

## **Tantalizing Idylls**

### **Nature and Unattainable Pleasures in Gay and Lesbian Literature**

#### *Abstract:*

This article presents comparative readings of works of fiction depicting homosexuality published between 1927 and 1941, with an emphasis on Scandinavian literature. It argues that the story of Tantalus, the mythical king whose thirst and hunger were never satisfied, functions as a catachresis that conveys the unattainability of homosexual desire. The article further makes the case that allusions to Tantalus carry a political significance in a context where homosexuality is perceived as a threat to incipient Scandinavian welfare states. Through readings of one novella, two novels and two poems, the article seeks to show that the Tantalus trope can support heteronormativity, but that it may also function as a potentially subversive symbol of the naturalness of same-sex love.

In Western states at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, homosexuality became a fulcrum of public debate. Not only was it a topic of political, pedagogic, and medical discussion; imaginative literature holding various degrees of seriousness also explored the living conditions of homosexuals, their guilt or lack thereof, and not least the possibilities of homoerotic fulfilment. Authors who sought to address these questions would often be compelled to hide their theme and allude to it in ambiguous ways—or, at least, to play down their potential subversive import by leaving the political norm open to interpretation. By reading five very different texts that span a period of fourteen years, I will discuss how they portray the homosexual's destiny by using a common trope: the allusion to the mythical king Tantalus. The aim of these readings is twofold. Firstly, I wish to bring attention to uncanonized works of fiction that engage with modern discourses on homosexuality in interesting and sometimes innovative ways. Secondly, the transtextual use of the trope I will identify sheds new light on the potential of imaginative literature to depict sexuality in alternative ways.

The starting point of these readings is a summary of the politics on homosexuality in Scandinavia and the West in the early twentieth century. Arguing that homosexuality is constructed as a taboo that must nevertheless be spoken of, I discuss how one might analyze the recoding of certain cultural elements as fundamental to establishing homosexual meaning in a text. I apply this to a comparative reading of the Austrian novella *Verwirrung der Gefühle* [*Confusion of Emotions*] (Zweig 1927) and the Norwegian novel *Følelsers forvirring* [*Confusion of Emotions*] (Krane 1937), focusing on their differing value norms. The second set of readings involves the aesthetic and political current of *vitalism*, and explores how the Danish novel *Et Vildskud* [*A Wild Shot*] (Holk 1941) and the two Norwegian poems “Dagdraumen” [“The Daydream”] and “Draum” [“Dream”] (Sveen 1933, 1935) connect the Tantalus trope with nature imagery in a way that potentially subverts the idea of homosexuality as “unnatural.” The article concludes with a summary of the differences between these works and a discussion of the various functions of the catachrestic Tantalus trope.

#### **Catachresis and Connotation as Homocultural Language**

In order to come to terms with the construction of homosexuality and homosexual culture in early twentieth-century Scandinavia, I will employ Michel Foucault's concept of *bio-politics*. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that from the late 1700s, the power of the state focuses less on protecting the head of state, and grows more concerned with controlling, governing, and ruling over life itself. The life of the nation is governed through defining and cultivating groups of valuable life at the possible expense of other groups that may be defined

as a threat to national well-being (Foucault 1980, 138). These aspects of bio-politics overlap with what I will refer to as vitalism below.

Sexuality is the core of bio-politics, according to Foucault (1980, 146). Homosexuality, as is well known, was invented as a concept in the 1800s, and the term was first used in a letter from the Hungarian writer Károly Mária Kertbeny (1824–1882) to the pioneering German gay activist Karl-Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895) in 1868. It was used publically for the first time in a pamphlet published anonymously by Kertbeny the following year (Murat 2006, 133). The concept started dominating medical discourse in the early twentieth century, replacing the older concept of “sexual inversion,” and the dichotomy between homo- and heterosexuality as *the* defining axis of human sexual behavior was established in sexology and psychiatry around 1900.<sup>1</sup> However, the identity category “homosexual” did not gain a foothold in countries such as Norway and Sweden until the 1930s (Jordåen 2010, 32; Björklund 2014, 19). The inter-war years thus constitute a highly interesting time frame with respect to the discursive formation of homosexuality.

Male homosexual relations were legally prohibited in all of the Scandinavian countries through much of the period until World War II.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the bio-political development of welfare states, the burgeoning gay scene of the Nordic capitals, as well as the breakthrough of Freudian psychoanalysis, put homosexuality at the forefront of public debate. Homosexuals were perceived as a threat to national health by all segments of the political spectrum, and failure to comply with heterosexual gender norms was considered a characteristic of ethnic, political, or cultural “others” (Jordåen 2010, 234; Bech 1997, 181–5). Further, the danger of homosexuality was even more acute as it was believed to entail an invisible and potentially contagious threat with a vague etiology (cf. Tamagne 2006, 190).

Therefore, while same-sex eroticism was in some ways a social and ethical taboo, discussing it in authoritative discourses such as medicine, law, and theology became an important task. This discursive formation of homosexuality falls in line with Foucault’s oft-quoted observation on the history of sexuality as the study of

une société qui depuis plus d’un siècle se fustige bruyamment de son hypocrisie, parle avec prolixité de son propre silence, s’acharne à détailler ce qu’elle ne dit pas, dénonce

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<sup>1</sup> It may be pointed out that heterosexuality as a concept and an identity is likewise an invention dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. “Heterosexuality” was coined by Kertbeny in the same letter to Ulrichs, but did not resurface until 1880, in a book by German zoologist Gustav Jäger (Murat 2006, 133–4).

