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The Life of the Soul: Vitalism and the Invisible  
in the Norwegian *Fin de Siècle*

By

Benjamin Arthur Bigelow

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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and the Designated Emphasis

in

Film Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Mark Sandberg, Chair

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Professor Karin Sanders

Professor Barbara Spackman

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## Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Scandinavian Languages and Literatures

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This dissertation examines the Norwegian literary culture of the 1890s, a decade often described with labels such as *nyromantikken* [neo-romanticism] and decadence. Rather than perpetuating the conventional literary-historical narrative that the foremost literature of the 1890s represented an absolute break with literary naturalism, I show that naturalist materialism persisted, even as the literary optic was shifted from the realm of social realism to a representation of the inner forces at work within the modern individual. Combined with materialism, this shift in focus from the external to the internal realm resulted in the crucial concept of the embodied soul, a seemingly contradictory combination of ideal and the material that I argue was characteristic of this literary generation. Looking forward to the form of literary and artistic vitalism that became central in Scandinavian culture after the turn of the century, I show how this tendency toward vitalism actually began with the depiction of the material soul in the literature of the 1890s.

Using three canonical authors as case studies, this dissertation examines how and why scientific materialism became combined with a vitalist interest in invisible natural forces toward the end of the century. Knut Hamsun, who was a brash young literary provocateur at the outset of the decade, depicted the individual soul as an embodied phenomenon that manifested itself in basic physiological functions, as well as in the momentary workings of the individual mind. Hamsun also made sensory perception a topic of debate, critiquing the way in which vision was commonly deployed in ways that implied objectivity, disembodiment, and distance; hearing, on the other hand, Hamsun depicted as an immediate and subjective mode that adhered much more closely to his preference for vital embodiment over detached objectivism. Arne Garborg, a much more well-established author and intellectual at the time, focused on the conflicts between science and religion that arose around 1890, and showed how a new kind of idealism informed all manner of cultural pursuits. Spiritualism was of particular interest for Garborg, in part because of the way in which it reflected a contemporary tendency toward “re-enchantment.” Sigbjørn

Obstfelder also focused on the relationship between religion and science, and showed how the scientific expansion of vision—achieved through technologies such as microscopes, telescopes, and the X-ray—was redirecting religious energies into a more scientifically-based search for the invisible forces that shape the universe and populate the earth with life. Obstfelder depicted a kind of vitalist “conversion narrative,” revealing how scientific naturalism was a necessary precursor to the shifting terms of religious devotion in the modern era, from the transcendent power of God to the immanent, life-giving force of the sun.

In all of these cases, vitalism grew out of a fixation on the invisible. Since previously invisible phenomena had become “visible” through the mediation of modern visual technologies, there was a broad sense that there were material forces at work beyond the visual horizon. Scientific naturalism was thus a necessary precursor to vitalism, because it provided a sense that there were undiscovered natural forces at work all around us and within us. Vitalism simultaneously critiqued the disembodiment and detachment that scientific vision was predicated upon, however, and instead advocated for a fully embodied mode of investigating and experiencing the vital force.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Vital Materialism and the Embodied Soul in the Norwegian *Fin de Siècle*

By the late nineteenth century, scientific materialism had become a dominant ontological framework in mainstream Scandinavian intellectual discourse. In practical terms, this meant that claims about the natural world were judged against their adherence to the accepted laws of nature. The only kinds of phenomena that could be broadly accepted as real were physical phenomena that could be empirically observed, recorded, and measured. But this general acceptance of a physicalist worldview did not mean that metaphysical concepts like thought, mind, spirit, or soul disappeared completely or were relegated to the intellectual fringes.<sup>1</sup> This apparently paradoxical persistence of such immaterial or idealist constructs within discourses of scientific materialism raised compelling questions that were taken up in a number of fields in the latter half of the century. In psychology and physiology, the problem of the mind was a vexing one. How could one describe, observe, and measure the subjective experience of the individual within a materialist framework that demanded physical evidence rather than subjective description? The study of the vital functions of living beings posed even more compelling methodological and moral dilemmas. To adhere to the demands of scientific materialism to provide empirical proof of vital phenomena, there was an epistemological imperative to observe such functions in action. This was true even of internal functions—the twitching of nerves, the circulation of blood, the contraction of the muscles, and so on. How could one observe the internal, vital functions of living beings without injuring or killing the living subjects, as was the case with the controversial practice of vivisection? In the broadest sense, the dilemma that united all the studies of intangible phenomena in the age of scientific materialism was the most basic one: how can one even speak of such notions as a “mind” in scientifically rigorous way? How does one account for the fleeting, subjective workings of the mind without resorting to idealist terminology? One response was to collapse the distinctions between the ideal and the material, insisting that such concepts as “mind” and “soul” could actually be reduced to physical phenomena.

Take the example of Ernst Ferdinand Lochmann, the eminent professor of pharmacology and toxicology who was one of the foremost writers of popular science in Norway in the 1880s. Lochmann’s notoriety in Norwegian literary history owes to his reputed status as Ibsen’s inspiration for Dr. Stockmann in *En folkefiende* (*An Enemy of the People*, 1882).<sup>2</sup> But in his day, Lochmann was better known for using the pulpit afforded him by his academic position to decry the godlessness of the modern materialism of the natural sciences, both in his widely publicized lectures and in the commentaries on modern scientific ideas that he wrote for a non-specialist readership.<sup>3</sup> In 1888, Lochmann published *Den nyere Naturanskuelse* (1888; *The New Perspective on Nature*), which

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<sup>1</sup> More recent work in neuroscience and neurophilosophy has similarly brought the study of a metaphysical concept—the mind—into a materialist framework, revealing how there is a material basis for thought and consciousness. The work of Francis Crick, Christof Koch, and Thomas Metzinger are all relevant recent examples of this intellectual tradition.

<sup>2</sup> See Larsen 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See Blikrud, Hestmark, and Rasmussen 2002, 71–3.



confronted contemporary discussions around the relationship between science and religion, drawing references from the latest scientific writing from Germany and the UK, as well as recent cultural movements. The problem with scientific materialism, according to Lochmann, was that it gave the false impression “at alle Gaader er løst, naar man faar se et lidet Glimt af Sandheden” (Lochmann 1888, 15) [that all the riddles have been solved, when one sees a little glimpse of the truth]. This overestimation of scientific certainty was, according to Lochmann, inconsistent with theoretical and provisional nature of modern science, which was always in the process of learning new things and revising previously held beliefs about the natural world. So although Lochmann was known as an ardent anti-Darwinist, he faulted Darwin’s dogmatic followers more than Darwin himself for the way in which Darwinism contributed to the excessive materialism of modern science. As Lochmann writes, “Hvad der for Darwin var en Formodning, en søgende Tanke blev for hans Elever og den nye doktrinære Skole af Darwinister sikre og uimodsigelige Sandheder” (Lochmann 1888, 15) [That which for Darwin was a proposition, a searching thought, became certain and indisputable axioms for his protégées and the new, doctrinaire school of Darwinists]. Lochmann claims that this purely materialistic school of modern science derived essentially from an excessively rigid interpretation of Darwin’s ideas, and that there was in fact a unifying monistic (as opposed to dualistic) impulse that underlay a number of the most important scientific discoveries of the century:

Det, som giver hele vor Tids Naturforskning sit Præg og er Formaalet for al videnskabelig Søgen, er Enheden, den skjulte Sammenhæng, den indre og dybe Overenstemmelse af det væsentlige, hvor forskellige og vexlende Energiens Enhed og Livsformernes Enhed, man overalt søger mere eller mindre klart bevidst. Vor Tids hele Naturforskning gaar imod dette Maal. I den biologiske Del af Naturvidenskaben betegner Darwinismen denne Søgen. Fysikerne har allerede tilegnet sig denne Sandhed, og Læren om Kraftens Vedvaren og Enheden af de saakaldte Naturkræfter er nu et sikkert Grundlag for denne Videnskab. (Lochmann 1888, 5)

[That which gives the entirety of our era’s scientific research its distinctive quality, and that which is the purpose of all scientific searching, is unity, hidden coherence, the inner and deep correlation of the essential, however different and varying the external forms may be. It is the unity of matter, the unity of energy, and the unity of life forms that is searched for everywhere, more or less consciously. Our era’s entire scientific research proceeds toward this goal.]<sup>4</sup>

This search for a “hidden coherence” or unifying force within the varying external forms of matter is a clear expression of monistic and vitalistic thinking, and is a theme that not only popular science, but also the new cultural tendencies toward the end of the century would return to again and again; it is the notion that there must be some hidden force, some invisible energy, that animated otherwise inert matter. This protean force that could manifest itself in many different forms was, fortunately for Lochmann, supported by some

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<sup>4</sup> Translations from the Scandinavian languages are my own, unless otherwise noted.

of the century's most important discoveries in physics and physiology, and the idea of an invisible force or energy that accounted for all observable physical movement and change:

Opdagelsen af Naturkræfternes Enhed tilhører vort Aarhundrede. Robert Mayer, Joule, Kolding, Thomsen og Helmholtz har grundlagt denne Lære . . . . Enheden af Varme, Lys, Elektricitet, Bevægelse er nu et sikkert Grundlag for al nyere Forskning. Baade Astronomien og Fysiken har her det samme sikre Udgangspunkt. (Lochmann 1888, 6–7)

[The discovery of the unity of natural forces belongs to our century. Robert Mayer, Joule, Kolding, Thomsen and Helmholtz have established this doctrine. . . . The unity of warmth, light, electricity, and movement is now a firm foundation for all contemporary research. Both astronomy and physics have the same firm point of departure.]

According to Lochmann, the modern study of invisible natural forces and their interactions with physical matter revealed an underlying unity within nature. Science could no longer conceive of natural phenomena in purely materialistic terms, but sought to account for the hidden reservoirs of energy that were responsible for movement, change, and life. Lochmann did not limit his discussion to the scientific realm, however; instead, he saw this search for a “hidden coherence” manifested in the latest developments as well:

Selv vore første Digtere har ikke undgaaet den. Zolas «La Terre» viser den naturalistiske Literaturs yderste Konsekvens. Men ligesom Reaktionen er kommen i Videnskaben, saaledes fremtræder den ogsaa, omend lidt langsommere, i Literaturen. Det guddommelige i Mennesket hævder sin Ret, og Romantiken og den ideale Livsanskuelse kommer igjen frem omend i en anden Form. Der er en Kjærne i Menneskets Sjæl, den kan fordunkles og overskygges, men kommer altid frem igjen. (43)

[Even our foremost authors have not avoided it. Zolas *La Terre* shows the logical conclusion of naturalistic literature. But just as the reaction has made itself felt within science, it also comes forth, if perhaps a bit more slowly, in literature. The divine element within man asserts itself, and romanticism and the idealistic view of life again presents itself in another form. There is a core within the human soul that can be obscured and overshadowed, but always asserts itself again.]

Interestingly, what Lochmann characterizes as a contemporary reaction against materialism and naturalism is actually more in line with his view of recent scientific impulses. Although he couches this reaction in idealistic and even religious terms here, he is clearly aligning this literary tendency with the scientific articulation of an invisible energy in the universe by such influential scientists as Joule and Helmholtz. In other words, both literature and the natural sciences have, according to Lochmann, moved away from the kind of extreme materialism and obsession with heredity that characterized Zola's work.

While Lochmann's commentary here is in line with the broader cultural trend away from naturalism, his claim that there was a broad cultural interest in the "unity" and "hidden coherence" in natural phenomena indicates that the "reaction" against naturalism that he references was not a total retreat from the material world. Instead, there was an interest in how invisible forces were bound up with the material and in fact underlay all natural phenomena, including the proliferation of organic life. This claim is a departure from the usual literary-historical account of the "neoromantic reaction" in the late-1880s and 1890s, which generally describes a rejection of the natural sciences that formed the basis of literary naturalism. Rather than seeing the literary changes underway as a rejection of science and materialism, Lochmann implies that literature was actually coming around to an implicit monism that had been informing modern science since at least the groundbreaking work of Hermann von Helmholtz in the mid nineteenth century.

In order to understand just how much Lochmann's characterization of the latest literary developments diverges from later literary-historical accounts of the era, it is helpful to get a sense of the broad consensus that has formed about the aesthetic and cultural dynamics that were shifting toward the end of the century. It is generally agreed that, for Scandinavian literary culture, 1890 was a moment of aesthetic upheaval. After a decade that saw the ascendance of a Brandesian aesthetics of social engagement and naturalist description, there was a "neoromantic reaction" (Beyer 1956, 251) underway that shifted the literary optic from the collective to the individual, and (according to the broad literary-historical consensus) from the realm of external, objective, tangible reality to one of dream, fantasy, and reverie. No longer fixated on the Darwinian biological explanation for human behavior, this new literary mode dove into the psyche of the modern individual. Various versions of a new literary aesthetic were articulated in a spate of essays by several of Scandinavia's leading young authors. In 1889, the Swedish poet Verner von Heidenstam called for a return to imagination, beauty, and lyricism in literature, after a decade of unimaginative realism. The following year, Heidenstam collaborated with Oscar Levetin to again call for a revolt against naturalism and an injection of fantasy and artistry into literature. In 1890, Knut Hamsun described a new kind of literature that traced the "ubevidste Sjæleliv" [unconscious life of the soul] in the "blodets Hvisken" [whisper of the blood] (Hamsun 1939, 61). The same year, Arne Garborg wrote of an "idealistic reaction" against the superficiality of realism in favor of a neo-idealistic interest in the mystical, psychological, and the occult. In Denmark, Valdemar Vedel wrote about a new psychological literary aesthetic in the pages of the journal *Ny Jord*, while Johannes Jørgensen took up the cause of symbolism in his periodical *Taarnet*. This surge of literary-historical commentary and calls for aesthetic revolt by the authors of the 1890s contributed to an overdetermined sense of literary rupture between the social realism of the Modern Breakthrough and the neo-romanticism or neo-idealism of the *fin-de-siècle*.

This literary-historical narrative of aesthetic revolt, inaugurated by the authors themselves, has largely remained intact in the retrospective accounts of later literary historians. Discussing the many terms used to summarize the decade—neo-romanticism, symbolism, decadence, etc.—Susan Brantly writes:

However accurate any single term might be, the 1890s constituted a revolt against the naturalistic, socially engaged literature of the 1880s. The 1890s came to focus on the individual rather than the collective, on aesthetic and psychological issues rather than social problems, on fantasy rather than fact. . . . Rather than trying to capture a piece of external reality, the prose of the 1890s began attempting to evoke psychological states through the use of dreams, hallucinations, and ghosts. (Brantly 1996, 273)

In the Danish context, Niels Ingwersen writes that any reader is “bound to sense a change” in the shift from Modern Breakthrough to the 1890s:

analysis becomes observation; plot dwindles in favor of mood; a belief in or desire for norms turns to a bleak acceptance of a void; lyric eloquence returns, but often as an exploration of the separate reality of the mind; and whatever gave or offered guidelines, purpose, or meaning to the human existence is doubted. (Ingwersen 1992, 289)

The general impression left by such literary-historical narratives is that the 1890s were a time of retreating from the material reality of everyday life and toward the realm of fantasy and the transcendent. This helps explain the currency of a term like *nyromantikken* [neo-romanticism], which is the standard label for the decade in Norwegian literary historiography.

But if we take this narrative of rupture and aesthetic revolt in a too absolute sense, we risk overlooking the persistence of certain strands of naturalist aesthetics well into the 1890s. Because although these literary-historical observations about the interest in individual psychology, subjectivity, fantasy, and artistic expression are entirely accurate, one crucial aspect of naturalism that remained was a firm foundation in the biological and physical realm. So although, for instance, Hamsun called for a literature that depicted the “unconscious life of the soul,” he understood the soul to be physiologically grounded, in the blood, the bones, the muscles, and the nerves. Another way of putting it is that for Hamsun, subjective experience was equivalent to embodied experience. The way humans perceived and imagined the world around them was a product of their physiological perception of it. So shifting the focus to the “soul” was not a move toward some higher realm of transcendent reality, but rather a move inward, into the immanence of embodied experience. And Hamsun’s depiction of the embodied soul was not unique. Indeed, as this dissertation will examine, combinations of the transcendent and the immanent, the ideal and the material, the ethereal and the tangible were so prevalent in the 1890s as to be arguably one of the defining features of the Scandinavian literary culture at the end of the century.

This peculiar combination of the material and the metaphysical fits well within the intellectual context of late-nineteenth century Europe. This was the era in which psychology, under the leadership of such figures as Wilhelm Wundt, was seeking to establish itself as a legitimate experimental science. To do so, psychology turned to a rigorously scientific methodology, and a theory of the mind based firmly in the body. In

order to make the mind empirically observable for modern science, it had to now be considered a tangible, material phenomenon. Along these lines, the Danish physician Carl Lange developed a materialist theory of the mind in his popular psychology tract *Om Sindsbevægelse: Et psyko-fysiologisk Studie* (1885, *On Movements of the Mind: A Psycho-Physiological study*). Lange's combination of the psychological and the physiological into one central concept was part of the larger scientific ambitions of the field of psychology at the end of the century to make the mind something tangible and therefore empirically observable.

In the realm of physics, Hermann von Helmholtz (whom Lochmann namechecks in the quote given above) had developed a law of thermodynamics based on the conservation of energy in 1847, and argued that the forces of nature “are forms of a single, universal energy, or *Kraft*, that cannot be either added to or destroyed” (Rabinbach 1990, 3). This notion of a protean force in the universe that is both intangible and invisible, yet at the very heart of every physical phenomenon, walked a similar line between the ideal and the material. Intellectual historian Anson Rabinbach, discussing the centrality of this notion of *Kraft* to nineteenth-century studies of work, labor, and fatigue, writes:

The promethean power of industry (cosmic, technical, and human) could be encompassed in a single productivist metaphysic in which the concept of energy, united with matter, was the basis of all reality and the source of all productive power—a materialist idealism, or as I prefer to call it, *transcendental materialism*. (Rabinbach 1990, 4)

Rabinbach's application of paradoxical, hybrid terms here—*materialist idealism* and *transcendental materialism*—is an indication of just how thoroughly modern science had made materialism the intellectual standard by which all propositions had to be judged. Even inexplicably invisible or intangible forces and phenomena had to be understood in materialist terms in order to be accepted by the intellectual mainstream. This underlying assumption of materiality in Nordic literature in the 1890s has generally been underplayed or ignored in literary-historical accounts.

This combination of material and metaphysical is also evident in the growth of vital materialism in philosophy, science, and culture at the end of the nineteenth century. Vitalism is an idea that can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle, but whose resurgence around 1900 is noteworthy because of the ways in which it was taken up by writers, artists, philosophers, and scientists. Vitalism was an intellectual impulse that took hold in various forms; one can speak of scientific vitalism, philosophical vitalism, cultural vitalism, as well as artistic or literary vitalism. Common for all these forms was a belief in the absolute distinction between living organisms and inert matter, and that this distinction was based upon the presence of an invisible life force within all living things. Norwegian literary scholar Eirik Vassenden has defined vitalism as “en forestilling om at alt levende stammer fra en særlig livskraft, en skapende impuls som ikke lar seg forklare ut fra mekanismens lover” (Vassenden 2011, 13) [a notion that everything living stems from a partical life force, a creative impulse that cannot be explained in terms of mechanistic laws].

Vitalism's dependence on a notion of a vital force as the basis for all organic life is one of the reasons why it is often contrasted with mechanism and materialism; a strict materialist would exclusively examine the structures of physical matter, and not posit some external, independent, invisible force as a necessary precursor to life. There is, then, a religious aspect to vitalism, since it depends on a kind of "leap of faith" that an animating vital force exists independent from any individual material manifestation. But in vitalism, more ostensibly religious terms like "spirit" have been substituted in favor of one organizing, animating principle: Life. As one intellectual historian has put it, "vitalism after Aristotle takes the soul as the model of the Life and attributes to Life the power of achieving and maintaining organic form" (Edwards 1967, 254). The vital force—*Livskraft* in Norwegian—thus has the same protean qualities of the notion of *Kraft* that Helmholtz had developed in physics: it is an invisible force that can take many physical forms, but wherever it is in effect, it is the cohesive energy behind all organic life. Vassenden continues his description of vitalism:

Vitalisme betegner også tendensen til å dyrke kraft og vitalitet, oftest med utgangspunkt i livet slik det viser seg i og gjennom naturen. Vitalismen er en holdning, en filosofi eller en ideologi som setter instinkter, intuisjon og det irrasjonelle fremfor rasjonell tanke og sosiale kontrakter. Vi ser en særlig opphopning av slike tenkemåter i perioden rundt århundreskiftet 1900, og denne tendensen kan sees som en del av en større kultur- og sivilisasjonskritisk anslag. (Vassenden 2011, 13)

[Vitalism also encompasses the tendency to worship power and vitality, often from the perspective of life as it is manifested in and through nature. Vitalism is an attitude, a philosophy or an ideology that sets instincts, intuition, and the irrational above rational thought and social contracts. We see a particular rise in such ways of thinking in the period around the end of the nineteenth century, and this tendency may be seen as part of a larger trend toward cultural and civilizational critique.]

Vassenden's description here of the celebration of "power and vitality" in vitalism indicates that, despite the tendency to think of vitalism as anti-materialist, it was in fact an ideology that was based upon the vital force as it is manifested in (often robust and powerful) physical forms. Just as we have seen in modern psychology, physiology, and physics, vitalism was centered upon a hybrid concept that had some characteristics of the ideal (invisibility, intangibility, boundlessness, etc.) even while it was intimately connected with material, physical reality.

In its fascination with hidden forces within living organisms, vitalism could be considered a new kind of semi-religious impulse in late nineteenth-century culture; in its leveling of the distinctions between human and non-human life, as well as its insistence on empiricism and materialism, however, vitalism was also clearly an expression of post-Darwinian scientific thought. Thus, there was a synthetic quality to late nineteenth-century vitalism, in that it positioned itself as a synthesis of religious and scientific discourses. In this vein, Art historian Gertrud Oelsner writes that in vitalism:

Heaven, or the religious, is so to speak brought down to earth, and life must therefore be understood as a fusion of the earthly and the divine. So in a certain sense Vitalism can be described as a modern surrogate religion, where the divine, not God, is drawn down to earth and manifested there in the form of nature's creative force. (Oelsner 2011, 185)

This cultural synthesis of the material and the ideal, the immanent and the transcendent, the spiritual and the physical, is the starting point of this dissertation. I argue that this vitalistic tendency toward the end of the nineteenth century was central not only to scientific and philosophical developments, but was a major factor in the aesthetic changes taking place in Scandinavian literature as well.

In recent years, the way in which Scandinavian literature and art were shaped by vitalism in the first half of the twentieth century has become a major point of scholarly discussion, particularly in the Danish and Norwegian contexts.<sup>5</sup> These studies have all done an excellent job of analyzing the way in which a vitalist impulse informed some of the most salient qualities of literature and art leading up to World War II, including anti-rationalism, a tendency toward Dionysian ecstasy and excess, an emphasis on physical robustness, a somewhat brutal disregard for the individual life and an accompanying emphasis on the life cycle, and a blurring of the lines between human and animal life. This scholarship has tended to focus on manifestations of vitalism roughly between 1900 and 1945, with little discussion of how the vitalist discourse relates to the widespread literary fixation on the soul starting around 1890. In fact, when the 1890s are brought into the discussion at all, it is often to posit that vitalism came about as a reaction to *fin-de-siècle* decadence and the aesthetics of pessimism. In his study of Danish vitalism, for instance, Anders Ehlers Dam writes:

Den vitalistiske strømning voksede frem som et brud med 1890'ernes overvejende negative og eskapistiske digtning. Dette skete netop blandt digtere, der selv havde deres baggrund i det nittende århundredes slutning. . . . De første eksempler på den vitalistiske strømning omkring år 1900 er særligt interessante, for her træder den vitalistiske forestillingsform frem med tydelighed i kontrast til sin indbyggede negativistiske modsætning. (Dam 2010, 10)

[The vitalist movement grew out of a break with the excessively negative and escapist literature of the 1890s. This occurred precisely among writers who had their own background in the end of the nineteenth century. . . . The first examples of the vitalist movement around the year 1900 are particularly interesting, because this is when the vitalist form of representation clearly distinguishes itself in contrast to its built-in negativistic opposite.]

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<sup>5</sup> See Boasson 2016; Dam 2010; Halse 2004, 2006; Hvidberg-Hansen and Oelsner, 2011; Mathisen 2012; Moldung 2005; Nesby 2017; Nielsen 2013; Simonsen 2005; Sørensen 2011; and Vassenden 2012, 2017.

The schematic picture that Dam draws here between the negativity of 1890s literature and the positivity of vitalism presupposes that the dominant mode in the 1890s was pessimism, and that vitalism is always optimistic. There are indeed many examples to support this argument in a general sense. One need only, for instance, look at the work of Edvard Munch before and after the turn of the century to see a vivid example of this shift from darkness and decadence to a more life-affirming and optimistic palette. But there are also clear examples of a more pessimistic strain of vitalism,<sup>6</sup> as well as literature produced in the 1890s that was neither decadent nor pessimistic. Furthermore, this fixation on the pessimism/optimism binary obscures an underlying commonality between literature of the 1890s and later forms of vitalism, namely that both are based on a conception of an invisible, internal force that is, paradoxically, both physical and intangible.

It is my contention that the central principle of vitalism grew out of this peculiar combination of the material and the ideal (or, to borrow Rabinbach's phrase, *transcendental materialism*) that became particularly prevalent around 1890. Furthermore, as a point of literary historiography, I argue that these inflection points when there is a reaction to and rejection of a previously dominant style (which conveniently tends to occur around the beginning of each decade) should not be taken as moments of absolute aesthetic rupture. In that regard, I argue that Scandinavian vitalism grew out of the cultural moment around 1890 when literature and art sought to shift focus to the realm of the soul; crucially, however, the notion of a soul or vital force that emerged was shaped by naturalist materialism. Rather than seeing the calls for a new literature around 1890 as a break with naturalism, then, we should understand it as the beginning of a materialist-idealist conception of Life that would become central to Scandinavian art, literature, and culture in the first half of the twentieth century.

This dissertation's other major intervention is to draw critical attention to how sensory perception plays into this new conception of a material soul. The conspicuous way in which the limits and physical conditions of perception are taken up in the literary examples from the 1890s that I examine attests to a widespread literary fascination with the relationship between subjectivity and the body. In the literature of the 1890s, the fact that one can think about or sense the surrounding world is not a function of a transcendent entity, but rather a product of the immanent perceptual capacities of the body itself. This tendency toward immanence is, as Eirik Vassenden writes, a central tenet of vitalism:

Kjernen i vitalismen som naturfilosofi er en overbevisning om eksistensen av en autonom, ikke-transcendent livskraft som i ytterste instans er universets drivende og skapende kraft. Det er en form for biologisk metafysikk som ikke tenker i retning av transcendens, alstå overskridelse oppover og utover, men som går i retning av immanens, en bevegelse *innover*, inn og ned i materien. Vi finner altså ikke en skille mellom det indre og det ytre, ånd og legeme, men en forestilling om at denne ikke-materielle livskraften er å finne *i materien* selv, og vi må betrakte dette som forsøk på å tenke disse konseptene hinsides dualismer og dikotomier. (Vassenden 2011, 22–3)

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<sup>6</sup> See Vassenden's discussion of Tarjei Vesaas, for instance (Vassenden 2011).



[The core of vitalism as a natural philosophy is a conviction in the existence of an autonomous, non-transcendent life force that in all instances is the driving and creative force of the universe. It is a form of biological metaphysics that doesn't tend toward transcendence, a movement upward and outward, but that goes in the direction of immanence, a movement *inward*, in and down into matter. We thus find no boundary between the inner and the outer, spirit and body, but a notion that this non-material life force may be found *in matter* itself, and we must consider this an attempt to think about these concepts beyond dualisms and dichotomies.]

Vassenden's important observation here about vitalist immanence demonstrates that, for vitalism, interiority and the internal experience of the embodied individual were of central importance. Despite this claim that vitalism is accompanied by a shift inward, most studies of Scandinavian vitalism focus on later examples in which introspection and interiority have given way to a more monumental and external view of the body. For the examples examined in this dissertation, which all demonstrate a vitalist form of embodied interiority, the immanence and materiality of the soul is of central importance. Part of this vitalistic move inward, toward physical immanence, was to examine the physiological basis of subjectivity and perception. As such, I analyze in this dissertation the ways in which the sensory experience of the modern individual is related to the development of a notion of an embodied soul or subjectivity.

One of the disciplines in which vital materialism motivated an investigation of the hidden forces within living organisms was in modern physiology, a field that was still relatively young, having been pioneered by figures such as Johannes Müller and Claude Bernard from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Physiology distinguished itself from the much older science of anatomy in that, rather than merely investigating the structure and composition of the body, it was interested in how vital processes took place within the *living* body. Physiology thus operated under a different set of practical and moral constraints than anatomy; rather than studying cadavers, physiologists depended upon living subjects. But since physiology was primarily interested in internal processes, it was drawn toward the controversial practice of vivisection—cutting open living creatures to view the vital processes taking place within. The paradox of using vivisection to observe living creatures, of course, is that in the process of studying them, it kills them. The emergence of vivisection as a (morally fraught) observational practice naturally led to the question of how to observe and record internal vital processes without killing the organism that was being studied. Perhaps because of this implicit paradox at its core, vivisection proved to be a compelling metaphor of literary observation for Knut Hamsun, who developed a notion of a literature that penetrated the body of the individual subject to reveal the internal dynamics operating within. But even though Hamsun used metaphors of vision in launching his literary program, he also recognized the limits of such a vivisectionist gaze—namely that it created an objectifying distance and destroyed life even as it sought to observe it. In chapter one, “The Voice of the Blood: Vitalism and the Acoustic in Knut Hamsun's *Pan* (1894),” I investigate how Hamsun's interest in preserving the integrity of the living body, as well as his fascination with the embodied nature of subjectivity and perception, led to a shift from the visual to the auditory in his

influential early novel, *Pan*. One of the crucial aspects of Hamsun's novel that has been debated in the scholarly literature is the role of visual observation in the protagonist's confrontation with a remote northern town in which he is an outsider. Less developed is the way in which Hamsun's protagonist shifts between visual and aural engagement with his surroundings. This sensory oscillation between sight and sound is no arbitrary movement; these shifting sensory modes reveal important underlying assumptions about the embodied nature of perception, as well as the observation of internal phenomena in vitalist discourse.

Vital materialism also manifested itself in the growth of spiritualism as a practice and belief in Europe toward the end of the century. Although spiritualism had originated in the middle of the century in North America and was quickly exported to England, it enjoyed a rather belated heyday in the Nordic countries, conveniently aligning it with temporally with the shift toward vital materialism around 1890. Spiritualism challenged religious and scientific dogmas alike, often drawing ire from partisans on both sides of the divide. At the same time, spiritualism imagined itself as a synthesis of religion and science. More precisely, spiritualism sought to confirm the existence of spirits using empirical means. By subjecting spirits to observation and attempting to "materialize" (in the parlance of spirit mediums) the ghosts of the departed, spiritualism participated in the larger discourse of vital materialism that I have described. At the same time, spiritualism (just like the broader vitalistic impulse) engaged in a strategy of "re-enchantment" by introducing idealist notions into a materialist worldview. Despite its attempts to synthesize science and religion, the rise of spiritualism sparked lively debates about which discipline could lay claim to intellectual freedom, and which was guilty of dogmatism and close-mindedness. Scientists, seizing on the metaphysical claims of spiritualism, dismissed it as a misunderstanding of scientific methods and a misguided attempt to legitimate religious ideas by cloaking them in an empiricist veneer. For the non-partisan observer, the debate could spark interesting questions about the nature of material phenomena and the limits of the scientific discourse. Was the scientific rejection of spiritualism an attempt to shut down alternative theories of life and natural forces—and therefore against the spirit of free inquiry at the heart of experimental science? How could intellectual freedom and openness to new discoveries be maintained in the face of competing dogmas? In chapter two, "The Soul Alone Has Meaning': Irony, Spiritualism, and Re-Enchantment in Arne Garborg's *Trøtte Mænd* (1891)," I examine Garborg's exploration of this disciplinary showdown as manifested in spiritualism. Garborg's engagement with spiritualism was itself a surprising development, since Garborg was known as a freethinker—hardly the type of intellect to be drawn into the metaphysical claims of mediums who, in many cases, had been debunked as frauds. But, as with all of Garborg's writing, the question that perplexed many readers was whether he was being sincere or ironic in his interest in spiritualism. Rather than attempting to answer the question of Garborg's *actual* beliefs, I explore the ways in which Garborg's use of irony conceptually lined up with the arguments of the new forms of "psychical research" that arose around 1890.

All forms of vital materialism—as implied in the name—are built upon a paradoxical combination of the tangible and the ethereal. In the terms of an older Christian theological tradition, this new tendency toward vital materialism at the end of the

nineteenth century posed crucial existential and cosmological questions for the modern believer. How does one experience a transcendent force if one is rooted in a physical body? In an intellectual milieu that based truth-claims on a rigorous empirical standard, how can one “see” (or otherwise empirically experience) God? In other words, how can one approach the divine as an embodied human? More broadly, how does one observe the invisible forces at work in the universe? Do modern technologies of vision that allow one to supercede the limits of embodied vision, and thereby “see” the invisible—photography, microscopy, telescoping, X-rays—help the individual to “see God”? In chapter three, “Higher Above and Deeper Within: Perceptual Transcendence and Vitalistic Embodiment in Sigbjørn Obstfelder’s *En Prests Dagbog* (1900),” I examine Obstfelder’s unfinished, posthumously published novel. In it, Obstfelder’s priest explicitly wonders whether it might be possible to “see” God through the mediation of modern technologies of vision. The apparently conflicting frameworks here—the conflation of materialist methodologies (using telescopes, microscopes, or X-rays) to observe idealist, religious phenomena—poses a conundrum that the priest repeatedly confronts throughout the novel. The question becomes which aspect of that paradox the priest will be forced to adjust—will he need to change his methodology, or change what he is looking for? The contemporary vitalist fixation on the life-giving and healing qualities of sunlight (particularly pronounced in the Nordic countries) turns out to be a crucial aspect of the priest’s attempt to resolve his religious and existential crisis.

All of these examples from Norwegian literature in the 1890s suggest that the conceptual conflicts that arose surrounding the rise of scientific materialism were hardly limited to the realm of scientific discourse. Indeed, the problem of accommodating idealist concepts within a materialist framework informed all kinds of disciplines, posing epistemological and ontological challenges that needed to be resolved. And although these literary examples pose some kind of alternative approach to scientific empiricism and a rigid materialism, they all depended upon the rise of materialism as a dominant worldview. Rather than understanding their exploration of subjective states, sensory perception, or immaterial concepts like the soul or the spirit as a rejection of scientific discourse, it is more accurate to say that they explored these concepts from the perspective of embodied, physical subjects. In their own way, each of these authors participated in the growing trend toward vital materialism at the end of the century.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Voice of the Blood: Vitalism and the Acoustic in Knut Hamsun's *Pan* (1894)

In his well-known essay, "Fra det ubevidste Sjæliv" (1890; From the Unconscious Life of the Soul), Knut Hamsun describes the perplexing experience he had on a recent morning of waking up to find that he had written two short sketches about hunting in his sleep the previous night. Hamsun's confusion arises not so much from the legibility of the texts themselves, which he judges were "skrevne med en svær Fart" (Hamsun 1939, 48) [written in great haste], although, remarkably using "den samme Ortografi, som jeg vilde brugt i fuldt vaagen Tilstand" (Hamsun 1939, 48) [the same orthography I would have used had I written them in a completely conscious state]. Rather, the mysterious texts have interest for Hamsun because of the questions they pose about the unconscious functioning of the human mind. He wonders quite simply: "Hvorledes skulde jeg forklare mig alt dette?" (Hamsun 1939, 52) [How was I to explain all of this?]. The anecdote points to a central mystery that Hamsun explores in the essay, namely the nature of the unconscious mind, and to what degree it exerts control over the creative and intellectual life of the modern individual. The sudden appearance of two relatively coherent and legible sketches on Hamsun's desk one morning is unsettling precisely because he has no conscious recollection of having produced the texts.

What makes the anecdote relevant to this dissertation, however, is not the mystery of this unconscious literary composition that so fascinates Hamsun, but rather the terms Hamsun uses to describe his vague recollection of the previous night. Although his conscious mind retained no trace of the nocturnal writing, Hamsun notes in passing that he feels "en Anelse i mit Blod om, at jeg om Natten, mens det endnu var mørkt, havde grebet Blyanten og Papirerne paa Bordet foran mig og skrevet ned disse to Smaaastubber" (Hamsun 1939, 49) [a feeling in my blood of having picked up the pen and paper from the table while it was still night and noted down these two sketches]. By using this unusual image of experiencing an "anelse" [a feeling or notion] in his blood, Hamsun both de-intellectualizes and corporealizes individual subjectivity. The dualism of mind/body is done away with in this model of fluid, corporeal perception, and subjectivity is even severed from the functioning of the brain, instead being carried in a constantly-moving stream of vital fluid circulating through the body.

This tendency of Hamsun to understand perception, memory, and subjectivity as fundamentally embodied shows how, despite Hamsun's reputation as an aesthetic radical who founded his career on a repudiation of naturalism, there were some crucial remnants of naturalist materialism in the Scandinavian literary culture of the 1890s. It is a commonplace of Hamsun scholarship to refer to his 1890 essay as a handy summary of the aesthetic priorities of his early authorship. Scholars most often emphasize the polemic intent of the piece, drawing as it does a sharp, rather schematic distinction between what he describes as the prosaic, moralizing realism of the Modern Breakthrough on the one hand, and literature that went beneath the surface to depict what he called the modern "life of the soul" on the other. James McFarlane's 1956 essay, "The Whisper of the Blood," on Hamsun's early novels is a typical example of this kind of framing. In it, McFarlane writes,

To the early Hamsun, the issues were simple and unambiguous. The world of literature fell into two parts: the literature of the external event and that of inner motive. Here was the social or ‘problematical,’ there the psychological; here the worthless, there the valuable. (McFarlane 1956, 565)

The key literary-historical function of Hamsun’s essay, then, is that it draws a rhetorical line in the sand between social realism and a more individually focused literature of the soul. This narrative of literary-historical rupture is in keeping with Hamsun’s own rhetoric in the essay, which (true to form for a literary manifesto) called for the rejection of what he described as the “billige ydre Psykologi” (Hamsun 1939, 61) [cheap surface psychology] of the previous generation in preference for a more penetrating representation of the modern individual.

