the very beginning that Hans is pressured to succeed by his father, the preacher, and his school teachers. The narrator invites sympathetically the reader to immerse himself in the character's thoughts and sensations and succeeds in drawing an empathetic eye toward the character. He functions as a figural mediator of Hesse's voice who values to render Hans' suffering authentic. This narratorial voice does not approach the narrative from a distant perspective, but instead repeatedly speaks for the young boy through reproachful and acerb questions and comments in his place, as it can be found in this instance:

> Warum hatte er in den empfindlichsten und gefährlichsten Knabenjahren täglich bis in die Nacht hinein arbeiten müssen? Warum hatte man ihm seine Kaninchen weggenommen, ihn den Kameraden in der Lateinschule mit Absicht entfremdet, ihm Angeln und Bummeln verboten und ihm das hohle, gemeine Ideal eines schäbigen, aufreibenden Ehrgeizes eingeimpft? Warum hatte man ihm selbst nach dem Examen die wohlverdienten Ferien nicht gegönnt? (111–112)

Behind this series of self-questioning lies the key problematic raised by Hermann Hesse and many others German writers of the turn of the century: the rigidity of German society. Indeed, how does one follow one's desires and become one's self in a constraining, limited, conservative social environment?

The narrator blames an old generation raised on obedience and harsh discipline and disengaged from the desires and dreams of a young generation. Firmly attached to Prussian virtues and in order to educate future philistines or 'Biedermänner',[9] school rectors and teachers reckon on 'die rohen Kräfte und Begierden der Natur zu bändigen und auszurotten und an ihre Stelle stille, mäßige und staatlich anerkannte Ideale zu pflanzen' (47). The image of planting ideals like seeds to grow obedient individuals is again unambiguously revelatory of the

[9] The term 'Biedermann' was first used in the German language as an honorific term to qualify a righteous, honest man. But it could also bear a pejorative connotation. With Goethe's description in his 'Was ist ein Philister?' poem (date unknown) and later with Friedrich Nietzsche's denotations and connotations in his 1876 essay on the Protestant theologian and writer David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), the Biederman, also known as 'Spiessbürger' or 'Bildungsphilister', was then considered the opposite of the artist, a narrow-minded bourgeois individual characterised by rigid thinking, pronounced conformity with social norms and aversion to changes in the familiar living environment (see Schumann 2019: 111–130).

narrator's stance against the ideology and interests of Wilhelmine Germany. The language is telling of the violence and strength the educational institution uses against young individuals. In the narrator's words, the students' raw forces and desires need to be harnessed and contained to turn them into complying, productive, and consumerist bourgeois models. The narrator purposefully and sarcastically parallels the stillness and secureness of this career path with alarmingly malnourished and overworked students: 'Jahr für Jahr betreten drei bis vier Dutzend Landessöhne diesen stillen, sicheren Weg, magere überarbeitete Neukonfirmierte durchlaufen auf Staatskosten die verschiedenen Gebiete des humanistischen Wissens' (9).

Contrasting and threatening the prototyp of the 'Streber' or 'Biedermann' constitutes in the Ephorus' eyes the 'haltlos stürmenden Neuerer oder unfruchtbar sinnenden Träumer' (47). The resurfacing concept of 'Haltlosigkeit' is here problematised by the institution's representatives. Whereas Heinrich Mann's discourse is more conservative and connects dilettantism with chaos, in the case of Hermann Hesse's *Unterm Rad*, this transgressive and boundless state is assimilated to the innovator and the musing dreamer. The rebellious and artistic young man, who writes poetry, possesses sufficient self-confidence and self-will to stand his ground against the external pressures of family and society, is portrayed by Hermann Heilner (70). Like the dilettante, this character exemplifies idleness, carelessness, and the pursuit of a boundless existence. He studies less than the other students, and yet Hans is surprised to discover that Hermann knows more about life. In other words, this character is presented in a positive light in contrast to the foil philistine: '[Hermann] lebte warmer und freier', and 'er war beweglich und unbändig' (71).

What can be however criticised in this narratorial voice's strongly siding with a transgressive character and its emphatic use of ironic treatment and sarcasm is a lack of distance and self-critical approach. Looking back to his text in 1907, Hesse in full awareness comments his then tendentious account of his experience at school, yet also underlines his past need to exteriorise, purge himself of the painful memory of his school years: 'Zwar ist *Unterm Rad* seinerzeit rein nur aus dem Bedürfnis entstanden, mir ein wichtiges Stück der eigenen Jugendzeit konzentriert vorzustellen, und das Tendenziöse kam erst während der Ausführung, absichtslos und nur aus bitteren Erinnerungen erwachsen, hinein. Aber das war unnötig' (Hesse 1973: 139). Anger and bitterness are regarded by the narrator as necessary to his introspection:

> Wer aber mehr und Schwereres vom andern leidet, der Lehrer vom Knaben oder umgekehrt, wer von beiden mehr Tyrann mehr Quälgeist ist und wer von beiden es ist, der dem anderen Teile seiner Seele und seines Leben *verdirbt* und *schändet*, das kann man nicht untersuchen, ohne mit Zorn und Scham an die eigene Jugend zu denken. (Hesse 2007: 93, emphasis added)

The words interjected by the narrator are compelling: 'verdirbt' and 'schändet' point at the symptoms of the problem within the educational system and society at large. It is in the narrator's belief that the external pressure to obey and perform well is contaminating the body and festering inside. As if it had been injected from an outside authority, the individual body is rendered powerless, stripped of his self-will, and incapable to reciprocate to this pressure. The reader gets a sense that Hans' 'Ehrgeiz', his strong striving for success, validity, and recognition has been exclusively inculcated in him. He has been forcefully moulded to fit into the typus of the so-called 'Streber', meaning a person who is very ambitious and selfishly trying to get ahead in school or at work. His ideal of 'vorwärts zu kommen' and to fulfil his duty to excel in life has been fully ingrained in him, in a way, against his will (81).

Along with the use of a vehemently critical narratorial voice, Hesse couches social criticism in symbols and metaphorical language. He particularly shines a critical light on the bourgeois performance principle. He conveys with efficiency the perverseness of the system and its institutions through the metaphor of the crushing and unstoppable wheel, apparent in the title *Unterm Rad*. Halfway through the narrative, Hans is advised by the Ephorus to distance himself from Hermann and to work harder to catch up with the other students. Hermann warns Hans to '[n]ur nicht matt werden, sonst kommt man unters Rad' (95). The metaphor immediately and succinctly establishes the themes of power, discipline, and competition inherent to Germany's performance-oriented society. In a socio-cultural context of mass-industrialisation, dominated by a cult of performance and competition, the spinning wheel symbolises movement, power, and progress. Yet, in this context, it also stands for oppression. The wheel dictates the rhythm and the individual is forced to keep up with it. It is a mechanical conception of a system based on production and consumption, crushing in turn the bodies of those who do not perform well.

The metaphor of the wheel adequately encapsulates the experience of the body being overwhelmed and physically rolled over by the speed and pressure of a progress- and achievement-oriented society. At school, it is the spirit of competition that stimulates the movement of the wheel. Hans is just a cog in the wheel, competing against others to remain useful. He is not in control of the wheel and solely subjected to the movement and the imperative to go forward. The image of the body exhausted by the wheel's pace aptly describes how Hans feels during his studies: pressured and overwrought. He works longer and harder than anyone else to keep up with the competition, feels guilty when time off is taken for pleasure, and yet, he does not see the end of the tunnel. As a matter of fact, the wheel is not moving forward, rather rotating *in situ*. One could almost visualise in this metaphor a confining hamster wheel, in which Hans is senselessly treading on the spot, needlessly chained to a performance ethos and by a spirit of competition. The image is anxiety-inducing with society and its institutions confining and directing the individual both in a rigid structure and oppressing him to follow a certain pace. Hans' enclosure in this wheel pressuring him to work strenuously and depriving him of rest might also be a reference to what Max Weber calls in *Die protestantsiche Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* 'stahlhartes Gehäuse' into which modern capitalistic society has restricted the individual (1920: 203–204). The iron cage also pressures one to conform, to follow cultural norms aimed at crushing one's individuality, limiting autonomy and individual freedom.

All things considered, what the narrative reveals is that remaining chained to the disciplined tempo of the wheel does not lead to the tempering of the character and the optimisation of the subject. The permanent, non-stop cadence and the crushing of the individual's desires have a pathogenic effect. The forbidding of his friendship with the rebellious Hermann, as well as his enjoyment of fishing and his idle contemplation of nature have resulted in Hans' morally depressive state. With no access to any form of pleasure or form of rest, he has not been able to regenerate his body and nourish even his dreams and desires. A weakened body and spirit have further contributed to his inaptitude to keep up with the pace. And neither is the competition resting. Hans may have been able to keep up for so long like a 'Hamster mit aufgespeicherten Vorraten', but his energetic capacity has been growing scarcer by the moment (Hesse 2007: 110).

For dramatisation, his depressive state is correspondingly synchronised with the dying of nature. The seasonal change worsens his mood: 'das reife, trübe Sterbenwollen der Vegetation trieb ihn, […] mit zu vergehen, mit einzuschlafen, mit zu sterben' (129). Nature also offers figuratively ways for the narrator to express Hans'

internal reality. The loss of vitality is aggravated by the narrator with the analogy between Hans' pathological state of exhaustion and the provocative image of a decapitated tree.

> Wenn ein Baum entgipfelt wird, treibt er gern in Wurzelnähe neue Sprossen hervor, und so kehrt oft auch eine Seele, die in der Blüte krank wurde und verdarb, in die frühlinghafte Zeit der Anfänge und ahnungsvollen Kindheit zurück, als könnte sie dort neue Hoffnungen entdecken und den abgebrochenen Lebensfaden aufs neue anknüpfen. Die Wurzelsprossen geilen saftig und eilig auf, aber es ist ein Scheinleben, und es wird nie wieder ein rechter Baum daraus. (121)

As illustrated with the analogy to sick blossoms, perpetuating the sickness around him, it is made clear that his mental capacities have been overconsumed, rendering a chance for regeneration even in a calmer and slow-paced setting impossible.

These metaphors partially resonate with certain anxieties at that time, that is to say with the fear neurasthenics would by their insufficient energetic capacity and their lack of productivity contaminate and curb the general performance and strength of the social body as well as the national economy. However, for the narrator, the harmful effects only impact the young boy and the healthy development of his selfhood and identity. The school environment as a microcosm mirrors the mechanism of society at large. Katrin Marquardt's theory explains how school functions as a capitalistic microcosm:

> Die Schule stattet Individuen durch die Vermittlung kulturellen Kapitals mit Handlungspotentialen aus, die sie an einen erfolgreichen Schulerfolg und einen schulischen Titel bindet. Die so erworbene staatlich autorisierte soziale Kompetenz des einzelnen bestimmt dann maßgeblich seine Stellung im sozialen, hierarchischen Gefüge – und insofern trägt jeder an seinem Ort zur Reproduktion der Gesellschaft bei. (Marquardt 1997: 41)

The Wilhelmine school system is deconstructed by Marquardt as one seeking to produce 'Schaffende' (production-people), to prepare them for the competitive, performance-driven outside world. Thus, Hans is already failing not just as a student at school but as an individual in society as well.

Governed by such principles of capitalism, the descriptions of Hans' exhaustion follow this economic model. For lack of capital energy, Hans is turned into a 'überreizte Rösslein', an overworked racehorse no one

should wager on due to its weak performance (Hesse 2007: 112). The outcome of a high-strung disposition, an over-expenditure of energy has rendered him an empty container, barren, and thus useless to society. Society cannot make any profit of the protagonist's assets, for he constitutes 'kein Gefäß mehr, in das man allerlei hineinstopfen konnte, kein Acker für vielerlei Samen mehr'; in short, 'es lohnte sich nicht mehr, Zeit und Sorgfalt an ihn zu wenden' (116). Correspondingly, as Hans also chants the following lines on his way home, 'Ach, ich bin so müde,/ Ach, ich bin so matt,/ Hab kein Geld im Portemonnaie/ Und auch keins im Sack' (118), the potent metaphor of the empty bank account known to neurasthenia befalls in the narrative. This mixing of the language of exhaustion and the language of finance had been widely popularised by medical discourses (see Beard 1881: 9–10; Krafft-Ebing 1885: 22).

The analogies to a seedless field and to an empty sack further refer to the idea of sexual impotence and infertility that often came to be diagnosed in neurasthenic conditions, particularly in Krafft-Ebing's morally conservative and pessimistic health manuals. On Hans' nature, the simile to 'ein schüchternes Mädchen' sparks an interesting connection between his passive behaviour, his weak disposition, and female qualities (Hesse 2007: 68). In this instance, the narrative partially feeds into the anxieties surrounding masculinity and the threat of effeminacy professed by socio-medical discourses. With an emphasis being put on the correlative between neurasthenic states and male impotence, the medical discourses promoted the belief that a loss of masculinity and thus virility would generate the decline of civilisation (see Krafft-Ebing 1895: 188–189). Thus, Hans does not just stand as a failure to society as an economic actor with no capital and with no leverage to invest in, but also as a boy on the verge of adulthood who does not possess the criteria of virility (control over the body and emotions, vigour, discipline, will power). As he returns home to regenerate his exhausted mental and physiological forces, he also finds himself incapable of responding to the sexual advances of a young woman (Hesse 2007: 138, 142). The same shyness occurs at school, when Hermann kisses Hans' lips (74). No sexual desire is awakened in him with both sexes. He fails in his initiation or construction process to becoming a man. His economic and sexual powerlessness render him unable to desire and to become a man according to societal standards. In addition to his lack of professional desire, one could set forth that Hans' absence of sexual drive impedes on his process of individuation.

Hans fits into the group of numerous other literary figures stuck in a state of in-betweenness. They are neither complete outsiders, nor do they fit into society. Hans is unable to either fit into the mould of the future 'Biedermann', nor does he have the will or strength to rebel against the authorities and to leave the school like Hermann does. As he returns to his hometown, Hans loses himself in a liminal space. The transition from the rigidity of the scholastic environment to a fluid space without borders is reminiscent of the transition experienced by Gustav von Aschenbach from Munich to Venice. Also, similar to the descriptions of the city floating in infinite waters in *Der Tod in Venedig*, Hans' hometown in the Black Forest with its limitless verdant fields and forests contrastingly embodies his wandering in a state of limbo. This familiar environment is depicted as 'eine unbegrenzte, fliessende Woge von lebendigem Grün' (103). The water plays a key role in dividing his natural world, his past days of fishing and contemplation from the tedious world of scholarly work and constraints. The river, as a symbol of liminality and rebirth, lightens the weight of his exhausted body and offers the possibility of an escape into a realm of boundlessness. The element's fluid, formless nature become a means for the individual to escape the burden of his pre-formatted existence. In a sense, it sensory deprives the body, removes all stimuli and outside pressures. Prior to his mysterious death in the river, closing the narrative, Hans already experiences a sort of purification and unburdening after his stressful exams when he jumps into the river. The narrator describes how he slowly swims against the weak current and rids himself of the anxiety and stress endured during the revision process and the state examination (27). The communion with the water soothes for a moment his overworked body and anxious mind.

On an abstract level, his return enables him to release all self-control and to open the floods of repressed memoires in his dream episodes. His escape from a distressing reality into a dream world turn into experiences of 'eine unwirkliche zweite Kindheit' (120). Like his body's alleviating fall in the river, his mind is subjected to a 'langsamen Fall in eine warme, tiefe Flut' (143). This boundless, insubstantial, and uncontainable space becomes a ground for release, repose, and momentary regeneration. The dream sequence is not described as a Dionysian dissolution of boundaries and descent into chaos akin to Aschenbach's dream sequence. The problem lies in his loss of sense of self. The narrator describes how Hans slowly loses himself and a sense of reality, as he vagabonds in his palace of childhood memories (120). These moments of escapism create a constant pressure against his obligations tied to the external world. Yet paradoxically, he encloses himself in another form of

containment. At the end, he remains caught in a state of limbo on the threshold separating the past from the future. There is no hope for new possibilities for Hans Giebenrath. The solution to his inner struggle for existence presents itself as his death.

Contraindicative Places: The Sanatorium and the City as Spaces of Exhaustion

Hermann Hesse not only participates in the discourse of education as a generator of exhaustion. His writings critique the effects of the metropolis, industrialisation, urbanisation, and the disease-inducing culture promoted by sanatoriums. Hesse rapidly became a fervent follower of alternative hygienist practices. These were associated with the turn-of-the-century 'Lebensreform' movements and included 'Freikörperkultur' (nudism), vegetarianism, alternative medical practices like naturopathy, and youth hiking movements ('Wandervogel'). The latter movement in particular protested against industrialisation and its alienating and denaturalising powers by recommending hikes in the country and communing with nature in the woods (see Lüthi 1970; Landmann 2000: 30; Voswinckel 2009: 7f; Radermacher 2011; Geist 2016: 193 ff). One can draw a correlative between Hesse's rigid, disciplined, and narrow-minded Pietist upbringing and his turn to alternative lifestyles and beliefs – being his interest in the Indian culture and Buddhism (see Baumann 2002: 1–10).

The author's prominent stays at the legendary Monte Verità, set in Ascona (Ticino), testify to his fascination with alternative life reform movements. Monte Verità was a community advocating the liberation of the body from social standards and the technological and industrialised world through practices of nudism, sun bathing, and vegetarianism. This alternative sanatorium attracted several famous artists and intellectuals, such as Carl Jung, Paul Klee, and even Max Weber (see Josephson-Storm 2017: 275; Landmann 2000). It was conceived as a place of deceleration, which counteracted the fast-paced and overstimulating experience of the city. The Monte Verità community and its remoteness from an urban and consumer-oriented reality appeared as a liberating space from the established norms of the performance society. It became a utopian colony of 'natural people': life reformers, occultists, adepts of open-air cures, vegetarians, and political revolutionaries (Prinz 2006: 148). By renouncing the materialistic precepts of modernity and reducing their needs to a minimum, the community's ethos was to resharpen the individual's senses and strengthen their physical and mental health. This entailed a

rejection of frivolous forms of pleasure and especially the indulgence in industrially processed products. Hesse found himself in this way of life and fully adhered to their therapeutic measures sticking to a restricted diet, natural remedies, and the search for an inner, spiritual recovery (see Decker 2012: 220, 256).

Hesse's discourse deploys many of the tropes of the cultural critical views on the modern metropolis and its detrimental effects on the individual. He persistently draws modern settings, as in the city and sanatoriums, as places of nervousness, irritability, unrest, and ultimately of exhaustion. In accord with the discourse of many artists, intellectuals, and cultural critics, these places of mass consumption and pleasure remained for Hesse main factors of over-stimulation and mental and physical disorders. Hesse agreed with the assumption that the individual may lose themselves in the hustle and bustle of the city and further deflect from nature. In *Unterm Rad*, the pivotal incident of nervousness experienced by Hans occurs after his train journey to and arrival in the city of Stuttgart. The journey to Stuttgart Hans and his father take by means of the train is concisely outlined in two sentences. The only insight gathered from this short description is that '[d]ie Reise war für beide eine Qual' (Hesse 2007: 18). In the Swabian metropolis, Hans grows:

> [S]tiller und ängstlicher, eine tiefe Beklemmung ergriff ihn beim Anblick der Stadt; die fremden Gesichter, die protzig hohen, aufgedonnerten Häuser, die langen, ermüdenden Wege, die Pferdebahnen und der Straßenlärm verschütteten ihn und taten ihm weh. […] Man wandelte auf und ab, hin und her und im Kreise, zwischen einem Schwarm von andern Spaziergängern. (19–20)

His feebleness and restlessness due to overwork render his body more sensitive and more prone to headaches and exhaustion, which city life seems only seems to further exacerbate. The noisy and fast-paced city is seen here as a sphere containing all sorts of threatening stimuli – throwing Hans off-balance. The porous boundary between inside and outside adds to the vulnerability. The penetration of external forces, here the street noise, the city's dusty air, and the hubbub of the crowd, penetrate his body, invading all his senses. The noise is represented as an entity physically 'hurting' Hans. The reaction on his part is explicably linked to his need constantly to process the information overflow generated in the city. Hans is already on the verge of collapse walking through the city's streets.

Next to the educational criticism, Hesse's novel again responds to the socio-medical discourses of his time. The triggers of neurasthenia were often and mostly placed in the outside world. Nearing the end of the century, the 'Kulturkritiker' Max Nordau had characterised modern man as a kind of machine that was in a perpetual state of overstimulation and excitement. In *Entartung* (1892), Nordau precisely lists 'die kleinen Erschütterungen auf der Eisenbahnfahrt, die beständigen Geräusche und wechselnden Anblicke der Großstadt-Straßen, unsere Spannung auf die Fortsetzung der Mitteilungen über begonnene Ereignisse' as overtaxing instances that lower energy levels, weaken the body, distract the mind and render it incapable of attention (1892: 72). In his study on nervousness, Wilhelm Erb also has a clear idea of the factors which exert 'mächtigen Einfluss […] auf das Nervensystem der Culturvölker', some being 'Welt umspannender Verkehr', 'gewaltige Werthe producirende Industrie', 'in's Ungemessene gesteigerte Concurrenz auf allen Gebieten' (1893: 5–6). Restlessness became the dominant form of life that stimulated the masses.

In Hans' case, in addition to being subdued to an entry exam stimulating his competitive drive, he is also subjected to the overstraining traffic of people and transportations in the city. In two later written texts by Hesse, *Kurgast* (1925) and *Die Nürnberger Reise* (1927), the narrative voice recounts similar reactions to external stimuli, resulting in an inner feeling of restlessness and general malaise. In contrast to *Unterm Rad*, these two texts are written in the first-person form and appear to be explicitly narrated from the author's perspective. In *Die Nürnberger Reise* the reader knows right from the start that the narrator is a well-known writer, going by the name of Hesse, who describes his journey from Ticino to Nürnberg. Similarly to Hans' trip to Stuttgart in *Unterm Rad*, Hesse describes in *Die Nürnberger Reise* his own experience of restlessness at the hands of modern world's realities, which is felt to be inhuman and devoid of spirituality, and his despair at the discrepancy between his self and the reality around him. He observes the mass of people overflowing the city's streets and concludes: '[m]ein Widerwille gegen jeden Glaubenssatz der modernen Welt und gegen diese moderne Welt selbst, worunter ich die ganze Maschinenkultur verstehe, ist so gross, dass ich es […] verschmähe, mich den Gesetzen dieser Welt anzupassen' (Hesse 2013: 19–20).

Hesse dramatises his antagonism to the dull and conscientious prototype of the modern individual, 'der Biederman', in his recounting of his trip to Nürnberg. This antagonistic depiction is reminiscent of the diverging descriptions of the dilettante and the conforming mass in Heinrich Mann's *Haltlos*.

> Menschen, welche eine geregelte, organisierte Arbeit leisten, welche gewohnt sind, täglich um acht und um zwei Uhr ihre Arbeit zu beginnen, auf ein Telegramm hin binnen kürzester Frist weite Reisen anzutreten, denen ein freier Nachmittag schon ein kleines Paradies bedeutet, die ihren Vergnügungen mit der Uhr in der Hand obliegen – diese Menschen haben ja keine Ahnung davon, in wie müßiggängerischer, ungeregelter, launischer, zeitvergeudender Weise ein Dichter sein fragwürdiges Leben hinbringt! (16–17)

Yet, counter to the views set in Heinrich Mann's novella, Hesse advocates in an almost pro-dilettantism attitude for a return to 'Müssigang', meaning the art of idleness. Positioning himself as an outsider looker, Hesse observes how, even in their free time, people have lost their capacity to appreciate not being in control and doing nothing as horror vacui or the fear of emptiness has taken hold of modern civilisation. Prior to this text, Hesse had already critically denounced in 1899, in a text entitled *Kleine Freuden*, the loss of the modern individual's sense of idleness and appreciation for this art of living (Hesse 1986/2000: 7–8). Even in their free time, the individual has lost their capacity to enjoy, to consume with measure, to be in touch with nature, or just to do nothing. Easily accessible and consumable forms of pleasure in the city have only heightened their restlessness, as Hesse signals in the passage 'missbrauchten, überangestrengten Augen' (9).

Extending the discussion in his essay *Die Kunst des Müssigangs* (1904), Hesse dives deeper into that subject and writes on the loss of the art of idleness and inaction even in the intellectual sphere. He criticises the exertion caused by the processes of industrialisation and the need for brain-workers to remain productive and overstrain their intellectual capacities to be able to keep up:

> [J]e mehr auch die geistige Arbeit sich dem traditions- und geschmacklosen, gewaltsamen Industriebetrieb assimilierte, und je eifriger Wissenschaft und Schule bemüht waren, uns der Freiheit und Persönlichkeit zu berauben und uns von Kindesbeinen an den Zustand eines gezwungenen, atemlosen, Angestrengtseins als Ideal einzutrichtern, desto mehr ist neben manchen anderen altmodischen Künsten auch die des Müßigganges in Verfall und außer Kredit und Übung geraten. (Hesse 1986/2000: 12)

According to Hesse, the consumption of great intellectual feats has grown with the assimilation of mental work with the industrial sector – also cancelling, in some way, the art of idleness in the intellectual sphere. With a performance culture dominating over social values and norms, the act of doing nothing has become preposterous.

Hesse mentions the 'harmless dilettante' being the last sort still practicing idleness. Yet even this professional stroller is threatened by the transformations of the city and the repressive and constricting forces of bourgeois values. In that sense, Heinrich Mann equally notes the exhaustion felt by the dilettante in the scene in which he struggles against the mass of people and against his vital need to perpetually seek new pleasures in the city pushing one's consumption.

Not just the city stands as a target of Hessian criticism and the embodiment of excesses. In his self-deprecating *Kurgast*, Hesse recounts his experiences as a patient at the Baden sanatorium. These explicitly autobiographical texts offer a more direct criticism and deeper insight into Hesse's observations of the mainstream sanatorium culture. As Hesse suffered from numerous physical ailments, which are often mentioned in his books, he interned himself in these specialised establishments to treat his sciatica and his gout tormenting him and making it difficult for him to move. He addresses the problem with the sanatorium atmosphere and lifestyle, constructing it as an enclosed space of collective sickness. In a diary-like form, Hesse gives us an insight into what he humorously formulates 'Psychologia Balnearia' (Hesse 1977: 69). With ironic distance and self-analysis, Hesse comically portrays the sanatorium and its inhabitants. For instance, during his medical examination, the encounter with the doctor is narrated as a physical fight.

> Vorsichtig begannen wir den Kampf, tasteten einander ab, probierten zögernd die erste Schläge. Noch waren wir auf neutralem Gebiet, unser Disput ging um Stoffwechsel, Ernährung, Alter, frühere Krankheiten […]. Wie erwartet […] das neutrale Gebiet wurde verlassen, mein Partner ging zur Offensive über, mit der vorsichtig akzentuierten, mit scheinbarer Nachlässigkeit hingelegte Frage: 'Glauben Sie nicht, dass Ihre Leiden zum Teil auch psychisch mitbestimmt sein können?' (21)

Hesse clearly knows his ailment to be 'psychogen' (21). He however delights himself in testing the physician's medical skills. Hesse stages in the form of a verbal exchange a confrontation between two worlds, the medical and the literary, in order to ridicule and undermine the authority and knowledge of the former entity.

From the very beginning, Hesse's work provides clear and ample evidence of a highly problematic therapeutic environment. The space is permeated with a 'faule[] und erschlaffende[] Badeatmosphäre' (69). From the start, we get a sense that the narrator does not fit in. He describes himself as less sick than others, which

enables him to observe these others. He notes how most of the patients have already been interned here multiple times. As he describes his stay and the tedium of his days, he witnesses how his body and spirit slowly waste away ('Versumpfung') into a state of extreme exhaustion and depression (69). Irritating thoughts and feelings have left him restless and mentally exhausted. On a physiological level, all movements cause him a discomfort. He feels apathetic. As a result of this condition, Hesse has lost his willingness to work and 'vor allem hat sich meiner eine Trägheit, eine missgelaunte Faulheit bemächtigt, die mich von allem Guten und Nützlichen abhält' (69). In turn contaminated by the sanatorium atmosphere, he starts to behave like all spa guests. He has become, like the others, ein 'Hund von Faulenzer, ein Schwein von fettem Geniesser' (70). Hesse narrates his painful struggle against himself as he powerlessly witnesses his own self succumbing to the consumption of trivial pleasures, indulging for instance in alcohol, eating excessively, and gambling.

Hesse regards his transformation into the diseased mass highly critically. He gradually blends in with the collective body: 'Ich wollte mich einer Norm anpassen, ich wollte Forderungen erfüllen, die gar niemand an mich stellte, ich wollte etwas sein oder spielen, was ich gar nicht war. Und so war er mir wieder einmal geschehen, daß ich mich selbst und das ganze Leben *vergewaltigt* hatte' (97, emphasis added). He ultimately questions the normative structures promoted by society and its institutions. Here, it entails a conforming to 'der oberflächlichen und verdummenden, der öden und lasterhaftern Seite diese trägen Kurgastlebens' (70). As depicted in Heinrich Mann's sanatorium novella, *Doktor Biebers Versuchung* and which can also be seen in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*, what is reoccurring in the narrative on sanatorium culture is the debilitating effects of these rehabilitative spaces on the body and mind. The narrator shows an awareness of the space's pernicious effects and willingly manifests self-distancing. Again, the notion of obligation to conform is fully at play here. In that sense, Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse unanimously offer to criticise the wellness-washing and capitalistic consumption of pleasure spread by the sanatorium culture.