<sup>2</sup> Denmark and Sweden removed their legal bans on homosexual intercourse in 1933 and 1944, respectively, although the age of consent was higher for homosexuals than for heterosexuals in both countries until 1976 and 1978 (cf. Rydström 2007, 21). Norway chose a different path in removing the old Mosaic phrasing “Omgængelse, som er imod Naturen” [intercourse against nature], and introducing punishment for sexual relations between men “naar det paakræves af almene Hensyn” [when public interest so demands] in 1905. Although male homosexuality was principally penalized, this was a relatively radical law for its time, as its intention was primarily to punish cases of older men seducing youth, instead of male homosexual relations in general (Halsos 2007). However, as Eve K. Sedgwick has pointed out, and as research on psychiatric and legal attitudes on homosexuality in Norway has demonstrated, this kind of vague legal regulation works all the more efficiently as a means of control by making it impossible for *all* men to know whether their erotic behavior is within the framework of the law (Sedgwick 1985, 88; cf. Jordåen 2010, 208). The Norwegian penal code was not changed until 1972, when the legal age of consent was made equal for all sexual relations.

les pouvoirs qu'elle exerce et promet de se libérer des lois qui l'ont fait fonctionner. (Foucault 2009 [1976], 16)

a society which has been loudly castigating itself for its hypocrisy for more than a century, which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say, denounces the powers it exercises, and promises to liberate itself from the very laws that have made it function. (Foucault 1980, 8)

Homosexuality is thus paradoxically constructed by an official apparatus—of psychoanalysts, pedagogues, and politicians—which tries to silence the categories it utters. This is because the proliferation of these categories, the fact of making homosexuality known, was thought to bring about the proliferation of homosexuality itself, by implanting immoral knowledge into the minds of the people (Edelman 1994, 157). From the outset, then, homosexuality is a linguistic and cultural construct that exists to the extent in which it is known and named but simultaneously silenced.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, we may recognize how homosexual meaning in a cultural text, in the words of film scholar D.A. Miller, is often conveyed by not being conveyed, in what Miller terms “a tantalizing play of connotation” (1991, 127). While several of the works I will discuss do openly depict same-sex love, I will also explain why I see them as contributing to a separate literary tradition with a particular connotative trope for a particular kind of impossible love. As we will see, what is transmitted through connotation here is not so much the fact that the characters are homosexuals, but rather the value norm applied to what was thought of as a “perverse” race.

Interestingly, Miller’s comment etymologically evokes—or connotes—the Greek mythical figure of *Tantalus*. King Tantalus was a descendant of Zeus who tested the gods by serving them his own son, Pelops, at a feast. When the gods discovered what kind of meat they were offered, they punished Tantalus for his hubris. A well-known depiction of this punishment is found in Homer’s *Odyssey*, 11.582–92, during the katabasis, Odysseus’ descent to the underworld:

Aye, and I saw Tantalus in violent torment, standing in a pool, and the water came nigh unto his chin. He seemed as one athirst, but could not take and drink; for as often as that old man stooped down, eager to drink, so often would the water be swallowed up and vanish away, and at his feet the black earth would appear, for some god made all dry. And trees, high and leafy, let stream their fruits above his head, pears, and pomegranates, and apple trees with their bright fruit, and sweet figs, and luxuriant olives. But as often as that old man would reach out toward these, to clutch them with his hands, the wind would toss them to the shadowy clouds. (Homer 1919b)

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<sup>3</sup> While I apply this idea to the European inter-war years, it is more thoroughly explored by Judith Butler in her analysis of the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in the U.S. armed forces, introduced in 1994. As Butler points out, the act of “stating that one is homosexual ... is reasonably construed as homosexual conduct itself” (Butler 1997, 106). Explicitly stating one’s homosexual identity is, in the post-AIDS era as in the context of homosexual panic in the 1930s, a speech act that is feared because it *might be* contagious. The proclamation of homosexual identity is thus imagined as identical to the very act the proclamation names: “Many would want to argue that homosexuality and its cultural representation are *not* dissociable, that representation does not follow sexuality as its dim reflection, but that representation has a constitutive function, and that, if anything, sexuality follows representation as one of its effects ...” (Butler 2007, 123, original italics).

Although the *Odyssey* remains a cornerstone of Western literature, the root of the verb *tantalize* is probably obscure to most modern speakers of English. In utterances such as the one by Miller quoted above, the fate of Tantalus functions as a catachresis, a metaphor which has sedimented in ordinary language, and whose metaphorical quality has been lost. As the Russian formalists argued, literary language is language that “deautomatizes” perception through the method of “enstranging”<sup>4</sup> a presupposed “prosaic speech” (Shklovsky 2015 [1919], 161–2). The meaning of the word “tantalizing,” however, rests on its being conventional, on its having a shared and familiar frame of reference that passes by almost unnoticed. In the following, I would like to estrange—or “pervert”—this word by relating the sedimentation of metaphorical utterances to Judith Butler’s theory of the performative construction of gender.

Gender, according to Butler, is not a manifestly existing object, but an idea that is conjured every time one expresses gendered doxa through actions—such as words. Through constant repetition, these accumulated actions acquire an air of “naturalness.” Butler argues that

gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions. (Butler 1991, 24, original italics)

In other words, gendered actions are not the result of a natural or biological sex. Rather, gender is installed through the mandatory repetitions of certain acts—whether they be linguistic or gestural: “[G]ender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself” (Butler 1991, 21, original italics). This process of constant repetition produces heterosexualized genders that conform to the norms applying to gendered acts in a given culture.

In addition, Butler underlines how gender is *catachrestically* installed. Referring to Spivak’s definition of the catachresis as using “a proper name improperly,”<sup>5</sup> Butler underlines how an utterance such as “I am a lesbian” fails to produce a revelatory insight into the subject’s identity (Butler 1991, 16). This observation also applies to gendered acts, as well as anatomical and cultural features. In my brief study of the Tantalus trope, I will read it as a conventionalized expression with *potential* homosexual meaning. In other words, the Tantalus trope is not a “proper” term for the unattainability of same-sex desire and love, but becomes, I will argue, a

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<sup>4</sup> This is translator Alexandra Berlina’s rendering of the Russian *ostranenie*.