Scholarly references to Hamsun’s essay almost invariably cite a quote from the end of the piece that contains Hamsun’s most explicit call for a literary changing-of-the-guard:

Hvad om nu Literaturen i det hele taget begyndte at beskæftige sig lidt mere med sjælelige Tilstande, end med Forlovelser og Baller og Landture og Ulykkeshændelser som saadane? . . . Vi fik erfare lidt om de hemmelige Bevægelser, som bedrives upaaagtet paa de afsides Steder i Sjælen. . . sælsomme Nervevirksomheder, Blodets Hvisken, Benpibernes Bøn, hele det ubevidste Sjæleliv (Hamsun 1939, 61).

[What if literature now began to concern itself a bit more with mental states, rather than with engagements and balls and trips in the country and accidents and such? . . . We would get to experience a little bit of the secret movements that go on unobserved in the peripheral places in the soul . . . the strange workings of the nerves, the whisper of the blood, the prayer of the marrow, the entire unconscious life of the soul.]

The materiality and corporeality of this key section of Hamsun’s essay indicates that even as he rejected what he described as the triviality and superficiality of the previous generation’s realism, he retained naturalism’s focus on embodied, corporeal subjects inhabiting a material world. Hamsun includes several images here of material substances within the living body, most memorably *Blodets Hvisken* and *Benpibernes Bøn*. This conceptual connection of “hele det ubevidste Sjæleliv” with the material, internal structures of the living body indicates a crucial point about Hamsun’s psychological thinking, namely that it treats the mind as intimately connected to the body.

The intellectual-historical context of Hamsun’s early poetics can help situate the use of this well-known image of “whispering blood” that is so crucial for Hamsun. My own research on Hamsun takes this as its starting point, asking questions of this memorable image that so far have not figured into the scholarly discourse. Why, for instance, does Hamsun associate a bodily fluid—blood—with the soul? And why is there

this insistence on the *acoustics* of blood circulation? In other words, why is the blood described as “whispering,” rather than “flowing” or “rushing”? Why does Hamsun register the movement of blood audibly, rather than visually? And, more broadly, if Hamsun was primarily concerned with *psychology* and the working of the mind, why is there such an emphasis on the *physiological* functions of the body? Why, in other words, does a traditionally metaphysical, transcendent concept—the soul—become entwined here with the very material realm of the nerves, the bones, and the blood?

Furthermore, Hamsun’s use of the adjectives “upaaaget” [*upåaktet* in modern bokmål, meaning unnoticed or disregarded] and “afsides” [*avsidet*, meaning peripheral or remote] to describe the internal “movements” within the body he is interested in indicates something crucial about the observational interests of his literary program. According to Hamsun, literature should be more sensitive to inner, physical dynamics that are at (or perhaps beyond) the bounds of the empirically observable. Hamsun is fixated, then, on that which is *barely* perceivable, but which normally goes unnoticed and for which literature might be the right supplementary observational tool. We might say, then, that his literature is interested in the “perceptual unconscious”—that is, physical phenomena of which we are unaware because of the limits of human perceptual sensitivity. This fascination with phenomena that play out below the threshold of human perception puts his writing in line with a number of nineteenth-century developments in visual and acoustic technology. With the advent of instantaneous dry-plate photography in the latter half of the nineteenth century, what Walter Benjamin called the “Optisch-Unbewußten” (Benjamin 1977, 371) [“optical unconscious” (Benjamin 2005, 512)] came to light on the photographic plate, which could now reveal visual phenomena that remained effectively invisible to the observer, since they unfolded too rapidly or were too small or distant to be consciously perceived.<sup>7</sup> The classic example of this effort to take photography beyond the limits of human vision is Edward Muybridge’s ground-breaking photographs from 1872 of California governor Leland Stanford’s racehorse at full gallop, which were used to settle the question of whether all four of the horse’s legs were off the ground (see Braun 2010, 69–70). Thomas Edison had similar perceptual ambitions for his phonograph, which he anticipated would one day could make audible for the human ear sounds that would normally escape the perception of even a trained listener:

The most skillful observers, listeners and realistic novelists, or even stenographers, cannot reproduce a conversation exactly as it occurred. The account they give is

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin introduction of the term provides a more specific description of what he means by “optical unconscious”: “Ist es schon üblich, daß einer, beispielsweise, vom Gang der Leute, sei es auch nur im groben, sich Rechenschaft gibt, so weiß er bestimmt nichts mehr von ihrer Haltung im Sekundenbruchteil des »Ausschreitens«. Die Photographie mit ihren Hilfsmitteln: Zeitlupen, Vergrößerungen erschließt sie ihm. Von diesem Optisch-Unbewußten erfährt er erst durch sie, wie von dem Triebhaft-Unbewußten durch die Psychoanalyse” (Benjamin 1977, 377) [“Whereas it is commonplace that, for example, we have some idea of what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis” (Benjamin 2005, 510–12)].

more or less generalized. But the phonograph receives, and then transmits to our ears again, every least thing that was said—exactly *as* it was said—with the faultless fidelity of an instantaneous photograph. We shall now for the first time know what conversation really is; just as we have learned, only within a few years, through the instantaneous photograph, what attitudes are taken by the horse in motion. (Edison 1888, 648–9, emphasis in original)

In drawing our attention to the barely audible “whisper of the blood,” Hamsun is thus engaging in a contemporary fascination with bringing the invisible to light, or (in the case of Edison) making the inaudible audible by recovering and preserving the fleeting auditory experience. Instead of achieving this through mechanical means, however, as Edison envisioned, Hamsun emphasized the role of the sensitive, corporeal, embodied listener.

This is far from the only reference to blood as a special kind of vital fluid in Hamsun’s early writings. With that in mind, I will argue that by directing our attention squarely upon this key phrase—*the whisper of the blood*—and by investigating the vital properties that Hamsun associates with blood, we see Hamsun’s early writing in a new light: Hamsun is no longer understood as a ruthless aesthetic radical who repudiated all the assumptions of the previous generation, but rather as someone who engaged with naturalism and materialism to a degree that he has seldom been given credit for. Hamsun’s role in ushering in the anti-naturalist reaction in the 1890s has been emphasized to the point that scholars frequently miss the conceptual continuities between his early works and the premises of literary naturalism. I will argue that although Hamsun depicted himself as an aesthetic revolutionary whose breakthrough as a cultural figure was predicated upon literary patricide, there are important remnants of naturalism in his early writings, especially in his emphasis on the materiality and physiology of lived experience. Hamsun’s intervention was far subtler than a mere repudiation of naturalist materialism; instead I argue that Hamsun uses a form of *vital* materialism to depict organic matter as infused with vital energy. One of the chief ways Hamsun achieved this was to represent blood as a fluid, material manifestation of the soul. This apparently incongruous combination of the material and the metaphysical was typical of the broader discourse of vital materialism that found expression in both the cultural and the scientific realms toward the end of the century.

One of the remnants of literary naturalism that survives in Hamsun’s poetics is a commitment to some form of empiricism in an effort to perceive and represent the material world. Hamsun’s empirical mode was built on the kind of perceptual sensitivity one associated more with modern technologies of vision and hearing than with literature. Hamsun’s aim was not merely to listen closely, but to hear that which was on the verge of complete inaudibility—to perceive the “whisper” of the blood, in other words. Rather than reinforcing the role of new perceptual technologies such as instantaneous photography and the phonograph, however, Hamsun engaged in a complex and subtle critique of mechanically aided perception. Thus, although Hamsun may have been provoked to focus on the “perceptual unconscious” by emerging technologies of visual and acoustic recording, his response was to resist the technological objectification of the human sensory experience, and to insist on the primacy of embodied, subjective perception. This striking

image of “whispering blood” that Hamsun uses to help launch his literary career, then, turns out to be a key to understanding the ways in which the Hamsunian consciousness was imagined to be situated within a vital, living body.

With this in mind, I will argue that Hamsun’s early writing conceived the visual and the aural as two fundamentally distinct modes of subjectivity, not merely because they involved different perceptual faculties (vision and hearing), but because the visual engendered an objectifying and disembodied observational stance, while the aural engendered a subjective and embodied mode of being. This dichotomy between disembodied vision and embodied aural is historically determined, and depended on the technological conditions that prevailed at the time Hamsun was writing. Although vision had a long history of being represented and circulated through visual media, and thus had a long history of being severed from the time and place of visual observation, sound recording was still in its infancy and extremely limited in its reach. Hamsun was thus writing at a time when one could assume that the perception of sound depended on the bodily presence of both the source of the sound as well as the listener. Although Thomas Edison had introduced the phonograph, making the concept of recorded sound was available as an idea, its reach was still limited to promotional exhibitions at the outset of Hamsun’s career. Consequently, the expectations regarding the perception of sound were predominantly pre-phonographic in character. Sounds were not typically thought of as something that could be “captured” through mechanical recording and projected beyond the time and place of their production; in other words, if one detected a sound, one could be reasonably certain that the original producer of the sound was in the vicinity. The experience of sound was thus contingent, embodied, and fugitive, and in that regard perfectly in line with the kind of subjective experience Hamsun aimed to represent with his literature. In Hamsun’s words, the kinds of psycho-physiological phenomena he was most interested in were “ofte for flygtige til at gribes og holdes fast, de varer et Sekund, et Minut, de kommer og gaar som farende Blinklys; men de har trykket et Mærke, afsat en Fornemmelse, før de forsvandt” (Hamsun 1939, 59–60) [often too fleeting to be grasped and held secure, they last a second, a minute, they come and go like the blinking of passing lights, but they have made a mark, left behind an impression before they disappeared]. This fixation on fleeting sensory impressions aligned much more closely with the contemporary assumptions about the aural experience (which assumed bodily presence) than about the visual experience, the latter of which could easily be “captured” and preserved through photography or its precursors.

Of Hamsun’s early writing, *Pan* (1894) provides an ideal text for exploring his concept of “whispering blood,” and how he imagined the acoustics of the vital body as central to his literary purpose. Before embarking on an analysis of the novel itself, however, it is helpful to get a sense of the intellectual context of Hamsun’s early writing, in particular the flourishing of vital materialism toward the end of the century in Scandinavian culture.



## *Vitalism and the Material Soul*

The unexpected connections Hamsun makes between the movement of bodily fluids and the subtle, elusive workings of the modern human soul show how radically Hamsun's life concept was severed from the metaphysical realm. Simply put, for Hamsun, the "life of the soul" could not be relegated to the realm of the ideal, but could only be detected in the vital, physiological functioning of the body. Hamsun's fixation on a fluid, mobile substance that is constantly moving, fluctuating, and responding to stimuli in surprising and unpredictable ways indicates that Hamsun's notion of vitality was tied precisely to this kind of internal fluidity and unpredictability. Rather than turning to a transcendent force to impose some form of ordered cosmos onto the chaos of human existence, Hamsun turns inward into the heart of the fluid and chaotic psycho-physiology of the human body in order to represent the "life of the soul."

The utter lack of a transcendent, metaphysical realm in Hamsun's thinking might seem surprising if one primarily thinks of Hamsun as a "psychological writer" fixated on the restless shifting of subjective states in the mind of the modern individual. However, this physiological consciousness in Hamsun's writing makes more sense if one takes into account the scientifically-inflected vitalism that became an influential intellectual impulse toward the end of the nineteenth century, as recent scholars have started to trace. Frode Lerum Boasson's dissertation *Men Livet lever: Hamsuns vitalisme fra Pan til Ringen Sluttet* (2015) starts with a reading of *Pan* that investigates "hvordan det gamle romantiske toposet «tilbake til naturen!» forskyves til et moderne vitalistisk forsøk på å nå ekte Liv og livsfylde" (Boasson 2015, 17) [how the old romantic topos of *back to nature!* is replaced with a modern scientific attempt to arrive at authentic Life and vital abundance]. For Boasson, *Pan* is a key text to cite in counteracting the overemphasis on *nyromantikken* in the 1890s in Scandinavian literary historiography. Rather than seeing Glahn merely as "en 'forsinket' romantisk vandrer," [a "delayed" romantic wanderer] as Per Thomas Andersen has described Hamsun's protagonist (Andersen 2001, 293), Boasson points out the subtle but crucial differences between romanticism and vitalism:

Den romantiske vitalismen skiller seg imidlertid fra den moderne vitalismen ved at romantikkens «Natur» har blitt til «Liv». Det som romantikkens tidsalder begynte som en naturfilosofisk undersøkelse av «den levende naturen», har omkring århundreskiftet blitt omstrukturert til en moderne biologi, hvor mennesket blir ansett som et cellevesen (Boasson 2015, 89).

[Romantic vitalism distinguishes itself from modern vitalism in that romanticism's "Nature" has transformed to "Life." That which in the age of romanticism began as a natural-philosophical study of "the living nature," has around the turn of the century been restructured according to modern biology, in which the human is understood as a being made up of cells.]

Boasson's analysis thus reveals the crucial importance of modern scientific vitalism to a proper understanding of not just Hamsun's authorship but many of the most influential

literary works of the Norwegian *fin de siècle*. Rather than understanding this literature as an escape from the physical body toward a notion of romantic transcendence in nature, we see that in fact this literature moved in the opposite direction—directly into the immanence of the material, physiological body—in order to detect and represent the vital force at work within the modern individual. Hamsun’s fixation on the dynamics of blood circulation and its relationship to the modern human consciousness is just one expression of this broader cultural tendency to corporealize what had previously been relegated to the realm of the ideal, and thus to favor the immanence of physiological experience over the transcendence of romantic idealism. Eirik Vassenden makes a similar point in his book *Norsk vitalisme: Litteratur, ideologi og livsdyrking 1890-1940*, where he summarizes this crucial difference between romanticism and vitalism:

En grunnleggende og prinsipiell forskjell er at romantikken oftest trekker i retning av transcensens, mens vitalismen søker innover, mot immanensen.... Der romantikeren lar det mikroskopiske speile det uendelige og universelle, ser livsdyrkeren livet manifestert og spesifisert i hvert enkelt dødelig skapning, uten at en teologisk modell får etablere seg. (Vassenden 2012, 146)

[A basic and principal difference is that romanticism most often tends toward transcendence, while vitalism searches inwardly, toward immanence.... Where the romanticist lets the microscopic realm reflect the infinite and the universal, the worshipper of life sees life manifested and specified in every single mortal creature, without a theological model establishing itself.]

Emphasizing Hamsun’s fixation on the material, vital fluids circulating in the living body, as I do in this chapter, is thus not merely an effort to point out an interesting trope in Hamsun’s early authorship, but rather a way of connecting Hamsun to larger cultural impulses that he responded to and the budding discourse of vitalism that he contributed to. The way my study departs from the work of scholars such as Vassenden and Boasson is in showing how Hamsun treats vitality as an epistemological and representational conundrum. If the “vital force” is manifested in all forms of life, and is a material yet invisible force, how can one detect it and represent it?

By positing the existence of an invisible soul or “life force” immanent to the human body, I argue that Hamsun participated in a nascent vitalist discourse in the Norwegian *fin de siècle*. Hamsun’s major contribution to this budding vitalism was to conceptualize the soul in psycho-physiological terms by presenting the vital force as it was manifested in the functions of the living body. Furthermore, by locating a traditionally metaphysical concept like the soul within the material body, Hamsun contributed to a *specific strain* of vitalist thought, namely vital materialism, which distinguished itself from older vitalist traditions by eschewing the metaphysical, and instead locating the vital force within the materiality of the physical body. This tendency aligns with broader intellectual trends in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when psychology sought to establish itself as an empirical science, and therefore developed a more biological understanding of the mind. As Svein Atle Skålevåg notes in his study of Hamsun’s early work, at the end of

the century, the mind was increasingly conceived as a “håndfast ting” (Skålevåg 2007, 239) [tangible thing], and understood to be localized in the material structures of the body. This tendency to “materialize” the soul and “biologize” the mind indicates the growing influence of scientific monism, a worldview popularized at the end of the nineteenth century by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel that refuted Cartesian dualism and instead posited that mental phenomena could be explained in terms of a single material substance (see Holt 1971).

One would assume that this tendency to biologize or corporealize the mind would make it more amenable to scientific observation, since physical phenomena would seem to be more available to empirical observation than traditionally metaphysical concepts. But there is a paradox inherent in this form of vital materialism that developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century—although the “vital force” was associated with the materiality and physiology of the corporeal body, it was nevertheless understood as somehow existing beyond the realm of the empirically observable and verifiable. This may be understood as vitalism’s empirical paradox, since it posits a force that is manifested in the functioning of the living body, but whose ultimate source escapes any attempts to isolate and observe it. Vitalism thus depended upon the apparently incongruent combination of the transcendent and the immanent, which was an impulse that was influential in a number of fields in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the study of the thermodynamics was contributing to a widespread fascination with the concept of energy as a physical force that could not be located or isolated, but was nevertheless responsible for the dynamics of growth, change, and entropy in the physical universe. Intellectual historian Anson Rabinbach describes this particular combination of the metaphysical and the material in his history of work and the human body, *The Human Motor* (1990), where he writes:

The Promethean power of industry (cosmic, technical, and human) could be encompassed in a single productivist metaphysics in which the concept of energy, united with matter, was the basis of all reality and the source of all productive power—a materialist idealism, or as I prefer to call it, *transcendental materialism*. (Rabinbach 1990, 4)

This combination of an immaterial, energetic force with the material body was not limited to productivist ideologies, however; it was also central to the budding discourse of vital materialism in philosophy, science, and art. I contend that Hamsun participates in this paradoxical conflation of the material and metaphysical in his writing, showing how the vitality of the modern human is both physiologically-grounded, yet also resists any efforts to isolate and observe it. This leads in Hamsun’s early poetics and fiction to a critique of the objectivism and empiricism inherent in modern scientific practices of vision; in its place, Hamsun advocates a fully embodied sensory mode of tracing and experiencing the vital force. This manifests itself to a large degree in Hamsun’s novel *Pan* as a tension between the visual and the acoustic, where vision is imagined as “tainted” by its association with objectifying visual practices such as scientific observation, and the auditory is portrayed as a more subjective and corporeal, and therefore more authentically vital mode. I argue that Hamsun’s embracing of the auditory realm as a space untethered to

the objectifying tendencies of the visual realm was a function of the particular historic moment he is writing from at this early point in his career, when mechanical sound recording and reproduction technologies were still in their infancy. At this moment in the history of sound recording, the kind of subtle, internal soundscape that Hamsun focused on was in fact outside the reach of phonographic recording technology, and therefore exclusively accessible through the fleeting perceptions of an embodied listener.

In addressing the epistemological uncertainty of searching for the visible signs of the vital force, Hamsun highlights a crucial challenge that vitalism faced in an era when empirical science was the dominant epistemology and when a mechanistic, materialistic understanding of life was increasingly replacing old-fashioned vitalist concepts. In the nineteenth century, vitalism often defined itself in opposition to purely mechanistic models of biological function, and although it may be articulated in the language of scientific materialism, the impossibility of observing the vital force empirically caused mainstream science to eventually reject vitalism as unverifiable. As one recent encyclopedia of philosophy puts it, “Vitalism now has no credibility. This is sometimes credited to the view that vitalism posits an unknowable factor in explaining life; and further, vitalism is often viewed as unfalsifiable, and therefore a pernicious metaphysical doctrine” (Bechtel and Richardson 1998). Thus vitalism presumes the existence of an invisible force that is the source and defining feature of all life. However, since the vital force is invisible, it cannot be located, and therefore must remain an unverifiable hypothesis. Because Hamsun was working within a discipline that is not based on a rigorous empiricism, however, he could simultaneously promote a vitalist concept of life and point out the empirical impossibility of ever *verifying* the existence of a vital force. In other words, he was under no disciplinary obligation to provide empirical evidence for a vital force, as scientific vitalists of the same era were. So although Hamsun often uses metaphors of visual observation in his early essays and lectures on literary aesthetics in a way that echoes the rhetoric of empirical science, reading his 1894 novel *Pan* against these essays and lectures shows how profound Hamsun’s epistemological skepticism had become. This epistemological distinction between scientific vitalism and literary vitalism thus presents itself as a question of visibility and visibility; while vitalist physiologists sought to uncover and bring to light the workings of the vital force within the body, and thus demystify the “soul,” Hamsun could reject the visual empiricism of modern science entirely, and instead retreat to the more subjective realm of the auditory. This tension between the visual and the auditory can be understood as a confrontation between two competing modes of sensory interaction with the world. While Glahn arrives at the northern region he is visiting with the domineering gaze of a post-colonial tourist, as Ellen Rees has argued, there is also another crucial sensory mode at work in the novel—namely the aural—which often works to undercut Glahn’s claims to visual mastery. As Glahn becomes more and more absorbed into the natural landscape of northern Norway, and is increasingly drawn into strange and subjective states of mind, the aural mode asserts itself more fully. And as I will argue, the aural mode that Glahn increasingly adopts in the novel implies an entirely different kind of subject-object positioning than the visual mode that Glahn assumes at the outset of the novel. In Glahn’s movement from a visual to an auditory sensory mode, we see how Hamsun’s emphasis on the audibility and fluidity of the vital force, implicit in such images

as “the whisper of the blood” from his early essays and lectures, comes to play a crucial role in his early fiction.

### *Vitalism and Nature in Pan*

Of Hamsun’s early novels, *Pan* (1894) is perhaps the one that bears the most obvious markings of vitalism. The novel contains Lieutenant Thomas Glahn’s recollections from his extended stay at a small hunting cabin on the outskirts of an obscure coastal village called Sirilund in northern Norway. Glahn, a retired military officer, has apparently arrived in Nordland to escape civilization, and he takes pride in his ability to live in a symbiotic relationship to his natural environment. He kills only the amount of game he needs to survive on a daily basis, he decorates his hut with animal skins, and he spends his leisure time stalking the forests with his trusty hunting dog, Aesop. Glahn commands a vast natural vocabulary, and seems to intuitively grasp the cyclical behaviors of animals, weather patterns, and the subtle seasonal shifts throughout the natural landscape. In short, although hailing from Kristiania, Glahn presents himself as an outdoorsman, but one whose connection to nature is not purely one of dominance; instead, Glahn’s relationship to nature is deeply emotional, and he seems intent on not merely living *off of* nature, but living *at one with* it.

The representation of Glahn’s relationship to the Nordland landscape has been a major focus of the critical reception of *Pan*, much of which has centered on Glahn’s immersive, symbiotic posture. In his seminal analysis of Hamsun’s early novels, for instance, James McFarlane emphasizes the Rousseauian impetus behind Glahn’s retreat to the northern Norwegian wilderness:

Glahn is. . . a child of Nature, ill at ease in society. . . a soul that seeks its fulfillment in the forest and in solitude, a mind that at moments of heightened sensibility is capable of a kind of mystical union with nature and the universe. . . . The novel contrives a single unity of Nature and human nature (McFarlane 1956, 586).

The relationship between man and nature, in McFarlane’s estimation, is thus one of (neo)romantic symbiosis and communion. *Pan* presents us with a sensitive soul capable of moments of “mystical union” with all of creation. Writing nearly thirty years later, Harald Næss connects Glahn’s turn to nature to the novel’s Norwegian reception, claiming that “*Pan* owes its Norwegian popularity less to its tale of passion than to Glahn’s eloquent declaration of his love of nature” (Næss 1984, 55). In Næss’s reading, Glahn’s retreat to the wilderness appealed to Norway’s well-known cultural attachment to the notion of *friluftsliv* (outdoor recreation), and this is what explains the novel’s status as Hamsun’s first popular success in Norway.

More recent readings of *Pan* as a vitalist novel have retained this emphasis on the role of Glahn’s romantic escape to the northern wilderness. Frode Lerum Boasson points out that Hamsun specifically referenced Rousseau as an influence on his conception of Glahn, and notes that Hamsun owned a copy of Rousseau’s *Du contrat social* (1762; *The*

*Social Contract*), which Rousseau famously opens by writing, “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains” (Rousseau 1968, 49). Boasson uses this Rousseauian image as he writes further:

Forsøket på å bryte ut av disse lenkene kjennetegner den moderne litterære vitalismen, og i denne sammenhengen forstås også Rousseau som en romantisk kritiker av alle typer rasjonalisme, klassisisme og fremskrittsoptimisme. (Boasson 2015, 83)

[The attempt to break free from these bonds characterizes modern literary vitalism, and in this context Rousseau is also understood as a romantic critic of all types of rationalism, classicism and progressive optimism.]

Glahn’s particular romantic/vitalist quest to escape the chains of society is what drives him up to Nordland in *Pan*, and this is of crucial importance for the novel, according to Boasson. In another recent reading of *Pan* as a vitalist novel, Eirik Vassenden contrasts the novel’s setting in the semi-wilderness of Nordland with that of Hamsun’s literary breakthrough, *Sult* (1890), which was set in Kristiania, famously described in the novel’s opening lines as “denne forunderlige By, som ingen forlader, før han har faaet mærker af den” (Hamsun 1890, 1) [that remarkable city which no one leaves before he has been marked by it]. Vassenden writes that

Glahns skildringer av nordlandsnaturen konkretiserer. . . en holdning til naturen som bygger på empati, samklang, sameksistens og *sympati* på instinktenes nivå. Han ser ikke naturen og sine omgivelser, som *Sult*-helten, han *er* i den. (Vassenden 2012, 145)

[Glahn’s descriptions of the Nordland nature embody an attitude toward nature that is built on empathy, harmony, symbiosis, and *sympathy* at the instinctual level. He does not see nature and his own surroundings, as the *Hunger* protagonist does, he *exists* within it.]

Here Vassenden draws a familiar distinction between participation and observation, and claims that because Glahn is so completely occupied with immersing himself in nature, he does not *see* it in the way a detached observer would. For Vassenden, Glahn’s communion with nature breaks down any barriers between man and his natural surroundings. Glahn’s immersive relationship to nature specifically precludes an observational stance, according to Vassenden. Glahn’s position within nature does not create any distance between observer and observed, but rather is corporeally absorbed into the life of the northern wilderness through sensory communion. Thus, for Vassenden, observation and immersion seem to be mutually exclusive modes of existence.

This critical tradition of reading Glahn’s interaction with the Nordland landscape as one of Romantic immersion and symbiosis has been challenged by revisionist readings. As Vassenden’s tactic of downplaying observation in order to emphasize vitalistic

immersion might suggest, one logical strategy for reinterpreting Glahn's relationship to nature has been to emphasize Glahn's role as a detached and voyeuristic observer of Sirilund and its surrounding wilderness. This shift to the visual makes sense, since the kind of observational situations Glahn describes in his narrative impose a specific kind of subject/object relationship between observer and observed in which Glahn makes use of a domineering, objectifying gaze to impose order and exert his will on his surroundings. Ellen Rees's reading of the novel does precisely this, drawing our attention to the colonialist dimensions of Glahn's visual encounter with Nordland. In doing so, Rees makes use of John Urry's concept of "the tourist gaze," which is "constructed through difference" (Urry 1990, 1), and is connected to the tourist's visual consumption and commodification of his exotic surroundings. Rees further notes, quoting Henning Wærp, that Glahn's cabin occupies a privileged visual position, and affords him a "kikkerposisjon" (Wærp 2000, 546) ["voyeur position" (Rees 2008, 14)] from which he can view the dynamics of both the natural and the social worlds around Sirilund.

In Rees's reading, Glahn's status as an outsider is crucial, and accounts in large part for Glahn's observational status. No disinterested observer, Glahn stalks the landscape like a tourist with a camera, capturing and commandeering views of the exotic locale that can serve his curiosity and fulfill his colonialist desires. Focusing on Glahn's lingering final description of Sirilund as it recedes in the distance, Rees writes that the passage "serves the function of a picture post card or a map that the departing Glahn can pore over" (Rees 2008 10). Far from wanting to immerse himself in his natural surroundings, the quintessential image of Glahn for Rees is as a distant observer, a voyeuristic outsider who seeks out privileged observational positions (the deck of a departing ship or the windows of his cabin in the mountains, for instance) in order to dominate and objectify the landscape.

It is helpful here to apply the terms of visual culture historian Jonathan Crary's influential study *Techniques of the Observer* (1990) to Rees's argument, since Crary aptly describes two opposing (and roughly historically sequential) models of visuality that differed according to how they viewed the role of the physical body of the spectator: the camera obscura model of vision, which was defined by a disembodied spectator, and the stereoscopic model of vision, which posited a thoroughly physiological viewing subject. The distinction between these two models of vision also aligns with the distinction between objective and subjective vision. In the camera-obscura model, the goal is to overcome the contingencies of the human perceptual faculties through the mediation of the camera obscura, within which the body of the observer is separated from the phenomena it is observing outside of the darkened chamber. In the stereoscopic model, the human body itself is recognized as a visual medium, and the physiological contingencies of the human sensory apparatus are the basis of the optical devices themselves, just as the stereoscope was built on recent studies of depth perception and the way binocular vision worked.

If we follow Rees's argument, it could be said that Glahn is participating in the camera-obscura model of vision. This observational paradigm is defined by the qualities of the camera obscura itself, which "performs an operation of individuation" as it "defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines" (Crary 1990,

39). Furthermore, one of the crucial functions of the camera obscura was “to sunder the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, to decorporealize vision” (Crary 1990, 39). Such a disembodied gaze was ideal for post-Enlightenment scientific observation, since it seemed to overcome the limits and frailties of the body of the observing subject, as the “observer’s physical and sensory experience is supplanted by the relations between a mechanical apparatus and a pre-given world of objective truth” (Crary 1990, 39–40). This classical, disembodied observational stance had obvious connections to the rhetoric of objectivity and disembodied, disinterested observation that accompanied the rise of scientific positivism in the nineteenth century. In Crary’s study, this camera-obscura model is contrasted with a more modern observational stance that posited a radically embodied form of vision in which the corporeal body is recognized as an active producer of visual experience.

Glahn’s efforts to occupy a *kikkerposisjon* and capture picture-postcard views of an exotic and remote locale thus build upon an observational strategy of disembodiment, withdrawal from surroundings, and objectification of the object of one’s gaze through the mediation of a visual apparatus. Rees’s reading is thus at odds with any notion of Glahn as a benign Rousseauian figure whose relationship to nature is one of sympathy and symbiosis. Rather, Glahn’s gaze is consumptive and domineering, and is tainted by an underlying impulse to conquer and colonize his surroundings. Rees’s argument is a convincing analysis of Glahn’s status as a visual observer and a tourist/colonist figure, but it is also crucial to remember that the visual mode does not exist in isolation in the novel. There is, I contend, an internal tension between the visual and the aural within the novel that adds a level of self-awareness to Glahn’s sense of his own visual prowess. Throughout the novel, Glahn oscillates between these two sensory modes—disembodied visual observation and embodied aural perception. However, the rhetorical weight of the narrative makes clear that Glahn’s attempts at visual mastery are wrongheaded, and embodied aural perception is posed as a more authentic and vital perceptual mode. Thus, rather than positing two contrasting forms of visibility—one objective and disembodied, the other subjective and embodied—we find in *Pan* in fact that visibility is inherently associated with visual objectivism, and that in order to retreat to a more embodied perception of the world, Glahn becomes a listener rather than a visual observer. That is not to say, however, that vision is merely a capacity to be discarded by the rhetoric of the novel. Indeed, visibility and empiricism more broadly are crucial (and often overlooked) features of Hamsun’s early aesthetics.

### *Hamsun’s Internal Vision*

In order to understand the role of the observation in *Pan*, it is instructive to first examine how Hamsun first articulated his own role as an observer in his early essays and lectures on literary aesthetics. Although the chief goal Hamsun’s 1890 essay “Fra det ubevidste Sjæleliv” was to launch the young author’s literary program, the essay also has important implications for Hamsun’s ideas about vision and visibility. Hamsun articulates not just his own literary style, but also promotes a particular literary gaze, one that indicates the physiological and vitalistic dimensions of his literary imagination. A major question for



Hamsun in the essay is this: in its quest to understand and represent the modern soul, where should literature *look*? Perhaps the most basic feature of Hamsun's literary gaze, as articulated in his essay, is that it is directed on the internal physiology of the human body, and is highly skeptical of surface representation, which he rhetorically aligns with the superficiality of literary realism and naturalism. Hamsun's is thus an aesthetic of depth and interiority.

The rhetorical dichotomy Hamsun draws between the "billige ydre Psykologi" (Hamsun 1939, 61) [cheap surface psychology] of realism and the kind of psychologically sensitive literature he advocates could hardly be more stark. As described above, Hamsun complains that realism focuses its gaze predominantly on "Forlovelser og Baller og Landture" (Hamsun 1939, 60) [engagements and balls and rides in the country], and famously writes that a truly modern literature should instead concern itself with "Blodets Hvisken, Benpibernes Bøn, hele det ubevidste Sjæleliv" (Hamsun 1939, 61) [the whisper of the blood, the prayer of the marrow, the entire unconscious life of the soul]. With this kind of schematic distinction drawn between the superficiality of literary realism and the penetrating representation of mental life in Hamsun's ideal literature, it is easy to see why literary historians would consider Hamsun's break with naturalism more or less absolute.

Hamsun's strong rhetorical position obscures what I would argue are the vestiges of naturalism's visual epistemology in his aesthetics. His 1890 essay is, in fact, filled with references to scientific vision and observation, which are used to describe the role of the author in representing the human subject. Hamsun writes toward the end of the essay, for instance: "Man har et gammelt Ord, som siger: Der er mangt skjult i Naturen. For vor Tids nervøse, undersøgende og lyttende Mennesker forbliver færre og færre af Naturens Hemmeligheder skjulte, en efter en bringes de frem til Observation eller Genkendelse" (Hamsun 1939, 59) [There's an old saying that goes something like this: There is much hidden in nature. To the neurotic, searching and perceptive minds of today, fewer and fewer of nature's secrets remain hidden, one after one they are brought forth for observation or recognition]. This description of nature as a coy, secretive entity that the scientist systematically subjects to a kind of visual probing in order to uncover her secrets and produce empirical knowledge has a long tradition in the rhetoric of scientific objectivity. Later in the essay, Hamsun also writes that if literature became more interested in the individual psychology instead of superficial "character psychology,"

Vi fik erfare lidt om de hemmelige Bevægelser, som bedrives upaaagtet paa de afsides Steder i Sjælen, den Fornemmelsernes uberegnelige Uorden, det delikate Fantasiliv holdt under Luppen, disse Tankens og Følelsens Vandringer i det blaa, skridtløse, sporløse Rejser med Hjærnen og Hjærtet (Hamsun 1939, 61).

[We would get to know a little bit about the secret movements that go on unobserved in the remote corners of the soul, the unpredictable chaos of feeling, the delicate imaginative life held under the magnifying glass, the wandering of

thoughts and feelings, the trackless and traceless journeys of the heart and mind.]

Hamsun's repeated assertion that modern literature should basically be concerned with observing and representing reality signals that his aesthetics are not agitating for a complete departure from the realist project, but instead that Hamsun wants to shift the arena of observation from the external world of social interactions and physiognomic revelations of character to the inner realm of the blood, the bones, the nerves, and the soul. This shift helps explain one hallmark of Hamsun's early aesthetics, namely his preference for depth over surface, interior over exterior. Literature, according to Hamsun, needs to "dive down" and penetrate the surface in order to fulfill its mandate to represent the reality of the human soul. Hamsun is insistent, then, not only that literature should concern itself with aspects of the human subject that are typically invisible to the naked eye, but that in order to access those invisible realms, the literary gaze must perform a kind of optical vivisection by penetrating the exterior of the living being in order to observe the vital processes that take place within. Hamsun's description of literary "vision" is, of course, metaphoric in nature, given the verbal nature of the literary medium. Nevertheless, evoking the idea of keen vision and empirical observation through metaphors of vision was one of Hamsun's key strategies for expressing his own particular ideas about how perceptive modern literature could be.

The centrality of this kind of interior vision to Hamsun's early aesthetics is made even more explicit in "Psykologisk literatur," one of a series of lectures on modern literature that Hamsun toured Norway with in 1891. In the lecture Hamsun attacks what he calls the "superficial character psychology" of modern Norwegian literature, which he claims does not "trænger fanatisk ind i det komplicerede moderne Menneske" (Hamsun 1960, 47) [fanatically penetrate the complex modern human]. Here we see that Hamsun continues to develop a rhetoric of interiority and depth, and advocates a literature that penetrates the modern human in order to reach its inner essence.

Part of the reason why the "character psychology" of the Modern Breakthrough generation is insufficient for Hamsun is that it is populated with what he claims are "enkle, usammensatte Mennesker" (Hamsun 1960, 47) [simple, uncomplicated people], and therefore it fails to adequately represent the complexity of the modern psyche. This kind of superficial literature relies on what Hamsun repeatedly calls "ydre Kendetegn" (Hamsun 1960, 48) [exterior signs] to reveal the main features of its uncomplicated characters. If a writer wants to show that a character is a drunk, for instance, he describes the character as having a red nose. In attacking this practice of revealing inner character through the exterior features of the face or body, Hamsun is identifying and subverting what he sees as a physiognomic logic to this style of literature. Physiognomy was a discipline that became a popular fascination in the nineteenth century, and was based on the belief "that the surface of the body. . . especially the face and the head, bore the outward signs of inner character" (Sekula 1986, 11). The basic premise of physiognomy was that there was a correspondence between the inner character and the exterior body; or, as the historian of visual culture Allan Sekula writes, physiognomy offered an appealing hermeneutic framework by providing "a means for distinguishing

the stigmata of vice from the shining marks of virtue” (Sekula 1986, 12). To distinguish his aesthetics from the physiognomic “surface psychology” of naturalism, Hamsun develops a kind of anti-physiognomy that presumes just the opposite—an unassuming or benign exterior can in fact obscure a dark and complex psyche lurking beneath the surface. This does not mean, however, that (at least at this early point in his career) Hamsun denigrates the role of vision or observation. Rather, he describes a gaze that is not naïve enough to accept these “ydre Kendetegn” [exterior signs] at face value, and instead makes an effort to imaginatively “reach into” the depths of the modern human and observe the hidden processes taking place there.