Inspired by their own experiences of exhaustion and subsequently their struggle with their own self and environment, these three significant German authors have produced alternative discourses to socio-medical representations. Their discourses evidently mirror certain constructs of the body and metaphors seen in medical texts, but they (Hermann Hesse more ardently than Heinrich and Thomas Mann) also seek to undo and criticise them, particularly the impetus for the body and mind to remain disciplined, under control, and rational to remain

or regain a healthy body and mind. Their characters test and transgress the borders established by normative structures and their institutions. Invoking again Theodore Lessing's quote mentioned at the beginning of Part Two, modern individuals were not given much space to develop their inner life. They were urged to 'do'. In this infernal capitalistic circle, they had to consume, produce, manufacture, perform, and achieve. These routinised acts upheld by society are shown as sterile measures to achieve individuation, meaning a whole person. With their individual congruences and divergences, each author problematises in his own way and based on his personal experience the question of how one can individuate oneself and develop into a stable individual when there is so much pressure and rigidity projected by external forces.

First, the characters are pushed into an initiation and, for some, to call into question their moral and ethical boundaries. Exhausted by spatio-temporal and socio-moral constraints, they undertake a journey to a foreign country, leave the parental nest, wander aimlessly, and get in touch with their desires and unconscious through dream sequences. In these liminal spaces, they momentarily get to embrace the potentiality of boundlessness and uncertainty and become a force free of any particular social hierarchy. They are offered a chance to temporarily step outside of themselves and of their containment within a normative structure and explore certain possibilities. And therein lies the temptation. The dilettante's condition of exhaustion is tied to an absence of solid values and set beliefs grounding him. He is left lost, rootless, and burdened by an unstable and restless existence. Thomas Mann's Gustav von Aschenbach und Hermann Hesse's Hans Giebenrath do not manage to reinscribe themselves within new set of boundaries: they are pulled back by regret, self-questioning, reminiscences of a lost and idealised past. The only exception, who succeeds in transforming into a new self and to exit the liminal state of uncertainty and aimlessness, is Erich Wellkamp in Heinrich Mann's *In einer Familie*. But he also agrees to be contained within conventional borders in the sense of conforming to an established, rational collection of social rules and assumptions dictated by Wilhelmine culture.

PART THREE

FRENCH LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF EXHAUSTION

A Sense of No Ending: The Body-Text of Exhaustion and Its Potentialities

The release of Emile Zola's *La Terre* in 1887 questioned the structure and objectives of the main artistic movements that were the realist and naturalist genres and paved the way for a crisis of the novel. About the literature of the fin de siècle, Michel Raimond notes in *La crise du roman. Des lendemains du naturalisme aux années vingt* (1966): 'On voyait se dissoudre la notion d'individu et de caractère: le moi apprenait bientôt qu'il s'échappait à lui-même et qu'il était miné de conflits souterrains […]; que nul ne peut prétendre posséder sur le réel une vue omnisciente: le contact était définitivement perdu avec l'absolu' (488). Through their attempt to apply scientific principles, the realist and more extreme naturalist literary movements had failed in their task to strictly, precisely, and objectively depict reality, to reproduce an absolute realism stripped of moral judgment. The fin de siècle with its rising Schopenhauerian nihilism, spiritual malaise, decadent metaphysics, and growing doubts in the benefits of the sciences made way to a new genre of novel.

This literature exemplified (in chronological order) by Joris-Karl Huysmans, Octave Mirbeau, and Marcel Proust embodies this rupture. This new generation of writers considered the realist/naturalist aesthetic as incapable of accounting for the complexity of the modern individual, which was by the end of the century steeped in uncertainty and disillusionment. The novelistic genre had to transform into a means capable of reproducing an illusion of reality and serving individual ideas and visions of the world. The narrative tendencies were no longer fixated on characters with an already traced hereditary destiny. Each in their own way, this new generation of writers aspired to give the novel another outcome: one which shed light on certain societal issues, demonstrated their indignation, often directed against the bourgeoisie, and explored the inner landscape, the sensations, the order of the symbolic as experienced and perceived by the individual. These writers did not hesitate to push the

limits of the novelistic genre with the conception of fragmented, anti-naturalistic, chaotic, and experiential narratives.

In this part, we will explore how each text delves into the internal reality of the exhausted character and ask what the symbolic functions of exhaustion are. In the following chapters, we will see that in the selected French texts, in contrast to the German ones, narratives push the performance of exhaustion not only on the level of the language but also on the level of style and the structure. The texts both report the crisis that the character undergoes, but they are also immersive through their embodiment of the character's crisis in their form. These 'body-texts' explore exhaustion and its symptoms from the loss of will power to the fragmented plot and text, from the character's world-weariness and feeling of emptiness to the heaviness of the sentences, the repetitions and the absence of narrative development. The narratives constitute a symptomatology of exhaustion in themselves. Yet, paradoxically, through their structural chaos, these narratives also comprise a creative force, an energetic matrix bearing possibilities.

CHAPTER ONE

From Brain to Gut Feeling: Joris-Karl Huysmans' Indigestible Narratives

'Entre douleur et ennui': Joris-Karl Huysmans, Disciple of Schopenhauer

Few influential figures have so strongly opposed their ideas to a world glorifying the inexorable march of progress. This is true in the case of Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose work contains a damning judgment of the values of his time. Philippe Berthier comments in his comparative study on the two prominent French decadent writers, Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (1808–1889):

> En fait, c'est toute la modernité, vécue comme le paradigme de l'autosuffisance humaine (et donc de la mort) que Barbey et Huysmans jettent à la trappe […] avec le même haut-le-cœur, ne cessant l'un et l'autre de dresser du XIXe siècle des bilans de faillite à la mesure du prométhéisme officiel. Le mythe du Progrès est sarcastiquement démontré: 'Le progrès de qui? Le progrès de quoi? Car il n'a pas inventé grand-chose, ce misérable siècle! il n'a rien édifié et tout détruit.' (Berthier 1985: 337; see Huysmans 1966: 113)

The imbedded quotation, from Huysmans' novel *Là-bas* (1891), is revelatory of the author's scepticism and pessimism regarding the fin-de-siècle era of social and scientific progress and proof of his belief in a degenerating and culturally 'bankrupt' society. Other Decadents, too, just like Charles Baudelaire, Jean Lorrain, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, and Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, deplore in their prose and poetic works the progress of commercialisation, criticised an invading Americanism, democracy, and the gentrification of the French (see Pryzbos 2002: 11).

With the loss of national prestige on the one hand (through the defeat in the Franco-Prussian war) and, on the other, a period of economic prosperity and the expansion of technical progress, a growing scepticism coupled with pessimism developed on this ambivalent ground. Many intellectuals perceived France as a sick and weary nation, setting off dangerously towards an irreversible decline. This type of discourse became a preponderant fashionable subject throughout the second half of the nineteenth century as it did in Germany. By

the time Huysmans began to make a name for himself, the philosophical currents of nihilism and pessimism had flourished. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) became a leading voice, not only in Germany, but for the French fin-de-siècle generation as well. The French craze for Schopenhauerian pessimism was omnipresent in the two decades of the end of the century. Albert Wolff, in his *Courrier de Paris* column of February 1886, notes of his growing influence in intellectual circles that at this time: 'Paris est plein de Schopenhauer en herbes qui rongent les lettres françaises comme le phylloxera dévore les vignes de Bordeaux' (quoted in Baguley 1990: 134).

At the origin of the phenomenon lies the book written by Jean Bourdeau, *Arthur Schopenhauer. Pensées, maximes et fragments* (1880). It is a selection of texts translated and presented by the French publisher, which will become the breviary of an entire fin-de-siècle generation. The words of Schopenhauer, though translated and thus interpreted by Bourdeau, strongly resonated with Huysmans. The phrase 'La vie oscille, comme un pendule de droite à gauche, de la souffrance à l'ennui' written by Schopenhauer is also quoted by the character Jean Folantin in Huysmans' novel *À vau-l'eau* (1882). The reason Schopenhauer's pessimism resonated so much in France is given by Huysmans. In a letter to Emile Zola in March 1884, Huysmans tries to explain why Schopenhauer and his thoroughly pessimistic 'Weltanschuung' may seduce this generation, in that 'dans l'impossibilité où les gens se trouvent de croire au catholicisme, ces idées sont, à coup sûr, les plus consolantes, les plus logiques, les plus évidentes qui puissent être. Au fond, si l'on est pas pessimiste, il n'y a qu'à être chrétien ou anarchiste' (Huysmans 1953: 99). That being said, Huysmans remained only an intermittent follower of Schopenhauer's worldview, at least until his reconversion to Catholicism at the beginning of the twentieth century, because in the end 'le néant de ses conclusions [le] gèn[ait]' (quoted in Chastel 1957: 283).

Still, in his early Schopenhauerian days, Huysmans links his moral pain, his dissatisfaction with life with an existential crisis caused by an unrecognisable urban landscape. He critically regards the rapid transformation of the Parisian cityscape, a city he finds difficult to live and prosper in. The modern infrastructural developments of the metropolis entails '[n]i silence, ni bouffées de verdure, ni place pour se mouvoir au-dedans; aucun moyen de s'abriter du chaud et du froid au dehors, tels semblent être les résultats obtenus par ce fameux progrès dont tant de jobards nous rebattent les oreilles, depuis des ans!' (Huysmans 1986: 52–53). He notes the lamentable state of a city in which the individual suffocates, is exposed to extreme conditions, and estranged from natural settings. He also denounces the process of Americanisation and its crass obsession with money and industry to

which France is gradually succumbing: ‘En somme les odieuses mœurs de cet abominable pays qui a le nom l’Amérique, filtrent, peu à peu, chez nous, en même temps que les idées démocratiques. L’aristocratie de l’argent remplace l’autre’ (quoted in Smeets 2019: 687). This anti-capitalist thought reappears as a constant in his novels where the characters are threatened by ‘Americanised’ urban landscapes, department stores lining up the streets and the rushing of the crowd driven by materialistic desires. It is important to note that his novels precede the work of sociologists like Georg Simmel, whose study *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903) will later analyse the impact of large metropolises on social behaviour and mores. And the first publications of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim did not appear until the 1890s. It can therefore be concluded that as a visionary Huysmans possessed a certain gift for observation and a very critical and lucid perception regarding the state of society in the 1880s.

His pessimism with regard to the urban landscape and socio-cultural developments naturally led him to loneliness and misanthropy, to the rejection of this ‘Other’, the new consumer, in whom he did not recognise himself. His misanthropy is so pronounced that it manifests itself in all his writings and especially in his personal correspondences. A letter to the poet Paul Verlaine, dating from September 1889, confirms Huysmans’ disdain for the crowd: ‘Ici à Paris, c’est à l‘heure présente, un ramas effrayant de rastaquouères, une tourbe de provinciaux éperdus […]. Quel ballotage ignoble! et quels funèbres coïts ces gens, harassés par des journées d’exposition, doivent avoir!’ (see Delahaye 1919: 13–14). The crowd is depicted as a cluster of bad taste and mediocrity perverted by a consumeristic society and pushed to engage in coitus in the city’s streets. Huysmans’ comments in a way perverts the processes of homogenisation invading the metropolis. In 1896, in another letter to the art critic Gustave Coquiot, Huysmans admits: ‘J’ai toujours aimé la solitude qui effraye (les hommes de lettres)’. And, he adds that bourgeois society particularly disgusts him deeply: ‘Les classes dirigeantes me répugnent et les classes dirigées m’horripilent! Je me désintéresse absolument d’elles et je ne désire que me retirer loin des deux... Au fond, rien de ce qui fait la joie des autres ne m’intéresse. Je me sens dépaysé dans la vie active et mes livres me paraissent maintenant comme ceux des autres, vains’ (quoted in Coquiot 1912; Veysset 1950: 26). He harshly criticises and rejects bourgeois society and its narrow-mindedness (Smeets 2019: 687).

This attitude of rejection and withdrawal from society and loneliness can also be read on his body. Huysmans was known to his entourage as an afflicted, weak-looking individual. In a portrait of Huysmans

published in the newspaper *Gil Blas*, he is described in the following terms: '[q]u'ils aient aperçu, le long des quais où Huysmans aimait flâner, la "silhouette grêle, maladive, languissante"' (Dumont 1893). In the daily *L'évènement,* his body is described as 'mince, aux épaules rétrécies par un habituel serrement des coudes au corps' (Descaves 1891). Rare visitors at his home were disconcerted by 'cet homme malingre qui rasait les murs en chatte peureuse et proférait des imprécations tertulliennes' (Harry 1908: 418). His contemporaries concur in their impressions of him: Huysmans was a man fleeing the world and people. And his body exhibited this mental stance in its feebleness, almost phantomatic invisibility, drifting through the Parisian streets.

Based on these descriptions, his condition can be assumed to go beyond the somatically framed nervous condition known as neurasthenia. It constitutes more of a moral affliction, but which remains enormously anchored in the body. This representation correlates with the theoretical transition that also occurred within the medical community. There was particularly a fine line between neurasthenia, melancholia, and abulia. Nearing the end of the century, exhaustion came to be encompassed as a sign of feeling an inner void, an absence of desire (anhedonia), a weakness of decision, the inability to construct an idea into reality, and moral depression. We find these representations for instance in the writings of Toulouse and Roubinovich on melancholia (1897) or earlier in cases of aboulia as described by Ribot in his 1883 text on the 'annihilation of the will'. Levillain also refers in his treatise to the depressive states of neurasthenia and to melancholics being neurasthenic as well (Levillain 1891: 199). The term 'melancholia' is even used by Huysmans himself. In a letter to Arij Prins, dated July 24th 1886, he observes with desolation: 'Je sors de névralgies pour être rongé d'un rhumatisme qui me picore l'épaule gauche – C'est vous dire la *mélancolie* des jours que je passe, sous un ciel de fonte, chauffé à blanc, dans ma tour de la rue de Sèvres. Rien de neuf, à part ces détails irritants et imbéciles qui vous mangent la vie et retardent le travail' (Huysmans 1977a: 53–54, emphasis added).

His condition is situated in a liminal space between the somatic and psychic, melancholic tendencies and bodily phenomena belonging to the neurasthenic, the visible symptoms (a physiognomy expressing weakness) and the invisible symptoms (feeling of inner void, absence of desire, moral depression, weakness of decision). In his correspondence from the 1880s, Huysmans often complains of his neuralgia and headaches, forcing him to stay in bed (quoted in Smeets 2019: 686f). Neuralgia was also an enigma to medicine. With no evidence of organic lesion, it was either interpreted as a transient inflammation of the nerve core or was identified as a mental

illness, close to hysteria (see Rey 1995: 223–224). In 1881, a bout of 'facial neuralgia' (acute pain in the head) required Huysmans' convalescence. Retired in Fontenay-aux Roses, on the edge of Paris, Huysmans occupied a house there that served as inspiration for *À Rebours*. Huysmans often uses different ways to describe these neuralgic crises, with the sensation wandering from his brain, or rather head, to his stomach. The words are compelling and insightful, given they come from a subjective experience: the painful sensation is described as one 'qui me coupe[] la tête' or the feeling of having a needle stuck in his eye (Smeets 2019: 688). After having followed different treatments to overcome his persisting neuralgia, the only result he obtained was a further deeply embodied condition: he managed to 'faire tomber mes douleurs de tête dans le ventre' (685).

***Members of the medical body also took an interest in the figure of Huysmans in their studies of cases of nervous illness. The subject was broached by Dr Georges Lavalée (1889–1950) who, in *Essai sur la psychologie morbide de Huysmans* (1917), attempts to paint a clinical portrait of the then deceased author. The physician notes the dyspepsia having afflicted the author from an early age. Dyspespia is a digestive disorder, therefore functional, characterised by a feeling of heaviness, overflow or bloating. This set of symptoms surfaces repeatedly in Huysman's fictional work. Yet, Lavalée especially underlines the signs of moral depression apparent in the writer's case. He characterises the writer as a surly misanthropist, a bachelor rebellious to marriage, a solitary surrounded by his art collections and his books. He concludes that Huysmans had been an intellectually and morally abnormal being, presenting in his character what Pierre Janet described at the turn of the century as the psychasthenic personality, with its symptomatic feeling of incompleteness, dissatisfaction, pessimism, anhedonia (dejection), feelings of an inner void, social retreat, and other symptoms which resulted from an imbalance in psychic tension and force (see Janet 1903: 675, 784). Dr Georges Veysset (1950) also suggests a psycho-medical portrait of the author, in addition to a description of the interest Huysmans had in medical matters. According to Veysset's case study, Huysmans' health was failing and his digestive discomforts caused him to suffer almost continuously and to seek, like his character Des Esseintes in *À Rebours*, a secluded space where he could acclimatise to his own desires and live without too much torment (1950: 29). Modern society tensed him up and, he even quotes Huysmans' own words, it weighed on him 'autant que la pluie froide des banalités qui vous accueillent dans tout salon et qui vous font maudire, en sortant le temps que vous avez

perdu' (quoted in Veysset 1950: 26). From a psycho-pathological perspective, Veysset paints a man torn between mania and melancholia.

Huysmans being well acquainted with the medical community as a suffering case in point, he also criticised and mocked their omnipotent attitude towards vague or uncategorised ailments. In a letter to Emile Zola from 1882, Huysmans writes:

> Enfin l'un [des médecins] a fini par découvrir que je devais être atteint de la maladie qu'ils ne connaissent, ni les uns ni les autres (quel tas d'ignares et de sots, mon Dieu !), de la *maladie nerveuse*. – Sur ce, valériane, assa-foetida, bromure, tous les antispasmodiques – résultat : 0 – En dernier lieu, on a eu recours à des douches glaciales, avec de l'eau à 0 centigrades. […] Mon dégoût pour ce ridicule et douloureux traitement dépasse les bornes du possible. (Huysmans 1953, emphasis added)

His words fall within a context of nervous diseases and their vague and broad aetiologies being considered fashionable and comprehensive concepts to diagnose states of restlessness, feeling of disgust and hopelessness, and depressive moods. Huysmans aims to show the shortcomings of the medical sphere and its over-somatisation of mental states. The multitude of therapeutics prescribed by physicians is revealed as being rather cumbersome and costly rather than a health stimulant. The physicians' ignorance on certain subjects and the simplification of certain states propelled Huysmans to also reject a purely objective, materialistic perception of the body and its ailments.

With *À Rebours* in 1884, he turned away from naturalism and a positivist perception of pathological states to become one of the most prominent representatives of symbolism, an anti-naturalism, and an observer of states of mind (see Jacquod 2008: 68–69). Seemingly to him, literary naturalism, with its focus on representing social realities and 'observable' facts, ended up condemned to repetition and exhaustion. As he explains in his preface to *À Rebours*, 'en 1884 […] le naturalisme s'essouflait à tourner la meule dans le même cercle' (Huysmans 1977: 54). In that sense, Huysmans wished to offer a fresh perspective in his texts by dissociating himself from the naturalist movement and its strict reproduction of reality. His interest became fixed on the uncovering of humankind's shadow, the deeper facet of being that which the medical realm could not positivistically prove: the realm of the psyche and that of dreams.

Decadent artists, Huysmans amongst them, frantically cultivated their inner universe. Huysmans' imagination had one of its fundamental bases in his talent as an observer who missed nothing. The author of *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883), Paul Bourget, describes *À Rebours* as 'la plus complète monographie et la mieux établie qu'[il] sache d'une névrose dans une tête intellectuelle' (quoted in Kociubińska 2020: 175). As Veysset also notes, Huysmans had an astonishing documentation at his disposal atop of his introspective ability. Like a scientist, he compared, reconciled, deduced, and noted his thoughts and emotions (1950: 30). And therein, Huysmans sided by way of his 'clinical' method with the scientific method. We can therefore establish that solid conceptual cross-traffic took place between Huysmans' work and the scientific field.

His gift for self-observation and introspective descriptions of his own life re-emerges in his novels. Many literary critics have adopted a biographical approach and argue that the distinctions between character, narrator, and author are often difficult to draw (for instance, Cogny 1953; Peylet 2000; Guérin-Marmigère 2010: 217–230). It is true that various paratextual elements invite such readings. Notably certain comments from contemporary critics and authors of Huysmans who believe in the character/author identity. According to Jules Lemaître, for example, the characters 'André, Cyprien et même, […] M. Folantin, c'est M. Huysmans [car] ils expriment par leur bouche tous ses sentiments sur la vie et ses idées sur l'art' or Barbey d'Aurevilly, according to whom Des Esseintes in *À Rebours* is 'le héros autobiographique de Huysmans' (Lemaître 1899: 316; Barbey d'Aurevilly 1884). In his novels, one can find detailed descriptions of illnesses, instances of painful boredom working as an administrative clerk, rejection of matrimony and the inner experiences of solitude and vacuousness. He is again this character who, sometimes is disguised as an artist in *Les Soeurs Vatard* (1879), sometimes as a man of letters in *En Ménage* (1881), or a small employee in *À vau-l'eau*. 'Je fais', Huysmans writes in the preface of *Marthe* (1876), 'ce que je vois, ce que je sens et ce que j'ai vécu' (Huysmans 2010: 26).

Huysmans therefore constitutes a fascinating case study, for he combines in his writing cultural criticism with an inner-directed gaze and introspection, focusing on the effects of environment and life circumstances on the body and psyche of the individual. This chapter primarily examines two texts: the lesser-studied novella *À vau-l'eau* (1882) and the much widely explored novel *À Rebours* (1884). In both we find a strong thematic focus on solitary, over-wrought, world-weary, and exhausted characters passively following the stream of a decadent society or battling against it, fighting for existence in an urban landscape or in a hermetically sealed shelter on

the margins of the city. In both scenarios, as we will see, the Huysmansian hero remains stuck in an immovable situation, struck by physical and mental inertia, and his possibilities exhausted by a weariness of life.

The Circle of Existential Despair: The (In)Digestions of the Solitary Clerk in *À vau-l'eau*

Léon Daudet (1867–1942), a French journalist and member of the Académie Goncourt, remembers about *À vau-l'eau*: 'Ce chef-d'oeuvre du morose et du quotidien, du bouvardisme (si l'on peut employer ce néologisme) traité en Pot-Bouille, fut *À vau-l'eau*. Huysmans a créé avec le bureaucrate Folantin un personnage inoubliable' (Daudet 1907). The main protagonist, Jean Folantin, represents the apotheosis of the pessimistic and conflicted individual, plagued by an uneventful and mediocre life. In his forties, single, without family or fortune, tenant of an impersonal-looking apartment, Folantin is a ministerial employee earning a meagre salary. In his youth, he frequented cafes and chased girls. His shy nature and limited financial resources gradually forced him to move away from places of pleasure and the prospect of marriage. Now, he is left with nothing but an uneventful, dreary existence, chained to a desk '[à] gratter des pages, surcharger des lignes' (Huysmans 2007: 62). With his paradigmatic solitary, average, and dejected office worker, Huysmans' novel is modelled on Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* (1842), Franz Grillparzer's *Der arme Spielmann* (1848), and Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853).

À vau-l'eau underlines this unbearable state of emptiness, of feeling stuck in a state of inertia, too exhausted in life to move forward, defeated by the monotony of life. Folantin confesses from the height of his forty years, 'un grand découragement le poigna; le vide de sa vie murée lui apparut' (Huysmans 2007: 63). Whilst all his friends are already married and set in life, he has only experienced romantic failures, which have propelled him to abandon himself in loneliness and celibacy. Folantin is dragged down by an aimless and tedious life punctuated by the repeated activities of 'se rendre au bureau, le quittait, mangait et se coucher à neuf heures pour recommencer, le jour suivant, une vie pareille' (75). His days are programmed like a machine and, like one, he possesses no will power to break this routine. He travels the long ordeal of the miseries of celibacy. His absolute is to be at peace with his stomach and with his sexual needs and, of course, reality constantly disappoints him.

His routine causes him to sink into ‘un alourdissement absolu d’esprit’ (75). In brief, this emptiness is one of having no desire, nothing to fuel his will to move forward in life.

His quest to find a restaurant, able to stimulate and pleasure his senses and alleviate his daily boredom, all fail. Strolling through the streets of a city overflowing with greed and mediocrity, Folantin is immediately confronted with the sordid blandness of ‘un désolant fromage’, a Roquefort cheese resembling ‘une sorte de dentelle blanche marbrée d’indigo, évidement découpée dans un pain de savon de Marseille’ (59). When it is not his monotonous work straining his muscles and overburdening him, it is the food establishments, supposed to restore him, which drain his remaining energy with their scorching (‘écrasante’) heat and the cigar vapours and feed his hopelessness; or it is the time which slowly drips and Sundays which weigh (‘pèse’) on his mind (97, 105). Since nothing satisfies him, Folantin is kept in a lethargic state and by a hopeless sentiment. Folantin has enclosed himself in a state – he coins – of ‘affreuse mélancolie’ (73) and ‘se laissait aller à vau-l’eau, incapable de réagir contre ce spleen qui l’écrasait’ (75). The expression ‘à vau-l’eau’, the novel is named after, means to follow the current and, in the figurative sense, to degenerate, to move inevitably towards one’s end.

This degeneration is explored throughout the novel mostly by an interior monologue recounted in the third person. The aim is to reconstruct, with the most realism, the lived experience of the inner feeling of void gnawing from within the main character. This is partially rendered by the character’s withdrawal into his own self, exploring his interiority, and questioning the events unfolding before him. The paucity of dialogue is compensated by an inner surge, which strives to convey feelings and thoughts at ounce. Certain passages in the free indirect style allow consciousness to unfold and the complexity of emotions to be translated instantly. This is the case when Folantin evokes in the first person his own thoughts and complaints: ‘Chaque état à ses inquiétudes et ses tracas; et puis c’est une lâcheté lorsqu’on a pas de fortune que d’enfanter des mioches! – […] Ah! Au moins, la génération des tristes Folantin, s’éteindra avec moi!’ (82–83). They are intercut with passages in omniscient narratorial intervention to the point that there seems to be no clear delimitation between the point of view of the character and the narrator. All focal points seem effectively merged giving an impression of one continuous flow of the mind and comment on the character’s thoughts and emotions and on surrounding events.

The ‘current’ of thoughts focuses on his search from one restaurant to another to find a fulfilling meal to satiate not just his stomach but his existential void as well. Eating could be interpreted as a way for him to compensate his inner emptiness. Folantin is looking for sensations, and this one he hopes to find in a satisfying and cheap restaurant. And there lies his misfortune and the source of his exhaustion. No restaurant manages to ‘restore’ his strength to a former state, to physically and psychologically nourish Folantin’s body. Without the taste for the pleasure of food, the character is inherently dissatisfied, hence the chronicity of lack of appetite and boredom. But at the same time, Folantin is very lucid about what he lacks: ‘Si j’avais une passion quelconque; si j’aimais les femmes, le bureau, si j’aimais le café, le domino, les cartes, je pourrais bouffer au-dehors, ruminait-il, car je ne resterais jamais chez moi. Mais hélas! *rien* ne me divertit, *rien* ne m’intéresse’ (119, emphasis added). His dissatisfaction with life in this sense fits into the notion of ‘anhedonia’. It is a concept which had not yet been coined or medically defined at the time Huysmans wrote his novel. Théodule Ribot first established the word in his *La psychologie des sentiments* in 1896, fourteen years after the publication of *À vau-l'eau*. Deriving from the Greek *an* (‘without’) and *hedone* (‘pleasure’), anhedonia refers to the loss of ability to feel pleasure: it is a condition of insensibility (*OED* Online). In Folantin’s case, we can assume that his dissatisfaction with life, his utter disengagement from the world is not a disorder that fits into the mould of neurasthenia, it is much more metaphysical.

Huysmans makes use of terms, for some dated and going back to the beginning of the century, like ‘mélancolie’ (Huysmans 2007: 73), ‘spleen’ (75), and ‘ennui’ (117). In comparison with the corpus of medical texts on nervous disorders and especially neurasthenia predominantly present in the 1880s, Huysmans uses notions that were more rarely medicalised. Yet Huysmans takes advantage of it as ‘melancholia’ and ‘spleen’, as the seat of the ‘black bile’ and associated with digestive disorders, constitutes a fitting concept to explain Folantin’s condition. As a reminder, melancholia extends far beyond Galen’s humoral theory. Etienne Esquirol’s nosography of mental diseases (1805) places the causes of moral affections as corporeal in nature, in the epigastric region (17). Maurice de Fleury (1897) later associates the melancholic man with the dyspeptic, the ‘ralentis de la nutrition’ (263). In this case, melancholia is a condition interrelating the body and the mind: signed by existential despair, a feeling of inner emptiness, and a constricted digestive system. From the start we discover the main character who, having had a bad day, ‘broyait du noir’ (61) and will in the course of the narration be gripped by a constrained interiority due to his irritated and unsatisfied digestive apparatus.