<sup>5</sup> A conventional, rhetorical definition of catachresis states that “[c]atachresis is not divergence from a literal meaning—in the sense of opposition to a word’s proper meaning—but rather its and its word’s *extension* to a place where there is no other sign (as in ‘leg of a chair’ or ‘wing of a building’), which extension then itself becomes a necessary norm” (Preminger and Brogan 1993, 410, original italics). This metaphorical extension of the word is then forgotten; i.e. the metaphor “leg of a chair” is no longer perceived as such—it is automatized. Interestingly, the etymology of the term is somewhat unclear while at the same time important in many critics’ assessment of its rhetorical value. The Greek verb from which it derives, *καταχράσθαι* [*katakhrāsthai*], means “to use fully, exhaust,” but also “use up, misuse, abuse, destroy” (cf. Liddell and Scott 1970). The same ambiguity is intrinsic to the Latin translation *abusio*, derived from the verb *abuti* which offers a range of meaning similar to its Greek parallel. Catachresis may thus be viewed in two ways: as the *misuse* of a term (such as Butler’s *improper* installment of gender), or as an exhaustive use of the full metaphorical potential of the term (thereby opening a possibility for its recoding and subversively enstranging “misuse”).

catachrestic shorthand for this kind of love in a way that recodes and potentially challenges a heterosexualized language on love and desire.

### **The Homocultural Coding of the Tantalus Trope**

Already in classical times, Tantalus seems to have been coded as a symbol of unattainable love. As an example, we may mention the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [c. 8 A.D.], X.1–82. After the death of his wife at their own wedding, Orpheus travels to Hades in order to implore the rulers of the underworld to return his beloved. As Orpheus makes his appeal to the gods, everything pauses in the underworld: “And all the bloodless spirits wept to hear;/And Tantalus forgot the fleeing water” (Ovid 1987, 226). Tantalus is briefly mentioned as part of a catalog of sinners whose fates in many cases have something in common with that of Orpheus. With respect to Tantalus, the parallel is clear: Just as he never reaches the water, no matter how close he gets, Orpheus will eventually lose his Eurydice, even though the gods permit him to lead her by the hand back up to the world of the living.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Tantalus is a conventional symbol of unconsummated *heterosexual* love. Although gender is not explicitly mentioned, an opposite-sex relation is implied in the sonnet “La dulce boca” [“The Sweet Mouth,” 1584] by the Spanish priest and poet Luís de Góngora y Argote:

La dulce boca que a gustar convida  
Un humor entre perlas distilado,  
Y a no invidiar aquel licor sagrado  
Que a Júpiter ministra el garzón de Ida,

Amantes, no toquéis, si queréis vida;  
Porque entre un labio y otro colorado  
Amor está, de su veneno armado,  
Cual entre flor y flor sierpe escondida.

No os engañen las rosas que a la Aurora  
Diréis que, aljofaradas y olorosas  
Se le cayeron del purpúreo seno;

Manzanas son de Tántalo, y no rosas,  
Que después huyen del que incitan hora  
Y sólo del Amor queda el veneno.

(quoted in MacPherson 1997, 153)

(The sweet mouth that invites you to taste/a liquid distilled between pearls,/and not to envy the sacred drink/that the page of Ida served to Jupiter,//lovers, do not touch it, if you wish to live,/for between one colored lip and another/lies Cupid, with his poisonous arrow/wriggling like a snake between one flower and another.//Do not let the roses deceive you, that Aurora/seems to hide, bedewed and redolent,/in her purple bosom;//they are apples of Tantalus, and not roses,/that later flee from what they tease out now,/and of Cupid only the poison is left.)

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<sup>6</sup> It is also worth noting that Orpheus, following a common interpretation of the myth, turns away from women in order to nurture the love of men. Orpheus may thus be regarded as “the first mortal man to love his own sex” according to Greek myth (Woods 1998, 1).

In Góngora's sonnet, the lover comes close to his desired object, but as soon as the arousal is a fact, pleasure is withdrawn and only Cupid's poison—loss and unfulfilled longing—is left. Love, then, turns out to be “apples of Tantalus”—as is typical of baroque poetry, the central theme of the poem is the uncovering of an unpleasant reality beneath a beautiful surface.

I will argue that the trope of Tantalus is recoded in the inter-war years in what we may call “gay and lesbian literature.” I use this concept broadly, referring to imaginative literature that in some way engages with and discusses same-sex love and desire, either explicitly, or indirectly by way of allusion and connotation. For allusions and connotations to work, we are dependent on a system of references where certain signs are conventionally ascribed a particular meaning. I will postulate a gay and lesbian literary culture that employs and recodes the language of the majority—such as the discourses of medicine, law, and religion, but also the literary canon—to create a new system of references.<sup>7</sup> The recoding of the Tantalus trope, then, may be viewed as contingent on the breakthrough of discourses on homosexuality in the 1920s and -30s.