In an article that contextualizes Hamsun’s early career in the history of psychology, Norwegian literary scholar Svein Atle Skålevåg similarly explores the role of scientific observation in Hamsun’s lecture. Skålevåg perceptively points out that Hamsun’s relationship to science is highly ambivalent; in one and the same lecture, Hamsun alternately rails against the superficial objectivity of science and portrays himself as a kind of scientific vivisectionist. Skålevåg focuses on a particularly vivid description of Hamsun’s attempts to isolate and observe the workings of the human soul:

Som moderne psykolog skal jeg belyse og forhøre en Sjæl. Jeg skal belyse den paa kryss og tværs, fra alle Synspunkter, i hvert hemmeligt Hul; jeg skal spidde den vagests Rørelse i den paa min Naal og holde den op til min Luppe, og jeg vil netop med forkærlighed undersøge de fineste Zittringer, jeg vil banke mig frem og lytte til hver sagte Lyd. Ikke blot til hele Toner og Mellomtoner, men til de fjærneste og tyndeste Toner, til de flakkende Pust, de næsten døde Lyde (Skålevåg 2007, 67).

[As a modern psychologist, I will illuminate and interrogate a soul. I will illuminate it back and forth, from all vantage points, in every secret cavity; I will impale it upon my needle and hold it up to my magnifying glass, and I will lovingly examine the slightest tremors, I will work my way forth and listen to every subtle sound. Not merely to whole tones and half tones, but to the thinnest and most distant tones, the flickering breaths, the nearly dead sounds.]

Skålevåg observes of this passage that “sjelen her forestilles som en *ting*, som kan spiddes på en nål og betraktes i en lupe” (Skålevåg 2007, 253) [the soul is represented here as a *thing* that can be pinned down with a needle and observed through a magnifying glass]. After asserting that this image “skal selvfølgelig ikke tas bokstavelig” (Skålevåg 2007, 253) [should of course not be taken literally], Skålevåg wonders whether the image of a soul pinned down for observation might nevertheless indicate that “sjelen hos Hamsun kan tenkes som en ting—det vil si et avgrenset objekt som kan studeres empirisk—i motsetning til det gamle paradigme, der sjelen ses som en kvalitet med mulig overgang til andre kvaliteter” (Skålevåg 2007, 253) [for Hamsun, the soul may be thought of as a thing—that is to say, a distinct object that may be studied empirically—in contrast to the old paradigm, in which the soul is seen as a quality that can possibly transition to other qualities]. Here Skålevåg touches on the materiality of the soul in Hamsun’s literary

imagination, but does not go on to explore this idea any further. As we will see, however, there is ample evidence in Hamsun's early writing that the soul is connected to its material manifestations in the human body. Hamsun does in fact regard the soul as a tangible, material "thing." Crucially we see that although the image Hamsun gives here starts as a visual metaphor, imputing the exacting vision of the natural scientist to the modern writer, it quickly shifts to an aural one. Not content to merely *see* more and more acutely, the psychological writer must be able to *hear* and detect the "de fjærneste og tyndeste Toner." What is more, the sounds are endowed with vital properties and thought of as living entities in their own right, as Hamsun says he wants to pursue even the "nearly dead sounds." Despite the visuality inherent in many of the images he uses to describe the role of the modern psychological writer, Hamsun also imagined his role as a sensitive listener whose goal was to recover the vital, vibrant tones before they fade into oblivion. This turn to the auditory in this quotation is, I argue, indicative of a consistent technique in Hamsun's early writing to set up the auditory as a mode of embodied, subjective perception in contrast to the objectifying, often disembodied visual mode. More broadly, this shift from a visual to an aural mode also signals Hamsun's departure from the objectivity of modern scientific empiricism—a philosophy that was built into the DNA of literary naturalism—and toward a more embodied, subjective mode of perception.

### *Glahn as Visual Observer*

Visual observation is, however, a crucial aspect of Glahn's northern sojourn, just as Ellen Rees argues. Thus my own reading of *Pan* will not downplay the role of vision, but rather show how the novel stages the failure of that particular mode of detached, disembodied visual observation (i.e. the camera-obscura model, in Crary's terms), and in its place poses a more embodied sensory mode through the aural perception of nearly inaudible phenomena. Instead of the gaze of the tourist/colonist that Rees discusses, the domineering visual mode that this chapter will focus on is the closely aligned mode of scientific vision, which similarly relied on a rhetoric of disembodiment and objective mastery over one's surroundings. Although Glahn himself is far from a scientist in his persona, it is clear that his attempts to accurately observe the human subjects around him in order to deduce their capabilities and psycho-physiological states was richly informed by the visual epistemology of scientific empiricism in the late nineteenth century.

To understand how the aural mode emerges as a viable alternative to detached visual observation, it is helpful to consider the observational conditions that are set up within the narrative. Due to the extreme northern setting of *Pan*, we are presented with a landscape that is subject to seasonal changes that are much more rapid and extreme than locations closer to the equator. Even in southern Norway, the latitudinal difference from Nordland means that the seasonal shifts in light and temperature would not be nearly as dramatic and sudden than they are in Sirilund. Hamsun's use of northern Norway as a setting, then, is not merely a tactic to get his protagonist away from the more densely populated south, but is also a way of making the seasonal changes in nature more visible. Indeed, just as Glahn and Edvarda are shown to be moody, capricious, mercurial, and

unpredictable in their behavior, the landscape is depicted as “moody” and capable of swift change. At a social gathering, Glahn remarks to a local girl “En sådan sommer som I har her! Den skyter frem en nat når alle sover og om morgningen er den der. Jeg kikket ut av mit vindu og så den selv. Jeg har to små vinduer” (Hamsun 1997, 350) [“What a summer you have up here! It springs forth some night when everyone is asleep, and in the morning, there it is. I looked out of my window and saw it myself. I have two small windows” (Hamsun 1998, 27)]. The seasonal shift from spring to summer, which in less extreme latitudes is so gradual as to be practically invisible, is here depicted as so swift as to be an objectively visible phenomenon: Glahn awakes one morning, and there it is, clearly visible through his window. It is crucial that Glahn does not say that he *felt* the sudden onset of summer, but that he *saw* it. Here we see that Glahn situates himself not merely as an inhabitant of nature, but as an observer of it. And what surprises him is that the arrival of summer happens so suddenly, it becomes visible. The northern latitude acts as a kind of natural time-lapse technology that can make visible changes that, at more equatorial latitudes, are so slow as to be invisible to the naked eye. This acceleration of seasonal change again points to Hamsun’s interest in what might be called the *perceptual unconscious* (after Benjamin’s notion of the “optical unconscious” cited above). By placing Glahn in Nordland, he makes normally gradual seasonal change more rapid, and therefore more visible.

This emphasis on visual observation extends beyond Glahn’s relationship to nature, permeating his social life as well, as his engagement with the social world of Sirilund is depicted first and foremost as an act of visual observation. In this Glahn is reminiscent of Hamsun himself, who in his early lectures and essays portrayed himself as a sensitive observer of the modern human mind, seeking knowledge of the “hemmelige Bevægelser, som bedrives upaaagtet paa de afsider Steder i Sjælen” [secret movements that go unobserved in the remote corners of the soul] as if gazing at the soul “under Luppen” (Hamsun 1939, 61) [under the magnifying glass]. Similarly Glahn portrays himself as an acute observer of the human soul, which he presumes himself able to perceive even *without* the aid of external optical devices, such as magnifying glasses.

The invasiveness that lies behind Glahn’s observational method is made clear in a memorable passage at the beginning of chapter 7, where Glahn makes a claim for his visual mastery over his fellow humans:

Jeg tror, at jeg kan læse lidt i de Menneskers Sjæle, der omgiver mig; kanske er det ikke saa. O, naar jeg har mine gode Dage, da forekommer det mig, at jeg skimter langt ind i andres Sjæle, skønt jeg ikke er noget videre godt Hoved. Vi sidder i en Stue nogle Mænd, nogle Kvinder og jeg, og jeg synes at se, hva der foregaar i disse Menneskers Indre, og hva de tænker om mig. Jeg lægger noget i hvert Vink, der iler gennem deres Øjne; stundom skyder Blodet op i deres Kinder og gør dem røde, til andre Tider lader de som om de ser til en anden Kant og holder dog lidt Øje med mig fra Siden. Der sidder jeg og ser paa alt dette, og ingen aner, at jeg gennemskuer hver Sjæl. I flere Aar har jeg ment at kunne læse i alle Menneskers Sjæle. Kanske er det ikke saa. . . (Hamsun 1997, 24)

[I believe I can read a little in the souls of those around me; maybe it is not so. Oh, when I have a good day I feel as if I can peer deep into other people's souls, although I don't have a particularly good head on my shoulders. We sit in a room, some men and women and I, and I seem to see what is going on in the hearts of these people and what they think of me. I put something into every flashing glance of their eyes; occasionally the blood rushes to their cheeks so they turn red, at other times they pretend to be looking another way while still watching me out of the corner of their eyes. There I sit observing all this, and nobody suspects that I see through every soul. For several years I have thought I could read the souls of everybody. Maybe it is not so. . . (Hamsun 1998, 16)]

Here we see that the soul is clearly understood as a “thing” that can be visually observed—the soul is understood as material, and its workings are visible. By observing subtle physiological changes, most notably in the circulation of blood in the face, Glahn is able to ascertain what people are thinking in the moment. But curiously, Glahn both asserts his visual mastery over other people and at the same time calls his observational prowess into question: can he or can't he “read the souls” of those around him? Here we see that, in the few years that elapsed between “Fra det ubevidste Sjæleliv” and the publication of *Pan*, Hamsun's epistemological skepticism has become more pronounced. Instead of the confident observer capable of penetrating the bodily surface to reveal the workings of the human soul, Hamsun presents us with a protagonist whose presumptions about his own visual acuity are repeatedly called into question, in this case by his own self-doubt. Thus the audacity of Glahn's claim here that he can “read the souls” of those around him is neutralized by his admission at the end of the passage that “maybe it is not so.” As a declaration of visual mastery over his surroundings, this passage is thus simultaneously audacious and tenuous, as it expresses both an irrational confidence in and realistic doubts about his capacity as a “soul reader.”

What is crucial to understand here is not merely Glahn's ambivalence about his abilities as an observer, but also the way he articulates his methods. How does one “read the soul” of another human? According to the passage, one must attribute meaning to “hvert Vink, der iler gennem deres Øjne” [every flashing glance of their eyes], one must make note of the rushing of blood to subject's cheeks, and one must notice when the subject is *actually* looking at the observer, even though the subject pretends to be looking the other way. In essence, then, “reading the soul” of another human consists of observing the subtle ways in which the mind manifests itself in the gestures, expressions, and physiological processes of the body, particularly in the rushing of blood to the face. In expressing his visual method here, Glahn reveals his debt to the visual epistemology of physiology. Just as physiologists performed vivisections to view the inner workings of a still-living organism—to observe the *milieu intérieur* [inner environment] in the terms of Claude Bernard, one of the founders of modern physiology, and a prolific advocate for the use of vivisection and animal experimentation—Glahn seeks visual access to the vital internal processes of living beings, specifically the circulation of blood.<sup>8</sup> Rather than

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<sup>8</sup> On the connection between Bernard, physiology, and literary naturalism, see Garner 2000; for a discussion of Bernard's promotion of vivisection as an inspiration for Strindberg, see Holzapfel 2008, 330.

performing actual vivisections, Glahn's gaze performs a kind of "optical vivisection" that is dependent on the semi-transparency of the skin, which in cases of extreme psycho-physiological response, can reveal the telltale rush of blood into or away from the face.

### *The Rush of Blood*

Once one grasps Glahn's visual method, the novel's extreme fixation on the circulation of blood becomes obvious. This focus on blood connects to one of the central questions of this chapter, namely why does Hamsun build his literary persona on the curious image of "whispering blood" in his 1890 essay? As we will see, Hamsun's fixation on blood circulation has become even more intensified four years later when he wrote *Pan*, which is replete with references to blood flow, most often as witnessed on the faces of those Glahn interacts with.

There are dozens upon dozens of references to the circulation of blood in the novel, particularly in the depiction of characters blushing or turning pale in socially fraught situations. And because Glahn specifically talks about blushing as a key piece of visual data he tracks as he "reads the souls" of those around him, we understand that these references are anything but haphazard. Edvarda is the character most frequently described as blushing or being flushed, which is appropriate, since her intentions and impulses are a central riddle that Glahn tries to solve throughout the novel. Among the dozen or so references to her face reddening, there are instances in which the blushing seems to derive from embarrassment, such as when she is corrected by the Doctor in chapter five about the nationality of the previous inhabitant of Glahn's hut: "Edvarda rødmet, hun stammet og så bort.... Fra nu av mistet hun sin livlighet" (Hamsun 1997, 340) ["Edvarda blushed, she stammered and looked away. . . from now on she lost her vivacity" (Hamsun 1998, 13)]. Sometimes Edvarda is apparently flushing out of romantic desire, such as when she comes to visit Glahn in his hut in chapter eleven: "Hun kom mig imøte med hete kinder, med aldeles strålende ansigt" (Hamsun 1997, 352) ["She came toward me with flaming cheeks, her face absolutely beaming" (Hamsun 1998, 29)]. Besides the references to blushing, there are also several instances in which Edvarda is depicted as growing pale, which Glahn seems to associate with the phases of their relationship when Edvarda becomes indifferent or hostile toward him. After one such phase, for instance, Glahn directly questions Edvarda, foregrounding his own "soul reading" of her gestures and her rushes of blood: "Da De kom var Deres ansigt bevæget og Deres øine skinte, De gav mig hånden. Nu er Deres øine blit likegyldige igjen. Tar jeg feil?" (Hamsun 1997, 374) ["When you came your face was warm and your eyes shone, you gave me your hand. Now your eyes are indifferent again. Am I wrong?" (Hamsun 1998, 59)] Edvarda responds with what, in the context of the extreme emotional fluctuations of the novel's characters, can only be described as an understatement: "Man kan ikke altid være ens" (Hamsun 1997, 374) ["One cannot always be the same" (Hamsun 1998, 59)], she tells him. Later in the novel, after her last big argument with Glahn, Edvarda is again described from Glahn's visual perspective as pale, and therefore presumably hostile toward him: "Hun gjorde nogen små, ivrige skridt, vendte sig om

endnu likblek i ansigtet og stønnet: Og kom aldrig for mine øine mere” (Hamsun 1997, 389) [“After a few short, eager steps, she turned around, her face still deathly pale, and groaned, ‘And don’t let me set eyes on you ever again!’” (Hamsun 1998, 79)]. In a scene toward the end of the novel, Edvarda’s paleness again betrays a coldness toward Glahn that is incongruent with her verbal politeness toward him: “Hun lo som om hun spøkte, men hendes ansigt var meget blekt” (Hamsun 1997, 397) [“She laughed as though she were joking, but her face was very pale” (Hamsun 1998, 90)]. Here we see why the rushing of blood into or away from the face is understood as a useful psycho-physiological phenomenon for Glahn to observe: it expresses an unconscious or unspoken feeling that is often a more authentic gauge of a person’s “soul” or “mind” than outward actions or verbal expressions. Although Edvarda *appears* to be pleasantly interacting with Glahn, her pale face reveals what her behavior obscures: she is no longer in love with Glahn.

In these instances when Glahn remarks on the blushing of others around him, Glahn makes use of an objectifying mode of visual observation. His gaze is essentially that of the modern scientific empiricism, which sought to track visual data in an objective, disinterested way in order to understand the functioning of natural phenomena. However, there are also frequent oscillations between objective and subjective modes in the novel, and we see that Glahn is conscious of the rushing of blood to the face not just as a visible phenomenon, but also as one that he can physically *feel* when it occurs within his own body. References to Glahn’s blushing are not nearly as frequent as those of Edvarda’s, indicating that blushing or turning pale is mainly important for Glahn in its role as a visual indicator of the inner emotional lives of *others*. Nevertheless, in several instances, Glahn consciously connects his own emotions with his psycho-physiological response of blushing or turning pale. For instance, during one of the less fraught phases of his relationship to Edvarda, Glahn says, “Jeg hører en kvindes røst utenfor min hytte, blodet strømmer mig til hodet, det er Edvardas røst” (Hamsun 1997, 373) [“I hear a woman’s voice outside my hut. The blood rushes to my head, it’s Edvarda’s voice” (Hamsun 1998, 57)]. Later, the same kind of psycho-physiological response is associated with Glahn’s emotional response to seeing the moon: “Jeg ser på halvmånen, den står på himlen som et hvitt skjæl og jeg har en fornemmelse av kjærlighet til den, jeg føler at jeg rødmer. Det er månen, sier jeg tyst og lidenskabelig, det er månen! Og mit hjerte hugger imot den i en sagte banken” (Hamsun 1997, 393–4) [“I gaze at the crescent moon sitting like a white shell in the sky, and I have a feeling of love for it, I feel I’m blushing. It’s the moon, I say softly and passionately, it’s the moon! And my heart beats toward it with a gentle throbbing” (Hamsun 1998, 85)].

It is easy to understand the epistemological appeal to Glahn of tracking the circulation of blood as a psycho-physiological indicator of the life of the soul. The circulation of blood is completely involuntary and unconscious; it carries out movements totally unencumbered by the intervention of the conscious mind. If blood can be said to “communicate” by betraying the emotions a person is feeling, then it is an unwilling, unconscious form of communication, just like the hunting sketches Hamsun had written in his sleep, which he referred to in his 1890 essay. But blood circulation offers an even greater appeal than a hunting sketch for the empiricist, since its status as a



visible (and non-verbal) phenomenon means that it “speaks” without the problematic mediation of language. In tracking the circulation of blood, then, Glahn expresses an empiricist desire to escape the mediation of language and to let the living body “speak” for itself, and to divulge its secrets even *against* the subject’s will.

The longer Glahn stays in the isolated Nordland society, however, the less effective his visual mastery over nature and his fellow man becomes. By the end of the summer, Glahn’s relationship with Edvarda has deteriorated because of their relentless mutual jealousies, their mercurial emotional responses to each other, and because Glahn has become quite simply less confident in his ability to possess her romantically. The waning of Glahn’s relationship with Edvarda seems to have brought with it visual challenges that undermine Glahn’s ability to navigate his own movements through nature, as well as his romantic interactions. Glahn first attributes this visual challenge to the arrival of fall, and the banks of fog that come with the new season. The mists have hindered Glahn’s navigation, and he sometimes departs his cabin bound for one destination, only to find that he has arrived at a completely different destination. Glahn tells of one afternoon walk he went on: “Tåken skjulte alt for mine øine og jeg hadde ingen solmærker å gå efter” (Hamsun 1997, 395) [“The fog hid everything from my eyes and I had no sun marks to go by” (Hamsun 1998, 88)]. Because of his surplus of free time, Glahn is not concerned about the extra time it takes to stop and plot his way with a compass. But even navigation by compass ends up leading him astray, and what eventually helps extricate him from the fog is strains of music that he hears coming from Edvarda’s house: “Nu hændte noget. Efter en halv time hører jeg musik gennem tåken, nogen minutter efter kjender jeg stedet igjen, jeg står like ved Sirilund hovedbygning. Hadde mit kompas misvist mig like bort til det sted, jeg vilde undfly?” (Hamsun 1997, 396) [“Then something happened. After half an hour I hear music through the fog, and a few minutes later I recognize the place—I’m close to the main building at Sirilund. Had my compass misled me to the very place I wanted to get away from?” (Hamsun 1998, 88)]. Glahn speculates that perhaps his gun barrel has influenced his compass, but then concludes, “Jeg vet ikke hvad jeg skal tro. Kanske var det også skjæbne” (Hamsun 1997, 396) [“I don’t know what to think. Maybe it was fate” (Hamsun 1998, 88)]. Glahn’s compromised vision has led him directly to Edvarda, and later in the novel, he finds upon seeing her again after a long separation that he can no longer “read” her soul with any confidence. He observes: “Hendes pande tænkte, disse aparte buede øienbryn stod i hendes ansigt som to gåter, alle hendes bevægelser var blit mere modne” (Hamsun 1997, 405) [“Her forehead was thoughtful, those unusual arched eyebrows were like two riddles on her face, all her movements had become more mature” (Hamsun 1998, 101)]. Instead of seeming to reveal her soul to Glahn through her blushing, Edvarda now presents little more than a visual riddle; he no longer has access to her soul. Thus, by the end of the novel, Glahn is now openly and consistently questioning his own observational abilities. He wonders, “Er det så at jeg kan gjennemskue mennesker eller er det ikke så?” (Hamsun 1997, 405) [“Is it true that I can see through people or isn’t it?” (Hamsun 1998, 101)]. His conclusion: “Jeg vet det ikke selv” (Hamsun 1997, 405) [“I don’t really know” (Hamsun 1998, 101)].

### *Glahn's Embodied Aurality*

All of the evidence given above suggests, as Wærp and Rees have discussed, that this domineering form of visuality is a predominant sensory mode in *Pan*. But how can such an objectifying visual stance toward the world be reconciled with a critical tradition (carried on more recently by Vassenden and Boasson) that has focused on Glahn's attempts to become immersed in a romantic and symbiotic relationship with the natural landscape? The kind of voyeuristic, objectifying gaze that Rees and Wærp describe, after all, implies a certain observational distance, and perhaps even the kind of total insulation of the observer's body from his natural surroundings, as Jonathan Crary describes in his camera-obscura model of vision. How can this be squared with Glahn's clear attempts to become bodily absorbed and immersed into the landscape, in which the goal is not to observe but rather to commune? If one examines how the moments of natural immersion are framed within the novel, it becomes clear that such instances are aligned with the embodied aural experience of the individual subject, which, unlike visual experience, could not be captured by mechanical means and objectified through a durable record. Aural experience was thus by definition more limited to the fugitive, subjective, and corporeal realm, conceptual categories that the young Hamsun was famously fixated upon. We will see, then, that although the visual mode is crucial to the novel, the aural mode is ultimately favored as a more vital and embodied perceptual experience. The episode recounted above, in which Glahn's attempts to navigate with his visual capacity are undermined by a fog, and it is an aural sensation that ends up bringing him back to a recognizable place again, can thus be seen as emblematic of the sensory oscillations in the novel more broadly.

In his capacity as an embodied, listening observer, Glahn is confronted with a northern landscape that is depicted as humming with life and movement; its vitality derives from the constant possibility of dynamic and unpredictable change, just as the modern soul is "alive" because it is "i uafødelig indre Bevægelse fra Vuggen til Graven" (Hamsun, "Psykologisk" 66) [in a state of unceasing inner movement from the cradle to the grave]. Hamsun conveys this unsettled quality in nature by depicting the unpredictable changes that are brought about by the springtime thawing, which Glahn frequently references toward the beginning of the novel. Not long after arriving, Glahn says that "I nogen dager drev en ufredelig og kald stemning henover jorden, rotne grener knak og kråkerne samlet sig i flokker og skrek" (Hamsun 1997, 337) ["For some days a cold, unsettled atmosphere hovered over the earth, rotten branches snapped, and the crows gathered in flocks and squawked" (Hamsun 1998, 8)]. The restless activity he observes in nature is immediately attributed to the springtime thaw that is taking place as Glahn arrives in the north. The return of flowing water after months of icy solidity is represented as the return of life itself:

Fjældsiderne var våte og sorte av vand som rislet nedover dem, dryppet og rislet under samme bittelille melodi. Disse små melodier landgt inde i fjældene kortet mig mangen stund når jeg sat og så mig om. Nu risler den lille endeløse tone her i sin ensomhet, tænkte jeg, og ingen hører den og ingen tænker på den,

men allikevel risler den her for sig selv hele tiden, hele tiden! (Hamsun 1997, 337)

[The mountainsides were wet and black from the water trickling down them, dripping and trickling to the same tiny old melody. Those little melodies far away in the mountains helped me pass many an hour as I sat there looking around. Here is the little endless tune trickling away in solitude, I thought, and nobody ever hears it and nobody thinks about it, but still it goes on trickling to itself, on and on! (Hamsun 1998, 9)]

The springtime return of life brings, according to Glahn, a kind of a natural music that only the attentive listener is privy to. The crucial audibility of the flowing water referred to here—the “dripping” and “trickling” sounds that constitute nature’s “melody”—is an external analogue to the concept of “whispering blood” that Hamsun had introduced in his essay on the life of the soul, written four years before *Pan*. Further, the use of internalizing and diminutive descriptors—*bittelille*, *små*, *langt inde*, *lille*—is a corollary to the kind of internal capillary action described in Hamsun’s essay. It is not merely the “whispering blood” of the living body that Hamsun is interested in, then, but also the vital fluids that circulate almost inaudibly throughout all of nature. The novel, then, enacts a kind of expressionistic externalization of the human soul, in which the natural landscape is given qualities that express Hamsun’s ideas about the vitality of the human soul. For Hamsun, it is clear that vitality is conveyed not through all kinds of acoustic phenomena, but more precisely through the *barely audible* vibrations that accompany the flow of vital fluids.

The return of flowing water also makes it possible for the local inhabitants to resume their industrial pursuits. We learn that the springtime water flow has brought the mill back to life from its winter dormancy: “Jeg ser nedenunder mig den lille elv og den lille mølle som har ligget nediset i vinter, og jeg stanser; kværnen går, dens sus vækker mig, jeg stanser like på stedet og med ett” (Hamsun 1997, 342) [“Below me I see the creek and the little mill, which has been icebound during the winter, and I stop; the mill is running; its hum rouses me, I stop short then and there” (Hamsun 1998, 15)]. Flowing water is thus not only connected with *life* more broadly, but also to the *livelihood* of the local citizens. We also see here yet again that the return of fluidity is expressed as an aural perception: the flowing water has set the mill in motion, and the hum of the mill is what gets Glahn’s attention

The flowing water of springtime brings not only sonorous melodies, however, but also the sporadic violence of a landscape in flux. The Nordland of *Pan* is a natural setting in which even the solid features of rocks and mountains are subject to sudden, unpredictable change. Glahn observes not long after his arrival:

Av og til hændte noget: en torden rystet jorden, en klippeblok løsnet og styrtet nedover mot havet, efterlatende en vei av stenrøk; i samme øieblik satte Æsop snuten mot vinden og veiret forundret mot den svidde lukt som den ikke forstod. Når snevandet hadde brutt revner i fjældet var et skudd eller endog bare et skarpt rop nok til å rive løs en stor blok og få den til å vælte. (Hamsun 1997, 337–8)

[Once in a while something happened: a thunderclap would shake the earth, a rock come loose and plunge down to the sea, leaving behind a trail of smoking dust; the next moment Aesop would turn his nose to the wind, showing surprise as he sniffed the smell of burning he couldn't understand. When the snow water had forced crevices in the rock, a shot or even a sharp cry was enough to tear a big block loose and send it crashing down. (Hamsun 1998, 8)]

Even the apparently solid features of the northern landscape are shown to be unstable and subject to sudden shifts and violent tumbles because of the snow runoff that has flowed into their crevices. Solidity and stasis are in the process of giving way to fluidity and movement. The springtime thus not only represents a return of the natural life that has lain dormant during the winter months, but also a state of extreme natural vulnerability, when nothing is actually stable, no matter how solid it appears to be. Springtime and the vital fluids it brings usher in a season of natural upheaval when the landscape may change drastically and without warning.

The only constant in this seasonal period of flux is change itself, which Hamsun explicitly connects to the newly flowing water. Glahn says that he “streifet om og iagttok hvorledes sneen blev til vand og hvorledes isen løsnet.... Hvorsomhelst jeg vendte mig hen var det like meget å se og høre, altig forandredes litt for hver dag” (Hamsun 1997, 338) [“wandered about observing how the snow was turning into water and how the ice was breaking up.... Wherever I turned, there was always just as much to see and hear, everything changed a little each day” (Hamsun 1998, 10)]. This juxtaposition of flowing water and the restlessness of nature makes clear the connection between fluidity and change more broadly; as thawing introduces flowing water into the landscape, the reappearance of life, growth, and change is made possible.

At this point it might be useful to consider how visual and aural modes of perception diverge, particularly in their historical construction at the time Hamsun was writing *Pan*. I have already suggested that Hamsun used visual metaphors in his early writings as a way of describing the scientific, empirical aspirations of modern literature. Thus, in his 1891 lectures on psychological literature, he describes the modern writer as a scientific investigator who will pin the soul down and visually interrogate it, as any other natural specimen may be pinned down in order to measure, describe, and record its features. This kind of metaphor is a useful indicator of how Hamsun understood the scientific gaze, and the visual mode of perception more broadly. Here we see a particular subject-object relation between the observer and the observed, in which the observer occupies the privileged position of an investigator who may poke, prod, and penetrate the observed specimen. The visual mode also requires a directed gaze—that is, in order to see something, the eyes must be trained in a particular direction. Furthermore, because visual phenomena had a long history of being mediated through devices such as the camera obscura, as well as recorded and circulated through visual technologies such as photography, seeing the image of a thing had no immediate connection with being bodily present with the observed object. The circulation of recorded images removes

vision from a temporal and spatial continuum, so that we can see something at a far remove (spatially and temporally) from its actual appearance.

If we compare this visual mode—which has features of physical and temporal separation of observer and observed, as well as requiring the directed gaze of an empowered observer/investigator—to the way aural perception was understood at the time Hamsun was writing, we see how historically contingent notions of perception can be. The first thing to note about the aural mode is that, by virtue of the omnidirectional feature of the human faculty of hearing, auditory phenomena have more autonomy and more freedom to “sneak up on” the aural observer than visual phenomena. That is, sounds have the potential to catch our attention, whether or not we are directing our ears in their direction. Indeed, the absurdity of a phrase like “directing our ears” gets at the anatomical factors that structure visual and aural modes differently—whereas we can direct our eyes toward a thing, our ears are simply open channels that are not easily “pointed” in any particular direction. The listener is thus potentially much less empowered than the viewer, because of his inability to filter out unwanted noise and focus in on a single aural phenomenon. Further, we must also recognize that aural phenomena had a much shorter history of mediation, recording, and circulation at the point when Hamsun was writing. Prior to the introduction of Thomas Edison’s earliest prototype of the phonograph in 1877, the notion that sounds could be “captured” mechanically and reproduced at will with reasonable fidelity was the stuff of pure fantasy. And before Edison’s introduction of his so-called “Perfected Phonograph” about ten years later (see Edison 1888), along with the subsequent commercial sales of phonograph machines to the public in the 1890s, the reach of phonographic technology was limited to the occasional public demonstration or other exhibition opportunities, such as world’s fairs.

This means that when Hamsun described his literature as recovering and representing “blodets hvisken” (Hamsun 1939, 61) [the whisper of the blood], the “næsten døde Lyde” (Hamsun 1960, 70) [nearly dead sounds] of the human body, and had his characters fetishize the absolutely individual and fleeting aural experience of being the only observer to experience the melody of a babbling stream at the onset of spring (see Hamsun 1997, 337), he did so against the background of a technological context in which such sounds were in fact outside the realm of mechanical sound recording and reproduction. At the time Hamsun was launching his literary career, the phonograph was little more than an impressive curiosity available only to licensed exhibitors (see Edison 1998, 68–9). The fact, however, that Hamsun emphasized the barely perceivable sounds of the inside of the body, and the fleeting and intensely local aural experience of a northern landscape in upheaval, suggests that Hamsun was writing with the fact of phonographic recording technology in mind, such as it existed in the early 1890s. He is writing at a point in the history of sound recording technology when sounds could be captured, recorded, and reproduced, but the sensitivity of the phonograph was not yet sufficient to capture the internal soundscape of the human body, nor could it faithfully record sounds as subtle as the hushed rustling of leaves in a forest. Thus, the kind of soundscape Hamsun develops in his early writing is precisely those sounds that were, in practical terms, most bound to the fugitive, subjective aural experience of the individual human body. Hamsun’s response to new technologies of capturing and objectifying sound

was, in other words, a reactionary embodiment; that is, his literature sought to represent the kinds of sounds that could only be experienced by an embodied listener in a particular time and place. Aurality in *Pan* is thus largely pre-phonographic in character, and thus the act of hearing a thing is always immediate and embodied, qualities that appealed to Hamsun's preference for the fleeting phenomena of modern subjectivity.

Returning to the vital soundscape of the novel, we see that the connection between the fluidity of the natural landscape and the intensifying emotional lives of its human inhabitants is made explicit, and that Glahn detects such natural and human vitality through an aural mode of perception. This connection between the fluidity of nature and of the emotional life of human beings is first expressed through the circulation of blood in Glahn's body. Glahn reminisces that "Våren var vel også kommet til mig og mit blod banket til sine tider likesom av fottrin. Jeg sat i hytten og tænkte på å efterse mine fiskestænger og mine dorger, men jeg rørte ikke en finger for å bestille noget, en glad og dunkel uro gik ut og ind av mit hjærte" (Hamsun 1997, 339) ["Spring must also have come to me, and at times my blood seemed to pound like footfalls. I sat in my hut thinking, I should check my fishing rods and trolling lines, but I didn't lift a finger to do anything; an obscure, joyous restlessness came and went in my heart" (Hamsun 1998, 11–12)]. Springtime is not a seasonal phenomenon that merely influences the exterior landscape, but, according to Glahn, even puts the human soul in a particular mood, expressed here as a psycho-physiological response, namely the pounding of blood that creates an "obscure, joyous restlessness" within Glahn's body. Just as springtime ushers in a seasonal melting and the return of flowing water in the natural landscape, Glahn experiences a kind of "physiological springtime," which hastens his bloodflow and creates a restless feeling of expectation within him. The human body and the natural landscape thus both respond in the same way to the same stimulus: the circulation of vital fluids.

The pumping of blood has obvious erotic connotations, and just as increased bloodflow signals a readiness for sexual activity in humans, the increasing fluidity of the natural landscape heralds a return to reproductive activity for all of creation. This motif of an erotic landscape expresses itself first in images that have overtly masculine, erotic overtones, such as when Glahn notes that "Skogen var litt grøn, det luktet av jorden og av trærne, græsløken stak allerede grøn op av den issvidde mose" (Hamsun 1997, 341) ["The forest was getting green, there was a fragrance of earth and trees, and the green leaves of the chive were already sticking up through the ice-burned moss" (Hamsun 1998, 14)]. The erectness of the chives Glahn describes here impute a potency and sexual readiness to the landscape that only intensifies as the novel goes on. Not long after describing the chives protruding from the frostbitten ground, Glahn writes that "den lille vind arbeidet med sit og bar blomsterstøv fra kvist til kvist og fylgte hvert uskyldig ar; hele skogen stod i henrykkelse. En grøn bladorm, en målerlarve, vandret efter enderne langsefter en gren, vandre ustanselig, som om den ikke kan hvile" (Hamsun 1997, 341–2) ["The little wind was doing its part, carrying pollen from twig to twig and filling each innocent stigma. The whole forest was in ecstasy. A green caterpillar, an inchworm, walks along a branch end by end, walks incessantly, as if it cannot rest" (Hamsun 1998, 15)]. Here, the reproductive impulse in nature is described as a

restlessness in both plant and animal life: botanical reproduction is aided by the wind, which hastens the insemination of “each innocent stigma.” Glahn then connects this microscopic sexual and locomotive restlessness to the macroscopic, human realm, as he says in the subsequent passage that “jeg er allerede litt urolig” (Hamsun 1997, 342) [“I’m already a bit restless” (Hamsun 1998, 15)]. The natural and the human realms are shown to be in a sympathetic or even symbiotic relationship with one another here, though it is not clear whether the sexual ecstasy in nature is awakening a restlessness in Glahn, or whether Glahn’s own restless mood is coloring his view of nature. Glahn sees the relationship as one of human submission to nature, and so it would seem that, from his perspective, the ecstasy of nature is exerting its influence on the human realm, and not the other way around. This is the way Glahn depicts the relationship between man and nature when, in the same scene, he says that “Det monotone sus og de kjendte trær og stener er for meget for mig, jeg blir fuld av en sølsom taknemmelighet, alt indlater sig med mig, blander sig med mig, jeg elsker alt” (Hamsun 1997, 342) [“The monotonous sighing and the familiar trees and rocks mean a lot to me, I’m filled with a mysterious gratitude; everything befriends me, intermingles with me, I love all things” (Hamsun 1998, 15)]. The image here is of nature actively reaching out to man and “befriending” him, and thus Glahn’s restlessness is depicted as a human being influenced by the irrepressible reproductive impulse of nature. But, given some of Glahn’s unreliable claims about his capacities as an observer (which will be discussed in greater detail below), there is reason to question his implication here that he is merely a passive inhabitant of nature opening himself up to its influences, and instead to see his own view of the landscape as hopelessly colored by Glahn’s own desires.

The connection between the natural and the human experience of eroticism is expressed even more directly as the love affair between Glahn and Edvarda intensifies. When he takes Edvarda on a walk through a forest one evening, Glahn describes how nightfall has brought about changes in the botanical life of the forest:

Men nu i nattens timer har pludselig store, hvite blomster utfoldet sig i skogen, deres ar står åpne, de ånder. Og lodne tismørkesværmere sænker sig ned i deres blade og bringer hele planten til å skjælve. Jeg går fra den ene til den andre blomst, de er berusede, det er kjønslig berusede blomster og jeg ser hvorledes de beruses. (Hamsun 1997, 354–5)

[But now, in the night hours, large white flowers have suddenly unfolded in the forest, their stigmas are open, they are breathing. And furry twilight moths dip down into their petals, setting the whole plant trembling. I go from one flower to another, they are in ecstasy; the flowers are steeped in an erotic ecstasy, and I can see them falling into ecstasy. (Hamsun 1998, 32–3)]

The nocturnal reproductive activity described here is even more erotically charged than in the previous scene. The stigma—the main feature of the female reproductive organ in a flower—is again referenced here, but this time it is “open” and “breathing”: receptive and ready for sexual activity. The plants are “trembling” because of the gentle touch of a moth,

a further indication of their extreme sensitivity and readiness in this period of intense reproductive potential. Botanical reproduction is not depicted here merely as a mechanical activity serving the purely practical function of propagating the species; instead, the sexual experience of plants is described in terms of the sensual excess of orgasm: they are said to be *berusede* [intoxicated] in the act of procreation. Although plants lack nervous systems, and therefore lack the ability to “feel” in the same way animals do, Glahn’s erotically excessive description here depicts plants as sensitive, sensual, and perhaps even sentient beings. Botanical ecstasy is again juxtaposed with human sexual relationships later in this same scene, when Glahn makes Edvarda aware of the ecstatic activity of the forest they are wandering through: “Hører du, Edvarda, hvor det er urolig i skogen inat? Det pusler ustanselig i tuverne og de store løvblade skjælver” (Hamsun 1997, 356) [“Do you hear, Edvarda, how restless it is in the forest tonight? There’s a ceaseless rustling in the undergrowth, and the big leaves are trembling” (Hamsun 1998, 35)]. Significantly, Glahn ties the ecstasy of nature into the perceptual experience of a sensitive observer, again emphasizing the crucial *audibility* of vital forces at play; he asks Edvarda if she *hears* the ecstatic restlessness of the forest, and we are reminded of the earlier trickling and dripping of the snow runoff that only Glahn was sensitive enough to experience. In one of the most charged scenes in the novel, in which the vital instincts and drives of plants is suggestively juxtaposed to Glahn and Edvarda’s budding relationship, we see that Glahn is not engaging with nature in a visual, objectifying mode. Instead, he suggests that the vital force at work in nature is sensed through a bodily immersed, aural mode of perception.