His mental state of depression comes to be physiologically and textually embodied by the experience of heaviness and constriction, which also alludes to the brain-gut relationship theorised by nerve scientists at that time. First of all, there is the sensation of heaviness pressing down to his guts. In *À vau-l'eau*, the digestive process is a ubiquitous motif. The abysmal quality and weight of aliments in Folantin's body is constantly felt throughout the lines. In addition to the unbearable heat, the crowded restaurants, the slowness of time passing and weighing on his body and his mind, Folantin experiences painful digestions. The effort demanded to digest fatty, undercooked or overcooked, tasteless, bitter foods affects his energy levels. The working intestines have consumed the last energy reserves: 'j'ai trop présumé de mes forces, je suis à bout. – Et le matin venu, il se levait les jambes brisées, la tête étourdie et molle' (110). The sensation of heaviness is conceptualised as physiologically vertical as Folantin experiences a feeling of heaviness moving from his head and upper spin to his digestive system. The movement of the painful sensations from the head to the bowels is that of a weight pulling the body down. He embodies and experiences the weight of his boredom and pain of living. And it is not insignificant that digestive problems (dyspepsia) and their sensations of heaviness, constriction, and bloating occupy an important place in the clinical picture of neurasthenia and intellectual 'surmenage' (see Bouchut 1860: 73–74; Axenfeld 1883: 887–888; Proust and Ballet 1897: 58–74) and, in a similar way, with melancholia (Toulouse and Roubinovitch 1897: 20–21). As seen in the study of medical texts, the diagnostic boundaries of these concepts overlap.

In this context, digestion becomes one of the major health concerns and embodies the character's inner malaise. Folantin, following this hygienic vogue, experiments with all remedies to treat his stomach aches and relieve himself from its weight. As pointed out by Larry Duffy, in the novel *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes pushes the idea of disembodiment to an extreme as he resorts to bouillons and nourishing enemas – an injection of fluid into the lower bowel to relieve his guts (see Duffy 2018: 166–167). The presence of various liquid forms, hot baths or chemical elements, listed in the text were at the time believed to empty the stomach and purge the digestive system (see Hecketsweiler and Frexinos 2009: 600–611). The liquid therapeutics Folantin possesses in his personal pharmacy are conscientiously enumerated by the narrator:

> [C]'étaient chez lui des masses de boîtes, de topettes, de fioles, une pharmacie en chambre, contenant tous les citrates, les phosphates, les proto-carbonates, les lactates, les sulfates de protoxyde, les iodures et proto-iodures de fer, les liqueurs de Pearson, les solutions de Devergie, les granules de Dioscoride, les pilules d'arséniate de soude et d'arséniate d'or, les vins de gentiane et de quinium, de coca et de colombo! (Huysmans 2007: 79–80)

The successive drug names, filling the space on the page, also shows the weight medicine and the pharmaceutical world held in people's everyday life. Folantin exemplifies the caricature of the modern man of his century, a victim of hygienist and consumerist practices. Proving once again the scientific and biomedical knowledge of Huysmans, this passage also reveals through the inner monologue of the hero the medicinal quackery by which Folantin is not fooled: 'Dire que tout cela c'est de la blague et que d'argent perdu!' (80). Folantin furthermore attests to 'l'inutilite des stomachiques et des stimulants' and how the medicinal treatments he takes do more harm than good as the iron supplements blacken his insides and the arsenic corrodes his stomach (105).

It is not just the food and treatments he has to ingest and digest but also the narrative form which exacerbates Folantin's heaviness. Indeed, his growing exhaustion is simulated in metaphorical experience and narrative structure. Textually, the constant use of long and richly decorated sentences provides the text with a monotonous tone and heaviness. By way of lengthy enumerations of therapeutics, making the sentence difficult to read and the words to digest, the narrator attempts to demonstrate their burdensome rather than effective effects. Coupled with lengthy lists, there are excessively extended and embellished sentences, such as 'la douloureuse lassitude des existences trainées sans espoir et sans but' (103), 'leur accent, souligné par des gestes d'épileptiques, hachait les phrases et vous les enfournait, toutes broyées, dans le tympan' (96), 'sa pièce empuantie par cette odeur de poussière et de renfermé' (90), and epithets such 'le désolant fromage' (59), which surfeit the narrative's form and exhaust not only its character but, beyond that, the reader as well. The plot of the novel becomes lassitude in its words and in its events. The reader can indeed experience the heaviness disrupting Folantin's lived body through its heavily descriptive and performative style.

The focus also lapses from an internal, physiological pressure of indigestion to the simulation of an external pressure, suspending the character's agency. First, it is emulated by the urban landscape. The environment surrounding Folantin weighs on his body and mind and asphyxiates him. The sight of a dreary and bleak Paris does not alleviate his unsatisfied stomach and lassitude. While writing *À vau-l'eau*, Huysmans felt

disgusted with Paris with its rapid transformation into an 'Americanised' city. Similarly, as Folantin walks the city's streets, he deplores the automatisation of means of transportation and the circulation of 'énormes omnibus jaunes' (107), the rapid expansion of luxurious department stores, the distressing uniformity of these 'casernes s'étendant à perte de vue' (106), and the grazed swathes of greenery in Paris. These few lines situate the loss in the disappearance of calm and intimate spaces making way for tight spaces and stuffy streets (105–106). In restaurants, the tables are likewise small, tightly arranged, and crowded. The cluster of people confined in tight spaces and the smoke of tobacco makes the air unbreathable (94–97). Space is described as hostile, as it blocks any attempt at movement and becomes the external complement of Folantin's inner heaviness. Secondly, the heaviness, the oppressed feeling felt in these spaces is worsened with a horizontal heaviness of time, also mimicking a difficult process of digestion. Time goes by, drop by drop (90). The impression is then that of unbearable slowness: 'Une demi-heure s'écoula […]. Une autre demi-heure s'écoula' (95); '[l]e dimanche devenait interminable' (108); [l]a semaine s'égouttait' (105). The subjective feeling of duration becomes that of an eternal present; it is empty and a pending time. It is a time between 'pas encore' and 'déjà plus', a temporal inertia on top of a spatial inertia culminating in the character's exhaustion. The exhausted cannot explore the possible in a context of immobility. Space and time prevent the usual narrative cogs from developing, thus bucketing any possible horizon.

The digestive difficulties Folantin experiences, the heaviness of space and time weighing on him, asphyxiating him, the oppressive rhetoric immobilising the development of the narrative amplify this inner despair and emptiness and are a permanent memento of the reality of life he remains stuck in. Folantin comes to the sad realisation that '[un] abominable vide s'était creusé dans son existence' (69–70). His actions are pointless and cannot satisfy him. This negation deepens the inner void even more, nothing in fact fills the void, nothing satisfies it. All actions and secondary circumstances are stricken with negativity. What Huysmans seeks to show through this narration is a desire for passage, to exit downwards or upwards, to exit outside the closed and limited horizon, but his quest cannot be achieved and remains stuck in a dead end with his digestive problems: 'il demeurait les pieds dans la crotte, rivés au sol. Il n'y avait donc pas moyen de sortir de son être, de s'évader de son cloaque, d'atteindre les régions où l'âme chavire, ravie, en ses abîmes?' (175). The temporal inertia, the spatial confinement, and the occlusion of his digestive tract close his horizon of possibilities even more. Words

of negation or structures signifying loss or impossibility haunt the text : ‘il n’avait plus envie de rien’ (63), ‘ses économies sont épuisées’ (116), ‘plus de virilité’, ‘le mariage est impossible’ (74), and ‘le manque d’appétit’ (105). In the end, Folantin even loses his appetite and any possibility of regeneration or fulfilment.

It may be noted that his lack of vitality is throughout the text always associated with the metaphorical image of an absent fire or a weak flame, a sign of his physical and moral ill-being. In the novel, when Folantin returns home unsatiated and congested, he finds himself with no fire to warm himself up and no flame in his lamp (60). The vital spark is extinguished both in his home and in Folantin’s body: ‘Il considéra, navré, la mèche qu’il venait de lever, une mèche éventée et jaune, à la couronne calcinée et tailladée de dents noires. […] Tant bien que mal, il répara son éclairage’ (60–61). The analogy between a fire and Folantin’s vital energy, emphasised by the possessive pronoun in ‘*son* éclairage’, is well anchored in nineteenth-century vitalist and materialist scientific discourses. One can immediately draw a correlation with Hermann von Helmholtz’s principle of conservation of energy. According to his law, exhaustion corresponded to a drop in energetic capacity caused by a decrease in capacity to generate an optimal conversion of the nutrients ingested. A lack or absence of initial chemical energy corresponded to malnutrition; also, another factor hindering the proper functioning of the system could be an accumulation of the heat produced and a deficiency in the evacuation processes. Folantin no longer ingests food, and remains isolated, locked in his apartment. Like under a bell, asphyxiating his body and his mind, his inner vital fire cannot be nourished and can only remain extinguished. Until the end, his apartment remains cold and unlit.

The series of unsuccessful and depressing episodes gives a new rhythm to the story. The narrative structure becomes fragmented, made up of a series of scenes and anecdotes breaking up the text. The deliberately damaged transitions accentuate the fragmentary aesthetic. The paragraphs follow each other and clash in a brutal way, cancelling out the previous content: ‘Plusieurs semaines s’écoulèrent’ (104); closely followed by ‘[i]l atteignit ainsi l’hiver;’ (104); and ‘[s]ans doute huit jours ne s’étaient pas écoulés’ (117). Folantin languishes in his thoughts and the reader experiences the character’s withdrawal into himself. Folantin looks back at his past, what he should have done better, shares his daily complaints. But he cannot look to the future. His repeated conditional verbal sentences opened by ‘si j’avais’ are negated by ‘rien ne m’intéressee’ (119). By its repetitively negated and circular structure, the narrative becomes a story of inertia.

The character stasis and story stagnation through the use of repetitions are reinforced by the design of a closed horizon leaving no space for possibility. Folantin is walled up in his office as an employee tasked to a routine and inconsequential job or in his apartment and the canteen route he performs in a loop. All places are the same: the different food establishments tested are equal to each other, all defined by poor meals and suffocating atmospheres. Like the ensuing digestive issues he experiences, Folantin remains stuck in a vicious circle. Huysmans invalidates the process of extending the narrative to the denouement and lets it remain open-ended. There is no escape out of time and space, and no possibility for the character nor for the narrative to develop. He adopts in a way Schopenhauer's vision of a society deemed colourless, decadent, and exhausted by way of repetitions and cyclicity through the image of the fiery wheel of Ixion (Ixion was bound to an endlessly spinning burning wheel) and that of Sisyphus' rock condemning him to futile, hopeless, and indefinite labour (see Rosset 2001: 51). In Huysmans' habitual insertion of an end moral, Folantin comes to the conclusion that there is no use of exhausting oneself by looking elsewhere as 'il comprit l'inutilité des changements de routes, la stérilité des élans et des efforts' (Huysmans 2007: 127–128). Yet, paradoxically, Folantin's story also denounces the weight and exhausting effects of a repetitive and aimless life. Huysmans exposes the vicious circle damning the individual to boredom, aboulia (lack of will power), melancholia, existential depression as well as to an exhausting search for pleasures and stimulants. For the modern man, there is no possible exit route. And in this, Huysmans agrees with the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer which is quoted at the end of the text: 'la vie de l'homme oscille comme un pendule entre la douleur et l'ennui' (128).

'Confinement contre nature': An Experiment of Body Transcendence in *À Rebours*

The influence of the German thinker Schopenhauer and the concept of 'Weltschmerz' or world-weariness continue to resonate in Huysmans' words. His pessimism, scepticism, and anti-conformism is further developed in the 1884 novel *À Rebours* (translated as 'against the grain' or 'against nature'). Believing that nothing can remedy the damned misery of existence, the main protagonist Duke Jean Floressas des Esseintes quotes the philosopher: '[Schopenhauer] aussi prêchait le néant de l'existence, les avantages de la solitude, avisait l'humanité que quoi qu'elle fît, de quelque côté qu'elle se tournât, elle demeurerait malheureuse' (Huysmans 1977: 164). Des Esseintes is aware of the decadent state of society and its nocuous effects on him and thus pushes

the experience of self-withdrawal further than in Folantin's case. This, in fact, amounts to crossing the border of the city and choosing solitary confinement in a secluded country house to escape the materialism and superficiality of bourgeois society, the detrimental effects of the hustle and bustle of the city, and a general cultural atmosphere he deems threatening to his nerves. From the start we find the character's, and knowingly Huysmans', eternal complaints, his contempt of the mass and the society of his time: 'Son mepris de l'humanité s'accrut; il comprit enfin que le monde est en majeure partie, composé de sacripants et d'imbéciles […]. Enervé, mal à l'aise, indigné par l'insignifiance des idées échangées et reçues, il devenait comme ces gens […] qui sont douloureux partout; il en arrivait à s'écorcher constamment l'épiderme' (77). Huysmans' misanthropy and criticism of modern society is evidently shown in these first few lines of the text. And, it also had repercussions on his physical and mental condition.

Affected by episodic nervous excitability and weakness, Des Esseintes goes to greater extremes and withdraws from the world to flee in a sophisticated and scholarly ivory tower to live a life of dreams and sensations and travel in his mind. His complaints pushing him to self-isolate overlap with the medical discourse of neuropathology. The narrative delves into the question of heredity, environmental effects, food habits, hygienic measures. In preparing for his novel, Huysmans had done extensive research and collected a rich amount of medical information, which served as a solid basis for presenting the evolution of Des Esseintes' neurosis: with various disorders of perception like anesthesia or hyperesthesia, hypochondria, depression, gastric ailments, neuralgia and many other symptoms (see Gengembre 2006: 240–246; Cabanès 1992: 7–16). Huysmans had in particular consulted Alexandre Axenfeld's 1863 *Traité des névroses* and Eugène Bouchut's 1860 *De l'état nerveux aigu et chronique, ou, Nervosisme* as a letter to Zola from May 1884 attests (Huysmans 1953: 103). Thanks to the richness of the descriptions, Des Esseintes appears to us as an exemplary clinical case. His character traits and psychophysiological disorders are carefully observed, meticulously transcribed, to such a degree of precision that some works by physicians refer to it as a reference point and exemplary case study (see Segalen 1902: 47–51; Daudet 1907).

Huysmans goes so far as to respect the rhetorical device used in medical presentation by making the statement of the causes of his hero's nervous illness the object of a notice, appendaged to the main text (Huysmans 1977: 51–79). Replicating medical nosologies, each paragraph concisely and in order of importance addresses

Des Esseintes' hereditary predisposition, childhood illnesses, religious education, mode of life, etc. The narrator lingers to note Des Esseintes' weak disposition and hereditary effeminate traits : 'La décadence de cette ancienne maison avait […] suivi régulièrement son cours; l'effemination des males était allée en s'accentuant […], usant leur reste de vigueur dans les unions consanguines' (71–72). His father had died of a 'vague illness', the condition of which is not being further elaborated by the narrator; but his mother, unable to bear any form of disquietude without a nervous breakdown, subsequently and clearly died of exhaustion (72). At a young age, Des Esseintes was already 'anémic et nerveux, aux joues caves', 'aux mains sèches et fluettes' (72). He also suffered a case of chlorosis. Chlorosis, a female disease classified in Littré's dictionary as a hysterical disorder and characterised by anemia, excessive thinness, yellowed or greenish skin, was primarily associated with pathological asexuality in women (Littré 1873: 608). In Des Esseintes' case, this case of chlorosis reinforces his effeminate weakness and sexual deviancy.

The influential medical treatises on nervous diseases authored by Bouchut and Axenfeld mention the incessant paradoxical melding of overexcitability and exhaustion, suffering and apathy, spasm and slackness, sentimentality and indifference, intellectual exaltation and mental incapacity. These symptoms are in Bouchut's text (1860) still listed under the old concept of 'nervosisme' before it was coined 'neurasthénie'. The literary symptomatology in Huysmans' text is inspired by the symptoms listed in Bouchut's medical treatise. Muscular weakness, insomnia, nightmares, hallucinations, migraines, sensitivity to stimuli of the senses, profuse sweating, breathing disorders, vascular disorders, digestive disorders, these are many neurotic signs which appear in the novel and which we also encounter in Bouchut's text (1860: 52–90). Bouchut remains rather vague on the details of nervous disorders, but lists the causes as nervous temperament, heredity, education, venereal excess, excessive work, and anaemia (1860: 18). When the disease is prolonged, the patient falls into a deep decline, to the point that, as Bouchut points out, his existence becomes a problem or unliveable. There follows a withdrawal into oneself, a disgust with life, which can lead to suicide.

In 1883, Axenfeld offers a more elaborate description with neurasthenia. He lists '[la] sensation de froid au sommet de la tête, de vide, de pesanteur, […] les étourdissements, […] le sentiment d'ivresse' as noticeable signs (1883: 883). In a consensus with other nerves theorists, Axenfeld emphasises the absence of organic lesions (1883: 889–890; see also Levillain 1891: 14; Bouveret 1891: 11; Proust and Ballet 1897: 1) and the notable

contradictions in this morbid state: great suffering from little exercise, weakness of the nervous system with exaggeration of moral and physical sensitivity, signs of exhaustion alternating with nervous overexcitability (Axenfeld 1883: 882–883). The causes constitute idleness, lively passions, and poor hygiene (late nights, excesses of all kinds, insufficient food) resulting in nervous exhaustion. Axenfeld does not enumerate the environmental impact, the urban setting as straining, tearing the nerves. But he advises hygienic treatment ranging from the establishment of a quiet, calm, simple life, to the countryside as a space of repose. One should move away from the sources of one's concerns and worries; yet, as were many hygienist prescriptions, his advice also paradoxically prohibits loneliness, boredom, idleness, contemplation, and reading (905).

Huysmans, having absorbed himself in theoretical texts on nervousness, therefore seems to have incorporated many of the psychosomatic symptoms and causes listed in these nosographies. This also includes the vagueness and protean structure of the pathologies described in these texts. As the pages unfold, Des Esseintes' troubles are more clearly defined but the conclusion of the diagnosis remains unvoiced. Amongst the many references to his panel of symptoms, one can find: 'son système nerveux s'exacerba' (Huysmans 1977: 78), '[s]es sens tombèrent en léthargie', 'l'impuissance fut proche' (78), 'abattu par l'hypocondrie', 'écrasé par le spleen' (99), 'les douleurs quittaient le crâne, allaient au ventre ballonné, dur, aux entrailles traversées d'un fer rouge', 'la toux nerveuse, déchirante, aride', 'l'appétit cessa, des aigreurs gazeuses et chaudes, des feux secs lui parcoururent l'estomac' (167), 'les nerfs n'obéissaient plus à la volonté' (192), 'ses lèvres énervées' (213), '[i]l se roidit' (256), 'la dyspepsie nerveuse se réveilla' (295), 'une déperdition de fluide nerveux' (300). *À Rebours* thus contains a maelstrom of diverse symptoms, regrouped under functional and organic diseases, and aims to distort and ambiguate them. The notions 'singulière maladie' (197), 'phénomènes inconnus' (295), and 'une indicible mélancolie' (301), used to finally describe his neurosis, highlight the theoretical insufficiencies of the positivist psychophysiology of the end of the century.

The narrative then also goes to develop on the discourse of sexual perversions, which remains unstudied and even unmentioned by Bouchut and Axenfeld. The type of the degenerate, exhausted aristocrat slips into the socially constructed representations of masculine deviancy (see Nye 1993: 98–126). Aside from his dandy-esque attitude and aesthetic tastes, noted and analysed by several critics (see, for instance, Kociubińska 2020; Roloff 2014: 57–67; Gnüg 1988: 271–291), Des Esseintes is also a striking character for his societally-perceived sexual

deviancy with his sado-masochistic inclinations. To boot the family's effeminate disposition, the notion of sexuality also becomes an element in Des Esseintes' pathological state. A variety of sexual roles and options are explored, specifically male masochism, homosexuality, fetichism, and voyeurism. Posteriorly to Huysmans' text, Julien Chevalier will be the author of the first thesis in modern French medicine on homosexuality (defended in 1885 and published in 1893) (see Corbin et al. 2011: 381). And, Richard von Krafft-Ebing will only become in 1886 with his *Psychopathia sexualis* the most prominent sexual psychopathologist to theorise on the male perversion of homosexuality/bisexuality, masochism and sadism (see Schaffner 2012: 45–57). The discourse here is therefore more socio-cultural than medical.

The significant concern with these perversions testifies to a cultural fear of feminisation, as they were stigmatised by physicians and hygienists as a loss of male sexual vigorousness and health. These pathological constructions further manifest the obsession of a society and its institutions with control, ultimately self-control, and discipline (see Schaffner 2012: 14–15; also, Noyes 1997: 6, 9). In Des Esseintes' case, he falls into the perverse desire to be dominated by a strong and powerful woman like Miss Urania as described in chapter IX. Yet contra to medical discourses of perversions, this desire is purposefully signified as a defiant exploration of unnatural and artificial pleasures and a rejection of bourgeois conformism. In fact, he takes it into his head, through an impulse of sadism or satanic erotomania, to take a young man of sixteen and to lead him astray, to pervert him in order to make him an assassin. He therefore wants to unleash his sexual instinct and follow his design to go 'against nature', or rather against the order of society. Des Esseintes' perverse inclination seems to be a natural response to his desire to cut himself off of society, its established gender roles and dictated norms and mores.

The causes are not solely endogenous. Following the symptomology of neurasthenia as described by numerous nineteenth-century theorists, one can discern the typical exogenous factor known to neurasthenia: the urban landscape. Des Esseintes' nervous system is irritated by the sight of the modernised metropolis and the experiences of its fast-paced rhythm. The streets are described as crowded and the rapid expansion of infrastructures have turned Paris into Chicago: 'Pendant les derniers mois de son séjour à Paris […], abattu par l'hypocondrie, écrasé par le spleen, il était arrivé à une telle sensibilité des nerfs que la vue d'un objet ou d'un être déplaisant se gravait profondément dans sa cervelle' (Huysmans 1977: 99). Rejoining Folantin's depiction

of the Parisian landscape, the city is again depicted as a site of disease, putrid infections, and leaking pores: 'Sous le ciel bas, dans l'air mou, les murs des maisons ont des sueurs noires et leurs soupiraux fétident; la dégoûtation de l'existence s'accentue et le spleen écrase' (208). The city feels almost melancholic with its black bile ('sueurs noires') oozing out of its walls. The blame for the character's infected and increased spleen is shifted towards elements external to his body and his own self.

The character believes that the root of his spleen lies in the ugliness and depravity of the outside world. Wanting to escape at the same time this bourgeois society, hygienist and repressive in its norms and values, and the prison of his degenerating, mortal body, he attempts to go into seclusion and to create an artificial universe, one unaffected and untroubled by the outside world. Barricaded inside this secluded residence filled with all sorts of objects, colours, and perfumes to excite his nerves and offer an escapism, Des Esseintes believes himself sealed off and protected from society and from his past frivolous, pleasure-seeking tendencies. But this 'confinement contre nature' he is aware of begins to weaken his body and open the gates of his unconscious (158). He falls into an asthenic state, in which fragments of long repressed memories resurface and come to haunt him. Dissolution, loss of control, and a Nietzschean Dionysian state of intoxication resonate in the language here. Ultimately, Huysmans goes beyond merely rewriting an aetiology of nervous illness by way of a rhetoric of fragmentation, decay, and confinement. The narration reveals an illness narrative, attacking the points of blindness in medicine by focusing on the patient and a subjective perspective. Huysmans develops a figurative language to explain the consequences of seclusion and a disorder that escapes and resists the scalpel and the rationalist and materialistic reductions of the time.

In terms of stylistic form, the narrative plot decelerates and produces an oppressing climate as the lengthy and vertiginous descriptions of the space Des Esseintes inhabits intensify and reach nauseating levels. A great deal has already been written about Huysmans' heavily ornamented style, specifically in *À Rebours* (see, for instance, Lloyd 1990; Guyaux et al. 1987). It is important to underline that the language itself, as it does in *À vau-l'eau*, performs through the excessive wealth of elliptical turns and tropes the character's languor, heaviness, and fragmented self. First of all, the heaviness, physical inertia, oppression, and inner fragmentation Des Esseintes experiences in his sheltered home is performed through the long and prolix descriptions, multiplying and branching out to carefully inventory the curiosities of Des Esseintes' newly founded universe. Each chapter

focuses on one aspect of the excessive and artificial living environment of Des Esseintes: the turtle adorned with diamonds, a mouth-organ expelling liquors, Gustave Moreau's decadent portrait of Salomé, the floral composition, and the room with perfumes. The description of objects, fantasies, memories, dreams in individual chapters compose and order a fragmented mental and decadent landscape. The chapters become the individual pages in a book, the individual cell disconnected from an organism, the individual disbanded from the social body described by Bourget in his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883). Like a degenerating organism, on the scale of the book itself, the chapters are turned into independent micro-stories. In a way, *À Rebours* dissociates with a more 'classical' form of the novel as the chapters are more like stand-alone episodes than a more 'natural' sequence of events.

Like an individual cell disaggregated from an organism, Des Esseintes seeks absolute emancipation from society's mundane fare and pleasures in favour of pure aesthetic indulgence in the construction of a world of his own. The aspiration to become invisible, to retreat from society, and to empty the body, recurrent in Huysmans' work, is a quest to transcend the confines of space and time and of the body. It is in his solitary confinement in Fontenay-aux Roses that he attempts to build another system of values, that of autarky, of quality against quantity, to choose the sole sovereignty of the self against submission to the social body, and to purge his body through the elimination of earthy and solid sustenance (Huysmans 1977: 166–167). In a study of the figure of the solitary, Jérôme Solal (2003) describes Des Esseintes' seclusion as an attempt of absolute emancipation, which involves trying out a plural dilettante existence – greedy for renewable fantasies and virtual excitations – which translates a desire of possibility. But one might add that this desire is also limited by the individual himself. Des Esseintes, although possessing everything and being able to get drunk on pleasures and memories far from society or the outside world, is impaired by the environment he has created and his own body rendered more vulnerable. In this state, he loses all sense of self-control and exacerbates his neurosis.

With the horizontal heaviness of the language and the fragmented chapters, there also follows in his solitary confinement a vertical heaviness. As the sentences become difficult to digest, Des Esseintes' dyspepsia manifests itself. Indeed,

> [L]es douleurs quittaient le crâne, allaient au ventre ballonné, dur, aux entrailles traversées d'un fer rouge, aux efforts inutiles et pressants; […] enfin l'appétit cessa, des aigreurs gazeuses et chaudes, des feux secs lui parcoururent l'estomac; il gonflait, étouffait, ne pouvait plus, après chaque tentative de repas, supporter une culotte boutonnée, un gilet serré. (Huysmans 1977: 167; see also 295)

With a certain medical realism, this clinical picture evokes a suffering mixing heaviness and constriction, gas and fire, movement and immobility. His body is afflicted by painful sensations descending like a weight from his head to his digestive organs. Like a clogged machine, the swelling of his stomach and body, the production of too much air in these organs prevents him to proper function and contrarily strain him. It seems that Huysmans has made it a general rule to reduce the conflict between the individual and the world to a problem of (in)digestion and foreground it to the body.

Metaphorical language influenced by the sciences is also invoked. It is not just his inner organs which are exhausted by the environment and the lifestyle. In a hermetically sealed environment, Des Esseintes experiences on a psychological level a growing feeling of asphyxiation and paralysis under this 'cloche pneumatique où le vide se faisait à mesure' (256). If we look at an engraving from an 1880 issue of *Le Monde Illustré*, we learn that a 'pneumatic bell' was a casing used to anesthetise patients during surgery (Yriarte 1880: 244). The air pump connected to the 'bell' could produce by air-suction a vacuum resulting in decreased oxygenation for the patient. This analogy to a medical invention helps to show what Des Esseintes experiences on an inner level. For his house and its flamboyant and excessive decor do not spare his weak nerves. The lack of air in the house as much as the lack of outside form of interaction and nourishment anesthetise and depress his body and mind. Between the tidal wave of past memories and repressed desires, he has no other choice but to return to the outside world.

All the attempts to break off with his past self, all the readings and artistic meditations, his attempts to purge his body and particularly his digestive system, have not released him from reality and the painful experience of living in it. Huysmans employs various other metaphors which remain anchored in an organic thematic. Des Esseintes' physical isolation and psychic distraction also leads to a fermentation of his yeast-like neurosis (194), which strikingly echoes the fermentation of the black bile in melancholic states. Like an infectious disease, or bacteria multiplying and rising, his isolation grows into regression. Similar to Thomas Mann's novel,

Aschenbach's journey to the frontier of the realm of dreams and dissolution in Venice, the isolated place in Fontenay-aux-Roses in *À Rebours*, place of all fantasies, dreams, and pleasures becomes a place of physical depression, moral asthenia, boredom, insomnia, and poor appetite. The place of possibilities becomes that of collapse, immobility, and exhaustion. Des Esseintes has eliminated physical action from his new daily life and is condemned to remain slumped in his armchair.