The constitution of this new system of references is evident in the transtextual relation between two narratives that bring the Tantalus trope into play. In 1927, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig published a collection of three novellas entitled *Verwirrung der Gefühle*. In this collection, the titular novella tells the story of a homosexual university professor through the perspective of one of his former and closest students. In a rather sentimental final scene the professor confides in his student; the following is the narrator's empathetic summary of the professor's fate:

[E]ine Stellung ist ihm auserselbst, wo solche Neigung zum Fluche wird. Dem Dozenten und bald darauf dem wohlbestallten Professor wird der Ständige Umgang mit jungen Menschen amtliche Pflicht, .... Qualen des Tantalus: hart zu sein gegen zudrängende Neigung, unablässig mit der eigenen Schwäche in nie endendem Kampf! (Zweig 1927, 266–7)

[H]e was offered a position where such inclinations as his are a curse. A junior lecturer, who soon became a full professor, he was professionally obliged to be constantly involved with young men ... His were the torments of Tantalus: to be harsh to those who pressed their admiration on him, to fight a neverending battle with his own weakness! (Zweig 2009, 145–6)

Surrounded by young male students, the professor's position is equal to the one of Tantalus. He finds himself in a paradisiac location, without being able to fulfill his desire—indeed the novella ends with him declaring his love for the narrator, then imploring him to leave. Already here we see the trope of Tantalus used not only to indicate “the love that dare not speak its name,” but also in order to underline the impossibility of homosexual fulfilment in a homophobic society. Zweig demands a mythical and literary knowledge of his reader in order for the analogy of Tantalus to function, thereby recoding what is conventionally a trope of unhappy heterosexual love into a trope of the specific torments of a closeted homosexual in the Central European

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<sup>7</sup> Here, I draw on David Halperin's recent analysis of gay culture: “[H]omosexuality itself, even as an erotic orientation, even as a specifically sexual subjectivity, consists in a dissident way of feeling and relating to the world. ... On this account, ‘gay’ refers not just to something you *are*, but also to something you *do*. Which means that you don't have to be homosexual in order to do it” (Halperin 2012, 13, original italics). What interests us here is thus not the sexual identity of the authors, but the culture in which they may be said to participate.

1920s.<sup>8</sup> The norm communicated seems clear: Same-sex love is unattainable, and therein lies a reason for sympathy with those afflicted.

In addition, Zweig's reference to Tantalus shows the "impropriety" of a catachresis. On the one hand, the analogy between the professor and the mythical king is somewhat lacking, as the latter is not really fighting his "inclinations" by aid of his own willpower, but is deprived of satisfaction by the gods. However, the analogy also opens another possible layer of interpretation: The professor might be said to be punished by the gods—or their proxy, the clergy, which in the early twentieth century increasingly denigrated homosexuality as the phenomenon turned more visible in bio-political discourses.

Regardless of how one reads the Tantalus trope in Zweig's novella, it is significant to note its repetition in what has been called Norway's first lesbian novel (cf. Brantenberg 1986, 35): *Følelsers forvirring*, the debut work of the writer and physician Borghild Krane, published in 1937. The transtextual relation established here is obvious: Krane simply translated Zweig's title into Norwegian. Krane draws heavily on her Austrian predecessor, and also reuses the Tantalus trope. In a conversation between the lesbian characters Randi and Åse, Randi turns to an inner monologue, before explicitly resigning in the face of her troubles:

Kanskje er det bare nødvendig med et glimt. Og så et blikk. Og så en berøring. Og så et kjærtegn. Og så videre gjennom det hemmelighetsfulle crescendo mot oppfyllelsen. Og så – – 'Men jeg vil ikke,' sa Randi redd, 'jeg tør ikke, for det er ikke som det skal være. Der mangler noe, det er dømt til å bli ufullbyrdet. Og jeg orker det ikke, disse tantalus-kvaler.' (Krane 1937, 185)

(Maybe only a glimpse is necessary. And then a gaze. And then a touch. And then a caress. And then onwards through the mysterious crescendo towards fulfillment. And then——'But I do not want to,' Randi said frightened, 'I do not dare, because it is not as it should be. There is something missing, it is condemned to remain unfulfilled. And I cannot stand it, these torments of Tantalus.')

In *Følelsers forvirring*, a stable lesbian relationship is impossible in a world where masculine-feminine complementarity is a prerequisite for erotic happiness—something is "missing" between two women. Instead of arguing that the homosexual should be able to lead a life pursuing loving relationships on her or his own terms, the novel implies that celibacy is the only viable solution. After her resignation, Randi has a short affair with Åse's gay, adoptive brother Dmitri. However unlikely and unmotivated this may seem, the plot twist makes sense within a sexual-political paradigm where complementarity is key—Randi, the "masculine" lesbian sleeps with Dmitri, the "feminine" gay man.<sup>9</sup> Krane's novel demonstrates the

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<sup>8</sup> German-speaking Europe is central in the history of homosexuality. Not only did Freud develop his highly influential psychoanalysis in Vienna; Berlin was in many ways the gay capital of Europe before the Third Reich (cf. Beachy 2014). However, § 143 of the Prussian penal code punished bestiality as well as all sexual relations between men until 1969 (Murat 2006, 124n). During the Weimar republic, 10 000 men were sentenced under this prohibition (Nieden 2005, 42). In Austria, the Criminal Code of 1852 punished both male and female homosexual activity; decriminalization only occurred in 1971 (Graupner 1997, 271–2).

<sup>9</sup> The idea that homosexual relations presupposed a masculine/feminine complementarity was formulated by Karl-Heinrich Ulrichs. Ulrichs' theory of so-called *Urnlinge* (as opposed to heterosexual *Dioninge*) was based on his own self-definition as "a female soul in a male body," but also on his ambition of "normalizing" same-sex eroticism by incorporating it in a heterosexual paradigm (Murat 2006, 123).

heteronormative implications of this paradigm: Randi remains dissatisfied with her situation, and dies in an accident shortly after having slept with Dmitri. For the lesbian, then, the choice stands between death (for those who try to seek out happiness) or celibacy (for those who resign to their fate). The latter is the solution opted for by the main character Åse, who argues that the troubles of the homosexual are no greater than those of others:

‘... Følelsen av å være ensom og forlatt i mengden fordi man er anderledes enn andre, er ikke betinget av at man er anderledes, men av at man mangler kjærlighet til nesten, medfølelsen med denne og med hin, med alle. Hvem trenger ikke medlidenhet? Står vi i en kainsmerket særklasse og alle de andre sitter inne med fordelene? Langtfra. Det normale er en idealtilstand, en arbeidshypotese nærmest. Alle avviker vi mere eller mindre fra det, og i avvikelsen har vi våre ulykker. Det gjelder bare om å se utover sine egne sirkler. Når man kan få øinene fra sin egen omkrets så pass, kan ingenting av det man ser virke fremmed og frastøtende. Vi er alle mennesker.’ (Krane 1937, 204–5)

(‘... The feeling of being lonely and left behind in the crowd because one is different from others is not conditioned on one actually being different, but on the lack of love for one’s neighbor, sympathy with this person or the next, with everyone. Who does not need sympathy? Are we in a special caste marked by the brand of Cain, while everyone else has all the advantages? Far from it. The normal is an ideal condition, a working hypothesis, so to speak. We all deviate from it, more or less, and our misfortunes are part of the deviation. One just has to look beyond one’s own circles. When one manages to lift one’s eyes a little from one’s own sphere, nothing one sees can seem foreign and revolting. We are all humans.’)

Almost paradoxically, sympathy for the homosexuals goes together with a refusal to acknowledge their special misfortunes. The moral, in other words, is one still seen in many Scandinavian religious communities: Homosexuals should be respected and shown sympathy, but they should refrain from *practicing*.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, this attitude is expressed through the refusal to see the homosexuals as “marked by the brand of Cain.” This is an allusion to Radclyffe Hall’s seminal lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928)—an allusion also to be found in the sixth volume of Swedish author Agnes von Krusenstjerna’s influential lesbian novel series *Fröknarna von Pahlen: Bröllop på Ekered* [*The Misses von Pahlen – Wedding at Ekered*] (1935, 421; cf. Borgström 2016, 175). As opposed to the Tantalus trope, then, this transtextual catachresis for lesbianism is rejected: the lesbian has no more reason to mourn her misfortunes than anyone else.

Thus, the Tantalus trope here performs quite a different normative function than in *Verwirrung der Gefühle*, and it might be considered closer to the mythical model. Randi’s constant attempts at obtaining what she desires are doomed to fail, because lesbians are condemned never to have their desires satisfied. However, as Åse’s monologue argues, this does not mean that any extra sympathy is called for—rather, the “torments of Tantalus” represent a challenge on the same level as any problems anyone else may have. Through the mention of Tantalus, then, Krane creates sympathy with the living conditions of homosexuals

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<sup>10</sup> This still seems to be a valid attitude among members of the Church of Norway. In a recent letter to the editor in the Christian daily *Dagen*, the author states: “Ingen sier at homoseksuelle følelser er synd. Men homoseksuell praksis er synd, det vitner både det gamle og det nye testamentet entydig om” (Åkenes 2015) [“Nobody says homosexual feelings are a sin. But homosexual practice is a sin, this is testified unambiguously in the Old as well as the New Testament”].

while simultaneously downplaying the exceptionality of their suffering. This is in stark contrast to Zweig's narrator declaring pity because "...[ich verstand,] wie sehr er um meinetwillen gelitten, wie heldisch er sich um meinetwillen bemeistert" (Zweig 1927, 272) ["...I understood how he had suffered for my sake, how heroically he had controlled himself for me" (Zweig 2009, 150)]. In Zweig's novella, Tantalus is evoked in order to underline the strength of the homosexual facing a series of temptations. One might see the depiction of the self-disciplined professor as an argument against the popular conception that homosexuality was a vice that young men were seduced into.<sup>11</sup> While the Austrian novella thus may be read as an argument for sexual liberty, *Følelsers forvirring* rather transmits, as Norwegian scholar Lars Rune Waage argues, a heteronormative value system (Waage 2012, 23).

While resisting one's inclination is an act of self-preserving heroism in the face of homophobia in *Verwirrung der Gefühle*, Krane invokes the myth of Tantalus in a more original sense. It might be relevant to the moral of the novel that Krane was a Catholic, and that Åse's monologue expresses how the homosexuals are punished for the original sin in the same way as everyone else has their particular challenges. Hence, these two works show how the Tantalus trope functions as a shorthand for the homosexual condition. However, they also demonstrate how the catachresis produces differing connotations while underlining the norm of the respective narratives.

### **Tantalizing Vitalism**

The final texts I would like to discuss represent a different imaginary. *Verwirrung der Gefühle* and *Følelsers forvirring* both depict the homosexual subculture as urban, reflecting the increasing visibility of homosexuals in cities such as Oslo and Berlin. Tantalus, however, is strongly associated with nature, mythically located in a lake with teeming branches above his head. The Tantalus trope thus acquires special significance as part of the gay and lesbian recoding of what I refer to as vitalism.

Vitalism may be considered an umbrella term for several sociopolitical, philosophical, and aesthetic currents at the turn of the nineteenth century. It encompasses the political work for social hygiene; activism for a return to nature, reformed clothing and the "primitive"; philosophical speculation about a presumed "life-force"; and aesthetic representations of primitivism, nature-worship, and the aforementioned life-force, overwhelmingly symbolized by the sun.<sup>12</sup> The concept of vitalism helps illuminate the overlaps between these fields. For example, the international exhibition on hygiene in Dresden, Germany in 1911 featured a pedagogical section, under the heading *Der Mensch als Kunstwerk*: "Tanken var at kroppen, som en form for arkitektur, kunne perfektioneres gjennom disiplin" (Berman 2006, 59) [The idea was that the body, as a form of architecture, could be perfected through discipline]. As literary scholar Eirik Vassenden states, vitalism entails a transfer from biology to moral, where the natural and uninhibited is regarded as positive (Vassenden 2012, 30)—one might add that it works as a positive contrast to an urbanity perceived as decadent, repressive, and feminized.