### *Conclusion*

This framing of Glahn’s natural surroundings as a vital and dynamic soundscape that is only available to the attentive, embodied listener helps us understand how Hamsun has constructed a narrative that is not wholly defined by the objectifying, domineering gaze of tourism, colonialism, or scientific positivism. Although Glahn occupies this visual mode at key points throughout the novel, we have seen that by the time his pursuit of Edvarda has come to its conclusion, Glahn’s vision has conspicuously failed him, and he has been led through a mist-drenched landscape through his sensitive hearing, not by his acute vision. All of Glahn’s attempts to occupy the objective, observational stance of a psychophysicologist who “reads the souls” of the villagers by tracking the rushing of blood to their faces have yielded no positive results. Thus I argue that we should understand Glahn’s voyeuristic, objectifying gaze as a stand-in for the failures of scientific observation and empiricism to gain insights into the workings of the vital force in all its fluidity and dynamism. In order to access the subtle whispers of the vital force, Hamsun suggests that the modern subject must become a fully embodied listener.



## CHAPTER THREE

### “The Soul Alone Has Meaning”: Irony, Spiritualism, and Re-Enchantment in Arne Garborg’s *Trætte Mænd* (1891)

Just like Knut Hamsun, Arne Garborg began to write about a new tendency in Scandinavian literature in 1890. By that time Garborg was already well established on the literary scene, and was known as one of Norway’s foremost literary naturalists, as well as a freethinker and a political radical. This reputation was established from Garborg’s literary debut nearly a decade earlier with the novel *Ein Fritenkjar* (*A Freethinker*, 1881), which centers on a theologian who loses his Christian faith. The novel was an outgrowth of Garborg’s own faith crisis, which he experienced after moving away from his family farm in Jæren to Kristiania to study. Given the autobiographical overlaps, the reading public was quick to identify the author with his first protagonist, and Garborg reinforced this perception by staking out some of the more radical positions within the literary and social debates of the decade. With *Mannfolk* (*Menfolk*, 1886), Garborg entered into the contemporary debates regarding sexual morality, prostitution, and free love that fellow Norwegian naturalists such as Hans Jæger (*Fra Kristiania-bohêmen*, 1885) and Christian Krohg (*Albertine*, 1886), along with writers all over Scandinavia, were preoccupied with at the time. Although Garborg’s personality was not as incendiary as Jæger’s, and his book wasn’t censored in the way Krohg’s and Jæger’s had been, Garborg similarly confronted the hypocrisy of contemporary Norwegian notions of sexual morality, marriage, and prostitution. So involved was Garborg in the contemporary *sedelighetsdebatten* [(sexual) morality debate] that he seemed to take it as a personal affront that his novel hadn’t been deemed offensive enough to be censored, which led him to write an open letter to the Department of Justice and Police in Kristiania that (in his characteristically ironic style) demanded that *Mannfolk* be banned (see Andersen 2001, 264).

Besides the five novels he published between 1881 and 1890, Garborg also waded into the cultural debates of the time by frequently contributing essays to major Scandinavian newspapers and journals. Because of this essayistic production, along with the social engagement of his novels from the 1880s, Garborg secured a place as one of the major public intellectuals in Norway. Garborg’s exceptional sensitivity to the latest cultural and intellectual developments may owe something to the extreme dichotomy between the rural, traditional, pietistic setting of his upbringing and the modern culture populated with bohemians, anarchists, and intellectuals he experienced upon settling in Kristiania. These circumstances lead Per Thomas Andersen to claim that “Knapt noe forfatterskap viser tydeligere enn Garborgs den striden som utspant seg mot slutten av 1800-tallet mellom en gammel tids religiøse og idealistiske orienteringsgrunnlag og den nye tids moderne tankeform” (Andersen 2001, 260) [Hardly any authorship reveals more clearly than Garborg’s the conflict that arose around the end of the nineteenth century between the religious and idealistic orientation of an older era and the modern way of thinking of the new era.] So perhaps more than any other young author working in Norway at the time, Arne Garborg had his finger on the pulse of the intellectual and cultural discussions taking place around the outset of the 1890s. If we are to understand the cultural shift from the externally-oriented naturalism of the 1880s and the internally-oriented

vitalism taking shape in the 1890s, it is natural to get Garborg's take on the matter, despite the fact that he is not as readily identified with these new tendencies as Hamsun and Obstfelder are.

For Garborg, the new cultural tendency was not merely a shift away from the realism and naturalism of the previous literary generation, but a much broader move away from the entire discourse of scientific positivism that had dominated the cultural landscape for the previous several decades. In an essay serialized in *Dagbladet* the same year as Hamsun's "Fra det ubevidste Sjæleliv," Arne Garborg describes a new sensibility in Scandinavian literature that he calls *ny-idealismen* [neo-idealism], and identifies as one of its primary traits the impulse to shed light on the mysteries of the modern soul. The neo-idealistic tendency is, according to Garborg, not merely a change in literary taste, but a more general cultural shift away from the realm of external phenomena and toward an interior realm that has yet to be fully explored by science. Describing the waning influence of scientific positivism on the cultural imagination, Garborg writes:

Den positivistiske filosofi behersker ikke længer det moderne sind; vi lever i hypnotismens og spiritismens alder. Man er kjed af de overfladiske kjendsgjæringer og deres regelmæssige rækkefølge; man længes efter det, som er bag dem, det uregelmæssige, det mystiske. Sjælen alene har betydning. (Garborg 2001, X:422)

[The philosophy of positivism no longer has mastery over the modern mind; we live in the age of hypnotism and spiritualism. People are bored with superficial facts and their predictable sequence; people long for that which lies behind them, the unpredictable, the mystical. The soul alone has meaning.]

According to Garborg, the neo-idealistic tendency arose out of a cultural weariness with the predictability and superficiality of scientific positivism, which had charted and measured the observable world, but which had failed to access the more fascinating and mysterious forces that underlay it. The cultural imagination had reached a point of such profound disinterest in positivism and its literary corollary, naturalism, that now "the soul alone has meaning," in Garborg's words.

In this quotation from Garborg's essay, we see a number of commonalities with Hamsun's ground-breaking essay from the same year, first and foremost in their common fixation on the soul. The nearly imperceptible forces at work deep within, beneath the surface of organic matter, are the focal point for the new literary direction Hamsun and Garborg each describe. Both authors thus also emphasize the importance of getting "behind" physical matter to reach something more essential, and connect this effort explicitly to non-literary disciplines such as psychology and other forms of parapsychological research.<sup>9</sup> For both Hamsun and Garborg, then, this interest in the soul

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<sup>9</sup> The term *parapsychology* is used to describe the study of psychic phenomena that cannot be explained with reference to an orthodox psychological understanding of the mind, such as telepathy, clairvoyance, near-death experiences, telekinesis, and spectral manifestations. Today, parapsychology is (understandably) regarded as pseudoscience by mainstream psychology journals and institutions. In the 1880s and -90s,

went far beyond literary trends; it extended throughout the cultural realm and informed a broad range of contemporary developments. Where Garborg departs from Hamsun is in connecting this new cultural fixation on the soul to a concurrent interest in supernatural phenomena and manifestations, particularly the growth of spiritualism, which was just gaining a foothold in the Nordic countries toward the end of the 1880s.

Another point of contrast is that, while Hamsun explicitly called for a shift in literary focus to keep up with cultural trends, it is difficult to tell whether Garborg is advocating for new developments, or merely describing them. Typically for Garborg, there is an aloofness to the essay that makes the author's attitude toward this new cultural fascination difficult to pin down. Is Garborg praising the general rejection of scientific materialism, or is he decrying the fickleness of intellectual trends? The interpretive space that Garborg's writing allows for has led to a repeated scholarly fascination with his use of irony as a literary tool. Jan Sjøvik has noted that "one of the most significant themes in Garborg criticism is the author's use of irony" (Sjøvik 2000, 70). This is particularly true of Garborg's 1892 novel, *Trætte Mænd* (*Weary Men*, 1892), of which Sjøvik writes, "It is probably no exaggeration... to say that on the whole the irony of *Trætte Mænd* is the most significant theme in the literature about the book" (Sjøvik 2000, 75). The critical debate about the nature of Garborg's irony has tended to center on whether Garborgian irony should be considered "stable" or "unstable" irony, using the terms of Wayne C. Booth from his influential study, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974). That is, does Garborg use irony in a way that allows for the communication of meaning from author to reader (i.e. "stable irony"), or does the use of irony lead to a proliferation of possible meanings, none of which necessarily bear the stamp of authorial intention? The critical fault lines in the debate over Garborg's irony thus tend to divide those who prioritize the authority of the author and those who prioritize the interpretive potential of the reader or the interpretive community.

My own approach to the problem of irony in Garborg's writing is not to try to resolve this divide, but rather to contextualize the appeal of irony at the particular intellectual-historical moment Garborg was writing, particularly against the backdrop of what he called the rise of "neo-idealism," but which could also be described as the advent of neo-romanticism or vitalism in Scandinavian literary and cultural history. As I will argue in this chapter, the kind of irony that Garborg employed fit in well with the intellectual developments of the early 1890s, as it became a rhetorical equivalent to the kind of epistemological skepticism and anti-dogmaticism Garborg was pointing out in his novels and essays from the time. By creating ironic distance between himself and his texts, thereby more readily allowing for a wide range of critical responses and interpretations,

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however, these phenomena were studied by serious scientific thinkers under the rubric of "psychical research," and there was a much wider breadth of opinion among the scientific community than there is today; some were unmoved by claims of such phenomena and aimed to debunk them, while others were more open to the possibility that some cases of "psychic" phenomena were genuine, and that the yet-undiscovered forces responsible for such experiences would one day be discovered and explained by mainstream science. The Society for Psychical research in England, for instance, counted among its early members major English, French, and American scientists (including chemist William Crookes, physicist Oliver Lodge, psychologist William James) and at least one Nobel laureate (physiologist Charles Richet) (see Oppenheim, 1988).

Garborg engaged in a literary demonstration of a contemporary yearning for intellectual freedom and plurality in the public discourse.

Garborg's claim in his essay that the rise of parapsychological practices was an important indicator of a broader shift in the cultural agenda is far from the only reference to spiritualism in Garborg's writings from the 1890s. Indeed, given Garborg's reputation as an outspoken atheist, it is one of the more surprising literary-historical facts from this time period that Garborg even dabbled in spiritualism himself, inviting the famed British medium Madame d'Esperance (née Elizabeth Hope) to his home over 20 times during the fall of 1892 to perform spiritual séances (see Myking 2011; Mehren 2016). Even though Garborg eventually wrote a series of articles about spiritualism for *Samtiden* in 1893 that did not shy away from the delusion and deception involved in some forms of spiritualist practice (particularly the fraudulent materializations achieved by certain mediums), spiritualism held an undeniable intellectual appeal for Garborg at the time. Even if he didn't believe in the veracity of spectral materializations or subscribe to the doctrines espoused by spiritualists, Garborg understood the popularity of this occult fascination as indicating something crucial about contemporary intellectual and aesthetic tendencies. As Garborg had written in his 1890 essay, Europe was growing weary of the materialism of modern science and entering the age of "hypnotism and spiritualism." Given Garborg's reputation as a rationalist and a freethinker, the question naturally arises: why was Garborg so fascinated with Spiritism as a belief and a practice, and what was it about spiritualism that led Garborg to connect it to the latest cultural developments?

One answer to that question lies in the connection Garborg makes between spiritualism and neo-idealism. For Garborg, the rise of spiritualism in Norway and the rest of Europe was just one of many cultural manifestations of the neo-idealist impulse he had identified in 1890. And although spiritualism is not generally evoked in studies of literary vitalism, Garborg eventually turned his attention to vitalist concerns about the nature of organic life and how vital forces work in nature. Garborg's fascination with spiritualism and vitalism in the early- to mid-1890s suggests an affinity between the two strains of thought not previously explored in any depth. Both spiritualism and vitalism were, Garborg recognized, expressions of a contemporary, neo-idealist yearning to get beyond the predictable facts offered by scientific positivism and to explore the more complex and mysterious realm of the soul.

Looking again to the quote given above, we see how crucial the mystery of the soul was for these new impulses Garborg was analyzing. Scientific facts were too "superficial" and "predictable" to hold any appeal to the modern sensibility, which longed to access the mystical, unpredictable forces *behind* the material superficiality of scientific facts. In the modern world, we long to escape the world of the *known*, the world of predictable surface phenomena, and access the hidden realms of the "soul." Garborg writes:

Vor sjæl er et mørkt kontinent; did når ikke den fattige videnskabens lygtelys. Vor sjæl er en urskov af gåder. Her kan fantasien tumle sig frit; her, hvor forskeren ikke når ind, må digtningen bringe forklaring. (Garborg 2001, X:422)

[Our soul is a dark continent; the feeble lantern of science does not reach it. Our soul is a primal forest of mysteries. Here fantasy can have free reign; here, where the researcher cannot reach, literature must bring clarity.]

The invisible realm of the soul holds interest precisely because it is a kind of intellectual *terra incognita* where new and significant discoveries can be made: as Garborg says here, the soul is a “dark continent,” an uncolonized intellectual field ripe for exploration. Besides the obvious colonialist, racialist implications of Garborg’s formulation, the metaphor of bringing light into darkness was one that modern scientific positivism frequently applied to describe its own mission. What is crucial in Garborg’s formulation here, however, is that he describes the failure of scientific positivism to answer any questions about the “soul” as an opportunity for literary discourse to “bring clarity.” The stakes for Garborg were thus not solely about answering questions about the material or metaphysical worlds, but also about the role of literature in an age of profound weariness and distrust with scientific discourse.

This quote also reveals what could be considered a misunderstanding on Garborg’s part about the disciplinary opposition between neo-idealism and scientific positivism. Rather than being opposed to modern science, neo-idealist pursuits such as psychical and Spiritist investigations conceived of themselves as a synthesis of religious beliefs and the experimental rigorosity of scientific positivism.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the aspect of modern science that Spiritism fought against was not its positivism or experimental basis, but rather its excessive materialism and lack of acceptance for the reality of hidden forces operating within the physical world. Spiritism rejected the dogmatism and lack of intellectual freedom and plurality in modern science, in other words. As Garborg says here, however, for neo-idealists working in a literary mode, it is literature that must bring clarity to realms where scientific positivism can offer no helpful explanations. This “idealistic reaction” in the late nineteenth century was driven, then, by an intellectual imperative to enter uncharted territory and produce knowledge about previously inexplicable, hidden phenomena. In other words, neo-idealism, according to Garborg, had an occult sensibility—it sought out the hidden and mysterious world of the soul and subjected it to observation and description. The possibility offered by the “dark continent” of the soul is a space that is emancipated from the intellectual tyranny of science, and so fantasy is given free reign. Garborg thus describes literature as a discourse that is more capable of dealing with mysterious, unexplored intellectual territory, whereas science is only capable of producing knowledge about material phenomena, a boundary that precludes the metaphysical or psychic realm.

If neo-idealism shifted the optics from the exterior realm of observable reality to the mysterious inner realm of the soul, then what was needed was an alternative discipline to positivism that is able to “bringe forklaring” [bring clarity] to the “mørkt kontinent”

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<sup>10</sup> Spiritualism’s scientific aspirations are made clear by an article in the Norwegian spiritualist periodical *Morgendæmringen* from November 1888, which detail a number of declarations about Spiritism made at an international congress of Spiritism held in Barcelona earlier that year. The first declaration adopted at the congress begins, “Spiritismen er en positive og experimental Videnskab” (*Morgendæmringen* 3.11: 88) [Spiritualism is a positive and experimental science.]

[dark continent] of the soul. As Garborg says in this essay, for neo-idealist writers, this alternative discipline was literature. By showing how literature was actually more capable than science of achieving clarity in the realm of the soul, Garborg demonstrated that the neo-idealistic impulse was a kind of a rescue mission intended to disentangle literature and science from one another—in essence, to break literature’s unfortunate dependence on scientific materialism during the previous decade’s preoccupation with naturalism, of which Garborg had been one of Norway’s foremost practitioners. Thus neo-idealism and spiritualism were closely related impulses in Garborg’s assessment of the shifting temperament of contemporary culture around 1890: both were forms of rebellion against the intellectual dogmatism and excessive materialism of modern science, especially the erroneous sense that science had banished all possibility of hitherto unverifiable or unobservable forces such as the soul. As we will see, just like Hamsun, Garborg used the soul as a site for staging his literary confrontation with scientific materialism, and as a device for depicting the existential struggles of individuals attempting to disentangle the material from the metaphysical.

In order to understand Garborg’s emphasis on the neo-idealistic impulse, this chapter will focus first on the role of spiritualism in the novel *Trætte Mænd* (1891), as well as the ways Spiritism, vitalism, and other neo-idealistic impulses are developed in a pair of essays that Garborg wrote during the mid-1890s on intellectual and cultural currents in contemporary Europe. We will see that Garborg described a limited model of scientific knowledge—one that was intellectually modest in its claims, and that did not reject the possibility of other realms of material “reality” beyond or beneath the observable material world. Understanding Garborg’s critique of the intellectual dogmatism of scientific positivism also helps us see his well-known use of irony in a new light. This is especially apparent as Garborg more explicitly engages with a vitalist worldview in his 1895 essay “Troen paa Livet” [Faith in Life] in which he adopts two completely opposing intellectual positions, refusing to resolve the questions about the nature of vital force his essay brings up, or even to argue for one over the other. In this way, Garborg’s use of irony may be seen as the rhetorical equivalent of the intellectual modesty and flexibility he demands of science; Garborg’s implication that *any* stable intellectual position becomes rhetorical, ideological, and dogmatic if it is not constantly questioned fits well with his adoption of a particular kind of shifting, multivalent irony. Unwilling to settle into any stable intellectual point-of-view, Garborg productively made use of many contradictory voices that the critic is hard-pressed to tie back to Garborg himself. The ironic distance between the author and his text, or the speaker’s “true feelings” and his utterances (which in Garborg’s case is almost always difficult, if not impossible, to gauge) can instead be understood as Garborg’s way of combating the tendency of an intellectual position to ossify into an unquestioned dogma. By examining Garborg’s irony in this light, we can understand irony not merely as a rhetorical device used in order to convey meaning indirectly, or as a way of coding a message so that only those capable of understanding the irony understand; instead, I examine the forms of irony Garborg uses in the early 1890s from an intellectual-historical perspective. Garborg’s commitment to intellectual freedom and avoiding all forms of dogma (religious, scientific, intellectual, political) found expression in his use of irony and his adoption of multiple, sometimes contradictory intellectual positions in his

writings, both in his fiction and essayistic texts. Jan Sjøvik claims that if we understand Garborg's irony as "unstable" in Booth's terms—that is, ironic structures that "owing to an absence of a clear authorial intention, lend themselves to a variety of interpretations" (Sjøvik 2001, 65)—we are essentially "depriving Garborg of the ability to communicate anything specific through his irony" (Sjøvik 2001, 78). Rather than seeing this negatively as the author being "deprived" of the ability to communicate a clear message, I argue that Garborg utilized irony as part of a broader refusal to perpetuate dogmatic structures of meaning through his own writing.

### *Decadence and Irony in Trøtte Mænd*

*Trøtte Mænd* (*Weary Men*, 1892) is generally regarded as a singular work in the context of Arne Garborg's wide-ranging corpus. Not only is it the work for which Garborg is most well-known outside of Scandinavia, but the novel is also a departure for Garborg on a number of fronts. On a linguistic level, the novel is Garborg's only work of prose fiction to be written in *riksmål* rather than *landsmål*. This was no arbitrary choice on Garborg's part. Since *Trøtte Mænd* is a diary novel, consisting of entries and fragments written by the urbane, middle-class civil servant Gabriel Gram, it reflects the language a bourgeois Kristiania-dweller would have used at the time. On a thematic level, *Trøtte Mænd* is generally regarded as a self-conscious effort by Garborg to write in a decadent mode, after the fashion of French writers like Huysmans and Bourget. This re-orientation toward the literary trends of continental Europe represents another departure for Garborg, whose previous prose works had almost without exception focused on the lives of (often displaced) Norwegian country folk dealing with the challenges of modern life. This connection to decadence may also provide further explanation for Garborg's use of Dano-Norwegian in the novel, since, as George Schoolfield explains: "Gram's language is a sign for Garborg, too, of Gram's decadence, and of his belonging to the past or, perhaps, of his having no future" (Schoolfield 88). Both linguistically and stylistically, then, *Trøtte Mænd* is fixated on the notion of decadence and decay.

Furthermore, the novel occupies an important point of transition in Garborg's oeuvre between the socially-oriented naturalism of the 1880s and the highly lyrical and psychological narratives of the 1890s. Per Thomas Andersen notes that:

På overgangen mellom disse to fasene finner vi så en av norsk litteraturs mest europeiske og urbane bøker, dekadanseromanen *Trøtte Mænd*, som ved siden av Sigbjørn Obstfelders lyrikk og Knut Hamsuns 1890-tallsromaner kan kalles vår første modernistiske litteratur. (Andersen 2001, 262)

[In the transition between these two phases we find one of Norwegian literature's most European and urbane books, the decadent novel *Weary Men*, which alongside Sigbjørn Obstfelder's poetry and Knut Hamsun's novels from the 1890s may be called our first modernistic literature.]

According to Andersen, then, the novel secures Garborg's position as one of the three major torchbearers of literary modernism in Norway, all whom form the basis of this dissertation. The book's status as one of the urtexts of Norwegian modernism owes in part to the way in which decadence is reflected not merely thematically, but also formally. Although it has the appearance of a diary, with dated entries in a linear sequence and a single, first-person diarist, as Andersen points out, the novel actually consists of fragments of notes and impressions that Gabriel Gram "tenker seg *kunne ha blitt til en roman*" (Andersen 2001, 266) [imagines *could have become* a novel]. Although there is a modicum of linearity imposed on the narrative by virtue of its diary form, at the level of the individual entries the novel is fractured and disorderly, shifting voice, style, and genre fluidly and unpredictably.

In order to explain the peculiarity of the novel both in the context of Norwegian literary history and within Garborg's own oeuvre, critics have often pointed out that it was written in response to a personal crisis Garborg experienced after immersing himself in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche starting in 1890. Around the end of that year, Garborg writes in a letter to fellow Nietzsche enthusiast, Ola Hansson:

Jeg læser Nietzsche om dagen og føler mig underlig udmattet og knust. Voldsomt tiltrækker han mig og voldsomt frastøder han mig, og jeg er som én, der midlertidig har tabt sit Selv, sit Personlighedssentrum—indtil jeg blir færdig med ham og faar sat mig i forhold til ham. (Andersen 1992, 369)

[I have been reading Nietzsche recently and feel strangely exhausted and broken. Violently he attracts me and violently he repulses me, and I am like someone who has temporarily lost his self, his center of personality—until I get finished with him and can position myself in relation to him.]

In the description here of feeling "udmattet og knust" [exhausted and broken] we see echoes of Gabriel Gram's own world-weariness. Garborg's foray into a decadent literary mode is thus generally regarded as a response to his "Nietzsche crisis," and was also richly informed by his friendship with Ola Hansson, who himself had written one of Scandinavia's first overtly decadent novels in *Sensitiva Amorosa* (1887).

The popular success of *Trætte Mænd* upon its publication in 1891, however, likely owed little to the Nietzschean connection or the decadent literary mode. Rather the Norwegian public was primarily fixated on Garborg's own attitudes toward Christianity. Contemporary readers, identifying Gabriel Gram as Garborg's direct mouthpiece, assumed Gram's conversion at the end of the novel indicated that "den farlige fritenkeren Garborg hadde omvendt seg" (Andersen 2001, 266) [the dangerous freethinker Garborg had repented.] As Per Buvik writes, the novel was interpreted by hopeful Christian readers rather directly as a "personal testimony and, generally, as a religious work" (Buvik 1999, 243). So concerned was Garborg about refuting these rumors of his own Christian conversion that he had his wife, Hulda, interview him in *Verdens Gang* to set the record straight.



This straightforward identification of Garborg with his literary creation points to what has become the most enduring critical fascination with the novel, namely the role of irony. The main question for readers at the time was to what degree the fictional novel could be understood as a sincere, personal testimony of the author himself, and thus whether Gram's diary entries could be regarded as reflecting Garborg's own personal beliefs. In her book on literary irony, Claire Colebrook describes how irony can be read into the relationship between an author and his work, saying that one form of irony is

a recognition of our capacity as readers to question whether a literary text is at one with what it "says"; for a text can always be read as if it were presenting or "mentioning" a world-view, rather than intending that world-view. This is one mode of irony: a writer uses all the figures and conventions of a context while refraining from belief or commitment. (Colebrook 2004, 5).

Although some forms of irony may be so clearly (or heavy-handedly) wrought as to communicate a clear message to any reasonable reader, even though the content of the text expresses the *opposite* of what the author means, less clear-cut uses of irony perform, as Colebrook writes here, an act of insulation between author and text that can complicate any act of readerly "decoding."

The degree to which Garborg's own sincere beliefs can be discerned behind the layers of ironic distance between author and text was not only a key question for contemporary readers of the novel, but has remained a topic of critical debate in recent decades. According to Per Thomas Andersen, *Trøtte Mænd* makes use of an irony that is "av et særlig avansert slag" [of a particularly advanced form] and takes place upon so many levels that the ironic distance between Arne Garborg and the text is difficult to fully analyze (Andersen 1992, 371). Furthermore, the ironic distance between author and text is echoed at the level of the novel, in which the protagonist's personality is defined by decadent irony, so much so that Andersen writes that Gram's monologues and diary entries are "gjennomsyret av ironi" (Andersen 1992, 371) [soaked with irony]. Andersen describes how critics might attempt to overcome this ironic distance and understand Garborg's "true" feelings about his characters by analyzing how the characters are depicted from different vantage points and by different narrators in Garborg's various novels, since Garborg populated his novels with characters who re-appear from book to book, sometimes as a protagonist, sometimes as a more ancillary character. But this attempt to calibrate, as it were, a "true" meaning by tracing a character's utterances through several different novels assumes that the characters who bear identical names from novel to novel can be understood as stable subjects and identities, a leap that Andersen is not comfortable making. Andersen thus concludes that "det ikke fins noen enkel metode til å komme *bakenfor* ironien i *Trøtte Mænd* og konstruere en *egentlig* eller *entydig* holdning uten ironisk avstand" (Andersen 1992, 374) [there is no simple method for getting *behind* the irony in *Weary Men* and construct an *actual* or unequivocal attitude without ironic distance].

Writing several years later, Jan Sjøvik responds directly to Andersen's skepticism about the possibility of "getting behind" Garborg's irony. Sjøvik is suspicious of what he

describes as the nihilistic understanding of irony, which he equates with readers who regard all uses of irony as “unstable” in the terms of Wayne C. Booth. To Sjøvik, this understanding of irony robs the author of any possibility of communication, just as it robs the reader of any chance of decoding or gaining access to any kind of stable meaning from the text. In the context of *Trætte Mænd*, Sjøvik writes that Andersen’s description of Gabriel Gram as a decadent ironist who is “unable to communicate positive (i.e. determinate) values” (Sjøvik 2000, 77) is “tantamount to saying that Gram, as a negative ironist, is unable to communicate anything but his own negativity and constitutes a significant hurdle for an interpreter who tries to establish that the author of a literary text means something specific by it” (Sjøvik 2000, 77). Sjøvik goes on to write that Andersen emphasizes the “distance between the author and the text” rather than “existing communal norms that permit the reader to invoke certain ironic constructions when confronted with Garborg’s text” (Sjøvik 2000, 77). The result, according to Sjøvik, is that Andersen “is able to claim for *Trætte Mænd* an inability to communicate specific meaning to the reader, be that meaning positive or negative in the everyday sense” (Sjøvik 2000, 77). Sjøvik writes further that this tendency on the part of Andersen is part of a larger strategy of “depriving Garborg of the ability to communicate anything specific through his irony” (Sjøvik 2000, 78). Sjøvik’s own preferred understanding of irony builds on the communal models of Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text in This Class?*, 1980) and Linda Hutcheon (*Irony’s Edge*, 1994), both of who recognize that “no ironic statement exists in a vacuum” (Sjøvik 2000, 68). Stanley Fish’s notion of interpretive communities shifts the understanding of irony (and language in general) to the social context, allowing Hutcheon to write that “the community...comes first and that, in fact, enables irony to happen” (Hutcheon 1994, 89). In his reading of the irony in three of Garborg’s novels, Sjøvik adopts this communal perspective and concludes that “both the creation and the interpretation of irony take place within a discursive framework that enables the irony to be made and understood. Irony is present whenever it is made or found by either the author or the reader” (Sjøvik 2000, 86).

One point of dispute that could be raised to Sjøvik’s argument that the supposed “existing communal norms” allowing readers to understand the meaning that lay behind Garborg’s irony were apparently not enough to allow contemporary readers to distance Gram from Garborg. In other words, if there was an understanding in the interpretive community that helped readers understand Garborg’s use of irony, why did so many people assume that the text was a confession of faith on Garborg’s part? While I agree with Sjøvik’s assertion that there is always a discursive framework in place that helps make certain forms of irony able to communicate specific meanings within the interpretive community, I am skeptical towards his insistence that irony is generally “stable,” and that the critical invocation of “unstable” irony is only ever deployed in a nihilistic fashion that “deprives” the author and reader of the ability to communicate. Instead, I argue that Garborg’s use of irony does indeed complicate readerly efforts to get at a clear and stable message, but that this should not be understood in negative terms as a failure of communication or as “nihilistic” irony. We shouldn’t see “unstable irony” (as Sjøvik does) in a purely negative light. The ironic distance between author and text, the possibility of saying many different kinds of things without having to commit to just one, offered Garborg a rhetorical tool that served his affinity for resisting dogma of all kinds, even the

dogma of adhering in a stable way to a single worldview. For Garborg, irony offered intellectual freedom, including the freedom to explore the process of a decadent Christian conversion without actually undergoing one himself. The Swedish author Hjalmar Söderberg makes this clear in an article he wrote on Garborg for the periodical *Ord och Bild* in 1893, where he calls Gabriel Gram the author's "underjordiska jag" [underground ego] (Söderberg 1893, 136), and says that Gram "är den personlighet, som en författare undgår att blifva i verkligheten genom att låta honom lefva på papperet" (Söderberg 1893, 136) [is the personality that an author avoids becoming in reality by allowing him to live on paper]. There is a tremendous freedom offered by taking up the pen and writing from a perspective that is not necessarily one's own. There is a productive anti-dogmatism that is encouraged as well, since one is not merely communicating a message directly to a reader, but allowing for freedom of interpretation.

This intellectual freedom was, according to Garborg (along with most neo-idealist causes, such as spiritualism and parapsychological research) undermined by the dominance of a strict and dogmatic scientific materialism in modern intellectual life. This critique of the dogmatism of modern science is, I argue, a key to understanding the intellectual-historical context from which *Trætte Mænd* arose.

### *Neo-Idealism and the Deficiencies of Science*

The same rejection of scientific materialism as superficial that is evident in Garborg's 1890 essay on neo-idealism is again articulated by Gabriel Gram in *Trætte Mænd*. Written a year after his essay on neo-idealism, the novel can be seen as Garborg's literary demonstration of his argument in "Den idealistiske reaktion," since it depicts the "conversion" of Gram from atheistic pessimism to mystical and religious idealism. Gram's rejection of scientific positivism arises not out of a sense that the knowledge it produces is false, but rather from an aversion to the narrow epistemological parameters it sets for itself, along with the narrow definition of progress it implies. Not only does scientific materialism really only concern itself with the tangible, corporeal, mechanistic functioning of the body (at the expense of understanding the mysterious and invisible force of the soul); science is also marshaled by a capitalist obsession with efficiency and power that no longer appeals to modern sensibilities at the *fin de siècle*. At the heart of Garborg's novel, then, is an intellectual-historical argument about the new cultural impulse to focus on the subjective, mysterious life of the soul since, as Garborg writes in his 1890 essay, "Sjælen alene har betydning" (Garborg 2001, X:422) [the soul alone has meaning.]

The conflict between scientific positivism and Gram's neo-idealism is represented in the novel by the often contentious exchanges between Gram and his friend, Georg Jonathan, an attorney whom Gram describes as a "...typisk repræsentant for den kolde, kjedelige *matter-of-fact*- og prosa-tid som kaldes nutiden... for denne fladprammede optimisme og positivisme uden fantasi og uden religion" (Garborg 2001, IV:100–101) ["typical representative of that cold, boring time, prosaic and matter-of-fact, which is called the present... of its shallow optimism and positivism, without imagination and without religion" (Garborg 1999, 121)]. Gram and Georg Jonathan's conversations quickly take on the weight of the opposing ideologies they come to represent: Gram's pessimistic

outlook and his fixation on the soul on the one hand, and Georg Jonathan's optimism and his fixation on physical and material progress on the other. And as the novel traces Gram's eventual emergence from his existential *ennui* and his apparent conversion to Christianity, Georg Jonathan is clearly depicted as Gram's antagonist. In the final scene, when Gram tells him of his decision to seek "tilfredsstillelse for min sjæl" (Garborg 2001, IV:198) ["satisfaction for my soul" (Garborg 1999, 241)] in Christianity, Georg Jonathan greets the announcement with contemptuous laughter, which Gram says in the novel's final line, "klang mig som fra helvede" (Garborg 2001, IV:198) ["sounded as though it came from hell" (Garborg 1999, 241)]. In a final gesture of Gram's conversion from scientific positivist to a decadent transcendentalist, Georg Jonathan's materialism is resituated in a metaphysical context, in this case a Christian vision of a malevolent and horrifying underworld.

The frequent discussions between Georg Jonathan and Gabriel Gram play out the ideological conflict between a number of related binary oppositions: optimism and pessimism; the body and the soul; materialism and metaphysics; science and religion; the future and the past. In these exchanges, Georg Jonathan frequently gives voice to the scientific and capitalistic impulses to rationalize, measure, and make natural forces economically productive. In one exchange, Gram attacks this tendency of Georg Jonathan's, and claims that "man begynder at bli lidt træt af disse evindelige hestekræfter" (Garborg 2001, IV:86) ["people are beginning to get tired of this never-ending horsepower jargon" (Garborg 1999, 100)], a remark that causes Georg Jonathan to give Gram a "koldt, speidende blik" (Garborg 2001, IV:86) ["cold, searching glance" (Garborg 1999, 100)]. This description of "horsepower jargon" is likely a reference to the tendency of modern science's obsession with measuring and rationalizing energy, particularly in the realms of physics and physiology. This fixation on *Kraft* [force, energy] was ubiquitous in the intellectual landscape of Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century, informing the latest scientific theories of thermodynamics, physiological studies of exercise and fatigue, as well as literary decadence's obsession with the inevitable dissipation of energy and vitality (see Rabinbach 1992).

Gram concludes the diary entry by posing the question, "Undres på, om vi «fritænkere» vilde tåle fritænkere iblandt os?" (Garborg 2001, IV:86) ["I wonder if we 'freethinkers' would tolerate any *freethinkers* in our midst" (Garborg 1999, 101)]. The reference here to Garborg's first novel (*Ein Fritenkjar*, 1878) would have been obvious to a contemporary reader, as well as to Garborg's own reputation as a freethinker, radical, and one of the mainstays of the naturalist *avant garde* in Norway. Garborg's deconstruction of the term *fritænkere* here, via Gram, would have thus been all the more surprising to the contemporary reading public who associated Garborg precisely with that outlook. The implication in this passage is that atheism and science are just as dogmatic as religion, and so anything that is perceived as questioning the ideology of positivism is rejected in the same kind of reactionary fashion as organized religion had historically rejected radical scientists as blasphemous. Gram thus calls into question the monopoly that atheism and science claim upon the notion of "free thought," and instead portrays them as ideologies potentially as intellectually limiting as organized religion.

Besides being ideologically dogmatic, Gram also emphasizes the negative epistemology of scientific knowledge. Science is not capable of producing knowledge affirmatively, according to Gram: it proceeds by *disproving* previously held beliefs. Gram explains it this way to Fanny Holmsen, his first love interest in the novel:

Når De sådan i alskens almindelighed spør mig, hvad videnskaben har fået rede på, at det og det og det og det – *ikke* er så. Og det er jo i og for sig ligeså vigtigt.... Jo; hver gang man får rede på sådan en ny uvidenhed, skrubber man af sig et nyt lag dumhed altså. (Garborg 2001, IV:49)

[When you ask me like this in general what science has discovered, I guess I'll have to answer sort of negatively: it has discovered that so and so and such and such—is *not* so. And that, you know, is in itself just as important.... Why, each time we discover such a new piece of ignorance, we scrub off another layer of stupidity, you see (Garborg 1999, 55).]