> [P]areil à ces bêtes engourdies, tapies dans un trou, pendant l'hiver; la solitude avait agi sur son cerveau, de même qu'un narcotique. Après l'avoir d'abord énervé et tendu, elle amenait une torpeur hantée de songeries vagues; elle annihilait ses desseins, brisait ses volontés, guidait un défilé de rêves qu'il subissait passivement, sans même essayer de s'y soustraire. (155)

Through his almost animal hibernation, he consequentially experiences difficulties in moving from the interior space to the exterior: the walk in the garden blurs his view, the opening of a window causes him to faint. His isolation from then on turns into a pathological state. The withdrawal into his mind, the withdrawal into the dream world has turned against him, paralyses him and weakens his will power. Despite bearing creative potential, the search for and confinement in – what Nietzsche would characterise in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* – a Dionysian world of dissolute boundaries, intoxication, and loss of sense of self, that is perfect in his eyes and impermeable to the outside world, leads to the disruption of his mental and physical balance (Nietzsche 1872: 1–2).

The irony of the novel resides in the oppression and exhausting effects of both worlds – the secluded individual world and a sickly, outside social world – as both weigh on and depress his body and mind by asphyxiation. The pneumatic bell towers over and weighs on both worlds and engenders a pathological state, nervous over-excitement and abatement. Towards the end of the narrative, the boundaries between the outer and inner world gradually fade to reveal the deeper, underlying problem. Disaggregated or integrated into the social body, neither of these circumstances represent a safe and regenerative space for the individual. His total isolation and alienation and attempt to ignore time passing and to go against the grain of regulations set by a dominant normative-oriented bourgeois society ends in failure, symbolised by the irruption of the doctor in his country estate. Medicine is taking hold of Des Esseintes' world, with two doctors visiting him and, above all, prescribing him to return to civilisation. The border he has built between himself and the world is weakening. Space is no

longer a place of retreat, a safe haven, but is rather defined and also transformed by doctors into a place of disease. He then inflects this world towards a pathological direction.

The Dionysian sphere and world of sensations of Des Esseintes seems gradually to be gained by a social influence, which is signalled in a double form: that of a gaze and a language. The first is the gaze of the physician, who auscultates him. The second is the oral diagnostic, which classifies and reduces Des Esseintes to a pathological case of neurosis on the basis of his drive towards excess, ecstasy, and chaos:

> Ces exemples, il les avait cités au docteur sans résultat; celui-ci avait répété d'un ton sec et qui n'admettait plus aucune réplique, que son verdict, d'ailleurs confirmé par l'avis de tous les nosographes de la névrose, était que la distraction, que l'amusement, que la joie, pouvaient seuls influer sur cette maladie dont tout le côté spirituel échappait à la force chimique des remèdes. (309).

Des Esseintes finds himself trapped and his condition pathologised and perverted by the medical discourse. As the source of the neurosis is believed to lie in this closed Dionysian space, he is urged to return to the city and society. However, the narrator sides with Des Esseintes' predicament by undermining the external authority as the first doctor of Fontenay is ridiculed and presented as a narrow-minded bourgeois, unable to understand the deeply underlying mechanisms of human psychology. The narrator exposes the blatant inaptitude and ignorance of physicians in the face of his neurosis (302). The prescription of cold showers certainly cannot resolve Des Esseintes' physical and mental affliction. The narratorial voice uses a derisive tone addressing these representatives of the medical profession as pretentiously all-knowing – as much as confused – in the face of a disease which lies beyond their understanding and theoretical framework.

The novel ends in suspense with the sad realisation that nothing in his case can be done. Society cannot offer any treatment to his 'malaise', any form of pleasure or satisfaction to remedy his melancholia (310). His condition goes beyond a perverse pathology categorised by the medical profession, whether due to hereditary or taboo sexual activities. It is a disease of the end of the century, a resignation to live in a reality and the loss of oneself in a world of dreams and fantasies that makes him sink. His neurosis is also a form of resistance, a way to go against the grain of society and its normative injunctions of health and masculinity. It allows him to explore the meanderings of his soul, to open himself up to new experiences and sensations, and to resist modern life and

its decaying, sickening environment. Yet, the novel's ambivalence resides in the sickening and nerve-wreaking environment of both the inner and outer world. Des Esseintes is condemned to ill-being in his cloistered country estate and in the Parisian society. The entire narrative frame revolves around the paradox of Des Esseintes retreating from a social universe where he feels trapped and alienated to a secluded space, where he exhausts himself in the deployment of aesthetic artifices intended to overcome the boredom and mediocrity of industrial civilisation. Like the dying and decaying body of Thomas Mann's Aschenbach on a Venetian beach, the novel ends with Des Esseintes falling, exhausted, into a chair – resigned to the fact that even a life in isolation in a refuge of refined aestheticism cannot cure his profound dissatisfaction with life. It only worsens it. Is he going to die? One cannot know as the narrative remains open-ended. But he is sent, like Folantin's return to the first restaurant, back to square one, to the narrative's beginning set in Paris.

Three aspects can be retained from these two Huysmansian texts. First of all, based on the in-depth research and study of medical treatises, the discourse is imbued with medical terms and their conditions, demonstrating an awareness of the scientific understandings of that time. The characters are presented as detailed and realistic medical case studies; yet, the narratives are not intended to be realistic, to solely show an external and objective perspective. As a second aspect, what Huysmans' texts manage to bring to the fore is a subjectively told illness narrative and an exploration of the lived body and the interrelatedness of body and mind through the motif of (in)digestion. Huysmans goes beyond the mechanical and materialistic construction of neurasthenia as he incorporates the notion of melancholia, spleen, ennui with a metaphorical language expressing the feeling of heaviness, suffocation, emptiness, world-weariness, and exhaustion caused from living in a constricting society of the masses, of acceleration, excess, and mediocrity, as well as from living a solitary, secluded, and 'unnatural' space. And thirdly, both texts narrate liminal experiences of solitary characters, attempting to escape society, the hustle and bustle of the city, and societal injunctions, yet remaining physically and mentally trapped in a vicious cycle of despair, anguish, and exhaustion. There is no possible escape from the reality of the body. Through novels whose structure has neither beginning nor end, is fragmented and bears little plot development, Huysmans explores deeper an existential malaise or melancholic state, which finds its source in a lucid awareness of the state of a society that does not nurture the individual, literally and figuratively, but rather asphyxiates any vital spark and depresses the body and mind.

CHAPTER TWO

Limited Bodies, Spaces, and Verbal Expression in Octave Mirbeau's Work

Octave Mirbeau: 'Paresse' or 'Impuissance' ?

'Je suis né avec le don fatal de sentir vivement, de sentir jusqu'à la douleur, jusqu'au ridicule' (Mirbeau 2003: 37). This confidence, which Octave Mirbeau lends in 1892 to one of his characters in the serialised novel *Dans le ciel* while he himself was going through a deep mental and physical crisis, turns out to be a confession on his part. Like some of his characters, and if we are to believe the many portraits and testimonies of intellectuals of his time, Mirbeau suffered from a 'sensibilité souffrante' (Lemaître 1899: 303–304). Mirbeau fits well into the mould of the suffering fin-de-siècle artist, whose writing turns into a pathological manifestation of inner turmoil – as Paul Bourget observes in *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883) when he cites examples such as Charles Baudelaire and Ernest Renan. In this regard, the case of Octave Mirbeau seems exemplary as his work is haunted by personal anxieties exacerbated by the cultural climate of the decadent era. Endowed with an extreme sensitivity, he was exposed with full force to the many kinds of sufferings and disappointments that marked this period. On the strength of this lucid pessimism, stemming from his sensitivity, Mirbeau therefore devoted himself in his works to a detailed analysis of the ubiquitous and polysemic 'malaise de la civilisation' or 'mal du siècle' through a critical reflection on the human condition and society (Michel 1995: 27).

From an early age, a heightened sensitivity and lucidity led him to suffer from an almost permanent state of frustration, dissatisfaction, and boredom – giving rise to a radical pessimism and nihilistic perception (Himy-Piéri and Poulouin 2017: 180). Mirbeau had to navigate chronic crisis, during which the nagging feeling of creative paralysis and the deep disgust that bourgeois society inspired in him exacerbated and weakened him. In an 1892 letter to his anarchist friend Jean Grave (1854–1939), he complains that he is in the grip of 'une affreuse tristesse sans cause' (quoted in Michel and Nivet 1990: 475). His complaints of headaches and an inability to work led to a fear of being interned and confined for treatment as he writes to Stéphane Mallarmé in 1894: 'le

cerveau vide, incapacité absolue de travailler, non seulement de travailler, mais de nouer ensemble deux idées très insignifiantes. J'ai cru que c'était fini, et je me voyais déjà, affalé dans une petite voiture, sous les ombrages d'une maison de santé' (Mirbeau 2009: 909–910).

The rare critics having diagnosed Mirbeau a neurasthenic have reported little evidence (see Michel 1995; Bablon-Dubreuil 1996; Bat 2020). There is, indeed, no clear mention of 'neurasthenia' in any of his correspondences. However, the mentioning of certain signs perfectly fits its nosological tableau. Looking at Mirbeau's correspondence between the 1880s and the turn of the century, one can notice that it contains one long lament about his health. In 1885 (when he was 37 years old), he writes: 'Si vous avez des moments de doute, moi je n'ai que des découragements, trop justifiés par mon *impuissance* et la *stérilité* de mon propre cerveau' (Cogny 1960: 622, emphasis added). In several correspondences from 1892 with the impressionist painters Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) and Claude Monet (1840–1926), as well as with the anarchist Jean Grave (1854–1939). Mirbeau expresses a similar deeply depressive state of a vague nature as when he complains to Pissarro: 'Je ne fais plus rien, je ne travaille plus, je regarde […] j'emmagazine pour l'avenir. Du moins, c'est ce que je me dis pour excuser ma paresse' (Mirbeau 1990: 104; quoted in Bablon-Dubreuil 1996: 17). And, a few months later, he writes to Jean Grave: 'Je ne comprends pas moi-même ce que j'ai et quelle crise d'affreuse tristesse, sans cause, je traverse. Depuis près d'un an, je ne fais plus rien […] et pourtant je ne suis pas paresseux. Je suis malade' (quoted in Michel and Nivet 1990: 475; quoted in Bablon-Dubreuil 1996: 17). To Monet, Mirbeau then confides: 'on croit que c'est la paresse qui me tient tandis que ce n'est que *l'impuissance*' (Mirbeau 1990a: 186, emphasis added). He therefore brings up the issue of the fine line between the normal and the pathological, between idleness ('paresse') and physical and/or mental powerlessness ('impuissance'). By idle, one can understand a state of wilful repose and contemplation, an inclination not to do work or engage in activities. By contrast, the experience of 'impuissance', which can be understood as physical and mental weariness, a complete depletion of energy, or an extreme state of fatigue, is considered as a symptom of a pathological state and out of his control. The difference seems unclear in Mirbeau's case, even to him.

But it should be noted that apart from these paroxysmal crises, Mirbeau had always gone since his youth – as evidenced by the letters to his childhood friend Alfred Bansard – through periods of depression, weariness and doubting, which alternated with recurring phases of agitation and creativity. As Pierre Michel and Jean-

François Nivet (1990) show, far from being the happiest period of life, Mirbeau perceived his childhood as a painful obstacle course. It is in fact in his family, even before school and church indoctrination had begun, that the pernicious process of 'deformation', in terms of miseducation, took root. Establishing the aetiology of his mental and physical condition from childhood begins with his father. He was a provincial health officer. Like Marcel Proust with his father Adrien Proust, medicine was a daily occurrence for Octave Mirbeau from his early childhood and it left a mark on his imagination very early on. As soon as Mirbeau graduated, he was encouraged by his father to undertake medical studies which he, however, immediately abandoned: 'J'avais constaté plusieurs fois que je n'étais pas fait pour la lancette et le bistouri', he confides to Alfred Bansard, 'du reste, je trouve qu'il faut avoir l'âme attachée dans le corps avec de gros boutons d'acier pour écorcher les gens vifs et les raccourcir quelquefois d'une jambe ou d'un bras; bienheureux quand ce n'est pas de la tête!' (Mirbeau 1989: 59). Obviously considered by Mirbeau in a negative way, the medical gesture, associated with the authoritarian paternal image, was perceived not as a form of reparation, but as an almost murderous amputation.

When, after having given up his medical studies, Mirbeau began, albeit without much more conviction, his legal studies, he quickly experienced a similar aversion. He felt an incurable disgust for jurisprudence and, more generally, for administrative work. Two years later, he became an apprentice in the notarial profession with the realisation that '[l]e code m'écrase l'orteil; les *Institutes* me fendent le crane! Je suis moulu, courbaturé, écrasé' (Mirbeau 2009: 104). It is as a disease-like manifestation that he identifies his legal practice: 'Quelle horrible chose! c'est comme les humeurs froides, les scrofules, la syphilis!' (104). The work turned out to be decidedly indigestible and to cause physical and mental discomfort. Unable to follow in his father's footsteps and to keep up with any profession, Mirbeau was continuously accused of idleness. Still a teenager, he wrote to Alfred Bansard: 'On me reproche sans cesse de ne pas travailler. Mais force donc un malheureux, les mains enchainées, les pieds liés, à piocher la terre et à courir comme s'il était libre de ses mouvements! Qu'on me rende ma force et je travaillerai' (Mirbeau 1989: 106).

He gradually became convinced that he had no talent. In the early 1870s, he moved to the French capital and decided to try out journalism. Before gaining late access to literary glory as a successful novelist with his first novel *L'Abbe Jules* (1887), Octave Mirbeau continued his mediocre training as a journalist to become 'un raté', chained to 'un humiliant proletariat de la plume' (see Michel 1995: 26; Goncourt and Goncourt 1989: 642).

He had no illusions about the press of his time, the commercialism of which he never ceased vigorously to denounce. But, before he knew remunerative literary triumphs, he was forced for a dozen years to sell his pen to this profession and submit to the dictates of his successive employers. Mirbeau comments on that topic in *Les Grimaces* (29 September 1883): 'Le journaliste se vend à qui le paie; il est devenu machine à louange et à *éreintement*' (Mirbeau 2009: 22, emphasis added). Mirbeau explicitly points out the exhausting position of the journalist, having to strain and fight his body to produce news at a fast pace.

What can be established from these pieces of evidence is that struggle was indissociable from his life. Grappling unsuccessfully with the obstacles of his writing, his limited physical and mental capacities, Mirbeau came to equate life with an agonising and slow ascent, with a vocation that for a long time had brought him only despair and frustration with himself and the world around him. Through his correspondence, the writer shares with his friends insights into his state of diminished motivation, an untimely desire to shed tears and above all his perception of an inability to express what he truly thinks or feels. Every line, almost every word, had to be painstakingly torn from his mind: 'Je vis dans une double angoisse et une double lutte. Je m'escrime contre l'adjectif rebelle et le ton qui fuit; et lorsque le soir vient, fatigué de mes œuvres, écœuré de ma plume, je remets toujours au lendemain le soin d'écrire mes lettres. Et le lendemain ne vient jamais' (Mirbeau 2009: 744). He also details the cost of this intellectual overwork as follows:

> [J]'ai senti derrière la tête, une douleur aiguë, comme si quelque chose s'était brisé dans, on cerveau. […] Je n'ai plus de force, je n'ai plus de courage, je n'ai même plus ce sentiment qui fait se dresser l'homme devant le danger, et devant la mort et qui rallume en lui les énergies éteintes et les volontés de se défendre. Ah! je suis bien fini, allez? bien fini. (Mirbeau 2009: 323)

The writer's struggle or his battle with the finite capacities is, as we have seen to this point, a recurring leitmotif in Thomas Mann's and Heinrich Mann's correspondences, which show evidence of their struggle to write and finish their novels.

Based on all these texts, we can conclude that these crises are similar to the episodes of overexcitement and abatement of the neurasthenic, following mental overwork. Mirbeau was in fact familiar with the term neurasthenia. In an article on the author, Monique Bablon-Dubreuil (1996) notes that one of the first occurrences

of the word ‘neurasthenia’ appears in January 1896 in ‘Scrupules’, a play created by Mirbeau for two characters and published in *Le Journal*: ‘Vous avez, Monsieur, des bibelots bien sensitifs, vraiment, et que l’approche de la plus légère pince – monseigneur fait tomber aussitôt un pâmoison […] je crois qu’ils sont atteints, eux aussi, de la maladie du siècle et qu’ils sont neurasthéniques comme tout le monde’ (Mirbeau 1896; quoted in Bablon-Dubreuil 1996: 20). This text will be inserted a few years later in *Les 21 jours d’un neurasthénique* (1901) but with a slight variation in the terms used: ‘Oh! Les meubles modernes… comme ils ont l’âme fragile, n’est-ce pas? Je vois qu’ils sont atteints, eux aussi, de la maladie du siècle, et qu’ils sont neurasthéniques comme tout le monde’ (Mirbeau 2010: 285). Old trinkets (‘bibelots’) are changed into modern furniture. With this variant Mirbeau shows that in the meantime he had taken measure of what had become a real epidemic and turned it into an attribute of modernity.

Drawing conceivably from the medical literature of the time, Mirbeau’s comprehension of neurasthenia is to be understood, at least during his adult years, as expressively linked to intellectual overwork and to his journalistic and writer profession. Fernand Levillain, a student of Charcot, declares in his clinical essay *La Neurasthénie, Maladie de Beard* (1891) that journalism, amidst other intellectual or brain-work professions, is a profession particularly exposed to neurasthenia. And even before Levillain’s publication, Beard had already pointed out the press as a cause and elaborated on the effects of the speed and quantity of information ingested daily and overwhelming those in contact with it. In France, journalism was likewise shown to be a profession particularly prone to this kind of affection, ‘en raison du nombre considérable de prédisposés, névropathes ou dégénérés héréditaires, qu’elle contient et des surmenages divers auxquels son exercice oblige ceux qui s’y consacrent tout entiers, n’ayant que ce moyen d’existence’ (Levillain 1891: 34). Levillain asserts that men of letters uselessly pursued the right expressions of their thoughts as words as well as ideas failed them (1891: 103). The irony, then, lied in the struggle against their sole mode of expression and the tools then needed to work.

During the writing process or following a completed work, Mirbeau experienced periods of time during which his mental faculties were overwhelmed and exhausted. As a matter of fact, as his work on *L’Abbé Jules* was barely finished, Mirbeau automatically indulged in self-denigration preceding a period of depression. He struggled with mental health whilst working ‘comme un bagneux à terminer [son] stupide Abbé Jules’ (Mirbeau 2009: 744; quoted in Bablon-Dubreuil 1996: 22). To conclude, a few months after its publication in 1888, he

describes it in a letter to Paul Hervieu (a novelist who had also beforehand practiced in a law firm) as '[le] roman le plus assommant des romans' (quoted in Michel and Nivet, 1990: 344). A few months later, as he just started working on *Sebastien Roch* (1890), the struggle with his own self re-emerged: 'Mon roman est commencé et c'est infiniment idiot' (Letter to Gustave Geoffroy, 3 December 1888; quoted in Michel and Nivet 1990: 381). Discouraged, he writes to Monet: 'je trouve à tout le monde un talent énorme [, il] me semble que moi j'en ai pas' (Mirbeau 1990a: 88). He declares himself 'intellectuellement foutu' (Michel and Nivet 1990: 381). Mirbeau finally completed the novel in a state of energetic collapse he then described to be similar to 'vidé comme une vieille gourde' (Letter to Monet, September 1890; quoted in Mirbeau 1890a: 107). In these letters, neurasthenia is never explicitly mentioned to diagnose his state, yet, his powerlessness to create, his intellectual slowness, lack of energy fit into the disease's symptomatology.

Not only the act of writing and the accompanying frustrations became a source of exhaustion. His lucid and critical look at society, the observation of a sick society, contributed to his morally depressed state. All of Octave Mirbeau's work is bathed in a pessimism which very often borders on nihilism, so much the word 'pessimism' must be understood here in the literal sense, as Marc Eider comments: 'Pour Mirbeau, tout est au plus mal dans le pire des mondes possibles' (Eider 1914: 16). The tragic vision of the human condition permeates all his literary production, and especially *Dans le ciel* (1892–1893) and *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899), as well as his articles. For instance, in an article to *Le Figaro* and *Le Gaulois*, he respectively writes statements like '[la vie] est infiniment absurde et infiniment douloureuse' (Mirbeau 1889) or '[l]'homme se traine pantelant, de tortures en supplices, du néant de la vie au néant de la mort' (Mirbeau 1886) (quoted in Michel 1995: 61). The diagnosis does not stop at existential pessimism. 'La grande névrose dont nous souffrons tous' – Mirbeau speaks knowingly from experience – bears multiple causes. In his articles, he evokes for example speed: 'Nous sommes au siècle de l'emballement', 'le siècle des vertiges', 'nous avons perdu la notion du petit trot; nous ne connaissons plus que le grand galop'. The nerves are over-stretched, the individual abuses his strength and no longer benefits from anything. In fact, 'nous avalons tout indistinctement' ('Le siècle du vertige', *L'Événement,* 19 July 1885; quoted in Mirbeau 1995: 9).

But the author is also an ambivalent man and in touch with his time. Despite his usual pessimism, the frustrations (he is notably passionately engaged in the fight for Truth and Justice in the Dreyfus Affair), 'les

crasses accumulées de la routine' and what he calls 'routinocracie' (Mirbeau 1886a) which contaminates minds, including his own, he expresses his faith in the inevitable evolution and in the intellectual emancipation of humanity: 'Et, pourtant la marche en avant de la vie est telle et les poussées lentes et profondes de l'évolution sont si irrésistibles, que malgré nous, en dépit des lourdes passivités de notre inertie, le progrès chemine sans arrêt' (Mirbeau 1926 : 225). This goes to show that he was not impervious to narratives of change and progress. Indeed, Mirbeau emphasises in his articles the vital importance of movement and going forward as, for instance, in an article for *Le Journal* in 1894: 'Il existe une loi de la vie, loi primordiale et nécessaire, hors laquelle le mécanisme mondial se détraque et s'arrête: c'est la loi du mouvement. Et, qui dit mouvement, dit lutte. […] Supprimer la lutte, c'est l'immobiliser, c'est la mort' (Mirbeau 1894). Mirbeau was thus also the promoter of emancipatory dynamics and developments.

Regarding scientific progress, the nineteenth century, Mirbeau predicted, would be known in the future as 'the century of Charcot' and that of nervous diseases ('Le siècle de Charcot', *L'Événement*, 29 May 1885; quoted in Mirbeau 1995: 90). This is how the journalist introduces the account of a 'leçon du mardi' led by Charcot – which he attended, like many artists of his time. This statement, which takes the form of a prediction, attests to the importance of the fields of modern neurology and psychology. Charcot is for the chronicler an incarnation of triumphant medicine. His name therefore often appears in the press or literature of the 1880s as a reference or even trend, without really testifying to any particular knowledge of the medical theories of the master of the Salpêtrière: Charcot was the specialist of the moment and, naturally, his name was associated with the various clichés on hysteria. But in his article dedicated to the scientist, Mirbeau testifies here to the impact of Charcot's lessons on the imagination of his contemporaries. The clinical lessons were indeed perceived there as a veritable spectacle and demonstration of scientific progress.

Mirbeau is, however, neither unaware of the limitations of science nor of the dangers of scientism, being the excessive belief in the power of scientific knowledge and practices. Because what is also raised in this column titled 'Le siècle de Chacrot' is the potential threat represented by an all-powerful and controversial medical body. Mirbeau discloses some of the popular opinions of his time: some taking Charcot for a charlatan or necromancer, others believing they saw in this central and influential figure a prodigious artist. The figure of the influential

neurologist is then partially problematised as his power and the possible implications of his suggestive methods are presented as disquieting:

> Est-il à craindre qu'une partie des hommes, la fraction malade, la plus nombreuse, devienne l'esclave docile de la minorité qui veut et qui sait? […] Voyez-vous d'ici tout un peuple hypnotise, ne voyant, ne marchant, n'agissant et ne souffrant qu'avec la permission de quelques êtres supérieurs? Les cerveaux humains ne sont-ils qu'une cire molle? (Mirbeau 1995: 94)

It is therefore this suspicious and fascinating performance of the physician that Mirbeau transcribes in his article on Charcot. His insightful observations regarding the fantasies of his contemporaries and the fears of the individual in the face of the great scientific machinery are not only to be found in his journalistic pieces but in some of his novels as well.

As much as Mirbeau kept a certain distance to the science craze, he neither did believe that the novelist's goal was to get to the truth and model their writing on scientific methods (as stated in Emile Zola's 1880 essay *Le Roman expérimental*) (see Zola 2006: 78). Mirbeau's work tends towards a representation of reality through the prism of a subjective mental structure. His artistic tendency is to break the linearity of the story, subvert its order based on causality, mix genres (journalistic and fictional) and tones as he recycles in his novels his journalistic writings. This renders his texts fragmented and heteroclite, playing to the detriment of the organic unity of the works. At the same time, this new form gives reality a vision that is at once partial, subjective, and critical: a vision that is therefore mobile and contradictory. This chapter focuses on two novels: *Dans le ciel* (serialised in the columns of *L'Écho de Paris* from 1892 to 1893 and published in volume in 1989) and *Les 21 Jours d'un neurasthénique* (1901). Both are compilations of journal articles unified into a novel. And, both offer insights into the experience of exhaustion as the text gives form to the experience through its structure. Drawing heavily on personal experience, Mirbeau seemed to have wanted to show (rather than tell) what was inexplicable to him. Thus, the frustrating feeling of creative powerlessness, the anguish of confinement and suffocation, the impairment of will power, the failure to achieve something, the inevitable despair of death permeate his fictional writing and further explore the feeling of unease and struggle with his own self.

The Impossible Ascension to the Sky and Artistic Transcendence in *Dans le ciel*

The relationship of the artist to his creative work and the connection between the body and writing constitute pivotal themes in Mirbeau's texts. The seemingly popular motif of the struggling artist fighting against his own mental and physical capacity to finish his work is perfectly exemplified in *Dans le ciel.* At first glance, one can draw a parallel with Thomas Mann and the theme of the painful and exhausting creative process of writing in *Schwere Stunde* or even at the beginning of *Der Tod in Venedig*. Thomas Mann himself was very impatient and suffered from his slowness to produce his works in comparison to his older brother. Yet Thomas Mann had turned his weakness into a sign of strength, wanting thus to replicate St Sebastian's martyrdom. Mirbeau, on the other hand, seemed less concerned by his level of productivity and more frustrated with the quality of his work. He was not exhausted by a rigid ethos of productivity as in Thomas Mann's case, but by the struggle to elevate his writing and attain a higher form of art with the reality of a limited mental capacity. Mirbeau never felt sufficiently talented and was perpetually frustrated with himself. Plagued by episodes of 'fièvre cérébral', 'crise du cerveau', 'congestion cérébrale', the act of thinking, writing, and creating is embodied in his work and turned into a painful, laborious, endless task.

A perfect illustration of the writer's struggle can be found in *Dans le ciel* and its three embedded stories with three different narrators. The first nameless narrator reports a brief stay in a provincial lair of an old friend he lost sight of fifteen years ago. Characterised by an idle, mundane existence, the first narrator presents himself as a businessman in eager pursuit of pleasure. He serves as a foil for neurasthenics and visionaries who are usually cast in the roles of decadent, indolent, and pleasure-seeking aesthetes. For this first narrator, ambition in life constitutes material achievement, not the discovery of heightened aesthetic experience. While this first narrator strove to rise in society, his old friend, a solitary and failed writer, persisted in staying in a former abbey, perched on top of a peak (Mirbeau 2003: 25). The businessman thus introduces this second narrator, a writer named X… and then revealed as Georges, who entrusts his friend, the first narrator, with the work of recording the story of his life and to write the text which constitutes the rest of the novel. But this text also contains snippets of a third 'I', that of a young painter named Lucien. Lucien is a genius but is also the cause of Georges imminent downfall. Inciting Georges to rebel against social conventions and established forms of representations, Lucien pushes him

towards dangerous levels of loneliness and madness. With its meandering plot and unstructured narrative, the novel suddenly ends with Lucien's suicide and Georges' implied sudden collapse.

Throughout the main part of the narrative, Georges tries to trace the aetiology of the deep discomfort affecting him. The initial exposition of the causes offers the opportunity to express his condemnation of family, society and its institutions' nocuous effects on the individual and his development. One of the causes first issued is the hereditary defects plaguing Georges. The mother of this narrator herself appears to be afflicted with a temperament disorder and an impairment of the will. The process of getting settled in a new home 'l'accabl[e] comme une tâche trop lourde pour elle, lui cass[e] les bras, lui aplatit le cerveau' (52). The paralysis of her mental faculties plaguing his mother seemed to have been transmitted to him. Mirbeau must have been influenced by then-common theories on the heredity of mental and nervous disorders, and have knowledge of Jules Dejerine work, which appeared in 1886 (*L'hérédité dans les maladies du système nerveux*).