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<sup>11</sup> In addition, the teacher-student relation obviously alludes to the Classical tradition of pederasty, which was often employed in defense of male homosexuality, as seen perhaps most famously in André Gide's dialog *Corydon* (2012 [1924]). Pederasty was conceived of as a way of attaining spiritual and intellectual knowledge through close male relations, and was associated with a more masculinist idea of homosexual men.

<sup>12</sup> In recent years, numerous studies of Scandinavian vitalism have appeared. A concise overview of the different aspects of vitalism is provided by Danish literary scholar Sven Halse (2004), whose distinction between natural-philosophical, politico-pragmatic, and aesthetic vitalism informs my account.

Thus, it is plain to see how it could be put into service for a heteronormative bio-politics that sought to battle perverse sexuality and establish a healthy, procreative nation.

The ideal of a perfect body, symbolizing national strength, was the muscular and naked *male* body—through vitalist painting and sculpture, masculine nudes became a visual symbol to a much stronger degree than before (Körber 2013, 32). Vitalism was mobilized in support of an anti-decadent, masculinist, and heteronormative value system, in opposition to an urban modernity that was thought to lead to perversion. However, it also carried an erotic ambiguity: The vitalist body image was soon adopted by a gay subculture that embraced the thriving representations of the idealized male nude (Steorn 2006, 83–4).

Vitalism is thus inherently ambiguous in two ways: Firstly, it supports life, strength, and nature, and has strong ties to female emancipation movements, for example in providing arguments for the removal of the corset. But at the same time, it contributes to a discriminatory bio-politics in defining certain *kinds* of life as less *worthy* of life (Körber 2013, 34–5). Secondly, while encouraging heteronormativity and traditional gender roles, the vitalist idealization of a certain kind of male body simultaneously turned the appraisal of nature into a potential (male) homosexual sign. Before discussing an example of this latter ambiguity, I will show how vitalism and the Tantalus trope merge in a lesbian novel challenging the medico-political ideology outlined above.

As Swedish queer scholar Jenny Björklund has remarked in her recent study of lesbianism in Swedish literature, imagery of nature in Swedish novels from the 1930s often makes female same-sex eroticism come across as natural (Björklund 2014, 31). This may be read as a counter-discourse against the prevailing medical, political—and theological—view that homosexuality was “against nature.” In addition, Swedish literary scholar Eva Borgström points out that hiking and physical culture was an important element of the female emancipation movement in this era (Borgström 2016, 106). These activities were considered masculine and were part of the reason why emancipation and lesbianism were often conflated. Björklund likewise argues that the imagery of nature is connected to a bio-political discourse that is part and parcel of the establishment of a welfare state seeking to promote *public health*. While the differentiating process inherent in vitalism has a dark side and, indeed, was adopted by fascist ideologies, its concern for freedom and the natural also opened a possible discursive field for portraying lesbianism as “natural.”

One of the most well-known lesbian novels in Danish literature prior to the post-war liberation movements, is the novel *Et Vildskud*, published by the pseudonymous author “Agnete Holk” in 1941.<sup>13</sup> The novel signals its dialogic and counter-discursive relation to vitalist and sexologist ideas of nature already by its title: a *Vildskud* is an “offshoot” or a “wild shot,” denoting a stem or branch that grows off a larger plant. In this way, the title might be read as questioning what should be thought of as normatively natural: Like an offshoot, the lesbian is part of nature and biological reality, although she could be considered an anomaly or something

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<sup>13</sup> The identity of the author remains unknown, although we are probably speaking of a woman born in Copenhagen in 1895 (Lindeqvist 2009, 10). As noted by German historian Raimund Wolfert, while lesbian novels in Sweden and Norway do not appear until the 1930s (Margareta Suber’s *Charlie* (1932) and Krane’s *Følelsers forvirring*), Vilhelmine Zahle’s *Vildsomme Veje* [*Impassable Paths*] (1890) has been regarded as the first Danish novel depicting homosexuality (Wolfert 2015, 10). (In reality, *Vildsomme Veje* contains two short stories, of which “Ogsaa en Kærlighedshistorie” [“Also a Love Story”] is lesbian themed.) Wolfert argues for a revision of gay and lesbian literary history where the novel *Nina* by Otto Martin Møller, published already in 1883, should be regarded as the first Danish piece of fiction to give an affirmative and emancipatory depiction of female homosexuality (Wolfert 2015, 10).

different from the majority.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the idea of “wildness” points to a defiance of societal norms.

*Et Vildskud* follows in the vein of Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*,<sup>15</sup> depicting the generically inverted lesbian. The protagonist bears a name as vitalist as they come: *Vita Storm*. Vita is strong and manly, constantly carrying her more traditionally feminine girlfriend Irene, a decadent city-dweller, through the forest—and, in the final scene of the book, into a bed where their relation is “blessed” by a star shining over their bed (Holk 1941, 284). Moreover, Vita is a vocal proponent of “Folkesundheden” [public health]. In the value system of this novel, then, there is no contradiction between anti-decadent bio-political ideas of health, and a happy lesbian relationship based on complementarity.