At this early point in the novel, Gram has not yet fully come around to the neo-idealist, spiritualist perspective he will adopt later in the novel, and we see that here he is actually functioning as a spokesman for scientific skepticism, which he describes for the religiously-inclined Fanny as a powerful force for good. Later in the novel, Gram starts to see the negative epistemology of science as a deficit; since science cannot produce affirmative knowledge, according to Gram, it cannot confirm any of the great existential unknowns that haunt Gram's psyche. In a journal entry, Gram caricatures the uselessness of scientific skepticism when it comes to addressing questions of real importance:

“Er der en Gud? —«Vi véd ikke.» — Er der en sjæl? —«Vi véd ikke.» —Skal vi leve eller dø? —«Vi véd ikke.» —Har livet en mening? —«Vi véd ikke.» — Hvorfor eksisterer jeg? —«Vi véd ikke.» —Eksisterer jeg i det hele taget? —«Vi véd ikke.» —Hvad véd vi da egentlig? —«Vi véd ikke.» —Kan vi id et hele taget vide noget? —«Vi véd ikke.»” (Garborg 2001, IV:121)

Is there a God?—‘We don’t know.’ —Is there a soul? — ‘We don’t know.’ —Will we live or die? — ‘We don’t know.’ —Does life have a meaning? —‘We don’t know.’ —Why do I exist? — ‘We don’t know.’ — Do I exist at all? —‘We don’t know.’ —What, then, do we really know? —‘We don’t know.’ —Can we know anything at all? — ‘We don’t know.’ (Garborg 1999, 146)

When it comes to these crucial existential questions for Gram, science falls short as a mode of inquiry. Science boils down to little more for Gram than a “systematiske vi-véd-ikke” (Garborg 2001, IV:121) [“systematic we-don’t-know” (Garborg 1999, 146).] This powerlessness of science in the face of existential questions was something Garborg already touched upon in his 1890 essay, where he writes that “Videnskaben er insolvent, kan kun forklare os sådanne ting, som vi ikke bryr os om at vide” (Garborg 2001, X:423) [science is insolvent, and can only explain such things that we don’t care to know.] We see

here, then, that Gram has become a mouthpiece for the neo-idealist position that Garborg had described in his 1890 essay. Gram's "conversion" should thus not merely be regarded as a conversion to a particular religion, but instead more broadly as an adoption of a widely-held contemporary fixation on neo-idealistic questions. When Gram turns scientific skepticism upon science itself in this entry, the whole intellectual system is dismantled; in Gram's reasoning, scientific epistemology appears to amount to little more than a chain of negations that ultimately produce no valuable knowledge whatsoever. The limitations of science are completely incongruous with the praise heaped upon scientific advances by modern culture, according to Gram, who contemptuously writes that "...menneskene slår hænderne sammen af beundring og jubler: Menneskeåndens fremskridt er ufattelige og ubegriperlige; herefter behøver vi hverken tro eller guder mer!" (Garborg 2001, IV:121) ["people clap their hands together in admiration and rejoice, 'The advances of the human spirit are just fantastic and incredible; from now on we need neither faith nor gods anymore!'" (Garborg 1999, 146)].

As the novel progresses, and especially after Fanny leaves Gram to marry another man, Gram turns decisively away from Georg Jonathan's emphasis on physical and material progress, and embraces the pessimism, existential resignation, and openness to the occult that is represented by his other friend, Dr. Kvaale. Comparing Kvaale with Georg Jonathan, Gram remarks, "Da liker jeg bedre dr. Kvaale; jeg aner dybder i ham; han er med al sin doktormaterialisme en mand med sjæl" (Garborg 2001, IV:101) ["I find Dr. Kvaale much more likeable; I sense depths within him. With all his doctor's materialism he's a man with soul" (Garborg 1999, 121)]. Gram, too, wants to become a "man with soul," and so he embraces the possibility that new pseudo-scientific fields such as spiritualism and parapsychology might lead him to a more expansive understanding of reality, one that encompasses the occult forces that lay yet-undiscovered beyond the reach of mainstream modes of empirical investigation. Just as in Hamsun's early poetics, we see in Garborg's novel a rhetoric of depth and interiority over surface and exteriority, as Gram seeks to emulate a man with "depths."

#### *Trætte Mænd (1891) and Garborg's Critique of Scientific Vision*

The critique of scientific positivism at the heart of *Trætte Mænd* is presented in visual terms. More precisely, Gram's troubles at the outset of the novel are focused on the condition of seeing too clearly, and the profound disappointment and disillusionment that visual clarity brings with it. The major challenge for Gram is initially articulated as a romantic one. Should he marry his younger female companion Fanny Holmsen, and accede to the demands that married life makes upon a man? Or should he remain a lonely bachelor, but continue to enjoy the freedom that comes with it? Touching upon the various social and ideological concerns that the *sedelighetsdebatten* [(sexual) morality debate] brings up (including marriage, premarital sex, and prostitution) the discussion in the novel seems to fit easily within the paradigm of the socially-engaged *tendensroman* [problem novel] that dominated the Scandinavian literary landscape during the previous decade, and which had characterized much of Garborg's writing in the previous decade.

Contrary to this understanding of *Trætte Mænd* as a “problem novel” in the Brandesian mold, Gram actually articulates the major conflict in the novel as one that could instead be seen as an aesthetic one: the tension between realism and idealism. The problem for Gram is, now that he’s a middle-aged bachelor with decades of experience behind him, love is no longer “blind” for him. He has no youthful illusions any longer in his “courting” of Fanny, if his casual evening strolls with Fanny can even be called “courting.” He writes during an early diary entry, “Jeg elskede ikke en gang. Ikke a la Romeo. Ikke a la Werther. Det er det fæle ved at være over 30 år: at ens kærlighed ikke længer er blind” (Garborg 2001, IV:9) [“I wasn’t even in love. Not a la Romeo. Not a la Werther. This is the horror of being past thirty: your love is no longer blind” (Garborg 1999, 3)]. The protagonist’s romantic and existential project—which becomes even more urgent after his resignation and refusal to act leads Fanny to abandon him for another suitor—is to recover his naive, youthful idealism on a number of fronts. He wants to believe in romantic love, or at least to embrace the institution of marriage. He wants to believe in the immortality of the soul. He wants to believe in religion, or at least be able to find comfort in the tradition of Christian worship. In Gram’s words, he wants to muster the “betagethed” (Garborg 2001, IV:9) [“fascination” (Garborg 1999, 4)] that his “kold, klar, spotsk” (Garborg 2001, IV:9) [“cold, clear, mocking” (Garborg 1999, 4)] consciousness prevents him from achieving. And this cold, clear, mocking consciousness is frequently aligned with his excessively acute vision. Describing his somewhat lukewarm attitude toward Fanny, Gram writes that “Jeg på nært hold altfor klart ser hende «som hun er»; der er ikke nogen idealiserende afstand længer, ikke noget forfalskende luftlag, som gjør fjerne højder så romantiske” (Garborg 2001, IV:13) [“I see her all too clearly ‘as she is’; there’s no idealizing distance anymore, no falsifying atmospheric layer such as makes faraway hills so romantic” (Garborg 1999, 11)]. Clear vision means that Gram cannot feign ignorance about details that detract from his idealist notions. Gram’s attempts to muster religious faith are thus initially thwarted by his own embarrassment: “Det går ikke. Det går altså ikke, simpelthen. Denne formentlige kur er værre enn sygdommen. Jeg blir bare simpelthen idiot, gal...” (11) [“It won’t work. It simply won’t work, you see. This presumed cure is worse than the disease. I’m simply turning into an idiot, going mad....” (5).] Gram thus perceives no way out of this irresolvable conflict between idealism and realism; although realism is boring and bereft of fantasy, to pretend that he doesn’t see material reality through a realist, non-idealistic lens would be to simply turn himself into “an idiot.”

If Gram as a character represents the broader cultural transition from naturalism to neo-idealism, as I have suggested, then it is important to note that his “weariness” is not merely the result of an excess of stimulation or some kind of nervous disorder (as one might expect with the protagonist of a decadent novel), but is manifested as a weariness with the naturalist gaze. The problem with “seeing too clearly” for Gram is that it makes it impossible to take comfort in traditional ideals like romantic love or religious faith. It is easy to see how Gram’s dissatisfaction with “clear vision” can be understood as a deeper dissatisfaction with scientific empiricism, and the movements that most closely align with the scientific worldview: naturalism and realism. If naturalism and scientific investigation have had a *disenchanting* effect on humankind, and have therefore ruined the old romantic

illusions and ideals that previously were so comforting, then Gabriel Gram's project seems to be one of *re-enchantment*. Is it possible to return to a state of innocence, when he believed in ghosts and deities, in romantic love and in the reality of the soul? Or do any attempts to recover this idealistic gaze simply descend into a contrived, inauthentic naïveté?

My choice of the term "re-enchantment" draws on the work of a number of social historians and philosophers who have theorized the history of modernity in the West as a process of "disenchantment." This line of thought can be traced back at least to Nietzsche's death of God, though it was Max Weber who formalized this concept using the term *disenchantment*. Weber wrote in 1917, "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (Weber 1946, 155). More recently, sociologists, philosophers, and cultural historians have built upon this observation by Weber, noting how this process of disenchantment is followed by a cultural reaction to recover some aspects of the religious or "primitive" beliefs that have been lost in the transition to modernity. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, for instance, write that "each time religion reluctantly withdrew from a particular area of experience, a new, thoroughly secular strategy for re-enchantment cheerfully emerged to fill the void" (Landy and Saler 2009, 1). Although Landy and Saler emphasize *secular* responses to the demise of religion, and specifically exclude "the sporadic generation of new creeds, such as spiritualism, that have sought to replace the old" (Landy and Saler, 2009, 2), the vocabulary of disenchantment/re-enchantment still has value in approaching modern spiritual and religious movements. Furthermore, dismissing spiritualism as merely a "new creed" that rushes in to fill the vacuum left by the death of God ignores the way in which spiritualists and other "psychical researchers" articulated their own project, namely to investigate spiritual and psychic phenomena within the rubric of scientific positivism and experimentation. It is certainly true that the efforts of spiritualists fulfilled another description of re-enchantment offered by Landy and Saler:

If the world is to be re-enanted, it must accordingly be reimbued not only with *mystery* and *wonder* but also with *order*, perhaps even with *purpose*. . . . there must be a way of carving out, within the fully profane world, a set of spaces which somehow possess the allure of the *sacred*; there must be everyday *miracles*, exceptional events which go against (and perhaps even alter) the accepted order of things. (Landy and Saler 2009, 2)

The emphasis here on the recovery of a sense of wonder and mystery, along with other aspects of the transcendent experience that had traditionally been the purview of religion within a secular modern world aptly describes the types of "neo-idealism" Garborg had in mind as he described the literary and intellectual trends taking hold of European thought around 1890.

Other theorists have been less anxious than Landy and Saler to bracket the reappearance of spiritual beliefs in a modern age from their theorization of re-enchantment. Art historian Suzi Gablik, for instance, has written:



Re-enchantment, as I understand it, means stepping beyond the modern traditions of mechanism, positivism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism, secularism, and scientism—the whole objectifying consciousness of the Enlightenment—in a way that allows for a return of soul. (Gablik 1991, 3)

Re-enchantment may be more capaciously understood, then, as a response to the waning influence of religion and spirituality in modern life that finds expression both in explicitly secular realms (such as literature) as well as in the appearance of new spiritual movements within a modern, sometimes scientific or pseudo-scientific guise (such as spiritualism). Sociologist Ernest Gellner thus associates re-enchantment with the appearance of mysticism and new age religious movements within the counter-culture of 1960s America, as well as with the “cult of subjectivity” in twentieth-century philosophy (Gellner 1975, 435).

Not surprisingly, re-enchantment is often thought of as a kind of uncanny persistence of discarded beliefs in the modern world. James Elkins and David Morgan write that in the wake of the disenchantment that accompanies modernity, “The gods are replaced by ghosts and they disturb us with hollow sounds. Ghosts are not the things they once were, but nagging forms of memory that refuse to let the past go away. They are unfinished business, terrifying proof that the past is not yet over” (Elkins and Morgan 2011, 5). This is why the experience of haunting is often thought of (somewhat counter-intuitively) as a characteristically modern phenomenon: “primitive” ideas and superstitions have to be surmounted, the Weberian process of disenchantment has to be complete, if the re-appearance of such unexplainable phenomena is to be considered threatening or *unheimlich*, in Freud’s terms. As Tom Gunning writes, discussing spiritualism from a media history perspective, “Ghosts may terrify folks in all cultures . . . , but only in the modern world does their appearance unsettle our world-view, threatening our sense of rational order and scientific reality” (Gunning 2003, 10). Only in modernity, in other words, is there a structure of scientific materialism and secularism that can be threatened by the appearance of apparently supernatural phenomena. For neo-idealists in 1890s Norway, however, the re-enchantment of everyday life—be it in the form of disembodied spirits or a literature that focused on the soul, rather than objectifiable social circumstances—was welcomed rather than feared.

From the perspective of Gabriel Gram, however, the problem with attempting to resurrect ideals and beliefs that have been debunked or rejected by the “clear vision” of modern science is that it can be seen as an inherently regressive enterprise. As Per Thomas Andersen writes, “Gabriel Gram må ty til en regressiv strategi, en tilbakevendning til et meningsunivers han selv egentlig har trådt ut av” (Andersen 2001, 266) [Gabriel Gram must turn to a regressive strategy, a return to a universe of meaning that he himself has actually left behind]. In attempting to recover the lost innocence of idealism, Gram would seemingly have to disregard or forget the knowledge and experience that helped him see the world so clearly in the first place. In other words, a kind of intellectual repression would need to take place, so that Gram could “forget” things he has already learned. However, as Gram’s romantic life becomes more and more bleak, and his existential and psychological dilemmas become more and more pressing, Gram’s “re-enchantment”

project takes on deeper epistemological meaning. In order to find meaning in old illusions, Gram calls the foundations of his previous “knowledge” into question. By questioning the monopoly that scientific materialism has on the production of knowledge about reality, and thus reconsidering “reality” as encompassing realms beyond that of the observable, material world, Gram is able to acquire an idealist outlook without rejecting the validity of scientific knowledge. However, in questioning the intellectual dogmatism and domineering epistemological ambitions of scientific empiricism, Gram turns scientific skepticism upon science itself.

### *Face to Face with the Soul*

Although he lists a number of issues about which science is unable to produce affirmative knowledge, it is clear that Gram’s most pressing concern is the nature of the human soul, and it is fair to say that Gram becomes increasingly fixated on this question. In one memorable scene, Gram comes home late one evening, glances in the mirror, and becomes drawn into the reflected image of his own eyes: “De er pene, de øine, brune og oprigtige med noget vist vemodigt og resignert i blikket; de suger mig til sig” (Garborg 2001, IV:77) [“They are good-looking, those eyes, brown and sincere, with a tinge of wistfulness and resignation in their gaze; they draw me in” (Garborg 1999, 90)]. True to their reputed function as the “windows to the soul,” Gram’s eyes catch his imagination and draw his consciousness inward, toward a consideration of his innermost essence: “Og får de først tag i mig, suger de stærkere og stærkere, indtil jeg gribes af et slags svimmelhed; tingene omkring mig forsvinder; jeg blir så uhyggelig alene” (Garborg 2001, IV:77) [“And once they get hold of me, they draw me more and more forcefully, until I’m seized by a kind of vertigo. The things around me disappear, I’m dismally alone” (Garborg 1999, 90)]. As the irresistible inner gaze draws Gram more and more into himself, he comments on the remarkable capability of the mirror to make one feel as if one is “ansigt til ansigt med sin sjæl” (Garborg 2001, IV:77) [“face to face with [one’s] soul” (Garborg 1999, 90)]. Gram says that the feeling of peering directly into his own soul

fylder mig på engang med en religiøs angst og en fortvivlet-fræk nysgjerrighed. Endelig engang få rede på dette spøgelse som står bag hele min existens, men som jeg ikke på nogen mulig måde kan få kloen i—ikke engang få sikkerhed for, at det overhoved er der. D.v.s. noget må der jo være, et agens, et drivhjul ... og hvorfor kan det ikke ligeså godt hede sjæl? Måske er det verdenssjælen selv, der sidder bag sit skjærbræt som en dukketheater-direktør og trækker i de traade som bringer mit kjødklædte skelet til at hoppe og danse og begå alle disse meningsløshed, dem han med guddommelig barnagtighed morer sig over. (Garborg 2001, IV:77)

[fills me at once with religious dread and a brazen curiosity. To find out, at last, about this specter that is behind my whole existence but that I cannot possibly get my hands on—not even get proof that it’s there at all! That is, there must be something, an agency, a driving wheel... and why can’t it just as well be called soul? Perhaps it is the world soul herself, sitting behind her screen like the director

of a puppet show and pulling the strings that bring my flesh-covered skeleton to jump and dance and perform all these absurdities, which she enjoys with such divine childishness? (Garborg 1999, 90).]

Gram's description of the soul here is of an invisible and immaterial force that resides somewhere deep within the corporeal being. His description effectively encapsulates the epistemological problem that confronts anybody who wants to gain knowledge about the soul through empirical means: it cannot be located and cannot be perceived, except through the apparent effect it has on the physical body. As Gram says, he is unable to get his hands on it, or access any kind of proof to verify the presence of a soul within his material body. The soul is a kind of an absent cause that is supposedly responsible for the workings of the brain and the body, but which itself is beyond the realm of human perception, and therefore inaccessible to empirical investigation of any kind. We also see that importance of the soul for Gram is separate from any religious concern with salvation, and instead reflects a more basic existential question: what is the force that is responsible for one's physical and mental experience? Gram uses the word "soul" for the sake of convenience, but what he is referring to is not a purely a religious concept; instead, "soul" is the label he applies to the hidden force that infuses living beings, and whose presence distinguishes living matter from dead matter. To get at this idea of a force permeating all organic life, Gram evokes a Platonic notion of the *anima mundi* [world soul]. Belief in this soul or vital force thus derives from the assertion that there is a certain immaterial, invisible, and essentially unverifiable "something else" that accounts for vital phenomena.

Gram's assertion of the reality of a scientifically unverifiable phenomenon such as the soul is not merely an exercise in religious faith, however; it is also motivated by a desire to critique the intellectual dogmatism of a purely materialist, scientific worldview. For Gram, one promising avenue of inquiry that presents itself as a more intellectually open field is what would come to be known as parapsychology, which included the scientific and pseudo-scientific investigations of psychic and paranormal phenomena such as hypnosis, somnambulism, telepathy, and apparitions. In one journal entry, Gram asserts,

De moderne undersøgelser af hypnotiske, magnetiske og andre nervøse fænomener er til syvende og sidst kanske det eneste som der er noget håb ved. Hvis man ad den vei ikke når ind til «sjælen» — dette mærkværdige ubekjendte som bringer kadaverer til at sprælle, —så gives der i det hele ingen vei. Der *er* mere mellem himmel og jord end medicinerne begriber (98).

[The modern investigations of hypnotic, magnetic, and other nervous phenomena are in the end perhaps the only things that give us some hope. If that path won't take us to "the soul"—this remarkable unknown that makes the cadaver strive and struggle—then there isn't any path at all. There *is* more between heaven and earth than the physicians apprehend (118).]

Gram's definition of the soul here as the "remarkable unknown" that animates the "cadaver" again demonstrates how the vitalist understanding of the soul is based on a kind

of epistemological deferral; the soul is an “unknown,” but because there are new para-scientific disciplines that are beginning to investigate psychic and spiritual phenomena, the soul is perhaps not unknowable. Again the concept of the soul is inserted as a kind of placeholder that stands in for a certain mysterious cause or force that accounts for vital phenomena.

Gram’s concept of the soul confronts the same epistemological conundrum that vitalism itself faced as it sought to define itself scientifically around the turn of the century. The central problem is that as vitalism in its various forms (and here I am including the various practices involved in parapsychology, since they all essentially investigate occult vital forces) sought to legitimate itself as an empirical science, it was forced to confront the unverifiability of its central premise—that there is an immaterial, invisible “force” that separates living matter from non-living matter. The impossibility of observing the soul or vital force empirically is what has caused mainstream science to reject vitalism as unverifiable. As one recent encyclopedia of philosophy puts it, “Vitalism now has no credibility. This is sometimes credited to the view that vitalism posits an unknowable factor in explaining life; and further, vitalism is often viewed as unfalsifiable, and therefore a pernicious metaphysical doctrine” (Bechtel and Robinson). But well into the twentieth century, long after the scientific materialism had become the dominant epistemology, respected experimental scientists were still attempting to articulate a vitalist natural philosophy. Their efforts to account for the “vital force” they conceived as the essence of living beings bears a number of similarities to post-naturalism’s fascination with the mysteries of the human soul.

Turning briefly to the work of one prominent scientific vitalist, the German biologist Hans Driesch, helps demonstrate how Gram’s speculations about the animating force working within the “cadaver” of his physical body represent a turn to vitalism in Garborg’s writing. Through his scientific research as well as his more philosophic and speculative publications, Driesch became one of the most influential neo-vitalist philosophers of the early twentieth century. His vitalist “conversion narrative,” so to speak, begins with his experiments on sea urchin embryos in the 1890s, through which he discovered that splitting fertilized sea urchin eggs resulted in two identical embryos. Because of these experiments he is sometimes credited as the first scientist to successfully clone an animal, over a century before Dolly the Sheep. He subsequently developed a vitalist theory based on the notion that the “idea of wholeness” is imprinted on every living cell. Driesch sensed that whatever force infused living cells was an entity that could not be reduced to material or chemical processes. A few years after his experiments in embryology, he said in a lecture:

No kind of causality based upon the constellations of single physical and chemical acts can account for organic individual development; this development is not to be explained by any hypothesis about configuration of physical and chemical agents. Therefore there must be something else which is to be regarded as the sufficient reason of individual form-production. (Driesch 1908, 142)

This passage demonstrates the major problem with vitalist models of life from the perspective of empirical science: Driesch's life concept relies on recourse to a vague "something else" underlying organic life that cannot be explained by physical or chemical agents. This "something else" Driesch gave the name *entelechy*, a term derived from Aristotle that denotes a mysterious, immaterial force that directed the development of the biological forms of an organism, and contained a teleological plan for the entire organism within it. Gram's "something more" between heaven and earth, found in the quotation cited above, serves the same rhetorical function as Driesch's "something else," that is as a kind of place holder that substitutes for an underlying, unverifiable cause of the otherwise inexplicable material phenomena that are observed.

In the same lecture quoted above, Driesch acknowledges the difficulty of accepting his notion of entelechy from the perspective of empirical science: "Vitalism then, or the autonomy of life, has been proved by us indirectly, and cannot be proved otherwise so long as we follow the lines of ordinary scientific reasoning. There can indeed be a sort of direct proof of vitalism, but now is not the time to develop this proof, for it is not of purely scientific character" (Driesch 1908, II:143). Since "life" is "not of purely scientific [that is to say, material] character," it is unfalsifiable, and therefore must remain an untestable hypothesis. Driesch implies here that the methods to prove the existence of a vital force have *not yet* been conceived of. He stops short of saying that vital force is ultimately unknowable or unverifiable, but simply says that "now is not the time" to prove it. This indicates another hallmark of vitalist epistemology, namely that it involves a kind of constant deferral of proof—at stake is not the *unknowable*, but instead the *not yet known*. This is because vitalism relies on an explanatory principle that is imagined as immaterial and invisible, even though this hypothetical life force "infuses" or "imprints itself" on living matter.

In Garborg's novel we see how vitalism is related to spiritualism not in merely in its emphasis on the soul or vital force at work within all living beings, but also in the challenges it posed to pure scientific materialism.

### *The Appeal of Spiritualism*

Even at the beginning of the novel, when Gram has yet to show any of the mystical or religious yearning that he eventually fully embraces, he already articulates a desire to believe in ghosts. Gram and Fanny are in the middle of one of their many evening strolls together, discussing Fanny's fear of the dark, which she says derives from the thought that she might experience hallucinations or see a ghost. When Gram expresses skepticism about the reality of spiritual apparitions, Fanny asks him, "Men er De forresten så sikker på, at der ikke er spøgelser?" (Garborg 2001, IV: 47) ["Are you so sure, incidentally, that there is no such thing as ghosts?" (Garborg 1999, 52)]. Gram responds, "Hja. Gid der var forresten,—havde jeg nær sagt.... Nå, af og til blir verden mig altfor patenteret. Det er så forskrækkelig fornuftigt og korrekt alt. Bare matematik og hestekræfter" (Garborg 2001, IV:47) ["Hmm. I wish there were, I almost said.... Well, every once in a while the world becomes all too patented for me. Everything is so terribly rational and correct. Nothing but mathematics and horse power" (Garborg 1999, 52)]. Here we see again that belief in the

soul or the spiritual realm is understood as a relief from the tendency of scientific discourse to rationalize and quantify the natural world. Belief in the metaphysical thus has a potentially liberating effect, in that it helps to counteract the predictability of a scientific worldview.

Later in the novel, after Fanny has left him to marry another man, Gram becomes more serious in his desire to believe in ghosts. He borrows books on spiritualism and hypnosis from his polymath friend, Dr. Kvaale. When Kvaale "...venligt anmoder mig om ikke at blive gal" (Garborg 2001, IV:99) ["Kindly [asks me to] not go crazy" (Garborg 1999, 118)] from the books, Gram makes it clear that he still maintains a healthy skepticism toward spiritualism, saying that "...der er altfor meget håndgribeligt tull i dem. Men meget (Garborg 2001, IV:99) ["there is too much palpable nonsense" (Garborg 1999, 119)] in the books for him to truly take the belief seriously. Nevertheless, Gram insists that "mærkværdigt og gådefuldt gives der, som vi alle oplever uden at lægge mærke til det" (Garborg 2001, IV:99) ["strange and mysterious things do exist, all of us experience them without being aware of it" (Garborg 1999, 119)]. Gram's attitude toward spiritualism and other para-psychological phenomena indicates that the appeal of such beliefs and practices was that they affirmed the possibility of the "strange and mysterious" aspects of existence, which ran counter to the tendency of scientific discourse to explain all of existence in terms of observable, material, objective phenomena.

As the novel progresses, Gram becomes even more open to the possible veracity of so-called "psychic phenomena" like telepathy and the spectral manifestations. When Fanny leaves on her honeymoon with her new husband, Gram begins to think that he may actually be capable of communicating with Fanny telepathically, and then becomes convinced that Fanny has died in a terrible accident and that her ghost has begun haunting him. Gram writes that

Hun begynder at forfølge mig om dagene. Jeg kommer neppe på gaden—strax er hun der; ti-tve skridt bag mig, stirrende efter mig med sugende, triste øine. Jeg vender mig uvilkårlig om—: naturligtvis er der ikke spor af hende. Men hun er der alligevel. (Garborg 2001, IV:101)

[She's beginning to haunt me during the day. No sooner have I appeared on the street than she's there, instantly, ten or twenty steps behind me, staring at me with sad, alluring eyes. I instinctively turn around; naturally there isn't a trace of her. But she's there all the same (Garborg 1999, 121).]

Rather than exploring the possibility that his perception is being deceived by his grief over the loss of Fanny's companionship, Gram interprets the apparent apparitions he witnesses as evidence of Fanny's untimely death. However, Gram never embraces an unqualified confidence in the reality of his "spiritual" encounters. What the experiences do attest to for Gram is his own particular capacity for such perceptions: "Jeg har ganske sikkert mediale anlæg; lignende ting har jeg oplevet før, naturligtvis uden at lægge mærke til det.... Det er på høi tid at disse felter undersøges" (Garborg 2001, IV:101) ["Without a doubt, I have a

psychic talent; I have experienced similar things before, naturally without taking notice of the fact....It's about time that these areas should be investigated" (Garborg 1999, 122)].

Just as in his romantic life, Gram shows an unwillingness to fully commit to intellectual propositions. He seems to be just too much of a skeptic and a radical to fully submit to either a scientific or a spiritual worldview. His belief in spirits is never uncomplicated; it's an anti-scientism gesture, more than anything else—a desire to affirm mystery and eschew predictability in all its forms; and especially to reject the dogmatism of scientific discourse, which demands total allegiance and makes sweeping truth claims about the material nature of existence.

### *Spiritualist Experiments*

Garborg's interest in spiritualism did not end with the publication of *Trætte Mænd* in 1891. According to Garborg biographer Rolf Thesen, after working within a decadent register in *Trætte Mænd* and in his subsequent novel, *Fred* (1892), Garborg wanted to "gjera opp med eit serskilt «dekandanse»-drag i tida: spiritismen" (Thesen 1945, 207) [reckon with a particularly "decadent" tendency at the time: spiritualism]. Thesen writes Garborg's intense study of spiritualism was undertaken "med ironi og skepsis, men òg med ei vis nyfikne. Jamvel her kan ein merke noko av det tvihøvet Garborg stod i til «dekandanse»" (Thesen 1945, 207) [with irony and skepticism, but also with a certain curiosity. Even here one can sense something of the ambivalence Garborg maintained toward "decadence"]. So although Garborg's writings about spiritualism indicated a skeptical stance toward the practice, they also bore witness to his curiosity and ambivalence about the new pseudo-scientific investigations of the soul that were coming into vogue.

In order to understand the context of Garborg's interest in spiritualist investigations and the role spiritualism played in intellectual and literary trends in the early 1890s, it is helpful to trace a brief history of spiritualism and how it came to exert itself on the Norwegian cultural scene toward the end of the century. Spiritualism traces its origins to the Kate and Margaret Fox, adolescent sisters who claimed to communicate with the spirit of a murdered peddler in their home in Hydesville, New York starting in 1848. The spirit communication came in the form of rappings or knocking sounds, which, through the application of a simple code, could be made to answer yes/no questions posed by the sisters. The following year, the Fox sisters began demonstrating their spirit communications to a paying crowd for the first time, drawing an audience of nearly 400 (at 25 cents per ticket) to a lecture hall in Rochester to hear the famous "Hydesville rappings" in person (Doyle 1926, I: 78–9; Natale 2016, 1). This public séance inaugurated a movement that by the mid-1850s had gained a major following throughout the US as well as Great Britain and France.

The terms "spiritism" and "spiritualism"<sup>11</sup> encompass not only a specific belief—namely that the spirits of the dead can and do communicate with the living, and may even

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<sup>11</sup> In practice, the terms "spiritualism" and "spiritism" are most often used synonymously, with "spiritualism" most often referring to the Anglo-American context, and "Spiritism" being applied to the continental European (and especially French) context. Strictly speaking, however, Spiritism is a branch of spiritualism founded by the French author Allan Kardec in the late 1850s as an attempt to systematize and

manifest themselves in physical form—but, perhaps even more importantly, they characterize a range of practices that entered a prominent place in American and European cultural landscapes in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These practices include especially the performance of group séances (both public and private) presided over by a psychically gifted medium who could achieve communication with (and later, physical materializations of) departed souls from the spirit world. The very public and spectacular nature that séances increasingly took on, as well as the quasi-celebrity status the most gifted mediums enjoyed, has led cultural historian Simone Natale to connect spiritualism to the rise of a larger popular entertainment industry toward the end of the nineteenth century that “placed ghostly apparitions and spiritual phantasmagorias at the very core of popular culture” (Natale 2016, 3).

It wasn’t until several decades after its proliferation in North America, Great Britain, and France that spiritualism gained a real foothold in the Nordic countries, marked in particular by the establishment of spiritualist periodicals, organizations, as well as the holding of public lectures, demonstrations and séances (Kragh 2). In Norway, B.C.S. Torstenson started a monthly periodical in 1886 entitled *Morgendæmringen* [The Daybreak] whose masthead description enumerated the topics to be covered: “Tidsskrift for spiritistiske Studier: Psychologi, Somnambulisme, Magnetisme (Hypnotisme), Tankelæsning etc.” [Periodical for spiritist studies: Psychology, somnambulism, magnetism (hypnotism), thought reading, etc.] (See *Morgendæmringen* 1.1, 1886). As this description implies, spiritualism was not an isolated occult practice or religious belief, but was instead treated as part of a constellation of related psychic phenomena that had captured the public imagination over the past century because of their unexplained origins, as well as the compelling questions they posed about the nature of the physical world as well as the human mind. The spiritualist movement in Norway largely followed the example of the Society of Psychical Research, which had been established in England in 1882 with the express purpose of approaching parapsychological phenomena “without prejudice or prepossession of any kind, and in the same spirit of exact and unimpassioned enquiry which has enabled science to solve so many problems” (Grattan-Guinness 1982, 19). The ambition of Spiritualism in the Nordic countries was thus to bring the principles of scientific rigor, objectivity, and experimentation to bear on phenomena traditionally thought of as operating on the faith-based principles of religious belief. An article *Morgendæmringen* from 1888 announcing the establishment of “Det Norske Spirite

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create a coherent set of doctrines (characterized especially by an emphasis on reincarnation) upon which spiritualist beliefs could be based. Spiritualism could thus be seen as a more inchoate set of beliefs and practices, while Spiritism is a more organized form of spiritualist religion. This distinction was rarely made in the context I am examining—namely Norway in the 1880s and 1890s. For instance, the Norwegian spiritualist periodical *Morgendæmringen* consistently used the Norwegian equivalent of “Spiritism” [*spiritisme*], and only used “Spiritualism” [*spiritualisme*] when referring to the North American branch of the movement. In keeping with the wide-ranging focus of his periodical, however, “Spiritism” was often used quite loosely by Torstensen to refer to a range of efforts to research and examine what we might call “parapsychological phenomena” today. Similarly, in modern Norwegian, *spiritisme* is far more commonly used than *spiritualisme*, and when the former is used, it encompasses both the Anglo-American and continental European contexts. However, since it is the standard in English studies to use the term “spiritualism” unless referring to the teachings of Kardec, I will accordingly use the terminology in this way.



Samfund” [The Norwegian Spiritual Society] makes clear the ways in which Spiritualism saw its field of inquiry as focusing on the same material realm as the physical sciences. The two goals of the new society, according to the announcement, were “at undersøge og udbrede Kjendskaben til den aandelige Verden og de materielle Verdene” [to investigate and widen familiarity with the spiritual world and the material worlds] and “at undersøge Naturen i den Verden, hvori vi leve, og de Kræfter, som røre sig deri..” [to investigate nature in the world in which we live, and the forces that move about therein] (*Morgendæmringen* 3.2, 16).

Here spiritual manifestations are put on the same level as physical forces modern science was preoccupied with, with the implication that they may occupy the same sphere and operate on similar underlying principles as phenomena such as electricity. There is certainly never any implication that Spiritualism sought to limit its purview to purely “spiritual” forces; instead, the scope of spiritualist investigations could be surprisingly capacious, discussing what we might consider psychological or medical topics (such as the physiology of sleep and the use of hypnotism in psychiatric treatment) alongside religious topics (such as the nature of prophecy and the concept of reincarnation) and what we now think of parapsychological or pseudo-scientific phenomena (such as clairvoyance and second sight). The common element of all of these spiritualist preoccupations was that they were interested in occult (that is to say hidden, invisible, unexplained) forces operating within the world. As with vitalism, spiritualism was interested in the forces that animate organic matter, and states in which physical bodies act under the power of an agency other than the conscious mind. This is why the figure of the “medium” is so important; far from merely being a person capable of reaching out to the spiritual world, the body of the medium (as the name suggests) could become a physical conduit that could be controlled by invisible entities such as the spirits of the dead, or other psychic forces.

Another similarity between spiritualism and vitalism is that they both fixate on invisible forces that they nevertheless insist are scientifically verifiable. There is thus a seemingly paradoxical combination of the material and the transcendent in both disciplines, as they seek to articulate the nature of apparently transcendent forces using the methods and (in some cases) the language of scientific materialism. Historian Shane McCristine explains the scientific aspirations of spiritualism, which derived from the idea that “proof of [supernatural] phenomena, if it could be found, would question not only the tenets of various forms of scientific thinking, but also extend the scope of mental abilities, redrawing the boundaries between illusion and reality, and posit radically new ideas of nature and humanity” (McCristine 2012, x). The hope of spiritualists was thus not to repudiate the scientific method, or return to a pre-modern way of understanding the physical world, but rather to expand the horizons of the known world through their investigations. As McCristine puts it, “The quest of many self-conscious ‘moderns’ was, in essence, to prove that the supernatural was not supernatural, but rather ‘preternatural’, a realm of undiscovered principles, or evidence that there were ‘more things in heaven and earth’ than dreamt of by nineteenth-century science” (McCristine 2012, x). In the spiritualist writings of the time, this is precisely the repeated claim: that spiritualism revealed forces that were materially real, but that had so far eluded scientific elucidation

either because of the lack of modern recording technology, or because of the prejudices of the scientists themselves.

Although the persistence of widespread beliefs in a “spirit world” well into the modern era can strike us as atavistic—an uncanny relic of “primitive” beliefs in a modern world predicated upon the repudiation of such superstitions—the alignment of spiritualist claims with a modern epistemological demand for empirical proof helped make Spiritualism into a conspicuously modern form of inquiry. The stated goal of public séances held in the name of Spiritualism was to support the claims of spirit mediums through public demonstration, which “offered modern men and women scientific proof, evidence that could be tested by the senses, for beliefs that previously depended on faith alone” (Gunning 2003, 10). Thus Spiritualism may be seen as a characteristically modern response to the supernatural; no longer willing to accept claims of otherworldly manifestations on the basis of religious authority, modern believers in unexplained spiritual and psychological phenomena sought material proof of the existence of the soul beyond physical death. This attempt to bridge the divide between the “primitive” belief in the supernatural and the modern reliance on empirical evidence has led the Danish historian Jesper Vaczy Kragh to observe:

Spiritismen var først og fremmest et forsøg på at forholde sig til et moderne problem, som optog mange mennesker—konflikten mellem religion og videnskab. I forhold til denne modsætning repræsenterede spiritismen en mellemvej. Spiritisterne søgte at tilpasse en religiøs tro til nye naturvidenskabelige metoder og teorier, som de var meget inspireret af. Spiritisterne mente at kunne forene religion og videnskab. (Kragh 2002, 53)

[Spiritualism was first and foremost an attempt to relate to a modern problem that many people were preoccupied with—the conflict between religion and science. In relation to this conflict, spiritualism represented a middle way. The spiritualists sought to adapt religious belief to new scientific methods and theories, which they were greatly inspired by. The spiritualists claimed to be able to unite religion and science.]

This attempt to “unite religion and science” manifested itself, among other ways, in an emphasis on the sensory experience and recording of spiritual manifestations. As an article in *Morgendæmringen* from 1888 entitled “Hvad er spiritismen?” [What is spiritualism?] explains, one of the main goals of spiritualism was to convince skeptical moderns, who demanded physical evidence, of the immortality of the soul:

Men dem, som tvivle, som ville have Fakta for at gjenoprætte deres Tro, bringer Spiritismen Beviser, den lader Enhver, som blot vil aabne Øinene, tage og føle paa Sandheden. Spiritismen vil ikke forandre Nogens Religion; den søger at overbevise de Vantro om Sjelens Existens efter Legemets død. (*Morgendæmringen* 1888, 3.11:87)

[But to those who doubt, who want facts in order to revive their faith, spiritualism brings evidence, it allows everyone who will but open their eyes, touch and feel the truth. Spiritualism will not change anybody's religion; it seeks to convince the faithless of the existence of the soul after the death of the body].