Georges' depleted condition here is, however, not just represented as the product of hereditary transmission of stigmata. To begin with, the central episode of the novel shows the corruption of Georges, who as a child has already been perverted by the family environment and upbringing. These are recurring themes in Mirbeau's works, especially in his earlier autobiographical novels, which deal with unhappy adolescence (*Le Calvaire*, 1889; *Sébastien Roch,* 1890). *Dans le ciel* shows that before being contaminated by the teachers' ideologies, children grow up in a family environment that is not very conducive to their development. Georges presents himself as having been 'un enfant prodigue et l'on [le] prenait pour un parfait imbécile' (Mirbeau 2003: 38). He explains how he was condemned from an early age to a state of neurasthenia:

> La maladie avait en quelque sorte liquéfié mon cerveau; dès que je penchais la tête, il me semblait qu'un liquide se balançait entre les parois de mon crâne comme dans une bouteille remuée. Toutes mes facultés morales subirent un temps d'arrêt, une halte dans le néant. Je vécus dans le vide, suspendu et bercé dans l'infini, sans aucun point de contact avec la terre. Je demeurai longtemps en un état d'engourdissement physique et de sommeil intellectuel qui était doux et profond comme la mort! (47)

The circumstances and social climate in which Georges grew up have given way to illness and obstructed the healthy development of his mental and physical capacities. Georges thus already suffers from a young age from a numbness in his limbs and his brain.

This environment is a 'petits-bourgeois' world, a suffocating, narrow-minded social milieu in its way of functioning and thinking due to its inaptitude 'aux grandes exaltations de la pensée' (51, 112). As Stéphane Gougelmann (2011) points out, Mirbeau mocks the ravages of an intolerant Catholic environment disconnected from any search for sacredness. He castigates the social environment's greed at work, for instance, during financial arrangements between parties in marriage agreements and in affairs of succession following the death of the parents as exemplified in chapters XI and XII. And, finally he points to 'l'ineffacable éducation de la famille' and the tyrannical, oppressive authority of the father (Mirbeau 2003: 57). It is in Chapter VIII that the narrator, whose voice seemingly reflects Mirbeau's views in his journalistic writings, most radically puts the bourgeois family unit on trial. According to him, the family environment is a primary factor in the spread of nervous disorders. Georges accuses his family of having ransacked his childhood and interfered with his healthy development: '[Au] lieu de veiller à leur développement, dans un sens normal, la famille a bien vite fait de les déprimer et de les anéantir' (58). He has been left with a deficiency of tools and resources to become an 'adequate individual', as he coins it, content with his self and involvement in the world and well in his body (58). The language is rather fiercely critical as families are accused of rejecting, imposing, and forcing a set of characteristics and desires upon their children. The narrator attacks the family's venture to deform their children before their development is able to be completed. The evocation of Georges' childhood serves to show the formation of the artist's personality, seriously hampered by the education he received from his family. Plus, his accusation is all the more serious as he argues that, as an end result, the whole of society is populated by unstable, inadequate individuals.

This process of alienation then continues at school, which constitutes a vast enterprise of individual decerebration and subjection to the established order. Georges emerges from his years of apprenticeship 'discipliné à souhait' and 'mûr pour faire un soldat, un notaire, ou tel fonctionnaire larveux' (62). The notion 'larveux' is recurrent in the narrative and refers to something that resembles a larva. It can be defined as the immature and invertebrated form of an insect or the intermediate form at the first stage of development. It is

therefore an issue of an individual being not completely formed. But the term also refers to something sickly, close to earth and confined in dim spaces. From Georges' perspective, his education has left an indelible imprint on his malleable brain, confining him to a subduable state. Indeed, in the disruption of his healthy development, he has been inculcated a mass of corrosive prejudices, comparable to 'chiures de mouches', 'ce dépôt excrémentiel et quotidien' that constituted the teachers' lessons and from which, most of the time, he will never be able to get rid of (62).

Georges strives towards a higher ambition, an ideal transcending the fragile, mortal, and limiting boundaries of the human and the body, meaning being closer to the sky and far from the plains of an obstructing, grounded, and diseased existence and environment. Entering adulthood, after having been broken by family and school conditioning, therefore consists in moving away from the world 'below' to go live in ancient abbey, perched on top of a mountain peak. Closer to the sky and a heightened aesthetic existence, his desire to live a solitary and secluded life resembles Des Esseintes' case. A noticeable feature of *Dans le ciel* is the use Mirbeau makes of the space. The central part of the landscape is a peak, which stands in the middle of a plain. The sky and the peak assume a metaphorical function in which we recognise the influence of Baudelaire's 'Spleen' from *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). Along a vertical axis, the sky is built as the border domain of the arts, the artist and creative freedom; as for the earth, it becomes the domain of social turpitudes, gravity, claustrophobic confinement in values and social dictates. The alienating powers of society are felt through the weight of the body, crushed to the ground (Mirbeau 2003: 82). The first narrator, who comes to visit Georges and embodies bourgeois society as a businessman, is only in pursuit of material, earthy pleasures, and insensitive to the nature surrounding him. He finds the experience on top of the mountain unbearable and oppressing: 'De gros nuages orageux, frangés de lune pâle, roulaient dans le ciel; il faisait une chaleur étouffante qui me congestionnait les poumons, et rendait ma respiration pénible et haletante. J'avais la tête lourde, lourd aussi l'estomac, et mes jambes tremblaient, molles de vertige' (33).

The sky is sublimated and thematised as an artistic ideal that is close since the abbey seems lost in the sky, yet also inaccessible: the sky very quickly becomes 'ce grand rêve' (27). As the story unfolds, we witness how Georges slowly loses himself in his contemplation of the sky and rendered powerless, both in terms of his creative capacities as well as mentally and physically: 'Et l'on semble perdu dans ce ciel, emporté dans ce ciel,

un ciel immense, houleux comme une mer, un ciel fantastique, où sans cesse de monstrueuses formes, d'affolants faunes, d'indescriptibles flores, des architectures de cauchemar, s'élaborent, vagabondent et disparaissent…' (27). This idealised, aestheticised sky gives way to a rather phenomenological and oppressing sky. It is experienced by Georges as a chaotic, disruptive space railing with formless shapes, and which embodies nightmarish and unintelligible images produced by a troubled mind. The tragic problem of the fin-de-siecle writer is found in this description of the sky: chaotic and formless. The sky is also reflected as vacuous entity in the other artist's – Lucien's – eyes, which Georges describes as frightening (90). Lucien is a character without a past, without ambition, suffering from a 'folie de doute' from whom the reader learns little except that he keeps talking about his suffering and his creative paralysis (140). Lucien exemplifies on an extreme level how the artist quickly loses all sense of reason and sense of self in this space out of touch with reality and society.

Following Lucien in this maddening descent, Georges' lucidity also disintegrates and dissolves as he finds himself on the peak closer to the sky. The sky weighs on Georges, crushes him, suffocates him: 'Là-haut!… Non!… non!… Je ne peux pas… Là-haut j'étouffe, mes membres se rompent, j'ai, sur le crâne, comme le poids d'une montagne… C'est le ciel, si lourd, si lourd!… Et puis ces nuages… Tu ne les as donc pas vus, ces nuages?… C'est livide et grimaçant comme la fièvre… comme la mort!...' (30). Describing this confused, disoriented state, by-product of the creative process and caused by his secluded life on the peak, Georges assimilates his consciousness to 'un grand ciel immobile' filled with 'pensées en déroute' (100). In this conflicting state in-between stasis and disarray, his imagination exhausts itself and his mind turns empty. Georges speaks of his experience of 'détraquement cérébral', which includes an aching brain and broken limbs. Georges undergoes a phenomenon that is both physiological and psychological. And, he comes to associate his creative process with episodes of neurosis resulting in a loss of sense of reality and ultimately exhaustion.

The sky, which at first was a positive and motivating element, begins to draw out all of his energy. From the start, the characters' creative or artistic ambition is symbolised by the vertical ascension of the mountain. Yet, elevation does not bring them closer to their artistic ideal or enable them to transcend their physical body. The higher they climb, the closer they are to the sky, the weaker their body and the more chaotic and irrational their thoughts become. Lucien is perhaps the most tragic characters of the three. He struggles against the feeling of his own helplessness, against the weakness of his expression, inadequate to capture the grandiose visions he glimpses

in his head. The phase of optimism is quickly followed by discouragement under the unbearable weight of a suffocating sky. Unable to duplicate what he sees on a canvas, Lucien flees the peak and returns to Paris, to soon find death there: in an act of supreme despair, he cuts off his hand which he deems too weak to carry out his plans. The peak comes to symbolise the artist's painful ascent to an unattainable ideal which remains too costly for the body and the mind. As seen in Gustav von Aschenbach's case in *Der Tod in Venedig*, one cannot help but see a metaphor for a global artistic struggle in an age of blossoming mass consumption and hustle culture.

As a writer, the ambition and lack of confidence in his strengths, which continuously characterised Mirbeau throughout his career, are expressed well in this metaphor, where the mountain, far from symbolising freedom and creative greatness, becomes a place of estrangement, imprisonment, and powerlessness. The struggle towards harmony and a superior form of art turns into a real debacle in this novel as content and form thematise the emptiness, the infertility of the artist unable to produce the work he dreams of whether it be in society or on an isolated peak. Intimately associated with the individual's being, speech becomes the exteriorisation of his inner struggle and suffering. If it is altered, fragmented, it indicates the progression of a disorder and the deterioration of his motor ability and mental capacities. Speech becomes in itself a manifestation of the character's powerlessness and exhaustion as the sentences disintegrate and lose their sense. In his state of creative paralysis, Lucien is also directly concerned with the problem of expression. Not only plagued by the inability to create 'de l'invisible dans de l'impalpable', the artist is also limited in his motor or verbal aptitudes and rendered further restless and powerless in his creative quest (126).

The redundant ellipses, of which instances closely follow one another, reinforce the impression of the writing being disjointed. This is a stylistic device that characterises all of Mirbeau's novelistic production and which this thesis has already encountered in the case of Heinrich Mann's *Haltlos*. An extract from Lucien's long seeming monologue on his art perfectly illustrates this point:

> Un arbre… un arbre!…. Et bien, quoi, un arbre?…. Qu'est-ce que ça prouve?…. Les naturalistes me font rire… Ils ne savent pas ce que c'est que la nature… Ils croient qu'un arbre est un arbre, et le même arbre!…. Quels idiots!…. Un arbre petit, mais c'est trente-six mille choses… C'est une bête, quelquefois… c'est, c'est… est-ce que je sais, moi?…. c'est tout ce que tu vois, tout ce que tu sens, tout ce que tu comprends!…. Je te dis cela très mal – mais je te dis la vérité, tout de même!… (93)

The painter is often unable to finish the sentence he just started, replacing the missing words with elliptic punctuations. His way to formulate his thoughts and emotions turns into mania. Like his elliptic and unfinished sentences, his art remains locked in the form of rough sketches. The irony is that the artist loses all means of expression, means of freeing himself, of ascending higher. He is wounded in body and text, of which inner rupture stands as evidence of absence, deficiency, uncertainty.

As does the landscape, the text becomes a projection of his experience of exhaustion, enacting performatively the heavy, depressogenic, and suffocating state of mind Lucien finds himself in. And, it is Georges, who living with Lucien, notices and analyses the corruption, that is the incoherence and contradictions, of his language and his motor speech disorder. Georges observes: 'Lucien […] avait même de la difficulté à exprimer ses idées. Lorsqu'il lançait une théorie, les mots sortaient, avec peine, de sa bouche contractée' (87). If the situation worries Georges, it is because he realises the inner struggle subjecting his friend to perpetual exhaustion and its maddening effects: 'L'effort qu'il dépensait pour trouver ses mots et les prononcer lui couvrait le visage de plus durs, de contractions douloureuses, tel un vieillard ou bien fou' (90). Or even:

> Lui s'épuisait en paroles, en théories, en gestes désordonnés. C'était un flux grondant de souvenirs, de projets, auxquels se mêlaient des récits de sensations étranges, des croquis de paysage, des plans de réforme sociale, lambeaux de nature, d'humanité et de rêve, choses vagues, haletantes, trépidantes, sans lien entre elles et comme vues, le soir, par la portière d'un wagon qu'emporte, vers on ne sait où, une *locomotive chauffée à toute vapeur*. (124, emphasis added)

Like an overheated engine, Lucien seems to be wasting away both physically and mentally from his tireless fight against himself. His body and his mind are unable to keep up with the magnitude of his desire, his ambition to ascend higher. No matter if he is in the plain or on the peak, since the low and heavy sky weighs on man like a lid, casting him down to his finitude and confining him to a limited range of possibility. The artist is particularly condemned to an eternal struggle, under the reality that 'vivre […] est l'unique douleur' (68). And this dizzying idea continues, without a doubt, the deep and ultimate cause of neurasthenia. Lucien being aware of his weakness and helplessness ends his life by sawing his wrist.

The difficult ascent of the peak and impossibility to reach the sky becomes an allegory of artistic creation. The figures of the artist in *Dans le ciel* stand powerless in the face of a world too big for their eyes, too strong for their hands. The mismatch between the infinitude of the universe and the human limited possibilities of translating it into art results in the artist's creative paralysis. Yet the main cause of the artist's physical and mental downfall in his creative process lies as much in his detrimental upbringing formatted by society and numbing his creative capacities. In this the narration strongly mirrors the suffering and frustration endured by Mirbeau in the creative process: as he fights against words and his exhausted body and numb mental faculties. With the character of Georges, Mirbeau deviates the root of the artist's decadence from a perceived deviant nature towards society's fault and its corrupting institutions. The work clearly shows the fragility and powerlessness experienced by the individual artist in struggling to extricate himself from the weight of society and the standardisation of ideas.

A Diary of Confinement: Moutain (Claustro)Phobia and Paralysis of the Will in *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*

'Oh! cher ami, n'allez jamais dans la montagne. C'est la mort, parce que c'est l'arrêt subit de toute vie cérébrale. Je ne sais pas si j'en reviens guéri. Ce que je sais, c'est que j'en reviens gâteux' (quoted in Mirbeau 2009: 327). These are the words addressed by Octave Mirbeau to Auguste Rodin in 1897 on his return from the spa town Luchon, where he had just experienced a three-week long treatment. The boredom and inefficient treatments that Mirbeau experienced in the midst of these mountains, which in his eyes constituted the embodiment of exhaustion and even death, inspired him to write a novel he published in 1901 under the title *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*. His text follows a tradition of critical and satirical sanatorium novels, predominantly found in German literature around the turn of the century. There is, of course, Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* and Heinrich Mann's *Doktor Biebers Versuchung*. One could also cite Henrik Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People* (1882) and its language of comic exaggeration which resembles Mirbeau's. Featuring some sixty individual tales that had already appeared as articles in the press, *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique* offers the reader a metaphorical picture of society through the description of a spa town in the Pyrenees, renamed X… for the occasion. The different chapters that make up this book each recount individual anecdotes recounted by several

spa guests. Pierre Michel talks in the preface of the novel of a simple 'collage textuel' of stories; but one could also argue that the novel is rather a creative work of de-construction (Mirbeau 2010: 5).

Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique marks a new step in the path of the deconstruction of the so-called 'realistic' novel set forth by Balzac and Zola. In line with the fragmented structure already observed in Huysmans' *À Rebours,* Mirbeau presents himself as an author at odds with the classic linear structure of the novel, inserting his own press articles into the novel in a patchwork-like manner. For this novel Mirbeau merely sewed, without worrying in the least about seams that were too visible, about sixty tales or fragments of tales, which had appeared in the press sometimes twice, or even three times, and under different titles between 1887 and 1901. The narrator writes, for example, with total casualness: 'Justement, voici un portrait de lui que je retrouve dans mes notes' (2010: 35); or: 'Rencontré, hier, deux personnages' (273); or even: 'Et voici M. Arthur Lebeau' (283) who appears out of nowhere. And even more abruptly: 'Premier récit' (330) and 'Deuxième récit' (335) etc. Following a similar pattern like *Dans le ciel* with its embedded stories, each of the chapters constitute an anecdote nested within an anecdote narrated by a different character. Each chapter could also be read on its own, pushing even further the idea of a dis-united and disaggregated narrative.

What at least unites and runs like a red thread through the narrative is the setting and its 'insupportables collections de toutes les humanités', patients of the spa town graced with 'l'animalité humaine' and characterised as grotesque or disturbing maniacs, imbeciles, scoundrels, and assassins (25, 117). This novel presents itself as an opportunity to put the upper bourgeois class of society on trial. The setting of the spa town, a microcosm of bourgeois society, serves to expose its mores and values. It becomes the setting of monstrous form and aberrant speech, reflection of a sick conscience. These short-term narrators, each recounting an anecdote of their life, represent the elite of the Third Republic: they are politicians, soldiers, or renowned judges and lawyers. Like exclusive interviews reported in a newspaper, the narrator offers the readers close-up insights into the lives and beliefs of high-ranked and influential men of French society. To emphasise their nature, they are most often decked out with degrading and discreditable surnames, much like Docteur Triceps, Clara Fistule, Docteur Trépan, Docteur Fardeau-Fardat, Jean Loqueteux, Jean Guenille, Isidor-Joseph Tarabustin, etc. The caricatural descriptions set the tone for the satire. Mirbeau makes abundant use of exaggerated physiological traits, insults or disease names to characterise these characters, associated with the high bourgeoisie and state institutions.

Observing and engaging in a conversation with each character is the main narratorial figure, a man named Georges Vasseur, who allows us, reader, to see these health institutions from within and to become witnesses of the negative effects of these places on their patients. The opinions voiced by Georges quickly point to a social critical position aimed at a decrepit bourgeois class. But this point of view is susceptible as he finds himself in this spa town under the auspices of fashion or expected bourgeois behaviour. He seems to also take shelter behind the banality of collective behaviour as he himself has come to benefit from the spa town and its therapeutic facilities. When he chooses to frame the stories in the setting of a spa town, Mirbeau resorts to a fashionable vacation spot, one of the good habits of the wealthy bourgeoisie, who went there for a period of time: a minimum of twenty-one days in the hope of treating certain diseases on the same level as deviant behaviours, such as tuberculosis, alcoholism, masturbation, physical and mental exhaustion. Usually, these places of rest and regeneration were enclosed by or perched in the mountains. These healthy spaces offered the luxury of fresh air, isolation, tranquillity, far from the noisy city and its all-permeating stimuli, and a cure for the overwrought nerves of urban bourgeois and aristocratic men and women.

Mirroring the structure of the novel with its twenty-two independent chapters and individual tales of patients, the spa town is made up of 'soixante-quinze hôtels, énormes constructions, semblables à des casernes et à des asiles d'aliénés' which follow each other, indefinitely, on a single line (24). The stories of the novel follow each other like these lined-up hotels. And like their uniform structure resembling military barracks insofar as insane asylums, the stories meld the normal with the pathological along the standardisation and homogeneity present in the spa town. In each chapter, each character that the narrator meets is defined by a physiological deformity and an absurd surname, yet all of them are typified by conformity and rendered insignificant by the gaze the narrator casts upon them. It is a world of superificiality and vulgarity in which, as the narrator notes, all these people come 'non pour soigner leurs foies malades, et leurs estomacs dyspeptiques et leurs dermatoses… ils viennent là – écoutez bien ceci – pour leur plaisir!…' (26). Losing all sense of aim or will power to cure themselves, they are continuously pushed towards consumption, such as in the casinos (233). This is a space dominated by the escalation of distractions that assert itself in futility. Casinos and other gambling establishments help combat the monotony of spa days. The peculiarities of the bourgeois lifestyle win over the benefits of thermal water.

Similarly, in his self-deprecating *Kurgast*, Hermann Hesse recounted his unpleasant experience as a patient at the Baden sanatorium. This explicitly autobiographical text offers a direct criticism and deep insight into Hesse's observations of the sanatorium culture and its superficial and even unbeneficial cure therapies. He addresses the problem with the sanatorium atmosphere and lifestyle, constructing it as an enclosed space of collective sickness. Much like Mirbeau's account of a place of relapse and idle consumerism, Hesse's work provides clear and ample evidence of a highly problematic therapeutic environment. The space is permeated with a 'faule[] und erschlaffende[] Badeatmosphäre' (Hesse 1977: 69), which equally brings the character of Robert Hagueman in *Les 21 jours* to confess: 'Je suis aussi démoli qu'à mon arrivée… De la blague, ces eaux thermales…' (Mirbeau 2010: 31). Again, this place of rehabilitation turns out to be a place leading to an aggravated state of passivity and powerlessness promoting the perpetuation of a diseased mass.

The disease in question is as much a fashionable concept as are the sanatoriums nestled in the mountains. The term 'neurasthenia' is prominently visible on the cover of the book, displayed in bold letters in the title. Yet, as for the rare instances in the text mentioning 'neurasthenia', one occurs in an anecdote by the thermal station resident M. Arthur Lebeau of his encounter with a thief. In the midst of his robbery, the thief replies to Arthur Lebeau: 'Oh! Les meubles modernes… comme ils ont l'âme fragile, n'est-ce pas? je vois qu'ils sont atteints, eux aussi, de la *maladie du siècle*, et qu'ils sont *neurasthéniques* comme tout le monde' (285, emphasis added). The tone is sardonic and points to the excessive use of this term and its definition covering a wide range of conditions. In this case, even furniture succumbs to neurasthenia. Another instance is given to Dr Triceps whose unorthodox medical reasoning asserts: 'à force d'être si rich, si longtemps riche… […] on serait neurasthénique à moins' (156). The notion is always aligned with a certain social position, reinforcing the idea that neurasthenia was mainly conceived at that time of the fin de siècle as 'un mal bourgeois'. In Mirbeau's novel, this idea is further stretched and satirised as what was once a seriously thought and studied syndrome is now trivialised by becoming a social behaviour falling under fashion and enacting expected rules.

Regarding the narrator, he reveals his symptoms to the reader and by that presents an almost perfect, or one might add, almost stereotypical symptomatology of neurasthenia:

> Eh bien, je suis à X… comme dans ces cauchemars. Vingt fois j'ai voulu partir, et je n'ai pas pu. Une sorte de mauvais génie, qui s'est pour ainsi dire substitué à moi, et dont *la volonté* implacable m'incruste de plus en plus profondément sur ce sol détesté qui me retient, m'y enchaîne… *L'annihilation de ma personnalité* est telle que je me sens incapable du petit effort […]je suis envahi, conquis par la *neurasthénie*… je subis, un à un, tous les tourments de la *dépression nerveuse* et de *l'affaiblissement mental*. Aucun visage, aucun souvenir ne me sont plus un repos, une distraction, une halte dans *l'ennui* qui me ronge. Je ne puis plus travailler. (207, emphasis added)

It cannot go unnoticed how the narrator uses an array of fashionable terms muddled into one small paragraph. Despite embodying the outsider looker and critic in this narrative, standing at a distance from the ridiculous spectacle the place offers, he succumbs to the tendency of his time by invoking 'neurasthénie', 'dépression', and 'ennui' in one same sentence. There is, as we have seen in some French medical texts, no clear and rigorous differentiation. Yet, also, throwing the terms arbitrarily in one same paragraph shows a certain desperation on the character's part to define and contain his ill-being. It may give an illusory sense of relief, or meaning, and rationalise his condition.

On the subject of his neurasthenia, Georges Vasseur addresses the issue of his loss of will power. He discovers in himself a hindered force as he cannot leave the spa town and its caging, surrounding mountains. Even, unconsciously, in a dream sequence, as we often find in novels at that time (for instance, Huysmans' *À Rebours*, Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*, Hermann Hesse's *Unterm Rad*), the narrator offers a range of anxieties of physical (and even sexual) impotence and weakened will power leaving the body helpless and inert.

> Je suis dans une gare, je dois prendre le train. […] Je ne puis pas; je suis clouée au sol. […] Je ne puis pas… Et le train s'ébranle, s'enfuit, disparaît. Les disques ricanent de mon impuissance […]. Ou bien je suis à la chasse […] J'épaule mon fusil, je tire… mon fusil ne part pas… mon fusil ne part jamais… J'ai beau presser la gâchette. En vain… Il ne part pas […] Ou bien encore, j'arrive devant un escalier […] Je lève une jambe, puis l'autre… et je ne monte pas… Je suis retenu par une force incoercible, et je ne parviens, malgré des efforts violents, à poser mes pieds […] Je piétine, je piétine, je m'épuise en mouvements d'inutile ascension. (205–206)

Whilst we can find in the German novels similar dream sequences of bodies falling and symbolising a loss of control exacerbated by a lack of aim and desire in life, in Mirbeau's text as much as in Huysmans' the bodies remain inert: they neither fall nor do they move forward. In these distressing dreams of will impairment, the

negation of actions, the repeated failures, the ellipses re-emphasise the static state of powerlessness the narrator finds himself in. Théodule Ribot's *Les maladies de la volonté* (1883), Albert Deschamps' *Les maladies de l'energie, therapeutique generale* (1908), Jules Payot's *L'éducation de la volonté* (1895), and Paul Emile Lévy's *L'éducation rationnelle de la volonté* (1898) had placed will impairment at the centre of nervous disorders, characterising it as the problem of modern life. And the neurasthenic narrator presents himself as an individual in a state of utter collapse, condemned to this place and unable to take control.

And this struggle with his own body is projected onto the environment. The mountains wall off the establishment with their 'épaisse muraille plafonnante de nuages qui la recouvre éternellement', '[d]e gros nuages qui trainent d'une montagne à l'autre leurs pesantes masses opaques et fuligineuses' externalises his internal malaise and lack of will power to extricate him out of this state of inertia (Mirbeau 2010: 25–26). Seized by 'la phobie de la montagne' (66) and 'la mélancolie des villes d'eaux' (69), he experiences an anguishing sense of confinement in his vulnerable body and in the spa town (66). In the same degree as *Dans le ciel*, the mountainous landscape and the sky form a vertiginous space yet also restricting and suffocating dome, reproducing and materialising the character's inner struggle, stuck in an state in-between loss of control and stasis, boundlessness and boundedness. We find the Huysmansian discourse in *À Rebours* with the pneumatic bell and the effect of pressure and heaviness on the character of Des Esseintes. Georges Vasseur, in turn, despairs of what delights Des Esseintes in his isolated and hermetically sealed mansion. Georges finds himself oppressed by a corporealised mountainous environment, enveloping, constricting, and reducing to an empty chamber his conscious 'I':

> La montagne m'oppresse, m'écrase, me rend malade. […] Et comment y échapper?... Devant soi, derrière soi, au-dessus de soi, toujours des murs, et des murs et encore des murs […]. Et pas de ciel non plus, jamais de ciel!... […] Des nuages lourds, étouffants, qui tombent, qui tombent, couvrent les sommets, descendent dans les vallées, en rampant sur les pentes, qui disparaissent aussi, comme les sommets… Et ce sont les limbes… c'est le vide du néant… (65–66)

The distressing space shrinks the more he struggles: 'Plus je marche, plus se rétrécissent les murs, plus les nuages se condensent et descendent, descendent jusqu'à me toucher le crâne, comme un plafond trop bas…' (67). Like the others patients, Georges Vasseur finds himself surrounded, forced to turn aimlessly in circles. 'Mais où donc marcher?... Vers quoi marcher?... Vers qui marcher?...' (67). The atmosphere is anxiety-provoking with the sky

bearing a seeming corporeality with its heavy, oppressive, suffocating clouds and at the same time the space described is vague, liminal, suspended in time. It emphasises and exteriorises the loss of control felt by the narrator, unable to grasp the surrounding environment and escape it – like his diseased state. Naturally, the narrative itself loses all sense of linearity as well. The structure of a story within a story lends a sense of circularity to the form of the novel. Neurasthenia is at the starting point and at the end of the twenty-one days, just like the unfolding 'à rebours' of Huysmans' novel of the same name or his *À vau-l'eau*, which both connote a looping return to the beginning of the narrative.

In this landlocked place, mirroring the life of bourgeois society, the norm becomes madness and disease. The narrative thus challenges the notion and boundaries between the normal and the pathological. Conformists to bourgeois norms and values sink into madness and neurosis. In this dizzying and uncomfortable place, the pathological grows and macerates. And so, in mirror effect, the so-called degenerates listed by men of science turn out to be on the contrary the vital spring of society. The narrator sees in marginal types a creative force, which lacks in the spa town:

> J'aime les originaux, les extravagants, les imprévus, ce que les physiologistes appellent des dégénérés... Ils ont, du moins, cette vertu capitale et théologale de n'être pas comme tout le monde... Un fou, par exemple... J'entends un fou libre, comme nous en rencontrons quelquefois... trop rarement, hélas! dans la vie... mais c'est une oasis en ce désert morne et régulier qu'est l'existence bourgeoise... (371–372)

In this instance, Georges perverts what society tries to normalise and advocates marginalism, the art of differentiation, especially epitomised by artists and intellectuals.