An archetypal example of lesbian vitalism, *Et Vildskud* takes care to blame society, and not nature, for the misfortunes of the discriminated homosexual woman. A metaphor indicative of the sexological attitude to homosexuals was Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s phrase “stepchildren of nature” (cf. Krafft-Ebing 1999, 485). While the title *Et Vildskud* may seem to fall in line with this idea, a more obvious allusion to Krafft-Ebing near the end of the novel rather seems to redefine and almost make fun of it: “... Samfundet havde skabt hende som et af sine Stedbørn ...” (Holk 1941, 216) [... society had created her as one of its stepchildren ...]. The novel thus alludes to and subverts the ruling medical discourse that disqualified a certain group of people as “unnatural.” Vita is convinced that her orientation is natural and innate: “Havde Naturen lagt saadanne Længsler i hende, saa maatte det vel ogsaa være hendes Ret at følge dens Bud, stille de Krav, Naturen – ja, netop Naturen – havde nedlagt i hende fra Fødslen, ja vel sagtens før” (Holk 1941, 112) [Had nature installed these kinds of desire in her, then it must be her right to follow its commandments, satisfy the demands nature—yes, precisely, nature—had installed in her from birth, or likely even earlier].<sup>16</sup> It is common to view vitalism as a substitute for religion in a secularized modernity (cf. Ydstie 2006, 9), and in this quote Vita uses the term “Bud” [commandment] in a context where nature has seemingly replaced religion as the provider of moral guidance. What deprives Vita of happiness in her relations with other women is the demand from society that her girlfriends leave and get married. Thus, the nature/society dichotomy is turned upside down: Instead of urban, degenerate society fueling an unnatural sexuality that can only be fought through a vitalist return to nature, *Et Vildskud* depicts a natural kind of same-sex love between women that is hampered by social constraints. Significantly, Tantalus is the chosen catachrestic symbol for this fact:

Tantalus var der een, der hed. Alverdens kostelige Spiser og vidunderlige Vine stod for ham, forsvandt, naar han rakte Armen ud for at naa dem. Hvem der kunde naa disse skønne Kvinder, tage dem alle i Favn, dem alle – nej blot den skønneste af dem alle – Irene. (Holk 1941, 171–2).

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<sup>14</sup> *Et Vildskud* was translated into English and published in England as *The Straggler* in 1954, and as *Strange Friends* in the USA in 1955 and 1963 (Lindeqvist 2009, 12). Both titles clearly have less positive connotations than the “wild shot.” However, the original title in Danish possibly inspired the seminal Norwegian gay novel *Villskudd* by Gudmund Vindland (1979).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Lindeqvist 2009 for a comparison of *Et Vildskud* and *The Well of Loneliness*.

<sup>16</sup> This is another possible allusion to Krafft-Ebing’s extremely influential *Psychopathia Sexualis*, where the Austrian sexologist noted that many homosexuals were unable to perceive their orientations as unnatural. Rather, the respectable prescribed by society seemed unnatural to them—it is contrary, if not to the all-encompassing nature, then at least to *their own* nature (Krafft-Ebing 1999, 485).

(There was someone called Tantalus. All the world's most exquisite foods and wonderful wines stood before him, disappeared as he stretched his arm out to reach them. If only one could reach these beautiful women and embrace them all, all of them—no, just the most beautiful one of all—Irene.)

Just as the name “Vita” is symbolically charged simply by meaning “life” in Latin, so her longed-for girlfriend is given the name “Irene,” which means “peace” in Greek. Vita is deprived of the ability to make peace with herself due to the constraints of a society that refuses to see the masculine/feminine lesbian couple as complementary and natural. This complementarity between the feminine and calm Irene, and the masculine, active Vita *Storm*, is thus underlined by a nominal symbolism alluding to the two complementary classical languages.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it seems only logical that the Greek myth of Tantalus should reappear. Interestingly, though, Holk's rendition of it through the voice of Vita changes some of the basic elements of the story: Instead of placing Tantalus in a sea and surrounding him with water and fruit, he is imagined as being tempted by food and wine. In this way, the punishment of the lesbian is not first and foremost related to a revenge from nature or the gods, but to a *socially* dependent form of discrimination. The return of Irene at the end of the novel, after her failed marriage to a man, thereby indicates that lesbian love is depicted as “natural,” in opposition to the cultural norm that defines heterosexual marriage as the only acceptable way of life.

*Et Vildskud* might be compared to an interesting example of vitalist gay male poetry. In 1933, the Norwegian writer Åsmund Sveen released his second collection of poetry under the title *Jordelden* [*Fire of the Earth*].<sup>18</sup> One of the longer poems from this collection is titled “Dagdraumen,” a languorous depiction of two people who wake up on a desert island with glittering conches and blooming branches. At the height of day, the two friends walk hand in hand through the high tide and are caressed by waves and sunshine—once again the standard tropes of vitalism:

Og da er dagen som høgast,  
og greinene tenjar seg ut over vatnet  
tunge av framand frukt.  
Og der vi stig or sjøen,  
dryp det og dryp det  
blodraude blømer på akslene våre  
frå kvar ein kvist.

(Sveen 1933, 47)

(And then the day is at its height,/and the branches stretch out over the water/made heavy by foreign fruits./And where we rise out of the sea/blood-red blooms/drip and drip on our shoulders/from every branch.)

This idyllic scene of bathing seems to hark back to the original elements of the Tantalus trope, except for the fact that the fruits and water are within reach. The characters in the poem leave

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<sup>17</sup> The classical allusions could also hint at the relation between Vita and Irene as a kind of female pederasty, offering an apologetic depiction of homosexuality along the same lines as Zweig's *Verwirrung der Gefühle* and Gide's *Corydon*.

<sup>18</sup> This is a typically vitalist title alluding to desire as a natural, elemental force. The term «fire of the earth» quotes a poem from the collection *Eros* by the contemporary poet Henrik Rytter (1928, 51).

the water dripping wet, and the branches sprinkle blooms on their bodies. The color “blood-red” and particularly the phrase “blodraude blømer” [blood-red blooms] are usually connected to erotic experiences in Sveen’s work. Seemingly, then, this is an idyll where the characters, whose gender remains unspecified, are included in a vitalist conception of nature as a place of strength, happiness and healing, while the trope of impossible love is overturned. The vitalist imaginary in this poem connotes health, but it also possibly alludes to the gay appropriation of vitalist tropes as erotic markers. The depiction of naked bodies on a beach may be regarded as part of the same system of references that recodes the heterosexualized Tantalus trope with homosexual meaning.