In the descriptions of séances from spiritualist publications, there is a consistent emphasis on physical details and other (particularly visual) data that might provide verifiable evidence over more subjective accounts of personal experiences. This is especially true toward the end of the century, when spiritualism (under fire from those who sought to debunk the claims of mediums) sought more and more to prove its claims through spectacular means. Most often this meant that mediums sought not merely to channel the voice of the dead, or to convey messages heard while in a trance, but to actually “materialize” a spirit. Séances thus became more and more spectacular in nature, focused on providing visual proof of the afterlife, fitting in with historian Anne Braude's claim that spiritualism gradually shifted from an emphasis on aural manifestations (voices or rappings) to more spectacular visual manifestations (such as full bodily materializations) (see Braude 1989, 177).

In an article in *Morgendämringen* from 1889 describing séances performed by a medium visiting Kristiania from her previous stop in Göteborg, Sweden, we get a sense of what sorts of practices a “materialization medium” (as opposed to a trance medium) used. The author describes the attendees of the two private séances the medium performed: there were 24 spectators in the audience (12 women and 12 men), most of who had never attended a séance with a complete materialization before. Thereafter the author describes the cabinet the medium sat within during the séance: “6 fot högt, 5 fot långt och 2 fot bredt” [6 feet tall, 5 feet long and 2 feet wide] with “mörkgröna draperier, som hängde utanpå hvarandre, och kunde... begagnas som in- och utgång” (*Morgendämringen* 1889, 4.3:21) [dark green drapes that hung across each other, and could be used as an entrance and exit]. The seats of the audience were placed in two semi-circular rows, “ej långt ifrån kabinettet” (*Morgendämringen* 1889, 4.3:21) [not far from the cabinet]. The séance began with a performance on the piano by one of the female attendees, during which time “andarne samla det material de behöfva, för att uppbygga de kroppar de för ögonblikket iföra sig” (*Morgendämringen* 1889, 4.3:21) [the spirits collected the matter they needed in order to build up the bodies they would momentarily inhabit]. All of the attendees remained as quiet as possible since, the author reminds us, speaking too loudly can disturb the spirits. The author then describes the first sign of a materialization they beheld: “något hvitt, som liknade en näsduk eller en liten sky” (*Morgendämringen* 1889, 4.3:21) [something white, which resembled a handkerchief or a little cloud] that appeared near the floor underneath the cabinet's drapery. The white substance disappeared and reappeared several times, until the drapery rustled and a spiritual figure emerged, a female spirit, who looked about the assembled circle, reached out her hand to a female attendee, took both her hands and stroked her cheek. Thereafter followed several other spirits, including a man over six feet tall with a thick beard, wearing white clothing and a turban. Later the spirit of a young girl named Ninia appeared, who the author notes is a spirit who frequently appears at this particular medium's séances. During the next séance, the author describes how a

spirit named Yolande appeared in a particularly convincing way: she gradually appeared out of a white, cloud-like substance *outside* of the cabinet. That this is described as remarkable implies (though it is not overtly stated) that all of the other spirit manifestations materialized *within* the cabinet, and only emerged from behind the drapes after the materialization was complete. Ninia again appeared at the second séance, offering one of the attendees the chance to cut off a bit of her white clothing to keep as a souvenir. One interesting detail offered by the author is that “Ingen af skickelserna kunde tala, då deras talorganer förmodligen ej hafva varit tillräckligt materialiserade dertill, men de besvarade de frågor man gaf dem genom knackningar” (*Morgendæmringen* 1889, 4.3:21) [none of the figures could speak, since their speech organs likely hadn’t been sufficiently materialized for such, but they answered the questions they were posed through rappings.] After the two séances, according to the author, the public was convinced:

Alla åskådarna voro eniga om, att seancerna hade haft en fullkomligt öfverbevisande karaktär, och för dem, på ett omiskänneligt sätt, stadfäst det faktum, att andarne kunne göra sig synliga för människorna i fullt kroppslig gestalt og de kände si uppfyllda af tacksamhet mot det medium, som endast af interesse för saken, utan någon som helst penningfördel, hade trotsat resans besvärligheter etc., för att hjälpa oss med sin värdefulla assistance under vort arbete för spiritismens stora och heliga sak. (*Morgendæmringen* 1889, 4.3:21)

[All the spectators were in agreement that the séances had been of a completely convincing character, and for them, in an unmistakable way, had established the fact that spirits could make themselves visible for people in full corporeal gestalt, and they felt filled with thankfulness toward the medium, who only out of interest for the cause, without any type of pecuniary benefit, had fought great difficulties etc., in order to help us with her worthy assistance in our work for spiritualism’s great and holy cause.]

What we see in the remarkable description of these séances held in Kristiania in 1889, is the attention the author gave to the physical details of the proceedings, from the measurements of the cabinet, the color of the drapes, the color of the clothing, and physical descriptions of the bodies the spirits inhabited. Furthermore, we see how the séance was geared toward an audience expecting spectacular visual and tactile audience—not only did the spirits allow themselves to be seen, one even let the audience cut off bits of her clothing as further physical evidence. The soundscape of the séance seems to have been profoundly hushed, not just because the spirits are incapable of speech, but also because the audience was careful to remain reverently silent during the proceedings, so as not to disturb the atmosphere. The only sounds we read of were the music that was performed at the outset of the séance, as well as the rapping noises the spirits used to answer questions (a practice that goes all the way back to the Fox sisters’ first performance in 1849).

Although the author does not give the name of the medium who performed these exceptionally convincing séances in 1889, it was almost certainly Madame d’Espérance, the alias of British medium Elizabeth Hope, who traveled extensively throughout

continental Europe and Scandinavia performing séances from the 1880s until her final séance, performed in Copenhagen in 1919, two months before her death. From a skeptical history of spiritualism written in 1920, we learn that Madame d'Espérance had begun her career around 1875 as a trance medium, but shifted to a materialization medium at some point in the late 1870s. We read further that

Her chief ghost was an Arab-maid—‘beautiful,’ of course—named Yolande (which is not very Semitic), apparently about sixteen years old. At times Yolande ‘apported’ with her beautiful exotic flowers. She was the most esteemed and attractive of all the ghosts in the contemporary Pantheon, and no Spiritualist dreamed of questioning the good faith of the pretty and refined young widow, Mme. d'Espérance. She was the last anchor of the belief in materialisations. (McCabe 1920, 166–7)<sup>12</sup>

Madame d'Espérance returned to Norway's capital three years later, a year after the publication of *Trætte Mænd*, when Garborg was at the height of his fascination with spiritualism. So taken was Garborg with finding out more about spiritualism through personal experience, that he undertook a series of spiritualist séances with his friends, Ivar Mortensson and Rasmus Steinsvik, as well as with his wife, Hulda in the fall of 1892 at his cabin Kolbotnen in Tynset. Since the famed Madame d'Espérance, whose last séances in Kristiania had been so convincing to the spiritualists in attendance, was back in Norway, Garborg invited her to perform the series of séances at his home. During that fall, the group held at least 20 séances, which both Garborg and his friend Steinsvik referred to in their personal journals. According to Rolf Thesen, it is clear that Garborg “har kjent seg forarga over alt tøvet i desse seansene—serleg syner referatet av ellefte seanse det; merknadene hans er her og der ironiske og skeptiske” (Thesen 1945, 207) [has felt vexed by all the nonsense in these séances—this is especially apparent in his summary of the eleventh séance; his remarks are by turns ironic and skeptical]. But Thesen even hints that Garborg's interest in spiritualism must have been significant, given the amount of time and effort he expended on seriously investigating the practice: “han dreiv då på med desse eksperimenta i to-tre månader!” (Thesen 1945, 207) [he carried on with these experiments for two or three months!]

Garborg's immediate motivation for holding the séances was not, however, merely a personal curiosity: he was planning on writing a series of articles on spiritualism for the periodical *Samtiden* the following summer. Garborg tellingly describes spiritualism as “denne nye religion, som holder på å overvelde verden!” (Thesen 1945, 208) [this new religion that is in the midst of overwhelming the world!]. In a letter, Garborg told a friend at the time that he was going to read five volumes on spiritualism, and added jokingly “Bed for meg” (Thesen 1945, 208) [Pray for me]. He was careful to keep the séances and

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<sup>12</sup> McCabe further describes an embarrassing episode for Madame d'Espérance in which an audience member at a séance in 1880 reached out and grabbed the apparition claiming to be Yolande, only to find that it was Madame d'Espérance herself. Although the incident damaged her reputation among skeptics in her home country, spiritualists generally didn't believe the accounts of her debunking (McCabe 1920, 167).

his intense study of spiritualism private, however, out of concern that people would think that “han likevel har vorti galen” (Thesen 1945, 208) [he has gone crazy after all].

Garborg begins his article on spiritualism by acknowledging the apparent incongruity of believing in spirits in the modern age: “Verden er blit slig, den. Skal vi sige, at den begynder at gaa i barndommen?” (Garborg 2001, XI: 24) [This is the way the world has become. Shall we say that it is beginning to enter its childhood?] Here we see that the process of *re-enchantment* in the modern world can strike some as a regressive process, just as Gabriel Gram’s religious conversion seems. The return of an apparently more old-fashioned mode of belief was all the more surprising because it was taking place in an age when scientific materialism had seemingly clarified and explained everything about nature that possibly could be known:

Vi var jo komne saa svært godt i orden nu. Der var sat skille mellem vandene oventil og vandene nedentil; det, der ‘kunde vides’, var saa godt udsondret og afstængt fra det, der ‘ikke kan vides,’ og der var befæstet et saa svælgende dyb mellem det kjendtes og det ukjendtes verden, at der ikke skulde kunne opstaa nogen forvirring mer. Ingen kunde naa over i det ukjendte, ikke med sin tanke engang, og endnu mindre kunde noget derfra naa over til os. (Garborg 2001, XI: 24)

[We had, of course, gotten everything into order. There had been put a boundary between the waters above and the waters below. That which “could be known” was so thoroughly banished and shut-off from that which “cannot be known,” and a gaping abyss had been secured between the world of the known and the world of the unknown, that there shouldn’t be any more confusion. Nobody could reach into the unknown, not even with his thoughts, and even less could anything from over there reach over to us.]

What Garborg describes here is a state of intellectual order that had seemingly banished the possibility of unknown, supernatural forces. The clear distinction between the known world and the realm of the unknowable is described as a “gaping abyss” that seemingly precludes the possibility of supernatural occurrences.

In the ensuing paragraph, Garborg connects this state of apparent epistemological order to aesthetic trends in the previous decades, which had favored realism and naturalism:

Over vor egen verden skinnede realismens klare sol, saa alle nattens taager og skygger blev borte. Der var ingen mysterier mer og ingen mystik, ingen mørkelofter og ingen spøgelse. Hvor langt man vilde reise, i tanken eller i virkeligheden, saa traf man overalt denne ene og samme regelrette, lovbundne, solide realitet; den var lidt kjedelig kanske, men tryk og tilforladelig. (Garborg 2001, XI: 24)

[The clear sun of realism shone over our own world, so that all the fog and shadows of nighttime were banished. There were no mysteries and no mysticism, no dark attics and no ghosts. However far one traveled, in thought or in reality, one bumped up against this singular and identical regulated, law-bound, solid reality; it was a bit boring, perhaps, but it was safe and dependable.]

Here we see one of the reasons why spiritualism seems to have fascinated Garborg so much during these years: its newfound popularity seemed symptomatic of a larger aesthetic and cultural trends. As Garborg writes here, the realism of the previous decade was perhaps a bit boring and predictable, but it offers the comfort of banishing the possibility of supernatural and otherwise inexplicable occurrences. Garborg continues:

Dualismen var beseiret; der var et eneste enkelt, stort forklaringsprincip, som strak til for alt; og naar det ikke strak til længer, saa kunde vi bare fornægte.... Orden i alt! – sa videnskaben; og der blev orden. Vi var stolte over denne orden, og vi trykkede hverandres hænder og forsikrede hverandre, at nu var fablernes tid forbi. (Garborg 2001, XI: 24–5)

[Dualism had been conquered; there was a single, solitary, great explanatory principle, which was sufficient for everything; and when it was no longer sufficient, we could just reject it.... Order in everything! said science; and there was order. We were proud of this order, and we shook each other's hands and assured each other that the time of fables had past.]

In his description of the dominance of the scientific epistemology in the modern world, it is fitting that Garborg alludes to the Biblical creation myth: let there be order, declared science, and there was order. Scientific materialism creates a comforting intellectual cosmos that precludes the metaphysical realm completely. As Garborg says here, dualism is conquered, and science declares the validity of only one great explanatory principle: materialism. If a phenomenon cannot be empirically observed and verified, then it does not belong to the realm of a socially agreed-upon “reality,” and is therefore relegated to the realm of superstition. But the comforting cosmos created by nineteenth-century science was soon to be thrown into chaos by the sudden appearance on the cultural landscape of people claiming to have seen ghosts: “Men det ukjendtes verden havde ikke spor af respekt for det nittende aarhundrede. En vakker dag begyndte det simpelthen at spøge” (Garborg 2001, XI: 25) [But the world of the unknown had no trace of respect for the nineteenth century. One beautiful day, the hauntings quite simply began].

If we compare the intellectual-historical narrative Garborg is setting up here with that of his earlier essay, “Den idealistiske Reaktion,” the connection between the rise of spiritualism and the rise of neo-idealism in Garborg’s thinking is clear. In the earlier essay, he describes how the predictability of scientific positivism no longer satisfies the modern mind, which he says has a need to seek out the hidden realm of mystical, metaphysical forces beyond or beneath the observable material world, and therefore neo-idealism appears on the cultural landscape to address that modern need. In his later essay,

spiritualism is serving the same function as neo-idealism, satisfying the modern hunger for mystery, mysticism, and the metaphysical realm.

Garborg proceeds to describe how, in a modern age dominated by scientific empiricism, spiritualism sought to establish its legitimacy by meeting the standards of a scientific epistemology: “spiritisterne havde optaget tidens metode—: de ‘experimenterede!’ Deres lære skulde ikke være en religion; det var den videnskab, en erfaringsvidenskab” (Garborg 2001, XI: 25) [the spiritualists had discovered the method of the times: they “experimented!” Their teachings were not to be a religion; it was a science, an empirical science]. The message of this empirically-oriented spiritualism toward the many skeptics was quite simply, “undersøg selv!” (Garborg 2001, XI: 25) [investigate yourselves!]. As Garborg says later in the essay, spiritualism seemed to pave the way for a new intellectual openness to mystical explanations: “Positivismens nøgterne, mandige ‘Hvorfor?’ viger pladsen for det mere feminine ‘Hvorfor ikke’. Istedetfor det samvittighedsfulde og besværlige: ‘Ikke tro uden, hvad der er bevist!’ faar vi det mere poetiske: ‘Ikke nægte uden, hvad der er modbevist” (Garborg 2001, XI: 27) [The manly, objective “Why?” of positivism makes way for the more feminine “Why not.” Instead of the conscientious and tiring “Do not believe that which is unproven!” we get the more poetic: “Do not reject that which is not disproven”]. The rising popularity of spiritualism thus indicated for Garborg a cultural openness to new ideas and explanations about the ultimate nature of reality.

Although Garborg was never fully “converted” to spiritualism, the practice held an undeniable intellectual appeal for him, despite his longstanding reputation as a radical atheist and a freethinker. If he was never convinced of the claims of spiritualism, where did his fascination with the rise of spiritualism come from? Why did he have the protagonist of his most successful novel experiment with spiritualism? Why did he go to such great lengths to hold dozens of séances at his own home? Why did he read so thoroughly about spiritualism, and write such a long article about it in *Samtiden*? The answer, I think, comes when he describes the limitations of science when it comes to understanding “the unknown”:

Vi er ikke længer saa trygge paa, at vi kan gjøre os færdige med uendeligheden ved at stænge den fra os. Videnskaben selv blir utryg. Jo dybere den graver, des hulere høres grunden under den;—skulde denne solide virkelighed kanske selv høre med i ‘det ukendtes’ verden? Paa den anden side gjøres der i psykologien opdagelser, som synes at pege i retning af, at ‘det ukjendte’ kanske ogsaa hører med i ‘virkeligheden’; hypnotismen tvinger os mer og mer til at antage sjælelige kræfter af overmaterial rang,—sjælekræfter, der behersker materien. (Garborg 2001, XI: 27)

[We are no longer so certain that we can get rid of infinitude by pushing it away from us. Science itself becomes uncertain. The deeper one digs, the more porous the ground beneath one’s feet becomes. Is it the case that even this “solid reality” belongs to the world of “the unknown”? On the other hand, there have been psychological discoveries that seem to indicate that “the unknown” also belongs to



the realm of “reality”; hypnotism forces us more and more to assume the existence of spiritual forces of supermaterial order—spiritual forces that control matter.]

Just as he did in his 1890 essay on neo-idealism, Garborg again implies that science is only capable of understanding the superficial aspects of nature; here he describes how scientific explanations become more and more porous the deeper it attempts to go in penetrating the surface of material reality. The ultimate insufficiency of science as a totalizing system of knowledge leaves open the possibility that the so-called “unknown” forces might also belong to the realm of the real. What is needed, then, is a new conception of “reality” that allows for the possibility of immaterial forces and phenomena—or what Garborg calls here *supermaterial* forces.

Garborg’s impulse here to call into question the intellectual dogmatism of scientific discourse is echoed in many of the writings of spiritualists at the time. As one representative example, we can take the influential Norwegian spiritualist and theosophist Richard Eriksen, who wrote a number of books and pamphlets explaining spiritualism and parapsychological phenomena for the Norwegian public in the 1890s, many of which were advertised heavily in the national newspapers. His 1891 book *Det Oversanselige: En kort Udsigt over de psykiske og spiritualistiske Fænomener* [The Extrasensory: A Short Overview of Psychic and Spiritualistic Phenomena] engages in the same kind of rhetorical tactics of Garborg, calling into question the dominance of scientific empiricism. Eriksen puts a finer point on his critique of science; rather than claiming unknown *immaterial* forces, he attributes the appearance of parapsychological phenomena to the existence of *ethereal* (i.e. gaseous) forces that science has yet to measure because of their invisibility. Scientific observation has not invented the tools yet that are sensitive enough to detect these forces, but that does not mean that they do not belong in the realm of material reality. Eriksen explain that it is possible “at der i naturen kan eksistere ukjendte legemer, som vistnok er materielle, men hvis materialitet er saa ætherisk, at de intet indtryk kan gjøre paa vore sanser” (Eriksen 1891, 3) [that in nature, there can be unknown bodies, which certainly are material, but whose materiality is so ethereal, that they can make no impression upon our senses]. Eriksen calls these imperceptible, material forces “oversanselige fluider” (3) [extrasensory fluids], a concept that opens up the possibility that the soul itself is material: “kunde det ikke være muligt at meget af det, som vi er vant til at tillæge immaterialitet dog til syvende og sidst var materie i oversanselig form? Man siger f. eks., at sjælen er immaterial, men kunde det ikke være muligt, at den bestod af oversanselig materie?” (Eriksen 1891, 4) [couldn’t it be possible that much of what we are used to characterizing as immaterial is actually in the end material in a extrasensory form? People say, for instance that the soul is immaterial, but couldn’t it be possible that it consists of an extrasensory matter?] It is important to note that Eriksen’s gesture here of claiming that the soul is a material, yet imperceptible, entity is an attempt to overcome the epistemological gulf between science and religion. By claiming to be investigating *material* reality, he appeases the scientific impulse to focus on empirically verifiable phenomena; but by saying that matter may in some cases be made up of such fine particles that it takes on an “extra-sensory” form, he appeases the religious tendency to focus on hidden, unverifiable forces.

Here we see in Eriksen's comments how the goal of spiritualism was to open up the public to new ways of thinking about "reality," and to call into question the apparent monopoly that scientific materialism had on knowledge. The message was not that science was "wrong," but simply that it could not explain *everything*, and that there was more to reality than the observable, material realm. Thus, although spiritualism frequently aspired to an empirical and experimental rigor akin to science, it also posed a challenge to the exclusive truth-claims science made about the ultimate nature of reality. For its advocates, spiritualism could thus represent a middle ground between the dogmatic extremes of science and religion, which was part of the reason why it might have held such an appeal for Garborg, despite the fact that he found that it was often based on delusion and deception in practice.

### *Conclusion*

As one of Norway's most important novelists, essayists, and public intellectuals, Arne Garborg played a hybrid role in the cultural landscape at the end of the nineteenth century. Simultaneously an engaged participant in the latest literary trends as well as an exceptionally articulate commentator on them, Garborg could address the rise of what he called neo-idealism from the perspective of both a writer and a cultural critic. One of the challenges of understanding Garborg's take on the rise of subjectivity, spiritualism, and the "literature of the soul" in the early 1890s, however, is his consistent and sometimes confounding use of irony both in his fiction and his cultural criticism. Rather than taking a polemical, thoroughly partisan stance as Knut Hamsun did in his essays and lectures about psychological literature and the "life of the soul," Garborg wrote about neo-idealism with the aloofness and the apparent detachment of a distant observer. Yet we know that he wrestled with the newest cultural trends and ideas in European culture in a sincere and engaged way that belied the ironic detachment of his literary style; the acuteness of the personal crisis Garborg experienced upon immersing himself in the writings of Nietzsche in 1890, and the apparent frenzy he worked under when writing *Trætte Mænd* attest to an authentic personal engagement with the religious, spiritualist, and neo-idealist yearnings to which his protagonist in the novel gives voice. Rather than understanding Garborg's irony as a pose, as a refusal to personally, sincerely engage with the questions of the day, or as a nihilistic gesture (as Sjøvik writes that Andersen would have it), I argue that it was another manifestation of Garborg's commitment to intellectual freedom and his resistance to scientific, religious, and cultural dogmas. Garborg's irony thus fits well within the ethos of the neo-idealist worldview he described in his 1890 essay, and which richly informed both *Trætte Mænd* and his personal investigations of and writings about spiritualism. What all of these have in common is a thoroughgoing epistemological skepticism, and an unwillingness to accept the predictability and hubristic self-assurance of modern scientific positivism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Higher Above and Deeper Within: Perceptual Transcendence and Vitalistic Embodiment in Sigbjørn Obstfelder's *En Prests Dagbog* (1900)

Sigbjørn Obstfelder's writing has been described as "en litteraturhistorisk markør for 1890-tallet" (Andersen 2001: 297) [a literary-historical marker of the 1890s], and Obstfelder's value for understanding that particular literary moment in Scandinavia can hardly be understated. His brief literary career, cut short by his premature death by tuberculosis in 1900, spans most of the decade, and his writing is often taken as the perfect encapsulation of the turn away from realist prose and toward neo-romantic lyricism at the end of the century. In her book-length study of Obstfelder, Mary Kay Norseng explains his place in Scandinavian literary history, commenting that he possessed a "vision as unique as it was contemporary and the daring to commit it to paper. The combination made him Norway's poet 'par excellence' of the *fin de siècle*, one of the significant precursors of Scandinavian Modernism" (Norseng 1982, 1).

Obstfelder's lasting place in the popular imagination, at least in his own country, is largely tied to the poem "Jeg ser" from his 1893 debut collection. In it, the poet describes his profound sense of estrangement from the city around him, as well as from the very planet he inhabits. Although the poem's title suggests an identity founded upon poetic vision, in fact it stages the failure of the poet's vision to guarantee any stable sense of existential significance or belonging in an unsettling modern cityscape. In the poem's memorable final stanza, we read:

Jeg ser, jeg ser  
Jeg er vist kommet paa en feil klode!  
Her er saa underligt... (Obstfelder 2000, I:40)

[I see, I see  
I must have come to the wrong planet!  
It's so strange here...]

This is far from an isolated expression of modern alienation in visual terms in Obstfelder's writing. Vision and visuality are among the most dominant motifs in his work. I quote from Mary Kay Norseng again, who writes:

Sigbjørn Obstfelder looked at the world and saw it staring back at him with strange eyes. They are everywhere in his writings. . . . Sometimes they are magical. . . . More often they are ominous. . . . The eyes of Obstfelder's work betray him. He was a haunted man, painfully self-conscious, never really at home anywhere, and seldom at peace with himself. (Norseng 1982, 1)

For Norseng, the conspicuous presence of the menacing, reciprocated gaze of the modern world in much of Obstfelder's writing is a manifestation of his own neuroses and

insecurities. Putting a less anxious spin on Obstfelder’s fixation on vision, James McFarlane describes Obstfelder as a “visionary” who translated his world into “essentially visual terms” (McFarlane 1987, xvi). Referring to one of Obstfelder’s other enduring fascinations, McFarlane goes on to write, “For all Obstfelder’s deep love and understanding of music, his imagination is nevertheless one which is most at home in a world where—whether directly visible, imaginatively visualized, or wholly visionary—vision is supreme” (McFarlane 1987, xvi). According to McFarlane, Obstfelder’s work encompasses both literal and metaphoric forms of vision. We can speak, then, of a visual imagination in Obstfelder’s writing that can accommodate the physical sense of vision as well as more speculative and even prophetic “vision.” No matter how vision is conceived—whether literal or metaphoric—the concept of vision is omnipresent in Obstfelder’s works.

Less remarked-upon than Obstfelder’s obvious fixation on vision and visuality is his perhaps equally persistent interest in a vital force or energy permeating all of nature. This vitalistic tendency is also on display in his debut collection, the opening poem of which describes a vision of what he calls *livsunderen* [the wonder of life] that the poet recalls having shared one night with a close friend. In the fourth stanza of “Venner” [Friends], we read:

Livet!  
 En i uendelige baner sig slyngende stråle,  
 gennem alle væsner, gennem alle kloder,  
 en uendelig, — tonende —, ildspiral, —  
 som vi ikke kan se begyndelsen på,  
 og ikke enden på,  
 og ånd risler i,  
 og sole drypper af... (Obstfelder 2000, I:36)

[Life!  
 A beam hurling itself in unending orbits,  
 through all beings, through all planets  
 an infinite, —ringing—, firespiral, —  
 that we cannot see the beginning of,  
 nor the end of,  
 and spirit murmurs within,  
 and sun drips from...]

Here we see “life” described as an infinite, spiraling, orbiting force, dripping with the life-giving energy of the sun. The vital force overlaps with Obstfelder’s visual fixation here, but in a negative sense; life exists beyond the reach of our vision—we cannot see the beginning or the end of it. The vital force is invisible. Obstfelder’s ecstatic vision of life as an unending beam or ray of energy penetrating the entire universe is an early expression of vitalism in Scandinavian culture. And although vitalism has become a significant topic of

critical discussion in Scandinavian literary studies in recent years, Obstfelder's life philosophy has not been discussed at any length.<sup>13</sup>

In opposition to the kinds of vitalistic concepts that Obstfelder's immediate precursors developed, which tended to reinforce the individual and shift the literary optic toward the vitality of the embodied modern subject, Obstfelder's vitalism was built upon a notion of the vital force that transcended the individual, that went "through all beings" and "through all planets," as Obstfelder says in this poem. There is always a cosmic scale at play in Obstfelder's vitalism. This later form of vitalism that Obstfelder points toward may be seen as profoundly dehumanizing and challenging to the integrity of the individual subject, a quality that would characterize much of the vitalist literature in Norway in the twentieth century. At its height in Scandinavian culture, vitalism was almost totally indifferent to the individual, preferring instead to focus on the universality of the vital force, which penetrated all living matter, no matter how varying the external forms.

Particularly in the Scandinavian context, this kind of expansive vitalism was frequently connected to a fixation on the life-giving role of the sun, and was based upon the notion that "alt levende stammer fra en særlig livskraft, en skapende impuls som ikke lar seg forklare ut fra mekanismens lover" (Vassenden 2012, 13) [every living thing derives from a particular vital force, a creative impulse that cannot be explained according to mechanistic laws]. In the poem quoted above, we see this hinted at by Obstfelder's use of the word "stråle" [beam, as in sunbeam], which suggests that the life force he describes is the vital energy emanating from the sun.

This heliophilic tendency in Scandinavian vitalism was identified as early as 1890 by Knut Hamsun, who described in his provocative essay "Fra det ubevidste Sjæleliv" [From the Unconscious Life of the Soul] what he called a modern "sickness"—namely the "Kærlighed til Solen" [love of the sun] which he claimed was "den samme navnløse Anelse af Blodsforvandtskab med Alskabningen" (Hamsun 1939, 40) [that same nameless sense of being related by blood to all of creation]. In the medical field, Niels Ryberg Finsen, the Faroese-Danish physician working in Copenhagen recognized the potential of solar rays to treat otherwise intractable illnesses, pioneering the use of phototherapy in medical practice and sparking a larger cultural fascination with sunbathing to promote good health.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A partial list of recent publications about Scandinavian vitalism, none of which address Obstfelder's work in any significant way, includes Boasson 2016; Dam 2010; Halse 2004, 2006; Hvidberg-Hansen and Oelsner, 2011; Mathisen 2012; Moldung 2005; Nesby 2017; Nielsen 2013; Simonsen 2005; Sørensen 2011; and Vassenden 2012, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Starting in 1888, Finsen began experimenting on himself by sunbathing at his home in order to treat the neurodegenerative disorder he suffered from, and became fascinated with the unclear physiological connection between sunlight and good health. Although he never successfully demonstrated how sunlight worked to ameliorate certain conditions, he became famous for his application of sunlight and so-called "chemical rays" (the contemporary term most often used for invisible rays contained in sunlight, especially ultraviolet rays) to treat small pox and lupus, and published a groundbreaking treatise on the subject entitled *Om Anvendelse i Medicinen af koncentrerede kemiske Lysstråler* (1896, *On the Medical Application of Concentrated Chemical Light Rays*). Finsen's pioneering work was supported heavily by the Danish government, which established *Finsens medisinske Lysinstitut* [Finsen's Medical Light Institute] in 1896 with the express goal of "at fremme Undersøgelser over Lysets Virkning paa de levende Organismer, hovedsageligt med det Formaal for Øje, at anvende Lysstråler i den praktiske Medicins Tjeneste" (Finsen

More famously, the motif of vitalistic sun-worship is conspicuous in the series of sun-themed paintings that Edvard Munch painted between 1910 and 1916, one version of which is prominently displayed at the auditorium at the old University of Oslo campus.<sup>15</sup> Munch's depiction of the sun is striking not only because of the blinding whiteness of the solar orb that is its focal point, but also for Munch's conspicuous attention to the *stråler* [rays] radiating from the sun to give life to all of the earth. In the painting, we see that Munch even breaks down the whiteness of the solar light into the various wavelengths of light contained within it—most prominently in this version of the painting, into blues and reds and yellows. This nod to spectroscopy had the effect of drawing our attention to the normally invisible array of light frequencies that are contained in the sunlight that (as the painting depicts) streams out from the sun and provides vital energy to all of nature. There is something about the vital force radiating from the sun that exceeds our visual capacity. The vital force, like the “chemical rays” in sunlight—the parts of the light spectrum invisible to the naked eye—is invisible, even though it is everywhere in the world, at the heart of all organic life. Just as Obstfelder had written in his poem “Venner” from 1893, the vital force emanating from the sun exceeds our visual register.

All of this cultural fascination with sunlight and vitality at the end of the century could be understood as manifestations of a kind of “heliophilic vitalism.” But because of the conspicuous focus on *stråler* in all of these contexts, and the recognition of the mysterious but crucial role that the electromagnetic radiation coming from the sun played in promoting health and life, it is perhaps more appropriate to broaden the term to “radiant vitalism.” Besides sunlight, there were other forms of radiation that were being discovered and theorized upon at the time Obstfelder was writing. In particular, Obstfelder's underlying interest in radiation took on a new significance after 1895, when the discovery of another kind of *stråle* was making a huge impact on the public consciousness all over the world, namely the X-ray (or as it is called in Norwegian, the *X-stråle* or *Röntgenstråle*). Thus, in the 1893 poem quoted above, the word *stråle* most directly points to the radiance of the sun, but by the time of Obstfelder's death in 1900, the word *stråle* had taken on a double valence—referring to the vital force (as in the sun-ray) as well as to a completely unprecedented way of visually penetrating matter in order to see the invisible (as in the X-ray).

Obstfelder developed a connection between vision, radiance, and vitalism most extensively in his incomplete, posthumously-published novel *En prests dagbog* (1900, *Diary of a Priest*), which he had, by the time of his death in 1900, come to think of as his magnum opus. In this fragmentary, meandering, firsthand account of the psychological struggles of a lonely priest who longs to find peace and existential comfort in a

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1896, 7) [promoting investigations of the effects of light on living organisms, with an eye toward applying light rays in the service of medical practice]. Finsen was later awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1903 for his hand in developing and promoting phototherapeutic treatments. After his death the following year, Finsen was memorialized with Rudolph Tegner's bronze sculpture *Mod lyset* (1909; *Toward the Light*), which was erected outside of Rigshospitalet in Copenhagen. Uncharacteristically for a memorial statue, Finsen himself is not shown; instead, a trio of nude figures depicted ecstatically basking in the sun as a tribute to the role Finsen had in discovering the curative effects of solar rays.

<sup>15</sup> On the connection between Munch's sun paintings and vitalism, see Berman 2006. On the connection between vitalism and sun-worship in the Scandinavian context, see Oelsner 2011.

destabilized modern world, Obstfelder contributes to an influential strain of vitalist thinking in the Norwegian *fin de siècle*—one that was predicated upon evoking the increasingly penetrative scientific gaze while at the same time exposing its limits. Because it was written largely after Röntgen’s discovery and the subsequent intense public fascination with the mysterious rays, Obstfelder’s attention to *stråler* in the novel takes on this double valence, referring both to sunlight as well as to more mysterious forms of radiant energy. The novel thus participates in a heliophilic strain of vitalist discourse, and at the same time explicitly draws our attention to other forms of radiation that can potentially offer the chance to “shed light” on invisible forces.

In Obstfelder’s particular form of vitalism, vital forces are depicted as deeply, microscopically intertwined with the material world, yet ultimately impenetrable and invisible to the scientific gaze. In opposition to the mediated vision of nineteenth-century science—with its reliance on optical tools such as microscopes, telescopes, spectroscopes, and camera lenses—this strain of vitalism advocated for an imminent, embodied perception of and communion with the vital force. In the novel, vital embodiment is posited in opposition to the disembodied nature of modern visual tools and media. The crucial role of scientific vision, however, was that it made use of new optical tools to create visual records of invisible phenomena, opening up new expanses and suggesting that there were undiscovered realms teeming with life and activity, forcing a reevaluation of the place of the individual human life. Thus, although Obstfelder’s strand of vitalism emphasized visibility, it actually derived from a fascination with the *invisible* forces and phenomena that exist in the natural world, though beyond the horizons of human vision, and so the detection of such invisible forces depended on technology that could help the observer achieve “perceptual transcendence.” But although Obstfelder’s vitalism depends upon technologically aided vision as a way of making the observer aware of hidden forces at work beyond the reach of the naked eye, the culmination of the vitalist conversion narrative only takes place once the priest has shifted focus to the immanent, embodied sensation of vital force. Although he spends most of his diary trying to transcend his bodily senses in order to perceive the divine, there is a gradual movement back to the body, and an ecstatic moment of communion with the vitality of the shining sun.

### *A Book Without Boundaries*

Sigbjørn Obstfelder is remembered primarily for his groundbreaking lyrical poetry, which gained him a reputation as one of Norway’s first literary modernists and perhaps its only symbolist poet. But this reputation as a lyrical poet rests almost entirely on one volume of poetry published in 1893, after which Obstfelder spent his time and authorial energy on prose and drama. This over-identification of Obstfelder with one literary genre owes partly to the fact that he debuted as a poet, and partly to the lyrical sensibility that characterized his prose and drama works. Obstfelder himself was aware that his poetic sensibility didn’t always lend itself to other genres; writing to the Norwegian actress Johanne Dybwad in 1896 about an early draft of his play *De røde dråber* ([The Red Drops], 1897), Obstfelder suggested that his play be labeled “dramatisk digt” [dramatic poem] (Obstfelder 1966, 160) to acknowledge the heavily lyrical nature of the work. His letter to Dybwad reveals an

acute awareness (and perhaps insecurity about) the fact that the play was “udramatisk” [undramatic] (Obstfelder 1966, 158), and he is anxious to attach Dybwad to the part of Lili so that the unconventional, lyrical play will be accepted by a theater director in Christiania and actually put on stage. He explains that, rather than drama, “Jeg har villet gi poesi” (Obstfelder 1966, 158) [I have wanted to give poetry]. On this point, then, Obstfelder and literary critics have traditionally agreed: Obstfelder brought his poetic sensibility to bear on everything he wrote, even his novels, plays, and short stories.

This emphasis on Obstfelder as a lyrical poet has gone hand-in-hand with a scholarly fixation on the volume *Digte* ([Poems], 1893) and a simultaneous dismissal of his prose and drama publications as lesser, flawed works. Per Thomas Andersen points out that not only is Obstfelder overly-identified with his poetry, but that his reputation has largely centered on a single poem from his debut collection, “Jeg ser” [I See]. Andersen writes that “Ikke noen norsk forfatter er i større grad enn Sigbjørn Obstfelder blitt gjenstand for en historisk fiksering knyttet til én enkel tekst” (Andersen 2001, 297) [No Norwegian author has to a greater degree than Sigbjørn Obstfelder become the object of a historical fixation connected to one single text.] For Andersen, this fixation means that Obstfelder becomes “nesten identisk med sitt dikt, slik at det er vanskelig å oppdage resten av hans forfatterskap” (Andersen 2001, 297) [almost identical with his poem, so that it is difficult to discover the rest of his authorship]. Although Obstfelder’s literary career was cut short by his death in 1900, this “historical fixation” on his one volume of poetry—and particularly on one short poem within it—have effectively cut Obstfelder’s literary career even shorter.

Over the last few decades, scholars have sought to remedy this oversimplification of Obstfelder’s literary output by shifting some of the focus to his later work, in particular his unfinished novel *En prests dagbog* ([The Diary of a Priest], 1900). This corrective makes good sense in terms of accurately representing the range of Obstfelder’s oeuvre. Even though it is the poetry that has “gitt ham ry som forløper og foregangsmann,” [given him a reputation as a forerunner and trailblazer] as Per Arne Michelsen has observed, “likevel brukte han mesteparten av sitt (korte) voksne forfatterliv på å skrive, ikke lyrikk, men drama og prosa” [however, he spent most of his (short) adult authorial life writing, not poetry, but drama and prose] (Michelsen 1995, 105). And although *En prests dagbog* was unfinished at the time of his death, Obstfelder had spent a number of years working on the novel, and had come to regard it as his major work.