In that regard, the overarching aim is to firmly protest against the theses disseminated by the Italian anthropologist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who in his 1864 text famously linked madmen and men of genius. Pierre Michel has already pointed out everything that Mirbeau castigates in Lombroso in *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique* (2005: 232–246). Indeed, the narrator mocks the tendency for pathological inflation, popular at that time, which medicalised and criminalised any behaviour and state deemed unconventional or abnormal. Lombroso, in particular, is known for having medicalised genius (and thus the men of letters) as a pathological form of epilepsy in *L'Homme de génie* (see Lombroso 1889: 52). According to the anthropologist, any deviation

from the norm, from cultural acceptances, turned into a symptom of insanity and degeneration. The genius of artists constituted in his sense an abnormality and threat to societal order. Lombroso also insisted on the connection between biological, hereditary causes and prostitution and delinquency (*La femme criminelle et la prostituée*, 1894), thus relieving society of all responsibility. Behind Lombroso's scientism hid a pretext for social discrimination and, more generally, for racist and sexist motives.

A critique of Lombroso's theories circulates through the text by way of remarks uttered by a central and recurrent character: Dr Triceps. The character's name already sets the tone for the satire. The satire becomes further apparent when Georges attributes to Triceps the discovery of poverty as a neurosis caused by '[une] déchéance physiologique individuelle' rather than '[un] état social défectueux et injuste' (Mirbeau 2010: 47, 324). Under the grotesque and neurotic features of Dr Triceps is mocked the scientism and absurd scientific correlations developed by Lombroso:

> Ah! La science quelle merveille!… Vous savez à la suite de quelles expériences rigoureuses, inflexibles, nous fûmes, quelques scientistes et moi, amenés à décréter que le génie, par exemple, n'était qu'un affreux trouble mental? […] Des maniaques, des alcooliques, des dégénérés, des fous… […] Zola? Un délinquant… un malade qu'il faut soigner au lieu de l'admirer… et dont je ne comprends pas que nous n'ayons pu obtenir encore, au nom de l'hygiène nationale… la séquestration dans une maison de fou. (325)

Dr Triceps belongs to the mediocrity of scientifical scholars: if he is grotesque, it is the scientific community that is targeted. His astounding theories on incest as a possible form of racial regeneration, if they are evidently absurd, given that they are the expression of Mirbellian sarcasm, are no less grotesque than the real theories on artistic degeneration or on Jewish racial inferiority promoted by theorists at that time (48). Like the spa town, the words of Lombroso are subverted by the erasure of barriers between the normal and the pathological. The dual status of Triceps, who is at the same time part of an asylum for the insane and of so-called civil society, represents the porous line between two worlds: between the normal and the pathological. In the spa town, the relations between the society of scientists and the society of lunatics are quite osmotic.

Thus, as porous as these boundaries remain, there is also no healthy outcome, no possible exit out of this oppressive and sickly environment, or rather, out of this neurasthenic body stuck in limbo. The novel finishes in

the mountains and in doubts of whether Georges will be able to return to the plain and civilised society: 'Du cirque des montagnes noires, en face de nous, autour de nous, de ces implacables murailles de roc et de schiste, il m'est venu comme une pesante oppression, comme un étouffement' (414). At the end of the twenty-one days a last character enters the scene, who is there to bear witness of the results of a life in isolation in the mountains. Roger Fresselou, a recluse nihilist who never leaves the mountains, has lost all ambition and hope in life. Since he perceives everything to be useless, he lets himself slowly die in the shadow of the mountains. The final chapter testifies to a permanent duplication: with on one side the narrator, who is hopeful in a future civilisational regeneration and tries to convince himself that 'le vent est plein de germes' and, on the other side, Roger Fresselou, who far from the corrupt and disappointing world, no longer believes in progress or in the fight for ideas, sees in art 'une corruption' and in the literature 'un mensonge' (414). Since everything, inevitably, is heading towards degeneration and death, Roger prefers to stay secluded and isolated in the mountains.

As much as Des Esseintes' retreat in Fontenay, where the more time he spends there ornamenting the boundaries of his isolation the emptier and exhausting his life becomes within these walls, Georges Vasseur's feeling of imprisonment in the mountains (*Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*) or Georges and Lucien's maddening isolation and alienation on the peak's refuge (*Dans le ciel*) makes them face their own finitude and limited and exhaustible range of possibilities. *Dans le ciel* is devoted to the problems of artistic creation and shows the difficult ascent of a lonely and weak artist towards an ideal that he knows in advance to be out of reach. The modesty and lack of confidence in his creative skills, which have always characterised Mirbeau, are well expressed in this metaphor, where the mountain, far from symbolising freedom and human greatness, becomes a place of limitation as well as loss of sense of self. After the frustrating vertical thrust in *Dans le ciel*, the main narrator succumbs in *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique* to the gravitational depression in the mountains and to a suffocating and aberrant bourgeois environment. In both texts, the experience of his lived body, the exploration of his inner life, is outwardly projected onto the environment. This is a narrative strategy we also find in the selected German texts and which extends the inner sensations of the characters beyond the private, subjective world to an external, unconcealed, and visually compelling environment. Lastly, like the environment embodying their malaise, both narratives perform on the level of form the character's experience of limited possibilities and powerlessness. Not only the novels' own discontinuous plot line and fragmented stories emulate the experience,

the compulsive use of ellipses, in terms of punctuation, fill the work with emptiness and no way out of this deficient bodily and mental state. Neither does the environment rehabilitate the character, nor does the very form of the novel offer any kind of resolution. The narratives become objects of exhaustion like their characters, turning in circles with no sense of direction, development or outcome, stuck in an infinite in-between.

CHAPTER THREE

Writing Exhaustion, (In)Exhaustible Literature:

Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*

The Son of Dr Adrien Proust: 'L'Hygiène' of an Asthmatic and Neurasthenic

In the memories collected by Georges Belmont, Marcel Proust's housekeeper and secretary, Céleste Albaret, remembers the particular way the renowned author had at the end of his life of dismissing her: 'j'entends encore sa voix, sa façon d'appuyer sur le "f" et la première syllabe: "Ah, Céleste, je suis fatigué…"' (Albaret 1973: 88). Towards the end, Marcel Proust famously wrote in his bed in a room lined with cork for quietude. And he remained bedridden in his Parisian bedroom for eight years to extricate his 'literary cathedral' – his search for lost time – from his imagination. One can already identify the salient points of Marcel Proust's illness and the questionable lifestyle which he maintained throughout his life, the main factor in the deterioration of his health: he slept during the day and wrote at night, hardly ate, lived confined in his small bed, drank twenty cups of coffee per night and inhaled a large quantity of smoke from anti-asthma cigarettes or powders (see Mabin 1992: 133–157). Ironically, the young writer embodied in that sense the subject of the study conducted by his father, Dr Adrien Proust, who had written a treatise on the treatment of neurasthenia. As a fashionable epidemic among intellectuals, as seen previously in Huysmans' and Mirbeau's case, neurasthenia did not spare this writer either.

Illness was a crucial and constant factor in Marcel Proust's life. As a child, he already showed a weak disposition. Yet one pivotal event condemned the young Proust to a life of suffering. During a walk with his parents, he developed an asthma attack described as 'une effroyable crise de suffocation' and, from this day on, 'la menace de crises semblables' never stooped to threaten him (Proust 1923: 24–26). His sleep was interrupted by asthma attacks that could last up to thirty-six hours after which he feared he would never be able to wake up. Doctors advised him to restrict his outdoor exposition, to follow a dairy-restricted diet and to seek prolonged bed rest. They thought that purges would cleanse away the asthma, and as a result the young boy was sometimes

subjected to several enemas a day (Blum et al. 2015). These crises continued to occur as he grew older as he often complains in his correspondences, to Robert de Montesquiou for example, of exhaustion from days of 'crise terrible' and 'crises incessantes' (Proust 1979: 175, 178, 189). These crises left him with no sense of control over his nervous body.

While asthma is the principal acute manifestation of his neurasthenic condition, the list of associated signs is inexhaustible: digestive problems, insomnia, cardiac spasms, headaches, dizziness, memory loss, thermal dysregulation, slurred speech, and general weakness, justifying the diagnosis of 'neurasthenia' in his case (Straus 1980: 86). Proust's neurasthenia transpires in his letters, especially those written to his mother. In October 1896, he asked his mother whether his father would have 'quelque chose contre mon rire nerveux' (Proust 1976: 137). His frequent correspondence with his mother, Jeanne Proust, and the content of the letters show that he did not have a close relationship with his father. In these letters, Jeanne Proust often conveys his father's hygienist prescriptions. For instance, she writes to her 18-year-old son: 'Il (ton père) t'engage cependant à réduire tes quantités de fromage à la crème' (Proust 1970: 136). These states of nervous sensitivity and exhaustion worsened when Proust began seriously to consider his vocation as an author and continued to engage in unhealthy sleep-wake cycles and excessive work. Meaning by that, he was determined to disregard the behavioural and therapeutic recommendations listed by his father.

Proust produced several texts within a short period: between the writing of fragments of stories in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* (1896), his essays written for the manuscript of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (written between 1895 and 1900) and the writing of the quasi-autobiographical account of *Jean Santeuil* (written between 1896 and 1900), he showed ambition as a writer. Paradoxically, the problem of the will power deficit also haunts his writing process. Well before *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the feverish writing of his first novel *Jean Santeuil* did not last long and, creatively exhausted, he left the text unfinished. In Septembre 1896, shortly one year later, the composition already seemed to be at a standstill as he attests in a letter to his mother: 'Je ne peux pas dire que j'aie encore travaillé à mon roman dans le sens d'être absorbé par lui, de le concevoir d'ensemble' (Proust 1976: 124). The 1900–1905 correspondences increasingly reflect his state of frustration: lack of inspiration, awareness that he lacks the content and power to design and imagine the long-awaited major work, being his *À la recherche*. In July 1901, he exclaims: 'J'ai aujourd'hui trente ans, et je n'ai rien fait' (Proust 1976: 32). In his 1903

correspondences to the Countess of Noailles, he complains of being unable to start working on his ideas of a novel as he is 'sans volonté', exhausted, 'malade plusieurs jours après chaque sortie' (Proust 1931: 45–46). These examples only constitute the tip of the iceberg. At this point, it is impossible to cite all the letters in which Proust claimed to be ill, given their profuse numbers of references and the richness of their descriptions in his correspondences.

Frustrated and doubting his capacities as a writer, he turned his gaze outwards, envying the will power of others. In a letter from January 1894, he expresses his admiration for the determination of the Comte Robert de Montesquiou (1855–1921), known as a French aesthete, Symbolist poet, art collector and dandy. In this letter addressed to the subject of admiration himself, Proust praises the Comte's literary productivity, describing his will as 'adroite, tenace, impérieuse, toute-puissante', admiring how much the power of his will and the therefore richness of his intellectuality differs from the mundane decadent (Proust 1970: 269–270). The effect of the power of his will does not just reverberate on the quality of his writing but also positively influences readers of Montesquiou's work. Indeed, this is first elaborated in Proust's collection of essais in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* in which Proust notes that '[d]ès qu'il [Montesquiou] parle, on est dompté par un rythme puissant qui étonne d'abord, habitué qu'on est aux molles voix, sans accents, d'aujourd'hui' (Proust 1954: 432). He presents Montesquiou as the enemy, the anti-type of the decadent young literary scholars of whom he paints the following portrait:

> Vous les connaissez tous, ces jeunes gens […]. Ils sont tous pareils. D'abord ils ont tous une 'maladie de la volonté'. Ils ne peuvent pas vouloir, d'où ils ne savent agir et ne veulent pas penser. La plupart s'en glorifient, d'autres affectent de s'en plaindre, comme d'une faiblesse infiniment distinguée. Quelques-uns sentent la profondeur du mal, ses ravages dans l'esprit et dans l'action, mais ne peuvent changer, justement pour cela il faudrait vouloir. (Proust 1954: 432)

In several passages of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, the decadent is shown in the grip of an abnormal inability to act or make decisions (aboulia) which prevents him from conceiving the totality of his work to come. This text seems to confirm that around 1894 Proust was already familiar with *Les Maladies de la volonté* and the struggle of the neurasthenic to mobilise his will, a study published in 1883 by Théodule Ribot.

Despite repeatedly deploying the medical language of his time, Proust was also wary of many ideas of medical treatment and often critiqued the vision of the medical establishment. Already as a young boy, in a comment on an article in *L'Echo de Paris* (1892), he mocks the naive and simplistic medical recipes of nerve hygienists: 'malgré son titre prestigieux, [cet article] se réduit à un conseil d'hygiène et, si j'ose le dire, à une prescription de bains froids contre l'impuissance' (Proust 1994: 48; quoted in Finn 1996: 269). The condition of the neurasthenic seems to be far more complex than just the outcome of a set of bad habits and a lack of discipline – a line of argument suggested by his father in *L'hygiène du neurasthénique* (1897). Adopting a certain medical language, Proust seems to be competing with the clinical expertise of medical men in one of his essays. Despite his concern about his artistic aboulia (or will power deficit) becoming more pressing and crystallising itself around his second translation of Ruskin, *Sésame et les lys* (1906), the translation includes an introduction, an essay 'Sur la lecture' (1905) in which he propounds reading as a means of therapy for those without will power: 'Les livres jouent alors auprès de lui [l'esprit paresseux] un rôle analogue à celui des psychothérapeutes auprès de certains neurasthéniques' (Proust 1993a: 34–35). Proust observes that weakened minds are in a kind of inner inertia, bogged down in self-denial, incapable of wanting. To find this taste for the will, and in particular that of healing, the writer believes that these individuals must find help in the creative impulse of an external spirit. The writer – and not the physician – is believed to be the one able to incite through suggestion, meaning through his writings, the desire of the reader and to set back in motion their will power.

Proust continued to interrogate the nature of his own affliction through his work. It is interesting to re-examine the idea that his first conception of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, that is to say the one that dominates in the 1910–1911 version, was a reduced version containing the first volume of *Un amour de Swann* and the end with *Le Temps retrouvé* (Topping 2011: 106). It was purely a fictionalised story of a neurasthenic and weak-willed patient, who ends up understanding his illness and succeeds in escaping his weakness by writing. At this moment, Proust critically scrutinised his life and regarded with a defeatist attitude the state of his art: 'La paresse ou le doute ou l'impuissance se réfugiant dans l'incertitude sur la forme d'art'. He was hesitant about the form this new project should assume: 'Faut-il en faire un roman, une étude philosophique, suis-je romancier?', he wonders in *Le carnet de 1908* (Proust 1976a: 61) Yet, in this helpless and indecisive state, Proust also saw the source and subject of his work. He considered at the same time his lack of will power**,** hypersensitivity, and

errancy of his thoughts as a preliminary and even necessary condition for his creativity, ‘car c’est souvent, écrit-il, quand je suis le plus malade, que je n’ai plus d’idées dans la tête ni de forces, que ce moi que je reconnais parfois, aperçoit des liens entre deux idées, comme c’est souvent à l’automne, quand il n’y a plus de fleurs ni de feuilles, qu’on sent dans les paysages les accords les plus profonds’ (Proust 1954: 302).

Everything suggests that the years 1904–1905 had a particularly profound impact on Proust’s literary career and his conception of *À la recherche*. In the two years following the death of his father (1903), the author continued the search for psychological and neurological answers to his condition (Proust 1931: 54). This event also marked his increased fascination and interest in medicine and doctors and fascination for neuropathology to enrich his work. In addition to Dr Merklen, who had diagnosed in 1904 his asthma as a nervous habit (Proust 1949: 195–196), Proust consulted Jules Dejerine, a specialist in mental and nervous illnesses (Proust 1978: 389). He also refers in his correspondence to the work of the Swiss neuropathologist Paul Charles Dubois entitled *Les Psychonévroses et leur traitement moral* (1903), to an article in *Le Figaro* published on September 23, 1904 under the title ‘Neurasthénie’ by Henry Goujon, and regularly to the work of the French neurologist Edouard Brissaud entitled *L'hygiène des asthmatiques* (1896) (see Proust 1978: 281, 288, 397).

In September 1904, Proust mentions in his journal that he could possibly be treated for his neurasthenia by Dubois in Bern. Then, in December, he anxiously wonders if he should not rather consult Dejerine at La Salpêtrière (see Finn 2004: 47). In December 1905, he is finally interned as a patient in Paul Sollier’s sanatorium on the outskirts of Paris, in Boulogne-sur-Seine, to follow a six-week isolation therapy (see Bizub 2006: 155–157). The aim of this treatment was not only to break the habits of the patients and for them to fall under the suggestion and moral persuasion of a single person: the doctor and psychotherapist. Sollier, a student of Charcot and Ribot, also specialised in the study of memory (*Les troubles de la mémoire*, 1892; *Le problème de la mémoire*, 1900). His therapeutical approach made extensive use of memory as a means of catharsis and treatment, not by asking the patient to remember particular facts, but by inducing ‘reviviscences’ (re-experiencing or revival in the consciousness of an image, an old impression, an involuntary memory), which, much more than simple memories, allow a reactivation of the whole emotional being (Sollier 1900: 29; see Bogousslavsky 2007). Constituting more than just an isolation therapy, his treatment was then also a psychological treatment. In fact, according to Sollier, consciousness and the power of attention needed to be stimulated by injunctions issued by the doctor, so that the

subject could feel, once again, all the parts of his body and emerge from the state of physiological sleep in which they fell, and retrace the path in reverse until it recovered their anterior normal state. Influenced by this sanatorium experience, Proust will later invoke the condition of isolation and cast a new light on involuntary memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, not as a means for health regeneration, but as a driving force behind the narrator's creative inspiration.

Following this institutional internment, Proust then turned from one extreme existence to another, submitting himself radically to a secluded, intra-mural existence. Based on his relatives' account, as he got older and his lack of literary productivity increasingly weighed on him, he gradually withdrew from society life and altogether condemned it as a waste of his time. From a youth dedicated to high society life, Proust suddenly withdrew into an ascetic and laborious confinement – to the point of exhausting himself to death. His brother, Dr Robert Proust, testifies that 1910 (Marcel Proust was then forty years old) marked a real transformation in his life:

> Jusqu'alors malgré sa santé délicate, il avait mené une vie assez mondaine; à partir de ce moment, il y eut une seconde période, une seconde phase de sa vie. Ce fut alors une vie de renoncement, une véritable vie ascétique, où cloîtré chez lui, entouré de ses cahiers, ne sortant presque plus, il mit debout cette œuvre formidable, dont l'achèvement lui était si cher. (Proust 1923: 24–26).

Marcel Proust's excessive devotion to his greatest work to come only exacerbated his physical weakness and asthmatic disposition. A medical certificate from Dr Bize certified in 1914 attests in his patient, Marcel Proust, to the perseverance of 'crises d'asthme très violentes et quotidiennes, d'une profonde déchéance physique et d'affaiblissement nerveux' (Dr Bize's certificates bear the dates of October 23, 1914 (Proust 1985: 310) and November 2, 1914 (Proust 1985: 320, n° 5)). Until the end Proust kept himself sheltered from any form of distracting stimuli. He only went out for a few hours at very rare intervals. And, it is in the confinement of his bed that he tackled his greatest literary production.

His most prominent and studied work, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, – which will be the focus of this chapter – also takes on the leitmotif of the struggling artist experiencing exhaustion, yet pushes further the concept of limitation together with that of possibility. Akin to Mirbeau's figures of the artist in *Dans le ciel* or Thomas

Mann's Aschenbach figure in *Der Tod in Venedig*, exhaustion constitutes an important part of the creative process. Starting with *Du côté de chez Swann* and ending with *Le Temps retrouvé, À la recherche du temps perdu* is a colossal seven-volume work, published between 1913 and 1927. It can be very briefly summarised as a story of an individual, also called Marcel, narrating his life, seeking to remember what it amounts to, and his struggle to become a writer. *À la recherche* engages with various diagnoses of diseases of the will and writing difficulties. According to Donald Wright, the different characteristics of the narrator's disease are part of a skilful intertextual game with the medical discourse of the time, as well as with the personal experiences of the author (Wright 2007: 92).

Other critics have noted the congruity between the author and the narrator (Ellison 1980). The fact that the first-person-narrator is called Marcel deliberately blurs the line between biography and fiction, creator and created. The sudden acknowledgment of the narrator's name, '"Mon Marcel", "Mon chéri Marcel"' in the fifth book *La prisonnière* clearly announces the author's playfull engagement with the boundary between fiction and autofiction (Proust 1999: 1658). Still, it is evident that Marcel Proust should not be confused with Marcel, the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu.* Proust himself denied having used his own biography to feed the main character of his novel. This is mainly suggested by an argument from Proust's posthumously published collection of essays in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1954). The incentive behind the project was to dispute the literary critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869) and his manner of connecting the life of an author with the literary work (see Saunders 2017). Saint-Beuve's literary criticism amounts to acquiring knowledge (different levels of ideology) about the author and to create a 'literary portrait' of the writer. Contra to Saint-Beuve's method, in the Proustian formula lies the necessary and unsurpassable distinction between the social self and the creative self (see Jefferson 2007: 246). According to Proust, a book would be 'le produit d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices' (Proust 1954: 137). And, in the case of *La Recherche,* Proust particularly explores the inwardness of the creative process.

As careful one needs to be in differentiating the author from its narratorial figure, admitting the close links – conscious or unconscious – between the character, his author and the socio-historical context of the time also allows as much to understand the nature and meaning of the discourse on illness within the novel as to assess how the fiction-integrates, critiques the clinic of his time, as well as explores the subjective experience of illness.

To study the disease in *À la recherche du temps perdu* is to study how an out-of-the-ordinary sensitivity is negotiated and articulated, for the writer in the making, in a society permeated by scientific discourses of degeneration and decline. Firstly, Marcel Proust, despite being the son of the renowned hygienist Adrien Proust, imagines a metaphoric language of his own to describe the internal struggles of a hypersensitive and weak-willed body and the relationship with the mundane world experienced by the narrator or writer-to-be. Cast between the role of the decadent, indolent and pleasure-seeking aesthetes and the relentlessly-working artist, the narrator of *À la recherche* stands out as an inactive hero in a quest to find the will and strength to write. And, secondly, the last part of the chapter will particularly examine how the narrative form evokes the idea that *À la recherche* is a vehicle for transformation. Indeed, contrarily to the previously studied texts, form and content do not point towards a suspended end, a negation of character and plot development, or a sterile cyclical structure, but rather towards possibility and regeneration.

'Avoir un corps c'est la grande menace de l'esprit': Imagining the Limits of the Nervous Body

With a father well acclaimed within the medical field, a physician brother, and close contacts with various neurologists, Marcel Proust closely followed advances in medicine. Several Proustian critics have studied the link between the author and the medical field, as well as his knowledge and use of medical terms. Indeed, his work constitutes a fruitful field for the study of the influence of medicine on literary texts. Proust's neurasthenic symptoms, the physical and mental pathological manifestations of the narrator and characters of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the hygienist ideology of Adrien Proust are all subjects that have been commented upon (see for instance Soupault 1967; Fladenmüller 1984; Miguet-Ollagnier 1990; Yoshida 1992: 101–124; Mabin 1992: 183–205; Wright 2007). The medical imagination evidently runs right through Proust's writing. The medical tone that characterises the highlights of the *Recherche* is particularly reflected in the mobilisation of specific lexical fields. Francois Vanucci notes a total of three hundred extracts referring to the sciences (2005: 95). The lexicon tends to particularly polarise around nervousness. The vocabulary (example of such being 'état nerveux', 'nervosisme', 'névropathe', 'neurasthénique', 'tension des nerfs') and the symptoms related to nervousness have also been carefully listed and the occurrences quantitatively studied by Frédéric Fladenmüller (1984). Based on these

studies, Proust's work can be considered as an index of the many nervous states examined in medical texts at that time.

Even outside of the research scope in the medical humanities, many critics have previously commented on the narrator's condition, his nervous weakness, lack of will power, and hereditarily transmitted tendency to succumb to exhaustion. The assessment drawn up by Marion Schmid summarises the opinion of a large part of the critics:

> Faible de constitution et de volonté, neurasthénique et maladif, le [narrateur] présente tous les traits d'un grand nerveux, voire d'un dégénéré fin de siècle. Enfant ultrasensible, sa fragilité nerveuse et son asthme causent des inquiétudes à sa famille qui, tout comme les Rougon-Macquart, compte une ancêtre hystérique, tante Léonie. (Schmid 2008: 170)

Also, on the subject of neurasthenia, Michael R. Finn has taken an interest in the impact that neurasthenia may have had on the writing of the *Recherche*. According to him, 'it is after all, the story of a "nervous narrator" who struggles against negative hereditary factors in his family (personified in the semi-invalid aunt Leonie), and who suffers from a chronic lack of drive that makes him prefer living room time to productive time alone' (Finn 1997: 1). In theory, symptoms of nervousness, hypersensitivity and other signs of irritability were typically increased by heredity. And, the narrator is part of a family with a history of nervous illnesses. The vocabulary of nervous disorders is constantly discernible, as it characterises not just the narrator but also men and women, namely Swann, Charlus, and aunt Léonie. The father suffers from 'névralgies' (Proust 1999: 38), a term used to describe an acute pain felt in the nerves. His mother and grandmother share with the narrator a similar 'sensibilité nerveuse' (39). And, his aunt Léonie is plagued by 'une affection nerveuse' (978). The narrator's hypersensitivity is then not of his own doing but transmitted by his entourage. At this point, one can already highlight the tension with Adrien Proust's views as his father pathologised the neurasthenic's lifestyle of idleness and excessive consumption at fault in their weakened will power and exhausted body.

Whilst Marcel Proust's interest in the medical culture of his time is proven, it clearly stands out from Zola's concept of the experimental novel, which aimed to equal the precision and objectivity of scientific studies. Drawing (perhaps) on his intimate experience, Proust not only tends to engage, sometimes critically, with the

medical concepts and theories of the time, he also describes the world from the subjective perspective of the patient. As a result, well beyond medical discourse, he creates a metaphorical language to describe the powerlessness, the exhaustion experienced by the narrator and certain characters. And, by that dives into the realm of the psychological, subjective sensations and impressions known to the sick patient. For instance, the narrator creates a metaphor of his aunt Léonie's neurasthenia as a water lily. The plant strikes the attention of the narrator during his walk. It is violently rocked by the water, being in this case an ineluctable and fatal force, and condemning the plant to an eternal repetition of what seems to be a pathological routine (140). The torture of the apathetic plant is that of an involuntary repetition of incessant movement, being stimulated and strained by external elements – tension that the narrator compares to the nerves of the neurasthenic. The episode generates a feeling of unease in the narrator at the sight of this plant and its frenzied movement in the water current. The uneasiness is also stimulated by the sensory metaphor of the tugging of the plant assimilated to the twitching of the nerves. Sympathetic words, in the character of 'malheureuse' and 'pauvre', show that the narrator empathises with the plant's experience and understands its inability to wilfully resist the current of the water (140).

Aunt Léonie and the narrator both roam or turn involuntarily in circles, being hurled and their nerves stretched and strained, by their repeated failures, disappointments and sorrows, illusion, jealousy, guilt and for the narrator, an inability to write. Of a poor disposition and weak-willed like his aunt, the narrator locks himself into habits and experiences throughout the novel the overwhelming experience of his inability to change and his powerlessness to start writing. The cause for his inner disruption emerges at the beginning of the narrative. The narrator associates the evening when his past younger self awaited his mother's good night kiss as the event – a nervous impulse – precipitating his illness. Surprisingly, the observation only strikes the narrator's mind at the very end of *À la recherche*, after a long writing process of remembrances and introspection:

> C'était de cette soirée, où ma mère avait abdiqué, que datait, avec la mort lente de ma grand-mère, *le déclin de ma volonté*, de ma santé. Tout s'était décidé au moment où, ne pouvant plus supporter d'attendre au lendemain pour poser mes lèvres sur le visage de ma mère, j'avais pris ma résolution, j'avais sauté du lit et étais allé, en chemise de nuit, m'installer à la fenêtre par où entrait le clair de lune jusqu'à ce j'eusse entendu partir M. Swann. (2398, emphasis added)

The brief description of the narrator corresponds to the descriptive clues of a deeply emotional and hypersensitive being, unable to bear the frustration of a change in his routine. Each symptom thus testifies to his inability to dominate his emotions and control his impulses, especially nervous ones.

During this pivotal scene known as 'le drame de mon coucher', his habits find themselves turned upside down and his body deprived of a maternal rite which automatically calms him (44). This 'drame du coucher' spells out the narrator's 'état nerveux' as a psychosomatic condition by reason of his emotional upheaval being accompanied by uncontrollable heart palpitations. The vocabulary 'céder', 'succomber', 'résister', with its explicitly militaristic tones, alludes to the narrator's physiological weakness and inability to withstand tension and changes in his daily routine (36, 39). The opening sequence also exposes the body of the narrator as 'other', as a member detached from the self's will. The narrator realises that his body has a will of its own, which he – the 'I' subject – cannot control. The description of his body as 'trop engourdi pour remuer', for instance, underlines his alienation from it as his body becomes a third person subject (15). The experience of the numb body is taken up again at the end of the seven-volume work, in *Le Temps retrouvé,* when in the middle of the night the insomniac narrator realises the 'otherness' of his body and that its self-governing force is the involuntary memory animating his limbs against his own will (2132).