Reading through Obstfelder’s letters from the last three years of his life, one gets a sense of just how all-consuming the project was for him. After setting to work on the book in 1897, Obstfelder wrote to Swedish author and activist Ellen Key that the few pages he had written so far “indeholder mere eller er dybere end alt det jeg hidtil har skrevet” (Obstfelder 1966, 188) [contain more or are deeper than everything that I have written so far]. The process of writing the book almost immediately turns out to be a major struggle for Obstfelder, and he writes a few months after beginning it that it seems he feels “som jeg måtte kjende alt, ha læst alt, ha tænkt alt, forat skrive det” [as if I need to know everything, have read everything, have thought everything, in order to write it], and that he “kun kunde betale hvert ord med en blodig smerte” [can only pay for each word with bloody pain] (Obstfelder 1966, 192). Despite this struggle with the novel, Obstfelder writes



to Key optimistically that the pages he has written so far “er sikkert det tyngste, det rigeste, jeg har skrevet. Det er, som jeg ikke får hvile, før jeg har skrevet færdig den bog” (Obstfelder 1966, 206) [is surely the heaviest, the richest of everything I have written. It is as if I cannot rest until I have finished writing the book]. By the last few months of his life, however, his mood about the novel has turned more hopeless. Writing again to Key, Obstfelder says that

Denne bog er blevet til min ulykke. I sin tid gik jeg til den med de støste forhåbninger. . . . Ja, jeg havde de vildeste drømme om at komme dybt ind på både guds-problemet og livs-dramaet. . . . Og mer og mer har et dybt mismod grebet mig. Jeg tvivler på, hvad jeg har gjort. Jeg synes ikke det svarer til det, jeg *vilde*, og som jeg endnu tror, jeg *kunde*. (Obstfelder 1966, 228).

[This book has become my misfortune. At a time I set to it with the greatest hopes. . . . Yes, I had the wildest dreams about getting deep into both the problem of God and the drama of life. . . . And more and more a deep dissatisfaction has gripped me. I am in doubt about what I have done. And I don't think it corresponds to what I *wanted*, and to what I still think I *could do*.]

So although Obstfelder had major ambitions for his novel—intending to address the great existential questions of the day—we know that by the time of his death, he thought that what he actually had written had fallen short of his hopes for the novel. It is thus a critical imperative to regard the novel as unfinished and imperfect, and a work that did not live up to Obstfelder's perhaps impossibly ambitious ideals.

Despite Obstfelder's own apparent disappointment with *En prests dagbog*, critical opinion in recent years has generally sought to rehabilitate the novel's reputation and to position it alongside *Digte* as one of Obstfelder's two major works. Acknowledging that the novel is “an imperfect work,” Mary Kay Norseng goes on to write that “by virtue of its serious intent, its aesthetic and psychological concerns, and its moments of real poetry, it is Obstfelder's major work.” For Norseng, the book is a synthesis of the major themes of Obstfelder's authorship: “the effort to see beyond the veil of reality; the relentless questioning of existence; the sensation of alienation, or homelessness, within the self and without; the vacillation between one emotional extreme and the other; and the search for peace and death.” And although the novel is unfinished, Norseng writes that “The Journal's lack of resolution, considered by some an aesthetic flaw, is in reality an aesthetic device: it is the essence of this novel more than any other of Obstfelder's works, making it his most fascinating, and at the same time, most frightening statement on the relativity of perception” (Norseng 1982, 129).

Like Norseng, Per Arne Michelsen has seized upon the supposed formal shortcomings of the novel as aesthetic virtues. Rather than regard the book negatively as being “without an ending,” and therefore being hopelessly flawed, we should think of it instead as “endless.” Michelsen writes that the novel

er ikke bare fragmentarisk. Den er også grenseløs, i den betydning at intet emne, stort eller lite, er den fremmed. . . . *En prests dagbog* er en roman som ikke pretenderer å utgjøre en sammenhengende harmonisk helhet. Snarere er den en stykkevis og delt utprøving av det som ligger utenfor vår syntetiserende forstands rekkevidde. (Michelsen 1995, 106)

[is not only fragmentary. It is also boundless, in the sense that no topic, big or small, is remote from it. . . . *A Priest's Diary* is a novel that doesn't pretend to be a coherent, harmonious unity. Rather it is a piecemeal and divided investigation of that which lies outside of the grasp of our synthesizing understanding.]

It was likely this boundlessness—the fact that the novel was all-encompassing in its thematic scope—that made it such an intense struggle for Obstfelder. We have already read that Obstfelder felt a constant internal pressure to have “read everything” and “thought everything” in order to be up to the task of writing it. Obstfelder’s description of the process of writing makes clear why he spent four years consumed in what turned out to be only a novella-length book. Obstfelder writes to a friend that, as he was transcribing passages he had already written, he constantly found topics that he wanted to expand upon, and this led to a compulsion to read more and more—he mentions “naturvidenskab, Plato o.s.v.” [the natural sciences, Plato, etc.]—before he could finish the book, so that although he has enough material to publish, he is tormented by the sense that he needed to do more, read more, and know more for it to live up to his ideals (Obstfelder 1966, 212). The diary was in essence an endless project that consumed Obstfelder for the last four years of his life. And it is precisely that capacious scope, the ambitious range of themes and topics that the book touched on, that has made it so appealing to Obstfelder scholars in recent years.

I agree with Michelsen’s praise for the aesthetic boundlessness of Obstfelder’s novel, as well as with Norseng’s point that the supposed weakness of the unfinished work is actually part of what makes it so compelling. But Obstfelder’s novel fits into this dissertation not because of its fragmentary, modernist form, but because of the intellectual ambition behind the novel. His compulsion to read “everything” before he can write the novel indicates that Obstfelder was acutely conscious of the intellectual debts his writing owed. Besides his mention of reading Plato and “the natural sciences,” Obstfelder’s correspondence leaves us little clue as to the reading material he was so occupied with while writing. But the novel itself centers on a clergyman whose diaristic exploration of his own faith crisis bears witness to a consciousness preoccupied with the latest developments of urban modernity, the way scientific discoveries had overturned the human relationship to the divine, and the uncertain place the modern individual yearning for existential significance occupies in a world in which old certainties are constantly being overturned by newly observed phenomena. My own point of entry into the novel will not be a formal analysis, but instead an investigation of the ways in which contemporaneous intellectual currents are echoed and interrogated in the novel. We will see that the priest’s uncertainty and unease stems from the way in which modern technologies of vision promise the possibility of “seeing” invisible, previously undiscovered forces. This way of “seeing” the invisible, however, is achieved through mechanical mediation and manipulates scale,

distance, and the opacity of physical objects in a way that is radically divorced from embodied human vision. This form of vision, then, is built upon an attempt to transcend the limits of the body, and can be considered part of an array of other modern interventions meant to achieve a kind of “perceptual transcendence.” However, by the end of Obstfelder’s novel (such as it is), the priest’s speculations about the possibilities of modern forms of disembodied vision are upended by a more immanent form of embodied perception, in which the priest is drawn into physical communion with the life-giving radiance of the sun. Norwegian vitalism in general, as we have seen previously in this dissertation, contained a critique of technologically-mediated perception, even as it depended upon the expansive sense of possibility that these visual technologies made possible. The move from transcendence and disembodiment to immanence and embodiment in *En prests dagbog* makes a strong case for Obstfelder as one of Norway’s most important early vitalists.

### *Seeing and Believing*

Although Obstfelder’s novel lacks a linear narrative or a novelistic plot in the usual sense of the word, it does begin quite clearly with a conflict, namely a religious crisis that is tied to the priest’s sense of his own compromised vision. More precisely, the priest’s crisis of faith is accompanied by a desire to see the God he professes to believe in to his parishioners. “Hvem er denne gud?” [Who is this God?] he writes (Obstfelder 2000, 261). “La mig få se ham! La mig få se hans ansigt!.... Ja, la mig se dig, du som skuler dig for os” (Obstfelder 2000, 261) [Let me see him! Let me see his face! Yes, let me see you who hide yourself from us.] The priest recognizes that his drive to see God is transgressive and potentially ruinous:

La mig se den store rædsel! La mig skue! La mig se din pande, der forstender, og dø, og synke hen! Men la mig se! Jeg vil se dig en eneste gang, et eneste øieblik! Jeg vil se ind i dit øie og dø. (Obstfelder 2000, 262)

[Let me see the great terror! Let me behold! Let me see your forehead, which turns me to stone, and die, and sink away. But let me see! I want to see you one single time, one single moment! I want to look into your eye and perish.]

This may seem like a common enough desire for a believing Christian cleric: to experience a “vision” of God in the traditional sense, and to have one’s faith thus confirmed by such a transcendent communion with the divine. But it becomes clear early on in the diary that the priest’s religious search becomes part of a scientific drive for empirical evidence. He doesn’t merely want to experience a transcendent “vision”—he actually wants to *see* God, or some kind of material manifestation of a divine or transcendent force, as he might see any other natural, material specimen. The priest repeatedly connects his own desire to gain empirical access to the divine to visual technologies typically associated with the natural sciences—microscopes, telescopes, and X-rays in particular. Obstfelder’s priest is thus a product of late nineteenth-century epistemological standards, which demanded empirical,

recordable, material evidence in the search for previously unknown natural phenomena. As the priest articulates later in his diary, in the age of a visual, empirical scientific epistemology, seeing is a necessary precursor to belief: “hvordan kan man få troens ild, når man ikke kan se for sig et ansigt?” (Obstfelder 2000, 279) [how can one get a burning faith when one can’t see (picture) a face?]

Although the impetus for the priest’s writing is the onset of a faith crisis, the diary is just as concerned with the state of scientific epistemology and new forms of seeing and understanding the physical world. The bulk of the priest’s diary is filled with references to the astounding acceleration of scientific and material progress in nineteenth-century Europe, and the challenges and possibilities such measures of modernity posed to a religious consciousness. At the thought of a train station, for instance, the priest reflects on how the dizzying pace of modern travel has fundamentally restructured human consciousness:

Den jernbanestation! Den gjør meg beklemt. Den bringer mig op i et tankemylder. Og jeg ved ikke rede. . . . Mennesket er blit en ny skabning. Dets hjerte slår andre slag, slår i ny taktart. Før stod de stille, menneskene. De voksede som planter og blomster. Nu er de revne op fra jordbunden. De er på vei til at flyve. . . . De reiser og reiser. De kan ikke få tænke én tanke til ende, ikke leve én følelse til ende, manden reiser fra sin hustrus seng, børnene fra sin moders bryst. Jeg ser dem tilslut alle, alle menneskene, i en eneste hvirvel. (Obstfelder 2000, 286)

[That train station! It makes me uneasy. It brings me into a turmoil of thoughts. And I don’t know what to do. . . . Man has become a new creation. His heart beats a different beat, beats to a new rhythm. They used to stand still, these people. They grew like plants and flowers. Now they have been torn from their soil. They are on the verge of flying. . . . They travel and travel. They can’t think one thought through to the end, can’t experience one feeling through to the end. The man leaves his wife’s bed, and the children their mother’s breast. In the end I see them all, all the people, in one great vortex].

In the priest’s account here, the mechanical innovations of modernity do not simply facilitate faster and easier commerce and travel; modernity reorders human subjectivity and perception. Man has become a “new creation” with a heart that beats “to a new rhythm.” Material and industrial progress has the effect of ripping individuals up from their roots and setting them into chaotic, confusing motion that the priest struggles to make sense of. And although the priest presents these developments in a negative light, as a loss of home and place in the whirlwind of modernity, he gives here another example of how human perception is reordered in the modern world; in this case, by achieving an “annihilation of time and space” (Schivelbusch 2014, 33), the modern railway gave human vision an unprecedented level of movement, dynamism, and speed. Cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes the perceptual upending that the railway effected this way:

Compared to the eotechnical space-time relationship, the one created by the railroad appears abstract and disorienting, because the railroad—in realizing Newton’s mechanics—negated all that characterized eotechnical traffic; the railroad did not appear embedded in a space of the landscape the way coach and highway are, but seemed to strike its way through it. (Schivelbusch 2014, 37)

The effect of this disorienting new form of transportation for the traveler was that, like the train itself, the human gaze could “strike through” the landscape rather than being rooted in a particular place. The dizzying new form of perception brought about by train travel is just one of a number of examples the priest cites that demonstrate how the human sensory apparatus has been made to adapt to the conditions of modern life.

Forms of technologically-mediated vision (such as telescopes, microscopes, and X-rays), the development of which had led to new ways of seeing and understanding the material world at both a molecular and at a cosmic level, dominate the priest’s commentary. What all these new ways of seeing have in common, is that they grant access to invisible realms, and thus have the effect of expanding the reach of human vision and the limits of what we consider the material world. Importantly, these forms of vision are also all achieved through mechanical mediation, so they are dependent on an external tool to artificially extend the reach of the human eye in the search for visual evidence. For Obstfelder’s priest, these repeated references to mechanically-mediated vision contribute to a kind of melting together of scientific and religious discourses, as the scientific search for new ways of seeing and understanding the material world takes on a semi-religious sense of searching for signs of a transcendent coherence beneath or beyond the reach of unaided vision.

The priest’s record even engages in a peculiar kind of media archaeology, tracing the development of modern forms of mediated vision back to the camera obscura, and projecting a religious motivation onto every step of technological development. Using the camera obscura as a metaphor for the search for God, the priest writes:

af og til kommer der her på vår jord måske en stråle fra den sidste, den inderste sol, kommer ind i den *formørkede forstands* camera obscura, —bare en stråle. Men den stråle føder den evige længsels blomst, længselen efter at kjende, stå ansigt til ansigt, tale med den største, den fagreste, den lyseste mand, Gud. (Obstfelder 2000, 265)

[perhaps every once in a while on our earth there is a ray from the final, the innermost sun, which comes into the camera obscura of our darkened understanding—just a ray. But that ray gives birth to the flower of eternal longing, the longing to know, stand face to face, speak with the greatest, the most beautiful, the most radiant man: God.]

We see here again the motif of the *stråle*, in this case a beam of light that enters the camera obscura, thereby inspiring the insatiable epistemological drive within the human to search out evidence of the divine. The turn to the camera obscura as a metaphor for seeking the

divine also signals the priest's preoccupation with his own compromised vision, or to put it more broadly, the insufficiency of his senses. In this description, we aren't privy to an unmediated view of God; we get only a single ray mediated by the pinhole and screen of the camera obscura. The camera obscura is an appropriate starting point for the priest's use of visual media as metaphors for seeking the transcendent, since it is generally where most accounts of the history of mediated vision start. It serves not only as a reference point for the beginning of a physiological understanding of vision (since the reverse image of the camera obscura replicates the way the images are captured by the eye, and are projected in reverse onto the retina), but also as an origin for the visual objectivity modern science increasingly adopted. Not content with the subjective interventions of the human body, artists and scientists could turn to the camera obscura to help trace faithful representations of nature long before the invention of photography. The goal of this kind of scientific objectivism, as historians Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison write, was to "let nature speak for itself" and to resist the temptation to impose one's own "hopes, expectations, generalizations, aesthetics, even ordinary language on the image of nature" (Daston and Galison 1992, 81). The most reliable way of bypassing the natural tendency of scientists to color their representations of nature with their own subjectivity was to outsource perception to a mechanical device: "Where human self-discipline flagged, the machine would take over" (Daston and Galison 1992, 81). For centuries before the application of photography to scientific investigation, the camera obscura was used to draft intricate drawings of nature that could achieve an "almost effortless accuracy" (Daston and Galison 1992, 94). An illustration from the title page of William Cheselden's *Osteographia; or the Anatomy of Bones* (1733) shows how the use of the camera obscura to make scientific illustrations worked in practice. Seated before a camera obscura, which is aimed at part of a skeleton suspended upside-down (to compensate for the inversion of the image within the camera obscura), the draftsman can simply trace the image onto a piece of paper. Such scientific publications relied on mechanical interventions like the camera obscura not only to achieve an accurate representation with less effort on the part of the artist, but also to fulfill the epistemological imperative of scientific objectivism to overcome the subjectivity of human perception and bias.

In the context of *En prests dagbog*, the evocation of the camera obscura is just one in a long line of examples the priest gives of humans relying on mediated vision to gain knowledge. It is interesting to note the way in which the motif of the *stråle* comes into this image of the camera obscura, however. Rather than the omnidirectional radiance of the sun, or the mysteriously penetrative radiation used to make X-ray photographs, the ray the priest describes here is a single beam that shines through the pinhole and enters into the metaphorical "dark room" of our imperfect understanding. The singular, unidirectional nature of the ray described here, as well as the separation of the viewing subject from the viewed object, reveals some of the shortcomings of mediated, modern vision for the priest. Rather than enjoying bodily presence with the divine, the stringent demands of objectivism impose a bodily separation, even a kind of simulation of disembodiment upon the observer.

Obstfelder's priest is fascinated with new technologies of vision for the same reason that scientific empiricism embraced the camera obscura, the microscope, the telescope, the photographic camera, and finally the X-ray: each new visual technology in

some way exceeded the capacities of the naked eye, and could help the observer gain access to hidden phenomena in the material world, while at the same time overcoming the messy subjectivity of the human body. The leap that the priest makes (which was a leap that a number of vitalists at the time were similarly making) is to assume that such hidden natural phenomena could also include traditionally transcendent concepts such as the soul and God. This collapsing of the distinctions between scientific and religious concepts is the defining feature of monism, a philosophy that was central to the resurgence of vitalism at the end of the nineteenth century.

Monism was a topic of discussion in popular science publications in Norway, and was widely seen as one of the defining features of both the scientific and cultural realms in the latter half of the century. One of Norway's most prominent scientists, the professor of pharmacology and toxicology Ernst Ferdinand Lochmann, wrote on the trend toward monism in his book *Den nyere Naturanskuelse* (1888), claiming that the unity of matter and energy was one of the most central goals of recent scientific research:

Det, som giver hele vor Tids Naturforskning sit Præg og er Formaalet for al videnskabelig Søgen, er Enheden, den skjulte Sammenhæng, den indre og dybe Overenstemmelse af det væsentlige, hvor forskellige og vexlende de ydre Former kan være. Det er Materiens Enhed, Energiens Enhed og Livsformernes Enhed, man overalt søger mere eller mindre klart bevidst. Vor Tids hele Naturforskning gaar imod dette Maal. (Lochmann 1888, 5)

[That which gives the entirety of our era's scientific research its distinctive quality, and that which is the purpose of all scientific searching, is unity, hidden coherence, the inner and deep correlation of the essential, however different and varying the external forms may be. It is the unity of matter, the unity of energy, and the unity of life forms that is searched for everywhere, more or less consciously. Our era's entire scientific research proceeds toward this goal.]

Lochmann goes on to connect this search for unity of energy and matter as an animating impulse behind research in biology, physics, and physiology, along with the latest trends in art and literature. This widespread sense that there was a "hidden coherence" at the heart of organic matter waiting to be discovered and explicated by scientific research and artistic expression was, according to Lochmann, the defining intellectual impulse of the day.

The most influential theorist of monism at the time was the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose major work *Die Welträtsel* (1900; *The Riddle of the Universe*, 1901) promoted an all-encompassing monistic explanation of the universe. Haeckel's monism distinguished itself from dualism, positing that there was no distinction between spirit and matter, and promoting the vitalistic concept of a life force that permeated all of nature. The effect of this monistic philosophy was to bring the transcendent down to earth, and to look for signs of the divine within the material world. Monistic vitalism thus tended to re-direct the worship of a traditional Christian deity toward a worship of the vital force emanating from the sun. Haeckel explains the scientific basis for this vitalistic sun-worship:

Die moderne Physiologie lehrt uns, daß der erste Urquell des organischen Lebens auf der Erde die Plasmabildung ist und daß diese Synthese von einfachen anorganischen Verbindungen, von Wasser, Kohlensäure und Ammoniak nur unter dem Einflusse des Sonnenlichtes erfolgt. . . . Auch unser gesamtes körperliches und geistiges Menschenleben ist ebenso wie alles andere organische Leben im letzten Grunde auf die strahlende, Licht und Wärme spendende Sonne zurückzuführen. Unbefangen und vernünftig betrachtet, erscheint daher der Sonnenkultus als naturalistischer Monotheismus besser begründet als der anthropistische Gottesdienst der Christen und andere Kulturvölker, welche Gott in Menschengestalt sich vorstellen. (Haeckel 1921, 172)

[Modern physiology teaches us that the first source of organic life on earth is the formation of protoplasm, and that this synthesis of simple inorganic substances, water, carbonic acid, and ammonia, only takes place under the influence of sunlight. . . . Indeed the whole of our bodily and mental life depends, in the last resort, on the light and heat rays of the sun. Hence in the light of pure reason, sun-worship, as a form of naturalistic monotheism, seems to have a much better foundation than the anthropistic worship of Christians and of other monotheists who conceive their god in human form]. (Haeckel 1900, 280–1)

Here we see that Haeckel traces all life back to the photosynthetic action brought about by sunlight, a biological fact that justifies sun-worship as a more legitimate religious practice in the modern world than traditional Christian worship. And although the priest still uses terms that imply an anthropomorphic god for much of the diary, his assumption throughout that it might be possible to detect the divine visually, within the material world rather than in a transcendent realm, reveals a monistic sensibility underlying his search. As Gertrude Oelsner notes, monism was thus a “religiously-grounded scientific interpretation of the world,” and because of that, “Vitalism can be described as a modern surrogate religion, where the divine, not God, is drawn down to earth and manifested there in the form of nature’s creative force” (Oelsner 2011, 185). The leap from worshipping an anthropomorphic God to worshipping the creative force of the sun still had the reverential quality of religious worship, but was more epistemologically defensible in an era when scientific materialism was increasingly the dominant worldview.

### *X-Rays and Perceptual Transcendence*

This vitalistic melting together of scientific and religious modes of inquiry in Obstfelder’s novel becomes even more explicit as the priest considers how the development of new visual technologies is connected to his own religiously motivated search for the divine. The priest wonders, “Er der måske mere af den sande religion i videnskaben, der aldrig tror at vide den hele sandhed, end i teologien, der har alt på det rene?” [Is there perhaps more of true religion in science, which never thinks it knows the whole truth, than in theology, which supposes that it knows everything?] (Obstfelder 2000, 281). Interestingly, this is a reversal from the protagonist of Arne Garborg’s novel *Trætte Mænd*, who accuses modern



materialist science of becoming dogmatic and inflexible, and of dismissing the possibility of previously unknown, occult forces in the universe. The intellectual humility that the priest imputes to science here is the basis of his sense that scientific empiricism can become a semi-religious kind of search for knowledge. Whichever way this reversal of the traditional roles of science and religion occurs—whether one thinks of science as becoming more rigid and dogmatic (as Gabriel Gram) or whether one imagines that science has actually taken on the intellectual humility of “true religion” (as Obstfelder’s priest does)—the impulse here to aim for some kind of modern synthesis of religion and science is typical of all of the vitalist-inflected discourses that are being examined in this dissertation.

One way that science was engaging in a quasi-religious mode of inquiry was in its aim to expand its perceptual reach in order to observe new realms. There is a yearning for transcendence in modern science, but not a spiritual form of transcendence; instead, science sought what might be called *perceptual transcendence*—that is, getting above or beyond the limits of embodied human perception in order to experience natural phenomena that lay beyond the perceptual horizon. The modern technologies of perception that science used to see and record natural phenomena were constantly expanding the realm of the known universe, revealing more and more to the modern observer. The priest continues:

Ja, der er religion i videnskaben. Den gør rummet videre og videre, opover og indover. Den stanser aldrig, den søger og søger, menneskenes egne sanser er den ikke nok, den opfinder teleskop for at komme højere og højere op, mikroskop for at komme dybere og dybere ind. (Obstfelder 2000, 281)

[Yes, there is religion in science. It makes space wider and wider, upwards and inwards. It never stops. It searches and searches. Human senses are not enough for it. It invents the telescope to get higher and higher up, the microscope to get deeper and deeper within.]

According to the priest, the scientific imperative to constantly, restlessly search for a better and more complete understanding of the world becomes a form of religious inquiry, and the effect of this relentless expansion of the scientific gaze is that the universe itself, in effect, is expanded. As he writes here, the telescope is invented because this incessantly expanding gaze wants to get beyond the limitations of body, it wants to get higher and higher up. The microscope expands the horizons of vision at the other end of the scale, and the effect is that the world opens up to us, deeper and deeper within.

What the priest sees with his naked eye only confounds his faith and impedes his visual access to the divine. Instead, the priest adopts scientific empiricism’s aim for perceptual transcendence. In this case, he reaches for mediated vision that can virtually take him to new realms and grant visual access to phenomena beneath or beyond the threshold of embodied, naked vision. He aims to perceptually transcend, to get higher up and deeper within. He hopes to strip away the surface of reality to see the hidden traces of God within the material world. Continuing his discussion of the role of modern scientific vision, the priest writes that science:

lader os skue verdenslivet i dets mægtige pragt, den viser os målene for det hele alliv høiere og høiere, den leder på vei til en svag skimten af sporene efter Hans lineal, og på dybden lader den os ane mysteriet, et mysterium, der eier lysende klarhed... (Obstfelder 2000, 281).

[lets us behold earthly life in its commanding glory. It shows us the aims of all of life higher and higher. It leads on the way to a faint glimpse of the tracings left behind by His ruler, and in the depths, it lets us sense the mystery, a mystery that possesses brilliant clarity...]

Again we see the desire to transcend here through augmented perception—to get “higher and higher.” But there is also an oscillation, just like in the previous passage, from “higher up” to “deeper within.” We thus see other aspects of scientific vision emphasized here, qualities that make the scientific search for truth “true religion” in the priest’s formulation above. Scientific vision is not only capable of transporting the gaze higher and higher, but can also employ a penetrating gaze that operates on a logic of stripping away the obscuring surface of things to reveal the hidden tracings of divine design within.

This emphasis on hidden structural lines brought to light “from the depths,” underneath the surface of matter, seems to point to a particular visual technology that had its spectacular debut just four years before the publication of Obstfelder’s novel—namely, the mysterious new form of radiation discovered by the physicist Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen in his laboratory in Würzburg. To signify the mysterious nature of his discovery—a phenomenon that was invisible, and therefore could only be observed second-hand, by its effects on photographic plates, for instance—Röntgen called them X-rays. And at the time that Obstfelder was writing his novel, the nature of these rays—why and how they were produced by highly charged Crookes’ tubes, and how they were able to so easily penetrate solid bodies, unlike other comparable forms of radiation—was still a confounding unknown.

This logic of stripping away the surface through mediated vision to reveal hidden designs within seems particularly compelling for the priest, whose crisis begins as a sense of compromised and insufficient vision. Later in his diary he writes:

Bak musklerne er benene, bag det bladgrønne årernes net. Gjennem mikroskop, med Röntgens stråler ser jeg overalt et net, en tegning... Med skarpt syn vilde man udover verden, udover jorden, gennem naturen, bag kjødvævet tåge se en deilig tegning, i buer og bølger med rum imellem og fyldt af farve. (Obstfelder 2000, 265)

[Behind the muscles are the bones, behind the chlorophyll are the network of veins. Through the microscope, with Röntgen’s rays, I see everywhere a network, a design... With sharp vision one would, across the world, under the earth, through nature, behind the fog of flesh, see a lovely design, in curves and waves with space between and filled with color.]

Here we see what the importance of the X-ray image is for the priest, namely that it gives the observer access to the hidden, internal structures that reveal a “lovely design” beneath the “fog of flesh.” In the visual epistemology laid out here, flesh is a problem to overcome, a barrier that the penetrative vision of the modern scientific gaze is potentially capable of getting behind. Thinking of flesh as a problem is nothing new in the religious context, since the physical body is often associated with the “fallen” state that keeps the Christian devotee remote from the heavenly perfection of God. But physical flesh is evoked here, not as a spiritual barrier, but rather as an epistemological one, since its opacity occludes our view of the “lovely design” contained within the living body.

This same interest in penetrating matter visually to gain access to deeper truths is later expressed as a metaphor of visual revelation, as the priest writes:

Hjernens tanke, øiets syn, mikroskop, teleskop, spektroskop, de drog teppet bort for en tegning, et net, et væv bag stoffets tåge. Bag muskler, bag det bladgrønne, bag den hårde sten, inde mellem celler, inde mellem kloder. En herlig tegning i buer og bølger med lysende rum imellem (Obstfelder 2000, 313–14).

[The thought of the brain, the vision of the eye, microscope, telescope, spectroscope, they drew back the curtain over a design, a network, a web behind the fog of matter. Behind muscles, behind chlorophyll, behind the hard stone, in between cells, in between planets. A glorious design in curves and waves with glowing space in between.]

Again, we see a desire to use optical tools here to get beyond—to go between and behind—in order to reveal a hidden pattern or cohesive force in an invisible realm. The forms of perception he enumerates here start within the body (the thought of the brain, the vision of the eye) and then progress to external perceptual technologies (microscope, telescope, spectroscope) that make the invisible visible, thus “drawing back the curtain” to reveal the structural design within matter. Here the priest’s formulation “fog of flesh” has been broadened to “fog of matter,” indicating that it is not merely human flesh, but physical matter in general whose opacity is an epistemological barrier. But because of the interventions of modern visual technologies, the “fog of matter” can be penetrated, and material opacity need no longer prove an insurmountable perceptual barrier.

But still the impulse the priest has here to use X-rays to “find God” in nature may seem like a complete contradiction and a misunderstanding of the technology. From our perspective it can be difficult to imagine why Obstfelder’s priest would reference X-rays in his crisis of faith and his consequent efforts to find empirical evidence of the divine. The X-ray seems hopelessly out of context in a search for spiritual insight. We take it for granted that X-ray images (and other forms of modern radiography) serve a practical, diagnostic function, or as a measure to ensure security in public settings. So when we see an X-ray image, we are unlikely to be mystified by the technology itself, instead focusing on the visual data such an image conveys, as well as whatever medical implications it might have. We are likely to be concerned with whether the bone is broken, whether there

are any signs of pneumonia, or whether we have anything in our carry-on bag that will need to be thrown away at the security checkpoint. But if we look at the way X-ray images were received in the years immediately following Röntgen's discovery, we can recover the sense of astonishment and wonder that followed the circulation of such images.

When we consider how novel and unsettling the X-ray photographs were that were published in the wake of Röntgen's discovery of the astonishing and mysterious new form of electromagnetic radiation, the reference to the X-ray in the priest's diary is not surprising at all. As media historians frequently point out, emergent media technologies tend to go through an early phase in which they are treated as technological attractions (and even wonders) in their own right, and so the data contained in their records or the possible practical applications take a back seat in the popular imagination. Media scholars Marita Sturken and Thomas Douglas describe the phenomenon:

Technologies take on a special kind of social meaning when they are new. . . . A so-called new technology is the object of fascination, hyperbole, and concern. It is almost inevitably a field onto which a broad array of hopes and fears is projected and envisioned as a potential solution to, or possible problem for, the world at large. (Sturken and Douglas 2004, 1)

We must keep in mind, then, that the X-ray image was an entirely different kind of signifier in the cultural landscape of *fin de siècle* Europe than it is now, when the technology has become a relatively banal feature of hospitals and airports. It is helpful, then, to look back at the rhetoric that accompanied the emergence of Röntgen's rays to get a sense of the kinds of associations, hopes, and fears that were articulated by the contemporary public.<sup>16</sup>

As Gunning writes, such accounts reduce early audiences "to a state usually attributed to savages in their primal encounter with the advanced technology of Western colonialists, howling and fleeing in impotent terror before the power of the machine" (Gunning 1995, 115). This type of caricature aside, Gunning nevertheless writes that "there is no question that a reaction of astonishment and even a type of terror accompanied many early projections. I therefore don't intend to simply deny this founding myth of the cinema's spectator, but rather to approach it historically" (Gunning 1995, 116). Applying Gunning's corrective to the practice of media history thus demands a careful consideration

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<sup>16</sup> In returning to the moment of the X-ray's introduction to the public in 1896 to recover some of the early sense of astonishment at the ghostly image of the X-ray, we must be careful not to perpetuate myths of public credulity in the face of new media. This notion of a gullible audience receiving a new technology with wonder and awe can be an overused trope in media studies, as Tom Gunning notes in his article "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," where he references the famous legend about the first audiences of the Lumières' *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, 1895), who were said to have "reared back in their seats, or screamed, or got up and ran from the auditorium (or all three in succession" (Gunning 1995, 114) at the frightening cinematic image of a train heading directly toward the camera. This supposedly "panicked and hysterical audience" actually has, according to Gunning, no basis in contemporaneous accounts of the early cinema screenings in Paris, but has nevertheless circulated in the accounts of film historians who seek to portray the absolute novelty of the new medium, and the ways in which early audiences therefore had no possible frame of reference for understanding what they were seeing on the screen.

of the historical context at the emergence of a new medium, and relying as much as possible on contemporaneous accounts rather than later iterations of media-historical legend.

The first thing to note about the introduction of the X-ray to the public at the end of 1895 was how broad and immediate the public response was. Magazines, newspapers, and science journals all over the world reported extensively on the new and mysterious form of radiation. As a reporter who interviewed Röntgen in early 1896 writes, “To-day, four weeks after the announcement, Röntgen’s name is apparently in every scientific publication issued this week in Europe; and accounts of his experiments, of the experiments of others following his method, and of theories as to the strange new force which he has been the first to observe, fill pages of every scientific journal that comes to hand” (Dam 1896, 403–5). This contagious public response to Röntgen’s discovery owed in part to the unknown nature of the rays themselves at this early date. I quote again from the reporter who interviewed Röntgen:

Exactly what kind of a force Professor Röntgen has discovered he does not know. As will be seen below, he declines to call it a new kind of light, or a new form of electricity. He has given it the name of the X rays. Others speak of it as the Röntgen rays. Thus far its results only, and not its essence are known... All who have expressed themselves in print have admitted, with more or less frankness, that, in view of Röntgen’s discovery, science must forthwith revise, possibly to a revolutionary degree, the long accepted theories concerning the phenomena of light and sound. (Dam 1896, 405–7)

Dam goes on to point out that it was not just the mysteriousness of the rays themselves, but the spectacularly unprecedented and uncanny images they produced that caught the imagination. Unlike more arcane scientific discoveries, early accounts of the X-ray could be accompanied by haunting visual aids, such as the skeletal image of Röntgen’s wife’s hand that was spread widely along with articles explaining the discovery. This image of Anna Bertha Röntgen’s hand is blurry and ill-framed by today’s standards, but we can still clearly see the internal structure of her fingers, with the outlines of the bones and knuckles clearly visible, as well as the bulbous, opaque shape of a wedding ring on one of her fingers. The image also provides a pictorial demonstration of the priest’s formulation “the fog of flesh,” which he said modern technologies of vision could help us see through in order to see the “lovely design” within. The flesh of Anna Bertha Röntgen’s hand shows up on the X-ray photograph as a hazy shadow, a fog-like web between the finger bones whose opacity to the X-ray makes them much darker and clearer in the photograph. It is reasonable to speculate that the priest’s formulation “fog of flesh” may derive specifically from the way human flesh is captured in the X-ray images that began circulating in European periodicals starting in late 1895. Rather than appearing as an impermeable visible barrier as it does to the naked eye, human flesh is a mere haze in the X-ray image, no barrier to seeing the internal structure of things. The X-ray thus had radical implications for the way in which the human body was perceived; for the religious believer, “flesh” might still be considered a spiritual barrier, but for the scientific observer, human flesh was

no longer an epistemological boundary that made the internal investigation of living organisms untenable. The inclusion of such compellingly unprecedented images in newspaper and magazine accounts of the X-ray helps explain, in part, why Röntgen's discovery made the immediate impact that it did on the public. The images seemed to suggest the possibility of achieving a new, previously impossible kind of vision—a kind of photographic vivisection—so when Dam sits down with Röntgen to start the interview, he provocatively begins with the question, “Is the invisible visible?” to which Röntgen responds “Not to the eye; but its results are” (Dam 1896, 411).

As has often been pointed out by media historians, X-rays arrived on the scene in the same year as another optical modern marvel: motion pictures. But the association between X-rays and the cinema is not merely about temporal coincidence; in practice, early cinema and X-ray images were often exhibited side-by-side in the same variety houses and theaters, presented as equally astounding new visual media. This exhibitionary juxtaposition is evident in the very first public demonstrations of film in Norway, which were sponsored by the German film pioneer and promoter Max Skladanowsky, who held nightly exhibitions in the Circus Varieté starting 6 April 1896. On the program each evening, according to an advertisement that ran in *Aftenposten* on 14 April, was eight short films (under the heading “Cinematografen”), along with “Videnskabens nyeste triumf” [The latest triumph of science], Professor Röntgen's X-rays, as well as a presentation of Fridtjof Nansen's North Pole expedition in 14 tableaux vivants, billed as a “Kolosal Succes” [colossal success] in the ad. By comparing the presentation of these three forms of visual media in the ad, we see that in the case of new media (film and X-rays), the medium and technical apparatus are typographically emphasized over the content of the presentations themselves; although we do get the names of the 8 films on the bill that evening, they are in much smaller print than the bold “Cinematografen” at the top of the ad. On the other hand, the tableau vivant, a much older visual medium, gets second billing to the *content* of the presentation: “Dr. Fritjof [sic] Nansen's North Pole Expedition.” In the broader Scandinavian context, Media historian Solveig Jülich has argued that both film and X-ray photography were understood under the rubric of “modern magic,” and points to the Stockholm Exhibition of 1897, where X-rays and the cinematograph were exhibited side-by-side, and that both were “permeated by a common rhetoric that stressed the power of new technologies to surprise audiences by performing something that earlier had been considered impossible or magic” (Jülich 2008, 31).

In the case of the X-ray, both form and content combined to create a sense of visual attraction as well as to fuel sometimes wild speculation about the properties of the X-rays themselves, and what other types of invisible forces and phenomena we might be able to “see” with the aid of the X-ray photograph. The haunting spectacle of the X-ray image, which stripped away flesh to reveal the insides of living things, and simultaneously seemed to give an uncanny premonition of death, provoked notions that previously undiscovered forces and phenomena were on the verge of being discovered.