On that subject, Théodule Ribot identifies in neurasthenics the absence of voluntary attention as the sign of their unstable function. Ribot most often speaks of a weakening of the will, but occasionally he uses the expression 'l'anéantissement de la volonté'. The impulse to act is too weak, if not inexistant. The weakness of the will (or aboulia) finds its expression in an inability to impose self-governance: powerlessness to resist, powerlessness to act and suggestibility plague the weak-willed (Ribot 1883/1888: 36). This passage redefines the meaning of exhaustion – psychologises and subjectivises it even – through the articulation of the concept of the will. If the ideas of Ribot can appear as a sort of a theoretical foundation on which Marcel Proust would have drawn to complete the neurasthenic portrait of his narrator, one must not forget that Adrien Proust also analysed in detail this state of absence of will in neurasthenics: 'La déchéance de leur volonté se traduit encore par des doutes, des hésitations interminables. Rien ne leur est plus pénible que de prendre une décision souvent c'est de *l'affaiblissement de la volonté que dépend l'asthénie motrice*, plus encore que d'une débilite particulière des muscles' (1897: 76, emphasis added). As there is no force to mobilise the will, there can be no 'volonté de guérir'

either (1897: 260). The ‘drame du coucher’ perfectly illustrates the confrontation of a weak-willed subject with an unpredictable event and his inability to adjust himself or rather withstand straining factors and change.

Thus, the opening scene not only introduces the problematic trait of the narrator as a man of habits, it also established a central motif in *À la recherche*: the repetition of unsettling events throwing him off balance and weakening his capacity and determination to start writing (Proust 1999: 1946). The first temporal section of the *Recherche* evokes a moment of remembrance of the past, at a time, when the habit of going to bed early suddenly tipped into insomnia and the incessant rehashing of events. Like a spark from fire, the ‘drame du coucher’ turns into a catalyst of a series of agitating episodes triggering various symptoms. Its most tangible manifestation is reflected in the febrility of the nerves and motor instability of his body. In the feverish expectation that precedes his meeting with Gilberte, the narrator describes the impact of his condition on the stability of the body:

> Un matin, portant coordonnés en moi mes malaises habituels, de la circulation constante et intestine desquels je tenais toujours mon esprit détourné aussi bien que celle de mon sang […] – je me mettais à table, quand, au moment d’avaler la première bouchée d’une côtelette appétissante, une nausée, un étourdissement m’arrêtèrent, réponse fébrile d’une maladie commencée. (396)

The young man describes the dissociation of body and mind, which in certain situations can lead to frantic situations, illustrated here by nausea and dizziness. The evolution of the pathology conditions the unfolding of events and structures the novel: appeasement during stays in Balbec, bed rest throughout the episode of Albertine, stays in a health facility during the war. The chronic suffocations for which the narrator has been treated ‘[d]epuis longtemps déjà’ give a new dimension to the perception that the reader could have of the young hero who, from being sensitive and fragile, suddenly rises to the status of a real sick person (396).

Several characters comment on the narrator’s illness and, in doing so, also show a certain understanding. The state of despair of the narrator as a child is perceived by the mother not as a whim or as the expression of an overflowing tenderness, but indeed as the mark of a more serious and deeper condition or at least difficult to treat. For the family, the young narrator suffers from a nervous condition, proof of which is his inability to control his impulses when, for example, he cannot receive the maternal kiss the evening when Charles Swann, who has

come to dine at home, keeps his mother in the garden. But this is not the typical nervous hypersensitivity of artists. The novel does not depict an embodiment of decadence but, more simply, a character who experiences illness. Long before the doctors look into his case and try to determine the best way to cure him, the narrator's mother and grandmother are already displaying a sense of awareness and thinking of an educational regimen 'afin de diminuer [sa] sensibilité nerveuse et fortifier [sa] volonté' and thus to allow the narrator to no longer be the slave to his own nerves (39) (see also 385, 460–461).

As the theme of illness occupies a central place in the narrative, naturally the narrator also invites the medical body to voice its perspective. The episodes where the narrator is sicker than usual are instances of display of a whole ensemble of doctors circulating at the patient's bedside. The various doctors who treat the narrator remain vague and speculative as to his disposition. Most of the time the scenes are limited to prescriptions without diagnosis, leaving out any extensive analysis. To counter his experiences of nausea, fever, and suffocation, the family doctor recommends him to altogether inhibit the function of his nervous system by drinking alcohol, much to the grandmother's despair (396). The only doctor not to be mystified by the complexity of the narrator's state is Dr Cottard. For the celebrated medical man, it is a complex physiological condition that can only be treated with an absolute diet: 'Purgatifs violents et drastiques, lait pendant plusieurs jours, rien que du lait. Pas de viande, pas d'alcool' (398). Dr Cottard, whose diagnosis and prescription only takes into account the physical condition of the narrator, is the first character in the novel who, although finding his young patient 'assez asthmatique et surtout "toqué"', does not attempt to cure the body by healing the soul first. Surprisingly, the treatment works and the narrator soon regains his strength and concludes that 'cet imbécile était un grand clinicien' (398). The satire vis-à-vis the medical establishment shines through the use of this oxymoron. Even so, the narrator shows an awareness to his condition and critically distances himself from Dr Cottard's dim-wittedness and tendency to only identify the observable, therefore physical symptoms. In that the narrator argues that in his case what is materially observable could just as well be caused by nervous spasms, tuberculosis, asthma, dyspepsia or by a complex state combining all these conditions (397–398). The diagnosis formulated by the positivistic Cottard, which discredits abstract and subjective psychological causes in favour of visible and readable symptoms of the disease, is only presented in the novel as one point of view among others on this delicate question.

Indeed, in anyone who really knows the narrator or who claims to really understand him like the writer Bergotte, who sees inscribed in the narrator's illness the proof of his artistic talent, the idea that the disease from which he suffers originates more deeply prevails over all other explanations. Bergotte, for his part, prefers the hypothesis of an artist's disease – a disease superior to the mass. He suggests the narrator should consult a doctor who will finally be able to treat him. He advises him to consult Dr du Boulbon, an expert on nervous diseases in intellectuals and artists. Dr du Boulbon not only opposes Dr Cottard's diagnosis and prescriptions but, more globally, the medical discourse of an era. Dr du Boulbon aims to identify and understand the particular illnesses of artists, whether or not they are aware of their talent, from an angle that places psychological symptoms at the source of the physical symptoms:

> Tout ce que nous connaissons de grand nous vient des nerveux. […] Jamais le monde ne saura tout ce qu'il leur doit et surtout ce qu'eux ont souffert pour le lui donner. Nous goûtons les fines musiques, les beaux tableaux, mille délicatesses, mais nous ne savons pas ce qu'elles ont coûté à ceux qui les inventèrent, d'insomnies, de pleurs, de rires spasmodiques, d'urticaires, d'asthmes, d'épilepsies, d'une angoisse de mourir qui est pire que tout cela […]. Vous vous croyiez malade, dangereusement malade peut-être. […] *Le nervosisme est un pasticheur de génie.* Il imite à s'y méprendre la dilatation des dyspeptiques, les nausées de la grossesse, l'arythmie du cardiaque, la fébricité du tuberculeux. Capable de tromper le médecin, comment ne tromperait-il pas le malade? (979–980, emphasis added)

This statement positions itself far from a discourse pathologising nervous states. The physician shows a sympathy and admiration for the neurasthenic. Countering the prevailing medical discourse, the physician sets forth that neurasthenia should not be considered a stigmatising term; on the contrary, it is the inevitable concomitant of sensitivity intelligence, for it is the artists, the creators, those who suffer, who have fabricated 'tout ce que nous connaissons de grand'. Ultimately, he opposes the pathologisation of genius and the positioning of artists as symptoms and catalysts of the degeneration of modern civilisation.[10]

In view of these elements, Dr du Boulbon seems to be presented in a better light than his colleague, Dr Cottard, as he puts artists and their genius hypersensitivity as a sought-after quality and vital to society and its

[10] For instance, Louis-Francisque Lélut (1804-1877) wrote a pathography linking genius and insanity. His case studies on Socrates and Pascal appeared in 1836 under the title *Du démon de Socrate* and *L'Amulette de Pascal pour servir à l'histoire des hallucinations* in 1846. Other subsequenlty written works include Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours' *La Psychologie morbide* (1859), Cesare Lombroso's *L'Homme de génie* (*Genio e follia*) (1889), and Max Nordau's *Entartung* (1892).

progress. Yet, in his contradictions, the narrator detaches himself as much from the speculations of an internal discourse without proof and foundations held by Dr du Boulbon. He describes his medical gaze as one that does not even examine the patient and still manages by a simple look to identify a neurasthenic. The narrator's tone is one tinged with irony as the famous doctor speculates on what is imperceptible and gives 'the illusion' of examining his sick grandmother when the physician would much rather talk about literature. As pointed out by several critics, including Donald Wright, this ambivalence towards Dr du Boulbon is due to the fact that doctors in the *Recherche* play a mixed role: that of the vehicle of medical discourses of the time and that of shallow pure socialite (Wright 2007: 96, 354).

In contrast to these characters, the narrator positions himself as one able to see through things with a penetrating gaze surpassing the superficial perception of the medical men. The narrator's gaze pierces beyond the limits of his own fleshy envelope and makes the invisible parts of his body, the inner experiences perceptible and tangible to the reader. The narrator does not see the outer film of things, but 'radiographs' the depths of the body-being (Proust 1999: 2147). The technical reference that organises this passage reveals a subjective vision aware of the space and its own embodied actions. For instance, at the sight of his new rom in Balbec's Grand-Hôtel, a room with which he is not familiar, every sensation the room echoes back at him is minutely described:

> J'étais brisé par la fatigue, j'avais la fièvre, je me serais bien couché, mais je n'avais rien de ce qu'il eût fallu pour cela. J'aurais voulu au moins m'étendre un instant sur le lit, mais à quoi bon puisque je n'aurais pu y faire trouver de repos à cet ensemble de sensations […] [qui] auraient maintenu mes regards, mon ouïe, tous mes sens, dans une position aussi réduite et incommode (même si j'avais allongé mes jambes) que celle du cardinal La Balue dans la cage où il ne pouvait ni se tenir debout ni s'asseoir. (529)

The anguish felt in this unfamiliar, secluded and confining space gives rise to an extreme feeling of fatigue, a fever, which remain unresolvable as he finds it difficult to relax and fall asleep. This set of manifestations, caused by a loss of control repercussed by an unfamiliar environment, is disconcerting for him. He feels foreign to the space and vulnerable. His growing anguish and subsequent insomnia encourage his fall into a state of physical and mental exhaustion. The anxiety experienced under this 'plafond inconnu et trop haut' remains a sign of his nerves failing to control his emotions and remain relaxed in the face of change (533).

The same continues to occur during his stay at the Grand-Hôtel during the elevator ride. His physical inertia is amplified by the immobility and passivity of his position in a closed elevator operated by a liftman, operator of the machine which follows his vertical ascent. Prisoner of the elevator cabin, he feels the opacity of his body inside another mechanical body: 'je m'élevais […] dans l'ascenseur, comme dans une cage thoracique mobile qui se fût déplacée le long de la colonne montante' (630). There are two levels of visualisation: one external and another internal. The metaphor captures the exhausting experience internally with the rib cage moving up the spine creating a feeling of suffocation, and externally with the body in the elevator feeling compressed by the space and the upward movement of the machine. The border between the outside and the inside is blurred in this instance with two bodies – the body of the narrator and the elevator – limiting the range of action, immobilising and moving independently from the individual's will.

The narrator contrives a new method of visualisation of the relationship between body and mind and the effects of a rational mind being confined to an unreliable, uncontrollable, and vulnerable body. In the last part of the final volume, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, like the body entrapped in the elevator, the anxiety that again takes hold of the narrator is linked to a series of evocations of the mind being naturally confined within the physical envelope of the body and subjected to its limitations:

> Il fallait partir en effet de ceci que j'avais un corps, c'est-à-dire que j'étais perpétuellement menacé d'un double danger, extérieur, intérieur. […] Car le danger intérieur, comme celui d'hémorragie cérébrale, est extérieur aussi, étant du corps. […] *Le corps enferme l'esprit dans une forteresse*; bientôt la forteresse est assiégée de toutes parts et il faut à la fin que l'esprit se rende. (2392, emphasis added)

The mind is configured as being enclosed in a fortress and dependent on the body envelope when it comes to facing external elements or illnesses from within. Another compelling image used by the narrator is that of 'un *thésauriseur* dont le *coffre-fort crevé* eût laissé fuir au fur et à mesure les richesses' (2393, emphasis added). One finds a similar limit-experience in Huysmans' *À Rebours* with the reclused and suffocating country house enclosing Des Esseintes and disconnecting him from the outside, yet rendering him further weak and predisposed to illness from the inside. One can notice again the trope of the self contained within an asphyxiating body-envelope.

The End is the Beginning: Toward a Literature of Inexhaustible Possibilities

Curbed by bodily limitations and the retrospection and repetition of patterns and plots of the past, the narrator is also paradoxically driven forward by a quest. Present from the outset, the motif of the artistic vocation is pointed out by the narrator himself as the main axis of the narration: 'la vocation invisible dont cet ouvrage est l'histoire' (Proust 1999: 1053). Again, Michael R. Finn suggests that it is possible to read *À la recherche* 'not only as the search for an artistic vocation, but specifically as the novel of a neurasthenic's search for a literary vocation' (Finn 1997: 295). Michèle Wilson follows in that sense in the footsteps of Finn's line of argument and understands the neurasthenic disorder as being the cornerstone onto which the narrator builds himself as a writer (Wilson 2006: 10–11, 361.). One could therefore interpret the figure of the narrator as not only being the passive vehicle of symptoms like the other pathological cases of the *Recherche*. Significantly, his nervousness or hypersensitivity labelling him a neurasthenic is for him both what he is fighting against and what helps him acquire the tools allowing him to realise the true purpose of his life. And in that sense, he clearly sides with Dr du Boulbon in this narrative constellation.

At an early stage, the narrator expresses his desire to become 'le premier écrivain de l'époque' and the author of a 'grande œuvre litteraire' (Proust 1999: 143). A long way still separates the narrator from the goal he dreams to achieve. Apart from the reluctance expressed by his father – who would like for his son to become a diplomat – he constantly needs to fight certain internal obstacles. The narrator cannot fix his attention and push himself to focus on his objective. The general structure of *À la recherche* also seems to illustrate certain words present in *L'hygiène du neurasthénique* and to demonstrate a process of internalisation of paternal ideas. The mutual relationship between neurasthenia and creative impotence presents itself as a well-founded explanatory model. Any neurasthenic artist would have, by definition, according to Adrien Proust and Gilbert Ballet's analysis, production difficulties (Proust and Ballet 1897: 77–78). Creation requires of the artist an intense and painful effort of the will. A description of the disorders which affect the memory of neurasthenics and, consequently, the stable essence of their personality, again recalls Proust and Ballet's treaty and prefigures the condition of the narrator of *À la recherche* incapable at the level of the effort of conscious memory and voluntary to remember the true content of one's life: 'L'évocation des souvenirs est défectueuse parce qu'ils – les

neurasthéniques – sont impuissants à soutenir l'effort d'attention nécessité par *la recherche du souvenir perdu*' (Proust and Ballet 1897: 76, emphasis added).

In conjunction with the frustrations, he has to endure with his body's lack of volitional power, he has to cope with mental exhaustion, described as 'cette absence de génie, ce trou noir qui se creusait dans mon esprit', exacerbated by his search for a subject that does not present itself (Proust 1999: 143). Indeed, discouragement and despair always accompany his intent to write and often push him to give up. From then on, he deplores his lack of talent and disposition for the arts and even believes himself to be suffering from a brain disease, incapacitating him in his process of creation:

> [P]uisque je voulais un jour être un écrivain, il était temps de savoir ce que je comptais écrire. Mais dès que je me le demandais, tâchant de trouver un sujet où je pusse faire tenir une signification philosophique infinie, mon esprit s'arrêtait de fonctionner, je ne voyais plus que le vide en face de mon attention, je sentais que je n'avais pas de génie ou peut-être une *maladie cérébrale* l'empêchait de naître. (142–143, emphasis added)

In a way, the narrator succumbs to the medical discourse and attempts to rationalise his inaptitude to complete his work by holding a physiological brain disorder responsible.

The last section is a point of convergence between father Proust and young Proust's text. The *Recherche* perfectly exemplifies the neurasthenic's volitional difficulties and attention deficits and its causes being for one the devitalising and over-stimulating environment and lifestyle habits. The narrator continues to expose himself to an aristocratic atmosphere and environment in search of pleasure, seeking a frivolous life, paradoxically knowingly deploring it as the source of his unproductive years. The all-knowing narrator warns himself that he could have omitted wasting his time had he been alone: 'J'éprouvais […] un enthousiasme qui aurait pu être fécond si j'étais resté seul, et m'aurait évité ainsi le détour de bien des années inutiles par lesquelles j'allais encore passer avant que se déclarât la vocation invisible dont cet ouvrage est l'histoire' (1053). Unable to lead an orderly life, he wastes his time, as he finally admits in *Le Temps retrouvé*, 'dans la paresse, dans la dissipation des plaisirs, dans la maladie, les soins, les manies' (2287). These remarks without the slightest doubt echo those of Marcel Proust's father, according to whom '[l]a neurasthénie est souvent la légitime mais regrettable rançon de l'inutilité,

de la paresse, ou de la vanité' (Proust and Ballet 1897: 32). Disrupted by the stimulating elements around him, the narrator is inclined to avolition, a reduced motivation to engage in motivated goal-directedness.

It is only by the end that the narrator actively tries to remedy his situation. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator highlights his break with his habits on the eve of his departure to go sojourn in a nursing home: he evokes 'l'engourdissement des habitudes qui vont finir cessant' and the fact that he needs to 'rompre avec la société, renoncer au voyage, aux musées' in order to cure himself from laziness and creative inactivity (Proust 1999: 2140, 2151). Thus, when the narrator finally withdraws from society to undertake two cure stays (both events are elliptically narrated), he moves away from the so-called temptations of high society and its superfluous pleasures. This leads to the demonstration of how only isolation and solitude can lead to creation. Social relations steadfastly become a hindrance to reflective and inspirational isolation and fruitless for the realisation of his work. Friendships, moreover, only procure a pleasure which would resemble 'à quelque chose d'intermediaire entre la lassitude et l'ennui (2261). At this pivotal moment, Proust's novel follows the concept of the solitary artistic adopted by Huysmans and Mirbeau.

This transvaluation goes hand in hand with the emergence of an imagery of the writer who shuts himself up in a secluded place. This is exemplified in Huysmans' *À Rebours* and the confinement of Des Esseintes in his Fontenay mansion and the secluded mountain in Mirbeau's *Dans le ciel* and by the end of *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*. Proust is no exception to this leitmotif of the solitary, self-isolated individual, yet explores further the possibilities this condition entails. One witnesses in the last volume of the *Recherche* the birth of a writer – a development strongly similar to that embodied by Proust himself, fighting against time and his dying body to finish his grand work. The creation of this position is largely based, as much for the fictional character as for the novelist, on the value conferred on them by the status of 'being seriously ill': both have become writers at the end of endless peregrinations. They not only succeed in overcoming this 'curse' which has been their lethargic and will-deficient bodies, but also in making it one of the discursive pillars serving to prove the exceptional character of their literary talent – and, by extension, to defend the originality and importance of their work. And in that sense, the Proustian project is to make explicit, or rather to exteriorise and materialise something that is usually experienced implicitly and internally. The text navigates the inner workings of the mind through a stream of thought and interconnected network of memory images. The narrator's simultaneous curse and creative driving

force, being the digressive stream of thought and involuntary memories rupturing the linearity of the narrative, become the foundation of his *À la recherche*.

One notable metaphor conveys the inexhaustible train of thought, memories, and inference shaping the narrative and the creative work itself. At the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator describes how his process of writing his work is like building a cathedral (2389). This analogy suggests that the work is the reincarnation of a modern Tower of Babel. This effort consists in the transformation of a material into a form or, if necessary, into a set of juxtaposed forms: for the builder the material is stone; and for the narrator, the material is his past. So much so that the effort of formatting his work, of remembering transforms into an arduous, almost impossible process. It creates an exhausting effect on the level of the structure of the text itself. Proust uses few paragraph breaks, rare line breaks in most conversations between characters, and long sentences strung together with clauses and conjunctions, – creating multi-layered sequences, containing past, present and future times in a single configuration. In this regard, Walter Benjamin perfectly captures the construction of the Proustian style in his essay 'Zum Bilde Prousts' as a syntax of 'uferloser' or boundless sentences (2012: 107). Through a series of complicated and interconnected images and sentences, the narrator (and by extension Proust) creates a complete and thickly described world. One could say that the complexity of Proust's work can arouse by its amplitude, the frequent length of the sentences, the effort of memory that distant correspondences and symmetries require. Presumably, extra-textually, the effect onto the reader – that of challenging his attention, provoking reading fatigue, lassitude, discouragement – may have been the intention of the author and a sign of act of resistance to a time of rapid change and constant activity. By that, exhaustion extends outside the framework of the narrative.

The disease, especially when it is a condition of nervous origin such as neurasthenia, indicates an extraordinary sensitivity. Indirectly, it is also the proof, according to Proust, of an artistic talent, because the sensitive (sensory and emotional) contact with reality is what, over time and without his knowing it, provides the aspiring writer a wealth of material for his literary work, much more than intelligence or imagination: Ainsi, '[o]n a beau vivre sous l'équivalent d'un *cloche pneumatique*, les associations d'idées, les souvenirs continuent à jouer' (Proust 1999: 1621, emphasis added). As spotted in Huysmans' *À Rebours*, the here re-emerging image of the confining and asphyxiating 'pneumatic bell' illustrates the narrator's experience of the limits of his body. Yet, the narrator explains that his neurasthenic condition enables him to extract himself out his body. His exhausted

body is transformed into a space for the expansion of the character's inner life and thus challenges the assumption of a limiting and inherently negative condition. The patient's mental activity, although it seems to be confined to a restrictive body-envelope, also arises as an inexhaustible source. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator imagines that 'les œuvres, comme dans les puits artésiens, montent d'autant plus haut que la souffrance a plus profondément creusé le cœur' (2294). By artesian well is meant a source from which water flows under positive, natural pressure without being pumped by an external agent (Allaby and Allaby 2018). The novel tells us in many instances that the more deeply a man plunges into suffering and illness, the closer he comes to his creative self. It is no doubt the narrator's hypersensitivity engages his observational and creative powers. The deep impressions, that the reality that surrounds him provides him, obscurely spawns in him the urge to write.

Proust presents this originality among French modernist authors, that of reimagining the notion of exhaustion not as a loss of vitality, emptiness, and under the eye of a decadent pessimism as seen in Huysmans' and Mirbeau's work, but with a positive effort and creation. A similar experience is explored by Thomas Mann in *Schwere Stund*e and Schiller's difficult but productive creative hour. However, Proust's story does not end with the death of the artist, nor his downfall. And his feeble condition does not remain until the end an obstacle in the creative process but a positive trigger. For the artist who finally wants to produce his work – and it is this culmination of the journey of the artist-sick that is staged *Le Temps retrouvé* –, illness bears a paradoxical role, for it both limits his productivity yet also 'cultivates' the creative process: 'La maladie […] m'avait rendu service "car si le grain de froment ne meurt [pas] après qu'on l'a semé, il restera seul, mais s'il meurt, il portera beaucoup de fruits"' (Proust 1999: 2398).

Furthermore, what triggers this process is the circular form of the narrative and its ever-repeating plot mechanism. The embedded narrative, the concentric circles allow us to reconsider the circular and repetitive structure into countless possibilities. The inclination for nesting doll-like clausal constructions and narrative sequences, comprised of repetitions and symmetries in the narrator's memories, sentences and episodes within episodes that deliberately extend over several pages, distinguishes Proust's writing style from other modernist authors. A large measure of this narrative's radical shift from the realist and naturalist novelistic genres emanates from the non-linear and circular unfolding of the novel. Furthermore, where in Huysmans' and Mirbeau's case the narrative structure consists of fragmented stories, independent from one another, here, prolepsis (flashforward

or anticipation) and analepsis (flashback) are narrative devices systematically used in structuring the work and creating the cyclical nature of the narrative and the circular nature of his 'reviviscences'. The narrator slips back and forth into multiple 'memory images' of a member of his family or acquaintance or a particular event, disrupting the linear progression of the narrative and rendering the reading of the text systematically difficult (see Larkin 2011: 70, 81; Haustein 2012: 73–75). The narrator eliminates the most elementary temporal indicators (now, once) and abandons all linearity in the plot structure as anachronies reaching into the past or future trace a zigzagged narrative. The narrator thus floats in a sense through time and space, foregoing the cause-and-effect explanations of a linear plot structure. But one can also see it, like Gérard Genette, as a swirling narrative constructed as a series of concentric circles of memories enclosing one another – creating a rippling effect (1980: 261)

In that regard, it is true that the parallel to the story collection of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, a continuous narrative compiled of individual folk tales, is well founded. First of all, the text itself is continuously mentioned by the narrator. The most important correlation between the *Recherche* and *Les Mille et Une Nuits* lies at the end of the cycle in *Le Temps retrouvé* as the narrator expresses his desire and the will to write a book. 'Moi, c'était autre chose que j'avais à écrire, de plus long, et pour plus d'une personne. Long à écrire. […] Si je travaillais, ce ne serait que la nuit. Mais il me faudrait beaucoup de nuits, peut-être cent, peut-être mille. […] Ce serait un livre aussi long que *Les Mille et Une Nuits* peut-être, mais tout autre' (Proust 1999: 2397–2398). The parallel having received relatively little critical attention, the main study has been conducted by Dominique Jullien in 'Proust et ses modèles' (1989) in which he identifies 177 implicit and explicit references to the *Les Mille et Une Nuits*. Richard van Leeuwen (2005) further analyses the relationship between the two texts. Van Leuwen draws attention to the way the *Recherche* has the structure of a frame story with a narrator-writer who sets about remembering new episodes in a vast cycle which has no real end, just as much *Les Mille et Une Nuits* is structured as a series of nightly interruptions, a chain of tales with no resolution (Van Leuwen 2005: 151). Coupled with the repetitions, symmetries, stories within stories, the text shows different versions of a variable reality and also adopts the narrative strategy of the infinite end. By that, this thesis adds, that Proust manages to come up with a novel with inexhaustible possibilities.

The reverse side of the writer's uncontrollable body and powerless will in the creative process is the revitalisation by a narrative structure conceived like an eternal restart through the effraction of involuntary memories. This literature on creative exhaustion is therefore not a literature of exhaustion. Unlike the disarticulated, disorderly, and depressiogenic texts of Mirbeau and Huysmans, Proust's text is generative, even regenerative. The *Recherche* is a work that wants to be designed like an impossible-to-complete cathedral as Proust explains to Céleste Albaret: 'je veux que, dans la littérature, mon œuvre représente une *cathédrale*. Voilà pourquoi ce n'est jamais fini. Même bâtie, il faut toujours l'orner d'une chose ou d'une autre, un vitrail, un chapiteau, une petite chapelle qu'on ouvre, avec sa petite statue dan coin' (Albaret 1973: 286, emphasis added). Likened to this metaphor of the cathedral in a state of continuous and inexhaustible construction, the narrator reveals the text to be a body full of potential. The text becomes a kind of 'meta-body', meaning a body beyond the current human form that has abilities beyond those of the physical body. Although the body of the narrator is struck by moments of inertia and an absence of will power, constrained by spatio-temporal and bodily limitations, the writing enlarges the field of possibilities, extends outside the limited body of the narrator into the narrative framework by way of its circularity.

Proust designed his story according to this circular scheme because the subject of the work required it. *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a never-ending quest, the search for a subject to write a novel about and this subject is discovered at the end of the novel. Circularity is closely linked to the subject of the work, this is how Antoine Compagnon has interpreted it: 'à la fois préalable et postérieure, prospective et rétrospective […]. Elle devait raconter l'histoire d'une vocation afin que la découverte après coup de l'unité de la vie par le héros fût le principe déjà mis en œuvre par le narrateur durant tout le livre, à l'insu du lecteur' (Compagnon 1989: 49). That is to say, the last part of *Le Temps retrouvé* announces the beginning of the novel, the writing of the novel itself. Indeed, the text begins at the end, when the narrator manages to isolate himself and write the novel the reader has just read. The circle of narration is thus closed between the end and the beginning, with an ending written to begin or rather re-start the narration. The beginning and the end deal with almost the same subjects: the matinée with the Guermantes at the end brings together almost all the characters presented throughout his book and it is thanks to this matinee that the narrator recalls his childhood, about which we have already learned at the beginning of the book. And this is what Proust announces to Benjamin Crémieux in January 1922: 'La dernière page du

Temps retrouvé (écrite avant le reste du livre) se refermera exactement sur la dernière page de Swann' (Proust 1993: 41).