The occult fascination with the X-ray was so widespread that more sober-minded scientific assessments of Röntgen's discovery were overshadowed. Physiologist Sophus Torup lamented in the pages of the Norwegian popular science magazine *Naturen* that the public was too fixated on the spectacle of the X-ray image, rather than with the more

important implications of the discovery for the scientific understanding of the physical world:

Det er snarere det halvt mystiske skjær, som opdagelsen straks fik, da det viste sig, at disse “nye straalere” kunde trænge gennem gjenstande, der for den almindelige bevidsthed stod som uigjennemsigtige, og at de ikke desto mindre virkede paa den fotografiske plade ligesom lyset, at det altsaa ved deres hjælp blev muligt at udføre den tilsyneladende modsigelse at fotografere usynlige gjenstande, der gjorde dem saa populære. Det er dog ikke her, at opdagelsens tyngdepunkt ligger. (Torup 97)

[It is rather that semi-mystical aspect that the discovery immediately took on, when it became apparent that these “new rays” could penetrate objects, which to common sense appeared to be opaque, and that they nonetheless had effects on the photographic plate that resembled light, and that it thus became possible by their aid to achieve the apparent contradiction of photographing invisible objects, which made them so popular. But it is not here that the weight of the new discovery lies.]

According to Torp, the importance of the X-ray was that it was a newly discovered physical force, not that it (almost by accident) could make pictures of the interior structures of physical matter. But in his lament, he describes the way these rays were actually understood by the public at large—namely that they took on a “semi-mystical aspect.” The X-ray was a timely discovery because it fit well with the *fin de siècle* fixation on occult (hidden, and therefore by definition, invisible) forces and phenomena. Furthermore, the X-ray provided scientific justification for the possibility of “seeing” (and thereby verifying empirically) these invisible phenomena. For serious scientists like Torup, this aspect of the public reception of X-ray photography was merely fuel for the fire of pseudo-scientific, “semi-mystical” speculation.

Returning to the reporter Dam, who interviewed Röntgen, we learn more specifically about the kinds of phenomena scientists and more speculative researchers thought they might be able to locate with the aid of the X-ray. Dam mentions an Austrian professor who “has photographed the living skull, denuded of flesh and hair, and has begun the adaptation of the new photography to brain study” (Dam 1896, 409), with the apparent aim of seeing if thoughts could make themselves visible on the X-ray photograph.<sup>17</sup> Dam continues:

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<sup>17</sup> Another contemporary researcher, W. Ingles Rogers, wrote about the possibilities offered by the X-ray in developing a new medium, “thought photography,” that he had been working on with little success. In his article for *Amateur Photographer* in 1896, “Can Thought Be Photographed? The Problem Solved,” Rogers discusses how the ability of the X-ray to penetrate opaque objects demonstrated how thought photography could work, at least theoretically. Discussing Rogers’s work, cultural historian Andrew Shail writes that, “As X-ray photography, known commonly at the time as ‘the photography of the invisible,’ was explained as rendering visible a part of the electromagnetic spectrum to which the eye was insensitive, other forms of ‘invisible light,’ many assumed, were yet to be discovered. Rogers displays a faith, common at the time amongst photographers, that the photographic plate will reveal sights invisible to the naked eye” (Shail 2010, 91).

The relation of the new rays to thought rays is being eagerly discussed in what may be called the non-exact circles and journals; and all that numerous group of inquirers into the occult, the believers in clairvoyance, spiritualism, telepathy, and kindred orders of alleged phenomena, are confident of finding in the new force long-sought facts in proof of their claims. (Dam 1896, 409)

Indeed, spiritualists who were hopeful in the veracity of so-called “spirit photographs” used the X-ray as a counter-argument to those who dismissed spirit photography out of hand. One author of a history of spirit photography published in 1911 wrote that “to say that the invisible cannot be photographed, even on the material plane, would be to confess ignorance of facts which are commonplace—as, for instance, to mention the application of X-ray photography to the exploration of the muscles, of fractures and bone, and the internal organs” (Coates 1911, 2). Even if X-rays couldn’t directly capture occult forces, then, they were a handy analogy for hopeful spiritualists to use in order to insist on the possibility of “seeing” the invisible. X-rays offered a compelling argument that, if a kind of “invisible light” existed outside of the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, other invisible forces and phenomena might someday be captured by photography or another physical medium.

Edvard Munch, who was a close friend and mutual admirer of Obstfelder, was still apparently in awe of the X-ray well after the turn of the century, and saw in it the possibility of seeing other invisible forces and phenomena. In an undated entry in a notebook he used between 1903 and 1908, Munch wrote about the occult phenomena that the X-ray could potentially reveal:

Gives der Ånder? Vi ser det vi ser—fordi vi har således beskafne Øine. . . . Havde vi anderledes beskafne Øine—vilde vi som med Røntgenstråler blot se vore Væger—Bensystemet—Havde vi atter anderledes beskafne Øine—kunde vi se vor ydre Flammering—og se Menneskerne i andre Former—Hvorfor skulde altså ikke andre Væsener med lettere opløste Molekyler færdes om os og i os—Afdødes Sjæle—vor Kjæres Sjæle—og onde Ånder. (Munch 1903–8, 42)

[Do spirits exist? We see what we see—because our eyes are built to see in this way... If our eyes were made differently—we would, as with X-rays, only see our skeleton—our bone structure—And if our eyes were different again—we would be capable of seeing our auras—and see people in a different form. Why should other beings that are physically less substantial than us not move around us and in us—the souls of the dead—the souls of our loved ones—and of evil spirits.]

We have already seen that Munch was, like Obstfelder, fascinated with *stråler* in all their forms, and was particularly fixated on depicting even invisible portions of light in his paintings. In this fragment from one of his many notebooks, Munch uses the X-ray *stråle* as a starting point for an argument about the limitations of human vision. What we see is only impressions of light that our retina is sensitized to; if the X-ray was capable of



“seeing” in a different way, revealing a certain segment of the invisible world to our eyes (our skeleton and bone structure), then there must be other ways of seeing that could reveal phenomena (auras, good and evil spirits) that were invisible to both the naked eye and to the X-ray.

With this bit of media historical context, it becomes obvious that Obstfelder was writing at a time when visual technologies that we now value for their scientific and medical utility were still approached with a sense of wonder and awe. These new visual tools sparked hopes that ethereal, invisible, even occult phenomena that might soon be captured on the photographic plate with the aid of X-rays. As Sturken and Thomas say, new media tend to be a screen onto which a wide array of hopes and fears are projected. So the fact that Obstfelder’s priest fixates on the idea that X-ray photography and other tools of scientific vision could help “pull back the curtain” to reveal the divine or transcendent within physical matter was in line with the thinking of many others at the time. Obstfelder’s crucial intervention was to draw mediated vision into a vitalist context, and to show both the possibilities and the downfalls of this drive toward perceptual transcendence via technology. One of the conclusions we can draw from *En Prests Dagbog* is that the use of mediated vision is a necessary step in drawing our attention away from a traditional notion of God and to the vital forces in nature, but that because it is based on a desire to escape the body, it also represents a denial of the vital force within us. The perception of vital force is thus a necessary precursor to the embodied experience of the vital force.

#### *From Transcendence to Immanence*

Although the mediated vision of modern science offers the possibility of revealing the hidden forces within matter, it comes at a cost; by relying on an external device to “see” on one’s behalf, to capture views of otherwise invisible phenomena, the observer seeks a kind of escape of the body. This escapism is typical of modern life, according to the priest, and this constant drive to be elsewhere is at the heart of his unease. In one scene near the end of the diary, the priest writes that considering the vastness of the universe had at first been an inspiring thought, and that “tusende nye livskræfter i mig syntes jeg var ved at vågne” (Obstfelder 2000, 341) [I thought that thousands of new life forces were about to awaken within me.] But then this vastness, as well as the dizzying speed of the expanding visual horizons at the microscopic and telescopic extremes, overwhelms the priest:

Jeg så ud og op. Jeg så, at himmelen var der. Jeg så, at der var millioner jorde. Den var der, himmelen. Den lå lige ned over vore hoder, den kogte vor mad med sin sol, blomstrenes rødt og gult og blå var bare et gjenskin fra dens regnbue. Ja, inde i vor egen tanke var selve tankens bund uendelighed, uendelighed i geometriske rækker. Hvordan komme udenfor det der over os, det der bag os, det der inde i os? (Obstfelder 2000, 341).

[I looked out and up. I saw that the sky was there. I saw that there were millions of planets. It was there, the sky. It lay right over our heads, it cooked our food with its sun, the red and yellow and blue of the flowers was just a reflection from its

rainbow. Yes, within our own thought the very bottom of thought was infinity, infinity in geometrical rows. How do we get beyond what is over us, what is behind us, what is within us?]

On the verge of the final scene in Obstfelder's novel, the priest seems tormented by a desire to get beyond the limits of perception, both without and within. The expansion of vision offered by modern technology merely keeps pushing the perceptual horizon farther and farther from the perspective of the embodied eye, creating an insatiable drive toward the exploration of elsewhere—within, without, above, and below. Indeed, if we look at the kinds of visual technologies the priest has focused on, we find that they are all tools that virtually transport the observer through manipulation of scale, magnification, or the use of invisible radiation that can penetrate surfaces that the eye cannot. This escapist desire to achieve perceptual transcendence is one of the major factors behind the priest's sense of alienation.

One of the religious problems that arises from the modern expansion of vision is that the more we see, the larger our visible universe becomes, and consequently God seems more and more remote. In the modern age, God has become both “større, større, større” [greater, greater, greater] and “fjernere” (Obstfelder 2000, 278) [more distant]. It is as if “han vandrer længer og længer bort, stiger høiere og høiere op” (Obstfelder 2000, 278) [he moves farther and farther away, rises higher and higher up.] This language is nearly echoed by the priest's claim (quoted above) that telescopes were invented to transport human vision “høiere og høiere op” [higher and higher up] and microscopes were invented to take us “dybere og dybere ind” [deeper and deeper within] (Obstfelder 2000, 281). If we assume these two claims have a causal relationship with each other, we could say that the expansion of the visible world has, in a sense, chased God farther away from the human realm. Thus, for the Christian believer, the only way to maintain any kind of satisfying belief in God is to turn God from an anthropomorphic being to an abstract concept; as the priest writes, “menneskene ikke længer kan se Gud selv blandt sig i stoflig skikkelse. Han er blevet ånd” (Obstfelder 2000, 279) [people are no longer able to see God himself among them in material form. He has become spirit.] Visual technologies have thus pushed back the horizons of the visible universe, which resulted in a more abstract, transcendent, distant concept of the divine.

Even though technologies of vision effectively enlarge the visible universe without ever revealing a divine agent, that is not to say that visual tools lead us to conclude that mankind is alone in the universe. On the contrary, the interventions of mediated vision reveal other forms of life teeming, moving, and perpetuating themselves, even in normally invisible realms. So as God becomes more distant, the vital force all around us becomes more present. This overwhelming proliferation of life can become an existential threat, because it suggests natural forces operating beyond our perception perpetuating forms of life that might be hostile to our own existence. In a number of scenes in the novel, the sudden realization of life at work just beyond the conscious world of human observation is a source of anxiety. In one instance, the priest senses a presence in his room, and can feel (even though he cannot see) that “der var noget i værelset, noget levende, noget andet end mig som leved” (Obstfelder 2000, 329) [there was something in the room, something

living, something other than me who lived]. When he finally catches a glimpse of the creature and realizes it's a rat, he wonders, "Hvad var den i rytmen, den rotte? . . . Den leved, det spilled i den, den nød. Den havde vel følelser, den vidste vel om mit nærvær i verden. Hvad havde den med min sjæl at bestille? Hvad havde min sjæl med den at bestille?" (Obstfelder 2000, 329–30) [What was its role in the rhythm, this rat? . . . It lived, there were forces at play within it, it had needs. It presumably had feelings, it was presumably aware of my presence in the world. What did it have to do with my Soul? What did my soul have to do with it?] Several similar instances recur in the diary, when the priest abruptly, unsettlingly realizes he's not alone in the room, only to become aware of another form of life in the room just beyond the reach of his conscious attention. In each case, this awakening to the ubiquity of non-human life suggests that there are realms filled with vitality that humans have either been ignorant of or consciously ignored. So although God has become more and more distant because of modern vision, life and vitality have become more and more present all around us and within us.

One instance that demonstrates at an early point in the novel the way in which the priest's vision overwhelms him and drives him to a more immanent mode of perception is a scene in which the priest looks up at the night sky and suddenly senses the omnipresence of vital energy all around him. He writes, "Det leved, rummet omkring mig, det var fyldt—af ånd! Og hen igjennem alle verdener suste det, men mildt,—ikke med fortærende ild,—men med duftfyldt varme" (Obstfelder 200, 325) [The space around me was alive, it was filled—with spirit! It hummed with activity among all the heavenly bodies, but gently. Not with a consuming flame but with a fragrant warmth.] This sense that the space around him is "alive" and filled with "spirit" and humming with activity is a typical starting point of vitalist narratives. The dizzying sight of the night sky above him drives the priest to withdraw into himself, a move which is accomplished quite simply by closing his eyes:

Jeg voved ikke at se op i den høiloftede verden, men måtte lukke mine øine. Og jeg lukked mine øine, og hen igjennem mit legeme bruste den, verdensrytmen, ikke i svimlende hvirvel, nei i verdensfavnende svulmen. . . . Det bæved nedover min ryg og i mit legemes mange kamre,—og dog var det, somom da, i det øieblik, kunde det begynde, —livet, —det sande. (Obstfelder 2000, 325)

[I dared not look up into the high lofts of the universe, but had to shut my eyes. And I shut my eyes, and through my body it surged, this rhythm of the universe, not in a dizzying vortex, but in a world-embracing surge. It ran down my spine and into the many chambers of my bod—and it seemed as though in that moment, it could begin—life—true life.]

Here the priest's reaction to the overwhelming ubiquity of the vital force is to close his eyes, and as soon as he does so, his perceptual mode immediately becomes fixated on the embodied sensation of the vital force, rather than the sight of it. This perceptual shift from the *høiloftede verden* to *mit legemes mange kamre*—from the sky to the inside of the body—is emblematic of the priest's gradual rejection of transcendence and embrace of

immanence. Once the sensation is perceived in the body, it becomes immediately more manageable and ordered—no longer a “dizzying vortex,” but a surging rhythm.<sup>18</sup>

This musical metaphor comparing the vital force to a rhythm is developed further, as the priest considers the way in which the orchestration of life in the universe might resemble that of a symphony:

En tonesymfoni kunde måske give en liden anelse—ti når verden engang i et sælsomt øieblik har åbnet sin musik for en sjæl, da ser den ikke længer, den hører, da mærker man det ikke længer i tanke og hjerne, men da dirrer hele ens legeme og dets nerve og blod i det, og det er ikke syn, men noe andet. (Obstfelder 2000, 326)

[A symphony might convey some sense of it—for when the world, in a rare moment, reveals its music to a human soul, it doesn’t see any longer, it hears. The perception is no longer by thought and brain but by the whole body’s resonance, on its nerves and in its blood. No longer something visual, but something else.]

The auditory metaphor here comes in, as it did with Hamsun, as a more immanent and bodily form of perception. Rather than processing with the reason and thought of the brain, the nerves and blood become organs of perception. So although Obstfelder gestures toward aurality here in his references to sound, rhythm, and a symphony, he is not interested in hearing in an everyday sense (i.e. hearing a noise, decoding it, responding to it) but rather the production and perception of sound through vibration; he doesn’t discuss here how we perceive sound through the ears, but rather through “the whole body’s resonance.” Indeed, it could be said that the body of the perceiver in Obstfelder’s formulation becomes a medium, resonating sympathetically with the vital vibrations of the universe. There is thus also an anti-rationalist aspect to the priest’s vital embodiment, which is typical of the way in which vitalism embraces Dionysian corporeality over Apollonian rationalism.

In the culminating scene of the novel, the priest decides to finally confront his religious crisis by retreating to nature—into the mountains—to see God, requiring only his own body, not the mediations of optical instruments. The priest’s ascension to the mountains to make contact with a divine force in the final scene is prefigured early in the

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<sup>18</sup> The way Obstfelder’s fixation on corporeal, embodied sensation begins with a closing of the eyes fits into a longer tradition in the history of philosophical and scientific studies of the physiology of perception. In his account of the history of physiological conceptions of vision, Jonathan Crary refers to an emblematic moment in Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colors*, 1810) in which Goethe demonstrates how we can become aware of physiological or “subjective” vision. Goethe starts by describing an observer confined within a camera obscura, which as Crary writes, is a “long established practice” in the field of optical studies (Crary 1990, 68). Where Goethe departs from previous studies is that he has the observer close the hole of the camera obscura. In the truly darkened room, the observer will now see afterimages: “the middle of the circle will appear bright, colourless, or somewhat yellow, but the border will appear red” (Crary 1990, 68). The colors we see in afterimages are, Goethe says, “physiological” colors. This closing of the aperture is a revolutionary departure from previous studies of vision, according to Crary, because it presented vision as something that was actively *produced* by the body, not just *received* by it. Crary writes, “The human body, in all its contingency and specificity generates ‘the spectrum of another colour,’ and thus becomes the active producer of optical experience” (Crary 1990, 69).

diary, where the priest has a vision of himself at the top of the Himalayas. The mountains are immersed “i brændende sol” [in burning sun], and there is “blændende glans henover de hvide sletter” (Obstfelder 2000, 304) [blinding brightness across the white peaks]. Even though he stands atop Everest, isolated from fellow humans by miles and miles of uninhabited space, he doesn’t feel alone. He says he has a “mægtig følelse” [powerful feeling] that

Min sjæl er i solen. Min sjæl *er* solen. Min sjæl bølger i de samme herlige bølger, som sollyset bølger i, se, derude er den, mellem de fagre stråler derude, danser som dem henover snekrystallerne, deler sig i to, deler sig atter, i fire, i seksten, i millioner nye, hopper op og ned i myriaders rækker. Ja som solstrålerne kan den og spalte sig i farver, ikke syv bare, syv gange syv, stadig nye, evig andre. (Obstfelder 2000, 304–5)

[My soul is in the sun. My soul *is* the sun. My soul undulates in the same splendid waves that the sunlight undulates in. Look, it is out there, amongst the beautiful beams out there, it dances across the snow crystals, divides itself in two, divides itself again, in four, in sixteen, in millions of new ones, jumps up and down in the myriad ranks. Yes, like the sun beams it can also can refract into colors, not just seven, seven times seven, always new ones, always others. ]

The priest’s mention of “blinding brightness” of the reflected sunlight serves a similar function to the instance cited above when the priest closes his eyes when overwhelmed with the vastness of the sky; in each case, the ecstatic communion with a vital force permeating the universe is predicated upon an undermining or rejection of vision. The point of his basking in the sun-soaked Himalayas is not to see or observe the sun, but to feel it, and for his soul to vibrate sympathetically with it.

As in this early episode of retreating to the mountains, the priest’s culminating experience of the divine turns out not to be a confrontation with a Christian deity at all, but with the energy of the sun itself. In an ecstatic vision, the priest watches the setting sun from the mountain and within it, he sees the image of a mother with full breasts, leaning protectively over her children and nursing them. As the priest basks in the setting sun, he thinks he can hear the sun speak to him, which he records as an extended monologue in which the sun calls him to task for his religious assumptions. She says that he has “lost himself” in abstractions as he sought out his traditional God, not noticing that the God of the sun was embracing him the whole time. She tells the priest:

Dine maskiner, dine love, dine systemer, hvad er det alt mod kvinden, der står midt i den skinnende og duftende sol og lader melken flyde ind i de rosenrøde læber fra de yppige bryster? Se dem, disse bryster, de er som mig, de er kloder. (Obstfelder 2000, 353)

[Your machines, your laws, your systems, what are they all compared to the woman who stands in the midst of this shining and fragrant sun and lets the milk

flow in through the rose-red lips from voluptuous breasts? Look at them, these breasts, they are like me, they are celestial bodies.]

The shift in divine gender—from the masculine God of Christianity to the feminine, life-giving force of the sun—hints at the way in which vitalism associated the life force with feminine power of procreation. Here the dichotomy is explicitly gender coded, with the hyper-rational (machines, laws, systems) coded male, whereas the female is associated with bodily presence and fecundity: rose-red lips and voluptuous breasts.

The monologue ends with the sun repeatedly pointing the priest to the vital force as a resolution to his crisis: “Er der af alt det dit øie og din tanke kjender noget, der er mægtigere end dette syn? Har nogen filosof udtalt en formel større end denne: Liv—i skjønhed? Er ikke alle ord, alle tanker, alle regnestykker som støv mod dette: at skabe liv—i skjønhed?” (353–4) [Out of anything your eyes and your thoughts have perceived, is there anything that is more powerful than this vision? Has any philosopher pronounced a formulation greater than this: life—in beauty? Are not all words, all thoughts, all calculations like dust compared to this: to create life—in beauty?] Here we see that the divine reproach from the sun a direct critique of perception and intellect in favor of vitalistic embodiment. Vision, thought, words, mathematical calculations all pale in comparison to the vitality of life itself. The rational systems alluded to here are based upon a secondary act of processing and rationalization, whereas vital embodiment is an immediate, primary act of experiencing and perpetuating life. After the sun sets, the priest’s immediate response to this rebuke from the sun is to seek out the life in the city below—to embrace the vitality all around him, rather than tormenting himself with his attempts to perceive God through the mediation of modern technology.

This final scene in the novel can be seen as the culmination of a vitalist “conversion” narrative in which the priest embraces immanence over transcendence, and in doing so, shifts his loyalties from a personal, masculine God to an omnipresent, feminine, vital energy. This conversion process begins early in the novel with instances of sudden awareness of the ubiquity of life and vitality, and scenes in which the priest experiences an embodied sense of his own soul—the vital force within him—vibrating along with the vital force permeating the universe. The priest’s struggle, detailed in his diary, has been driven by an empirical imperative to see God, and in an effort to do so, the priest conceives vision as a profoundly escapist undertaking. To see the invisible, the observer had to transcend the body.

### *Conclusion*

This longing for embodiment and for the life-giving energy of the sun at the end of *En Prests Dagbog* has a noteworthy connection to Obstfelder’s condition toward the end of his life, at the same time that he was trying to finish his novel. This biographical connection is interesting on its face, but even more crucial as an illustration of the way in which the sun was brought into discourses of health and healing through the work of phototherapy pioneer Niels Ryberg Finsen in Denmark. In Obstfelder’s published letters, the very last correspondence is a letter to Signe Thiel, dated July 1900, the month of his

death. Obstfelder's final letter is a heart-wrenching document of the desperation and impotence that accompanies being confined to one's deathbed. Based on the content of the letter, two things seem to occupy Obstfelder's mind at that point, days or (at the most) a few weeks before his death: a longing to get out into the summer sun he has been deprived of for so long, and a desperation to complete his book, which he is now afraid he won't be able to complete until after a protracted convalescence. Obstfelder begins, "Det er en tung skjæbne, når man har gået en lang kold vinter og en hård vår og længtet som aldrig efter solen, længtet dag efter dag, —så at måtte lægge sig tilsengs, når den kommer" (Obstfelder 1966, 230) [It is a heavy fate, when one has completed a long, cold winter and a hard spring and longed for the sun as never before, longed day after day—to be forced to lie in bed when it comes.] After describing the claustrophobia of being stuck in bed, he writes:

Og så bare den tanke: Bogen! Hvorfor denne nye hindring? Jeg, som ikke kunde andet end, måtte, måtte, måtte arbejde. Fordi der er intet andet for mig, indtil den er færdig. Og nu rædselen for at sygdommens helbredelse skal vare længe, længe, måneder" (Obstfelder 1966, 230)

[And then that thought: the book! Why this new hindrance? I, who couldn't do anything besides having, having, having to work. Because there is nothing else for me until it is completed. And now the fear that the recovery from this disease will last a long, long time, months.]

Obstfelder spends most of the letter describing how he is filled with ideas and the motivation to write, but is too exhausted to do so. His doomed hope for more time in the future to finish his book is only rivaled by his fixation on the simple pleasure of being out in the sun, a pleasure he has been cruelly denied by a long, cold winter and spring, and then being confined to bed as soon as summer came. Obstfelder writes that "Nogle dager efter, at jeg lagde mig ned, kom solen. En måned forsent! Denne måneds regn og blæst ødelagde mig. Og at ligge og tænke på dette, uafsluttelig!" (Obstfelder 1966, 230) [A few days after I was confined to bed, the sun came. One month too late! The rain and wind of this month destroyed me.] A few lines later, Obstfelder ends his letter abruptly, "Nu må jeg vist slutte. Jeg er træt" (Obstfelder 1966, 230) [I suppose I have to stop now. I am tired.]

The longing in Obstfelder's final letter for the warmth and healing radiance of the sun gives us a sense of how high the stakes of embodiment were for Obstfelder as he lay on his deathbed, hoping to complete his manuscript. Confined to his bed, bound to his dying body, Obstfelder expressed no desire to transcend or escape the earthly realm (even though he is clearly troubled by the feebleness of his body, which is too exhausted to allow him to write). The one thing he seems most fixated on is to simply bask in the warmth of the sun.

Even more crucially, the immediacy of Obstfelder's longing for the sun in his final letter shows what a potent symbol and object of reverence the sun was for vitalist philosophers, scientists, doctors, writers, and artists at the end of the century. Niels Finsen's development of therapies for forms of tuberculosis, lupus, and other maladies based on retiring to the Alps and sun-bathing for an extended convalescent period was both

an expression of and a perpetuation of the contemporary Nordic “love of the Sun,” as Hamsun had described it. Obstfelder’s final letter as well as the final scene he completed in his unfinished novel similarly testify to a particularly strong cultural association between the sun and physical vitality and vigor. So it is no surprise that, in the choice between escaping or transcending the body through the aid of optical tools, and rooting oneself squarely in the physical body to feel the warmth of the vital force on one’s skin, Obstfelder’s priest favors immanence over transcendence.

This is a typical move in all of the vitalist works I have examined in my project, which may be considered a kind of “reactionary embodiment” that vitalist discourse tends toward. Thus, although mediated vision provides the promise of perceiving invisible forces and phenomena, there is an ultimate rejection of disembodied, mediated perception and a reactionary embrace of physical immersion. But technological mediation has a crucial place in the process of the vitalist conversion. Being able to “see” beyond the limits of the naked eye makes us aware of the overwhelming abundance of life. Mediated vision also serves the role of “chasing away” a notion of a personal God, because as it expands the realm of the visible universe without revealing any divine agent, it shows us that man is not alone, but is surrounded by other vital beings. Once the vital energy all around human life is revealed, however, the excessive drive to transcend the body becomes a kind of betrayal of one’s own vitality. So although visual technologies help us to supersede the limits of embodied perception, they reveal energy within us and all around us. By the end of the diary, the priest is thus no longer fixated on locating the divine “out there,” but instead with being part of the vital energy which is inside of him and all around him.



## CONCLUSION

Each of the authors discussed in this dissertation contributed to the rise of vital materialism in Scandinavian literature toward the end of the nineteenth century in his own way. Common for all three authors was an interest in the corporeal basis of subjectivity—a synthetic impulse that resulted in a focus on the “soul” as an embodied, physiological phenomenon. But Knut Hamsun, Arne Garborg, and Sigbjørn Obstfelder emphasized different aspects of a vital materialist worldview, and each used literature in his own way to elaborate this peculiar contemporary combination of the material and the ideal. A brief glance back at each of these authors can help situate them in relationship to one another and give a sense of the variety of ways in which literature reckoned with the notion of an embodied soul.

In chapter one, I reexamined the early writing of Knut Hamsun in light of the contemporary discourses of vitalism and materialism it was in dialogue with. It is a literary-historical commonplace that Hamsun’s career was launched with a repudiation of naturalist and realist aesthetics, in particular the way in which literature of the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough fixated on social issues and political controversies rather than the more submerged psychological experience of the modern individual. My contribution to the literary-historical narrative of Hamsun’s early career is to draw attention to the extreme materiality and corporeality of one crucial term for Hamsun: the soul. Hamsun imagines the soul not as a transcendent, ethereal, or intangible phenomenon, but rather as a fully integrated part of the body. This seemingly paradoxical combination of the transcendent and the immanent—the soul and the body—is indicative of the intellectual debt Hamsun owed to contemporary discourses of vital materialism. Because of the dominance of scientific materialism on the intellectual and cultural landscape from the middle of the nineteenth century, efforts to describe phenomena like the “soul” or the “mind” in the 1890s necessarily had to corporealize and materialize such ethereal concepts. Hamsun was part of that tradition, but in a complex way, since he also rejected the external bias of naturalism.

Part of Hamsun’s alignment of soul and body was a fascination with the physiological basis and limits of human perception. Hamsun fixated on the barely perceivable, since this was the kind of perceptual experience most ripe for subjective interpretation. As such, Hamsun was interested in representing what might be called the “perceptual unconscious” (after Walter Benjamin’s *Optisch-Unbewußten* [optical unconscious]). But not all modes of perception were created equal in Hamsun’s imagination. In analyzing the perceptual landscape of *Pan* (1894), I find there is an implicit sensory hierarchy in which vision is depicted as a domineering, hyper-rationalist mode that tends toward objectivity and disembodiment, whereas hearing is imagined as receptive, ecstatic, and subjective mode that is inherently embodied. Hamsun’s sensory hierarchy depended upon the particular media-historical conditions that prevailed in the early 1890s, when visual images had had a long history of mediation, production, and circulation; however, at this early moment in the history of sound recording, aural experience would have been considered inherently fleeting, and therefore only capable of being perceived by a particular embodied subject at a specific time and place. I thus argue that Hamsun’s early

writing conceived the visual and the aural as two fundamentally distinct modes of subjectivity, not merely because they involved different perceptual faculties (vision and hearing), but because the visual engendered an objectifying and disembodied observational stance, while the aural engendered a subjective and embodied mode of being. Understanding the physiological basis of Hamsun's thinking about sensory experience and the "soul" helps recast his early writing not as a retreat from the materialist basis of literary naturalism, but rather as an important contribution to a budding vitalist impulse in Scandinavian culture at the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapter two focused on Arne Garborg's fascination with the new areas of scientific and pseudo-scientific research—in particular, spiritualism and parapsychology—that were beginning to flourish in the early 1890s. Garborg's interest in spiritualism went hand-in-hand with his articulation of a new tendency in literature and culture, which he termed an "idealistic reaction" and a form of "neo-idealism." Like Hamsun's essays and lectures from the early 1890s, Garborg identifies a renewed interest in the soul, now seen as an embodied, material phenomenon, as the most salient feature of this new cultural impulse. Garborg recognized that, in the contemporary literary and intellectual landscape, "Sjælen alene har betydning" (Garborg 2001, X: 422) [the soul alone has meaning]. Where Garborg departed from Hamsun was in explicitly connecting this new cultural fixation on the soul to a concurrent interest in supernatural phenomena and manifestations, particularly the growth of spiritualism. Spiritualism conceived of itself as a synthetic enterprise—an attempt to bring together the spiritual aspects of religion and the rigor and materialism of modern science. As one among many examples of contemporary efforts to make the soul something tangible, spiritualism was another manifestation of a growing vitalism in Scandinavian culture.

Because of the kind of irony Garborg deploys in his writing, however, he presents a different kind of interpretive challenge than Hamsun. That is not to say that Hamsun doesn't use irony in his writing, but that he more directly advocates for giving oneself over to immanent embodiment, a stance that cannot help but lessen any ironic distance. Whereas Hamsun was an enthusiastic advocate for a literature of the soul, Garborg consistently maintained an ironic detachment in his writing on the new literary trends, making it difficult to tell whether Garborg was promoting a new trend, or merely describing it. The challenge Garborg's irony poses has led scholars to describe it, using Wayne C. Booth's terms, as "unstable" irony—a rhetorical strategy that creates a gap in meaning that cannot be bridged. Unstable irony counters the interpretive urge to create coherent and cohesive meaning out of a text. My own approach to the problem of irony in Garborg's writing is not to try to resolve this divide, but rather to contextualize the appeal of irony at the particular intellectual-historical moment Garborg was writing. The kind of irony that Garborg employed fit in well with the intellectual developments of the early 1890s, as it became a rhetorical equivalent to the kind of epistemological skepticism and anti-dogmaticism Garborg was pointing out in his novels and essays from the time. By creating ironic distance between himself and his texts, thereby more readily allowing for a wide range of critical responses and interpretations, Garborg engaged in a literary demonstration of a contemporary yearning for intellectual freedom and plurality in the public discourse. Rather than seeing this negatively as the author being "deprived" of the

ability to communicate a clear message, I argue that Garborg utilized irony as part of a broader refusal to perpetuate dogmatic structures of meaning through his own writing. This anti-dogmatic gesture went hand-in-hand with one of the aspects of “neo-idealism” that Garborg admired most—that it challenged the cultural dominance of scientific positivism and instead championed the intellectual freedom that was required to investigate supernatural phenomena.

In chapter 3, I examined Sigbjørn Obstfelder’s posthumously published, unfinished novel, *En Prests Dagbog* (A Priest’s Diary). The novel—a meandering, fragmentary, firsthand account of a priest’s struggle to find visual evidence of the divine, and thereby to rekindle his faith in God—culminates in a moment of vitalist “conversion,” as the priest communes with the life-giving energy of the sun. As such, Obstfelder’s novel is an early example of what might be called “heliophilic vitalism” in Scandinavian culture. But Obstfelder also gestures toward another form of radiance that was newly discovered at the time he was writing—the X-ray. As another kind of *stråle* (ray), the X-ray was both invisible and also capable of revealing otherwise invisible structures on the photographic plate. The priest therefore recognizes the revelatory potential of the X-ray image, which can penetrate opaque matter and, in essence, “see the invisible.” But the images captured by the X-ray photograph are also radically severed from the view of the embodied eye, and therefore engage in a kind of escapist impulse to transcend the limits of the body through technological mediation.

In the novel, vital embodiment is positioned in opposition to the disembodied nature of modern visual tools and media. The crucial role of scientific vision, however, was that it made use of new optical tools to create visual records of invisible phenomena, opening up new expanses and suggesting that there were undiscovered realms teeming with life and activity, forcing a reevaluation of the place of the individual human life. Thus, although Obstfelder’s strand of vitalism emphasized visibility, it actually derived from a fascination with the *invisible* forces and phenomena that exist in the natural world, though beyond the horizons of human vision, and so the detection of such invisible forces depended on technology that could help the observer achieve “perceptual transcendence.” But although Obstfelder’s vitalism depends upon technologically aided vision as a way of making the observer aware of hidden forces at work beyond the reach of the naked eye, the culmination of the vitalist conversion narrative only takes place once the priest has shifted focus to the immanent, embodied sensation of vital force. Although he spends most of his diary trying to transcend his bodily senses in order to perceive the divine, there is a gradual movement back to the body, and an ecstatic moment of communion with the vitality of the shining sun.

Reflecting on the ways in which these three authors were in conversation with one another, it is fair to say that the writings of Hamsun and Obstfelder have more obvious conceptual overlaps than those of Garborg. Both Hamsun and Obstfelder were interested in sensory perception, particularly the objectifying tendency of vision. In Hamsun, this manifests itself in Glahn’s insistence that he can “read the souls” of those around him by observing subtle psycho-physiological changes in their faces, a visual epistemology that ultimately fails him. For Obstfelder’s priest, scientific vision is depicted as an ever-expanding field that is driven by an impulse to transcend the limitations of the human

body. This broadening of the visual horizons plays a crucial role in redirecting religious impulses toward a visual exploration at the edges of the perceivable universe. As with Hamsun, vision is depicted in Obstfelder's writing as a sensory mode that tends toward disembodiment and objectification, and is easily drawn into the detached, analytical epistemology of modern science. This escapist impulse to transcend the limitations of embodied vision through the mediation of visual technologies is set against a more immanent mode of basking in the vital radiance of the sun. Obstfelder's intervention, then, was to reframe what would otherwise be considered a more rigorous mode of materialist scientific investigation as a misguided strategy of escaping the body through perceptual mediation.

Where Obstfelder and Hamsun differ is in their attitude toward a transcendent or divine realm. For Hamsun, there is effectively no transcendent sphere. Although Glahn's subjective states, fantasies, and reveries do periodically make themselves felt in the narrative, there is no suggestion that supernatural phenomena are responsible for such episodes. There is no tortured hand-wringing about the erosion of religious faith or the death of God; everything plays out in the material and the social universe of the northern Norwegian village where Glahn makes his home for the summer. Obstfelder's universe, on the other hand, is one in which man is constantly drawn toward the divine or the transcendent, although this impulse is critiqued and challenged by an alternative drive toward immanence at the end of the novel. Whereas Hamsun's world is explicitly personal and interpersonal, Obstfelder's is centered on the relationship between the individual and the vital forces and energies that permeate the universe.

In contrast to the work of Obstfelder and Hamsun, Garborg's writing is more directly concerned with the epistemological and rhetorical conflicts that arise between scientific materialism and the kinds of parapsychological and pseudo-scientific practices that were gaining a foothold toward the end of the century, in particular, spiritualism. Like Obstfelder's priest, however, Gabriel Gram does experience a kind of religious crisis, albeit from a slightly different direction than the priest. Rather than being tormented by a desire to see God, Gram is afflicted with an ailment more commonly associated with the *fin de siècle* in European literature—namely *ennui*. Gram's weariness fixates on the materialism, lack of imagination, and intellectual freedom that characterize the modern age. His conversion to a traditional mode of religious belief toward the end of the novel is thus a more fraught enterprise than that of the priest; rather than starting at a point of faith in God and "transferring" his faith to a new kind of transcendent force, Gram starts from a point of having moved beyond religion, and is faced with the task of trying to achieve "re-enchancement" in a world in which the divine and the supernatural are no longer generally accepted. Although Gram's attempt to regain religious faith has been characterized as a "regressive" strategy, understanding Garborg's irony as a principled stance against the intellectual dogmatism of modern science casts doubt upon such dismissals of Gram's yearning for the supernatural. Garborg's concern thus seems to be more centered on the broader intellectual conflicts of the age than on the embodied nature of individual subjectivity.

One thing that all three authors share is a depiction of the resurgence of an interest in vital energy and immaterial forces at the end of the nineteenth century. And all three

authors also depict the earlier rise of naturalism and scientific materialism as necessary precursors to this turn toward the soul around 1890. Without naturalism as its antecedent, this renewed interest in the soul could hardly have been so materialist in its depiction of individual subjectivity and sensory perception as embodied, carnal phenomena. I propose, then, that this widespread fixation on the embodied soul at the end of the nineteenth century was both the outgrowth of literary and scientific naturalism, and was the beginning of a broader shift toward vital materialism that was a major strain of Scandinavian literature throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

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