Furthermore, the circularity of the work does not signify its sterility as one finds in Huysmans' text and the hollow circularity of the character's quest. In *À vau-l'eau*, for example, between beginning and end nothing really happens. The novel echoes events that are repeated unnecessarily without developing the character or the plot of the story. The novel performatively expresses and embodies the character's liminal experience of exhaustion with no way out of its infernal loop. This principle of circle empties and exhausts the work of any possibility of progress and growth. The resumption of the movement, back to the initial restaurant of the beginning, can only lead to and aggravate the exhaustion and inner emptiness of the character's existence. The novel then turns into a vicious, suffocating and infernal circle, condemned to exhaustion, without hope of a resolution. The work of Huysmans is thus also the embodiment of the cultural pessimism that reigned at the end of the century. In a century anxious about decline, degeneration, the meaningless void left by the death of God, the circular form of the novel of the decadent spirit also expresses a closed and retrogressive journey. In the case of Huysmans and his decadent spirit, his literature can be understood as a literature of renunciation and emptiness which manifests itself by an attraction of the character for nothingness which prevents him from evolving. The cyclical and repetitive restart leads to a kind of paralysis of the text incapable of progressing and barring off possibilities.

Regarding Proust's work, the return to the opening of the *Recherche* does not produce the idea of an infernal Sisyphean circle and an effect of emptiness, nor of inertia and sterility. On the contrary, this circularity gives depth and movement to reality with the addition of the element of Time. This is the story of a maturation, of a work in the making. And time makes the link between this passage from childhood to maturity. Time in the *Recherche* is therefore active, it acts on beings and transforms them. The same situations do not stagnate and produce a sense of unease in the reader. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator depicts characters as he sees them, but does not know them. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, with time having passed, the narrator no longer recognises them. Such is the case with the character of Gilberte, whose encounter is like re-experiencing it for a first time: 'Une grosse dame me dit bonjour […]. J'hésitais un instant à lui répondre, craignant que, ne reconnaissant pas les gens lieux que moi, elle eût cru que j'étais quelqu'un d'autre […]. Et je reconnus Gilberte' (Proust 1999:

2349). This spectacle of renewal gives the reader an impression of a return to an initial state with the difference that time has changed.

With this novel founded on recollections, Proust marks a break in literature. Through various metaphors, the narrator brings into being the frustrating and distressing feeling of imprisonment and powerlessness he experiences within his own body, with its overly-sensitive nerves and reduced will power. If the narrator struggles with his innate limitations, he considers at the same time these internal obstacles as a prerequisite for his creative process and a key subject-matter of his work. The inner struggle with his disabled body accordingly inspires his work and form a thematic centre-piece. Proust explores the interrelation between body and mind beyond the reductive medical conception and its fixation on the uncontrollable, powerless, and disabled body experienced by the exhausted. He describes how the narrator's condition estranges the self from his body; yet it is precisely this sudden distancing and state of in-betweenness, inviting 'reviviscences' to disrupt the natural linear flow, which might turn into a productive and primarily creative force. The loss of self-control is no longer perceived as a sign of vulnerability and a burden for the artist, but rather as a resource bringing about new sensations and experiences expanding understandings of individual existence.

Also, within the realm of literary and artistic movements, we are far from a pessimistic perception borrowed from the decadent literature of the fin de siècle. On the contrary, the narrator frees himself from the declinist and sterile narrative circular structure borrowed from his writer predecessors. The Proustian subject, however discontinuous or fragmented he may be, is carried by the force of his desire to become a writer. In him can be read the excess of modernist projects, the colossal work, the writing swallowing up decades of titanic labour in a work. But such effort in the end is the opposite sign of degeneration and collapse. In this counter-discourse of his, both within the medical and literary realm, Proust creates a text and metaphorically also a body without finality, in fact, inexhaustible. The text reflects the potentiality of the mind and its successful overcoming of the deficient body through artistic creation. The unlimited power of the novel, linked to its non-specific duration, its repetitions, fragments, even to its long paragraphs and syntactic structures, nourishes, aspires, overflows the frame and becomes a means of self-transcendence. Far from just undergoing the spatio-temporal determinisms of novelistic narration, the narrator remains in control of the narrative, even goes beyond the framework of fiction, and creates an undying 'I-subject' through his structure. Like a cathedral in perpetual

construction, the narrator remains an inexhaustible figure, who has also taken back a form of agency over the body of the text. As a circular narrative exploring infinite variations of the reality through subjective remembrance, Proust's text embodies a literature of possibilities rather than a literature of exhaustion.

CONCLUSION

The German and French Pathologisation of Exhaustion

This thesis has mapped out and investigated the prevalent medical concepts, theories, and ideologies, as well as cultural constructs shaping these ideologies, based on a selection including influential and prominent medico-scientific texts and minor texts on lesser-known exhaustion-related syndromes. The first section of the thesis has explored medical discourses of exhaustion in Germany and France. I there analysed the language (both literal and figurative) employed in German and French medical discourses and shed light on the concerns and anxieties permeating the biomedical imaginary and its control and classification strategies. In both national contexts, the constructions of syndromes of exhaustion, starting with neurasthenia and developing into culturally-specific syndromes such as aboulia or will power deficit, psychasthenia, and melancholia, point to a specific cultural and even national crisis: one which particularly threatened the order, stability, and health of the bourgeois, upper-class or brain-working men. It was a time when not only natural events were understood in terms of increase or depletion of force, movement, and energy, but also in terms of societal processes and human life in general. These forces remained invisible, unpredictable, too abstract to quantify, and a plague difficult to contain for industrialised societies.

In this period of heightened nervousness, exhaustion encompassed a whole array of anxieties that had arisen as rapid modernisation processes were taking root. Exhaustion was assimilated with finitude, powerlessness, alienation, loss of volitional control, invisible and visible signs of moral and physical degeneration. As a functional disorder with no organic lesion and thus open to various interpretations and diagnostic processes, the list of symptoms remained similarly broad as it included restlessness, anxiety, insomnia, apathy, attention deficit, irritability, dizziness, heavy limbs, indigestion, headaches, back pain, sexual impotence, morbid fears, ideation among many others. Altogether uncertain as to whether the seat of exhaustion was the body or the mind, both scientific communities initially aligned with the conception that those were the various signs of a body that had reached its limits and was unable to resist stressors caused by social and environmental conditions (it being the individual's consumer habits or the urban space).

Yet, beyond these initial signs, the explanatory models and ideologies differ across both national settings and are temporally unsynchronised. For one, the German medical community remained firmly attached to the initial vague concept of neurasthenia and only gradually turned its interest to will power theories at the beginning of the twentieth century. German theorists also laid a greater importance to 'biologising' social factors and emphasising the rapid pace and irritations of modern life. In a way, the cultural setting with its parasitic external agents rendered individuals nervous and weak. In a historical and social environment, in which founding sociological thinkers like Max Weber and Georg Simmel addressed the relationship and divergences between societal beliefs and ideas and the social and material conditions of that society, the body and its illnesses transformed into social constructs and ideological means. And social constructs in turn became biologised and pathologised. In turn-of-the-century Germany, the politics of social modernity, the need for human improvement and social cohesion, turned social pathologies into a discourse of national decline. What had to be defended was society and the body against any kind of subversion, also coined perversion, from within and without. The social biologisation of certain states and behaviours crossed with ideologies related to 'Kulturpessimismus', 'Grossstadtfeindlichkeit' and later on 'Rassenhygiene'.

Biomedical knowledge was actively formed by a culture of taboo and obsession with the cult of the disciplined, compliant, and productive body. The quota of texts on nervous disorders, mainly fixated on the study of neurasthenia, remained minimal in contrast to the importance given to the propagation of hygienist and preventative manuals in the age of the 'Lebensreformbewegung'. The few German medical texts and their rather rudimentary study of the topic of neurasthenia or nervous exhaustion, in comparison to the French texts and their individualised and psychologised theories on exhaustion, does raise the question about the recognition of neurasthenia as a serious pathological condition in Germany. Nervousness remained a vague and schematic diagnosis. There seemed to be a resistance, even culturally, to the individualisation of the body and delving into psychological meanings in disorders. In this context of cultural pessimism, biomedical control strategies were particularly focused on cultivating an ideal body image and preventing the physical and moral degeneration of the individual and society at large through strict and natural therapeutic treatments and the strengthening and straightening of the body ('Körpererziehung').

The body became a projection plane not only for fears but utopias as well. The transmission of values and rules was built on the desire to modify the body 'from the inside' with a view to the constitution of a largely idealised fusional social body: straightened, disciplined, uniform, and energetic. Both life reformers and doctors considered strength and beauty to equate health, for weakness and irregularity belonged to sickness. Health was believed to be restorable or maintainable by means of exercise and cleansing of the body through rigorous and ascetic habits (cold showers, no substance abuse, strict diet, etc.). The propagation of aesthetic, 'natural' body stereotypes – conforming to the motto 'Kraft und Schönheit' – was intended to strengthen or even regenerate the foundation of what it meant to be a healthy and normal German man and woman. The hygienist practices surrounding the nervous body hid an anguish in Germany, in fact a crisis of German identity. The ideal model of virtue and health had been lost in modern civilisation and Germany's rapid industrialisation. The biopolitical conception of the German body was based on a largely idealised conception of the body of a previous grand civilisation, that of the ancient Greek athlete by virtue of his ability to form a perfect body under the attributes of discipline, strength, and beauty. This stereotypical image thus provided the model of a state of harmony that needed to be reproduced at a higher level (nationally) and in ways adapted to the modern world. In search of the historical and biological foundation of German identity, the model of the Greek body was used by Friedrich Nietzsche in the early twentieth century in order to place the 'Germanen', the 'blond beast', in an imaginary tradition right down to an ancient model. This will later in the twentieth century precipitate the eugenics cult and the rise of the ideology of the Aryan race in the Germany of the Third Reich.

By contrast, French theorists were much ahead in the field of psychology and psychoanalysis and focused on individual-centred interpretation. Already with Morel's notion of 'dégénérescence' in 1857, the attention shifted from physiological damages caused exogenously to physiological damages caused from within. Heredity then held an obvious place in the aetiology of nervous diseases. This position can be explained by two general orientations: the adoption of the concept of neuropathic family (the maintenance of diseases over generations in the same family) in a context of social determinism and the rejection of infectious aetiology. The individual was cast as pathogenic through biological inheritance. Yet, in contrast to a cultural pessimism and fear of wide-spread *horizontal degeneration* that had permeated the German worldview and its medical discourses, the French

biomedical ideology remained focalised on an individual *vertical degeneration*, present on a biological level (heredity) and on a moral and intellectual level (education, lifestyle habit).

Then, at the turn of the century, a decisive step in medical knowledge was taken, generating new understandings of nervous disorders from a psychosomatic view. The shift to the theoretical development on the diseases of the will or psychasthenia, for instance, showed a continuous intention to subjectivise the causes of exhaustion and render the individual sole actor in his pathological state. The notion of insufficiency moved from the decrease in nervous tension to an absence of will power, attention, and difficulty of ideation (forming ideas). Despite the advanced research in psychology in France, its biomedical knowledge remained rooted like its German neighbour in physiological patterns. Psychological disorders were at this time explained by mechanisms of a transverse vessel, balanced or disbalanced in energetic resource. However, extending beyond the German somatisation, exhaustion became in this national setting the pathological sign of a moral suffering. Neurasthenia in France was no longer a disease simply caused by modernisation processes, but an enigmatic individual manifestation whose meaning had to be related to the subject itself and their way of being in the world. Between society and the nosographic entity came the singularity of a patient's personal history. Neurasthenia allowed neurosis to become a psychological disease and to be the subject of studies on the internal logic of the disorder and the possibility of its psychosociological explanation. And naturally, it branched into new overlapping concepts, namely aboulia, melancholia, and psychasthenia, to fit the French vision of exhaustion and diagnose this specific 'mal de vivre'. Because it was still a question of giving to these functional disorders a status of reality. Still, something escaped the medical discourse. Medical modelling failed to capture such a unique and subjective experience as exhaustion. The attempt to quantify bodily and psychic energies revealed its set of limitations. And, medical theorists struggled to issue a clearly-cut diagnosis, but also to consider these pathological manifestations of exhaustion as real. The medical construction remained artificial and reductive as the medical gaze rested on a generalist approach.

Literature of Exhaustion

The selected literature of the turn of the century across Germany and France found the motif of exhaustion to be metaphorically fertile ground for a variety of explorations. Although the narratives of the six chosen authors are disparate, what connects them is their valorisation and problematisation of exhaustion. First of all, the narratives are presented as case studies written by clinician-like writers explicitly professing an ambition to reveal the inner struggles and anxieties prevalent to their time. As demonstrated at the beginning of each chapter, these writers were informed to some degree about the scientific language and interpretations, as they all suffered from exhaustion themselves. Some more than others willingly relied on medical literature as a methodological paradigm. Others are even constructed to subvert socio-medical ideologies and invent alternatives structures of meanings. Yet, altogether, these 'third-person' account narratives voice individual experiences and push the conceptual boundaries of exhaustion by allowing for a diversity of perspectives, complexifying the experience, and creating new structures of meaning though literal and figurative representations. Undermining and resisting the generic and schematic perception of the medical gaze, these narratives at some point and in various manners criticise, mock, or satirise medical men and their simplistic diagnoses, culturally or morally biased perceptions, or disregard of the patient's story. Additionally, these literary texts do not turn away from reality, but approach it differently, subjectively and individually, thus offering the possibility of a laboratory to study various phenomenological cases of exhaustion. Each story is a gateway inviting the reader to experience the internal reality that can only be perceived, felt, and worded by an individual who experienced them. Even if there are divergences between the author's own story and the character's, the experience is in each case voiced in a manner that can only be shaped by the author's subjectivity and way of being in the world: his relationship to his self, his work, society and its norms and values, and search for meaning to his existence. Altogether two discourses and a relationship are put in tension: that of the individual (the patient) and that of the specialist (doctor) and society at large.

Secondly, if there is one thing this research has shown it is that a person is a body and yet, at the same time, not to be reduced to this body. Each story explores in its own way the individual's being-in-the-world and represents the sufferer's relationship to the world, their perception, and their way to cope. By being attentive to these narrative processes and seeing them through the versatile prism of liminality, this thesis has attempted to explore both the disruptive, disorienting, alienating, and limiting experiences of exhaustion as told and shown by

these narratives as much as their transformative potentialities. With no exception, experiencing a state like exhaustion is bound up with a meaning attribution process that shapes the individual's perception. The reconstruction and reorganisation of experience as a liminal process, particularly through metaphors and narrative structures, constitutes a way to explore individual realities, their temporal and spatial awareness, their bodily consciousness, and also to generate new aesthetic and creative possibilities to form new meanings. Metaphors of exhaustion are particularly pluripotent tools. These metaphors enable the narratorial and character voices to give form and even essence to the experience of exhaustion. Many of the encountered metaphors remain influenced by medical discourses by way of describing the experience as an empty porte-monnaie, an overwrought machine, or an extinguished fire, but also by underlying symptomatic processes of exhaustion such as dizziness, feeling of heaviness, and digestive problems. Yet there are also those exploring the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of human nature.

For instance, aside from the use of mainstream economic and technical metaphors, other metaphors found in the novels and novellas written by Thomas and Heinrich Mann and Hermann Hesse reveal the struggle and frustration of the individual wanting to push through the capacities of his body while also being pressured to conform and having his possibilities asphyxiated. The metaphor of the crushing wheel is telling of the individual's powerlessness to rebel and assert his boundaries. Yet, the figure of the 'haltlose' dilettante is equally exhausting himself drifting aimlessly and with no future prospects through the city's streets and against the current of normativity. Both antithetical types ultimately transgress and actively rebel against the visible and invisible barriers of a rigid and closed system, which predominantly centres on the principles of order, discipline, and determination in one's professional and personal life. In these instances, the presence of liquid metaphors reinforces their experience of exhaustion as a transgressive, uncontainable condition and reflects the transformative possibilities of 'letting go' and 'giving in' to bodily and emotional needs. Yet, what these narratives tell the reader is that the exhausted fails in his initiative quest as the protagonist remains stuck in a liminal space of boundlessness, inner chaos, and uncertainty. The dilettante is no more in control than the achievement-driven performance ethicist lost in Venice. The narratives express that the root of their suffering lies within their loss of sense of self, rootlessness and unhomeliness in a setting, as well as for others an identity, they are unable to fit in in a Darwinian sense. In a way one can conclude that they project a number of fears and

anxieties parallelly used by biomedical, hygienist, and culture critical discourses, but complexify and give more depth and form to them through the character's awareness.

The struggle for existence of the exhausted individual is further enacted through the linear structure of the hero's or self-discovery journey or quest for individuation. Exhaustion is present from the start of the narrative. A journey is taken by a worn-out, lost, or struggling hero as he crosses a threshold pushing him into a transformative initiation to face several trials and temptations. The structure creates a consequential sequence of events of cause and effect, which dynamically invites movement and change. The ascetic artist travelling to Venice, the solitary dilettante encountering a woman, the young man entering matrimony, the talented boy being sent to a seminary are all significant threshold moments. Crossing the threshold, transgressing certain norms and values they conformed to or believed in, and letting themselves go in an-between state and space of limbo does not bring about a positively regarded transformation. In testing and extending their boundaries, by experiencing different forms of existence, criticising and/or resisting societal injunctions, entering the threshold of the unconscious through the experiencing of dreams and repressed memories, and giving in to bodily needs, the protagonists fail to re-adjust or undergo a radical identity shift leaving them lost, wandering at the margin of society. What precipitate their transgression, their failure, and for some ultimately their deaths are the rigid and harmful binary categories and stereotypes drawn by medical and cultural discourses. For the most part, the character's story ends with him wandering aimlessly in a space of in-betweenness leading ultimately to his death. By way of ending the narrative with the death of the protagonist, the narrator also negates the impulse that drove the character in the first place in this final act of self-destruction. And, in that sense, the German narratives tend to be constructed as cautionary tales and bear for some narratives even a moralising tone.

A noticeable comparative point that can be made between German and French narratives is that the experience is less embodied and more attentive to the tension between the subject and exogenous factors in the German texts than in the French texts. The selected French narratives embody the experience by exploring the brain-gut axis for instance, but they also seek to transcend the realm of the body and explore exhaustion through the inexhaustible flow of thoughts and memories, unreachable aesthetic and artistic ideals, and indigestible or asphyxiating depressing realities. Focusing on the inner disruption of the character's sense of self, his stream of consciousness and the realm of the unconscious, the writers prove to be more sensible and lucid about the modern

individual's internal reality. Exhaustion, equally present from the start in these narratives, is above all caused by an 'invisible' restlessness, an existential malaise, which translates a lack of desire, a lassitude to exist, a loss of meaning in life. While the linear structure of the German narratives is found to be simpler and even predictable in its sequences of events by focusing on the idea of quest, transgression, and the character's downfall, the selected French texts complexify and push the idea of narratives embodying exhaustion further through the performativity of the texts.

A remarkable feature in the case of Huysmans', Mirbeau's, and Proust's work is that the text becomes the lived body (disruptive, messy, and complex), and also demonstrates that exhaustion is far more than a loss of energy. The textual excesses (the long sentences, the repetitions, ellipses, fragmented, disordered, disconnected chapters) give body to the word and performatively enact signs of exhaustion. They provoke a feeling of oppression, slowness, emptiness, a profusion of negative thoughts and emotions, which ends up exhausting the literary material and at the same time the attention of the reader. The text is exhausted in the sense of an absence of plot: the character and story line do not evolve, move forward; yet neither are they fully inert. The body of the text performs the paradoxical experience of the exhausted. It shows how exhaustion encloses, limits, and immobilises the characters; yet, at the same time, the endless, circular or fragmented, and repetitive structure also happens to be a formidable reflective and generative matrix. A new paradox intervenes in these narratives as the narrative structure with its long sentences and sequences of events, repeated or reinvented is traced like an uninterrupted line. The same uninterrupted line of dots, like a series of suspension dots, also becomes the mark of an unfilled lack of what remains to be written, of what could possibly be written. The motif and embodiment of exhaustion within the text becomes a storytelling 'engine'. It opens doors, or rather, produces a threshold from which new forms could be created.

While they may borrow medical codes, write an aetiological picture of the protagonist's illness drawing from medical knowledge, German and French literary discourses are also undermining medical illusions of certainty and control about the topic by exploring the complexity, ambivalences, ambiguities inherent to the internal reality of the exhausted being. This thesis has highlighted disruptiveness of this border-crossing condition in relation to the body experience, identity, and the self by looking at the literal and figurative language as well as the unsettling structure and characteristics of these narratives. This thesis has also attempted to contribute a

new perspective to the research on exhaustion by examining the multifaceted dimensions of this disruptiveness. It argues that liminality is a useful concept for framing the ambiguous nature and the uncertainty and estrangement (from one's self and environment) experienced in states of exhaustion. It is also revelatory of the transgressive, critical, introspective and transformative possibilities of existing in-between seemingly fixed and stable boundaries and resisting dominant cultural understandings of embodiments of health and disease or disability and ability. Each author evidently engages in his writing with exhaustion and its fluid, ambiguous, and complex embodied experience in a diverse and unique way, sublimating the experience, thinking towards porous interpretations which engages with the body and mind, external and internal worlds, the possible and the impossible, movement and inertia. Writing about exhaustion and embodying it through the text offers the possibility of a clearer and more nuanced picture of an individual's internal reality and to challenge the fixed and exclusionary strategies of biomedical certainty and control.

The Meaning(s) of Exhaustion Today

Competing against the socio-cultural, political, and health crises of the turn of the twentieth century is our present time, also, by many, experienced as an era of exhaustion. In today's societies of mass-production, mass-consumerism, and hyperconnectivity, the requirement to meet quantitative 'performance indicators', to remain efficient and productive, and constantly up to date, have already been correlated with the inflation of cases of stress, sleep deprivation, exhaustion, anxiety, burnout, and depression among adults as well as children. The recent COVID-19 crisis has crystallised and further amplified the phenomenon of exhaustion with the digitalisation of working and social interactions, for instance, having accelerated the shifting of spatial and temporal boundaries. Individuals in the 1900s exhausted by their attempts to individuate themselves have given way to individuals in the 2000s exhausted by the need for self-management, self-realization, and flexibility. As the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg notes: 'Hier, les règles sociales commandaient des conformismes de pensée, voir des automatismes de conduite; aujourd'hui, elles exigent de l'initiative et des aptitudes mentales' (Ehrenberg 2008: 15). According to Ehrenberg, today's weariness of the self and its pathological manifestations (burnout, depression) are the result of the confrontation between the notion of unlimited possibility as one is given free rein and that of individual responsibility. In light of this study on turn-of-the-twentieth-century

discourses of exhaustion, it is still topical to raise the following issues: Are cultural or systemic factors to be blamed? Is the disease a product of our modern civilisation? Or, does the source lie within the individual's physical and mental (in)capacities?

Burnout, seen by some as the new disease of civilisation (Kury 2012; Chabot 2018/2019: 2), exemplifies the two-sided nature of this debate. Burnout documents a form of social suffering, particularly related to modern working life. Some argue that it is an individual problem, generated by bad stress management and a lack of personal resilience; others emphasise the systemic occupational and political factors that generate burnout, in the form of toxic working environments and structural inequalities. Further causes of this exhaustion-related syndrome are socio-cultural in nature, in the form of the stressful effects of social and structural transformations demanding the individual to adapt in terms of a high level of commitment, flexibility, responsibility and increased self-management. The concept of burnout was first introduced by the American psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger (1974). Freudenberger observed in a New York clinic for drug addicts a paradoxical phenomenon. Many of the young volunteers working there ended up, after a year of activity, losing the enthusiasm they had at the start. Shortly thereafter, Christina Maslach (followed by other researchers) broadened the scope of the concept to social care professionals and reformulated burnout as a psychological syndrome signed by emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of professional efficiency (Maslach 1976, 1982, 1986; see also Kahill, 1988; Cordes and Dougherty 1993). In general, what triggers this syndrome can be classified into two categories: organisational factors (workload, emotional demands, lack of support, role conflict) and individual factors (worker's personality such as competitiveness, impatience, impulsivity, and aggressiveness; coping strategies) (see Edú-Valsania et al. 2022). Bridging both categories is the internalisation of deeply-held cultural expectations and attitudes about time, productivity, engagement, and success at work. In this culture-bound syndrome, then, the core question remains an object of debate: Is it caused by structural and cultural problems, a lack of personal resilience or will power, or a combination of those?

In retrospect, not much has changed from the old neurasthenia. Several parallels can be drawn with the nineteenth-century exhaustion-related syndrome. First of all, both syndromes have become umbrella terms to define any form of exhaustion linked to overwork (whether physical, emotional, and mental). And both equally point to cultural problems and questions pertaining to individual responsibility and willpower. While social and

cultural-historical codifications remain in some way distinctively characteristic of their time, symptoms have remained the same. Exhaustion in both syndromes is negatively connoted as a loss of energy, a consequence of bad energy management, a collapse of one's resistance or resilience aptitudes, a failure to keep up with the pace. In addition to the initial theoretical texts, the psychological and self-help literature of the past four decades has given us a consistent picture of what burnout means and feels like. It is triggered by a phase of ever-increasing effort and pressure to meet the demands set by the individual or by external agents. The figurative representations of burnout as a burning match, a frenzied hamster wheel, and an uncharged battery pack evidently illustrate the experience of restlessness, weakness, depletion, and impossibility (Neckel and Wagner 2013: 179–193). Indeed, the individual stuck in a hamster wheel never arrives or ends the infernal cycle. In these metaphors, what is rendered pathogenic is the permanent tension consuming the individual. These metaphors testify to the *ex negativo* connoted experience that is exhaustion and the loss of energy it implicates. However, in recent years, one can also observe the extension of the burnout syndrome and inclusion of metaphysical subjects. Where neurasthenia had developed into melancholia or psychasthenia in French discourses and become a concept for existential depression in literary works, burnout has also branched into depression, bore-out, and brown-out to include in its aetiology a loss of meaning and direction in one's work and personal life (see Rothlin and Werder 2014; Valette 2018). Still, similar to the nineteenth-century discourses, its negative connotations continue to occupy a preponderant place.

Today, knowledge of the finiteness and exhaustibility of resources and the need to reduce resource consumption also permeates into and breeds an atmosphere of anxiety in social, political, financial, and ecological spheres. Exhaustion manifests itself in very different social and scientific contexts. It is less and less considered an exceptional case. Even workers in Western societies who do not suffer from burnout are pushed to the brink of exhaustion, pressured by the constant compulsion to communicate, function, perform. Exhaustion seems to have become a constant and inescapable companion, a condition structuring everyday life. Also, the tighter succession of geo-political, health, and climate crises are not only changing the perception of our being-in-the-world, it is also altering our sense of being-in-the-body. The threat of collapse indeed borders our industrial civilisation but also our individual experiences. First of all, the realisation of our fragility and mortality during the COVID-19 crisis has elicited a host of anxieties and concern over a growing increase in mental health

conditions. With the realisation that one lives in a world that is vulnerable and exhaustible, like the body, one is today likely to experience at one point anxiety, fear, loneliness, depression, post-traumatic stress, and even a crisis of meaning and suicidal ideation (see Van Tongeren and Van Tongeren 2021). Beyond the work environment, on a larger scale, the constant, unrelenting stresses caused by uncertain times play a role in our experience of exhaustion.

The malaise of our century is, according to the French philosopher Pascal Chabot (2018/2019), author of *Global Burn-out*, a disease that burns everything from within, leaves the individual feeling vulnerable, incomplete, and even empty, but in all its ambiguity, it is also a sign of dispossession, liberation, and an opportunity for change. Counter-balancing the aforementioned conceptions, exhaustion can be looked at from another angle. In states of exhaustion, as the capacities of self-control, emotional regulation, goal directedness collapse, new possibilities arise: the imagination can be transformed creatively, thoughts and feelings can be examined introspectively. There seems to be a creative and innovative potential in exhaustion, which is seldom considered. The end of resources, the depletion that inevitably forces innovation and change from an economic and ecological point of view can also be understood as freedom to innovate and change from an aesthetic point of view. Philosopher and feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti argues in *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019) that we ought to approach exhaustion differently and even positively: 'Let me dare to suggest that there is a creative potential here, which means that exhaustion is not a pathological state that needs to be cured, as an actual disorder, but a threshold of transformation of forces, that is to say a virtual state of creative becoming' (17). Perhaps, then, instead of focusing exclusively on the darker, pessimistic aspects of exhaustion and the despair and discomfort it causes, we should also reflect on the potential that could emerge from this complex and ambiguous state. What might happen on an individual and societal discursive level when we also look at exhaustion as a liminal space of possibility rather than merely a negative space of impossibility? After all, in the liminal also resides the potential for self-exploration through introspection, transformation, and self-realisation.

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