Although the scene described is idyllic, the poem is also furnished with an epigraph: “Det var den tida da eg var lite lykkeleg – da hadde eg denne dagdraumen” (Sveen 1933, 46) [It was the time when I was not very happy—then I had this daydream]. The poet seems to place himself in the poetic discourse at the beginning of the poem, and plays on the convention of poetry being somehow closer attached to the author than narrative fiction. Sveen invites us to read this as *his* daydream, a fantasy from a time when he was unhappy. Are we then to think that he *is* happy at the time of writing this? The past tense of the epigraph and the fantastic setting of the poem destabilize the interpretation in such a way that the reader is unsure of what to make of it. Perhaps this is also a sign of the “tantalizing play of connotation”: It *may* mean that the author has found love, and that this love is another man – but it also may *not* mean this. The recoding of the Tantalus trope, however, contributes in creating the effect of homosexuality in this poem.

While this couple finds happiness in a nature free from torment, a later poem by Sveen forebodes the counter-discursive use of the trope in Holk’s novel, while also alluding to the myth as told by Homer. Sveen’s third publication, *Eros syng* [*Eros Sings*] (1935) marks a religious turn in his work, with his texts relying strongly on mythical and spiritual references. At the same time, Sveen continues his dialogue with contemporaneous discourses on sexuality. This is evident in the poem titled “Draum,” which, like “Dagdraumen,” also alludes to the importance psychoanalysis accorded to dreams in understanding the subconscious. In this way, the title signals a transtextual relation between these two poems.

“Draum” is divided into four parts. In the first poem, the speaker finds himself in a field of tall grass, when a spark suddenly rains down from heaven on his palm. The glow turns into a female character who acts as a sort of guide or introducer to the eternal dream-world the speaker will enter. In the second part of the poem, the poetic subject walks along with a “felage” [companion]. They reach a fortress, the home of the companion, where the subject is refused to enter as his friend and saving prince leaves him. Here, the tantalizing theme of being denied the fulfilment of one’s desire is introduced, and followed up in the third part of the poem:

Dei baud meg eta or gylne fat  
gjevaste forkunn-retter.  
Mi hand var kvik og mi tunge kvat  
da tok dei attende all den mat  
eg hungrig tana meg etter.

Og frukter lavde i høge tre –  
saftige, silkeraude.  
Eg stansa og bøygde ein ungvist ned,  
da gleid or mi hand den doggsleipe ved  
og fruktene slong i lauvet.

Og vinen sprang i ei solvarm stund,

kjøleg dogga han i glaset.  
Eg lyfte han alt til min tørre munn –  
da brotna støtten, staupet gjekk sund  
og vinen rann vekk i graset.

(Sveen 1935, 45)

(They asked me to eat of golden trays/the most exquisite and noble courses./My hand was quick and my tongue was alert/then they withdrew all the food/that I hungrily reached out for.//And fruits were dripping from high trees—/juicy, silky red./I stopped and bent down a young branch,/then the wood, slick with dew, slipped out of my hand/and the fruits were thrown back into the leaves.//And the wine was flowing in a moment of sunny warmth,/it coated the glass with dew./I lifted it to my dry mouth—/then the stem broke, the cup went asunder,/and the wine flowed away in the grass.)

In order to read this part of the poem, I would like to return to the fate of Tantalus as depicted in the *Odyssey*, but this time in the translation of the author, critic, and *norskdomsman* Arne Garborg. I will only cite Garborg's translation here, as an English version has been provided above:

‘Tantalos saag eg med; i fælsleg pine han mødde;  
midt i ei tjønn han stod, med vatnet heilt upp til hoka;  
tyrstande stræva han saart, men kunde kje torsten faa sløkkje;  
for naar han bøygde seg ned, den gamle, og freista aa drikke,  
vatnet vart søge burt og seig, so botnen den nakne  
sistpaa seg viste ved føterne hans; ein gud lét det kverve.  
Og ikring øyro hans hekk greiner som lavde av frukter,  
saftige fikur i mengd og pærur og kinnraude eple,  
dertil granaten søt og den gode grønne oliva;  
men naar gamlingen upp rette handi og vilde deim taka,  
braakomne vindgufsar straks deim høgt upp fraa honom lyfte.’

(Homer 1919a, 158)

The vocabulary of this excerpt has obvious points in common with both of Sveen's Tantalus-poems. Although many of Sveen's poems may be labeled "modernist," his work also often gives an impression of antiquatedness through the use of a rather *recherché* nynorsk lexicon. This is especially true of "Draum," which seems to quote Garborg's *Odyssey*: Words such as "lavde" and "kinnraud" are echoed in the second stanza of the excerpt from "Draum." The partially dactylic meter of "Draum" also functions as a classicizing element. Sveen might thus be seen to allude back to the original Greek myth, while the exquisite courses and the flowing wine turn the loss of food and drink into an allegory for the loss of the speaker's friend.

In the fourth and final part of "Draum" the speaker mystically melts together with a female character, a woman that reminds him of "ein skuldlaus svein" (Sveen 1935, 46) [a blameless swain]. The mirroring of the lyrical subject with the woman is completed as the speaker realizes her resemblance to the swain in his memory. The synthesis between these three characters—one speaking, one present, one absent—is a sign of the fusion of vitalism and a monistic spirituality inspired by Islamic sufism in Sveen's poetry. However, spiritual synthesis is also a marker of male homosexuality: The final reunion with the "blameless swain," referring back to the "companion," makes for a potentially homoerotic happy ending, where the

deprivation of everything good is finally surmounted. However, this is only depicted as possible in a dream-world, an element of these two poems which may be seen to underline the comparison between the homosexual and King Tantalus.

Sveen's two poems, published before Krane's and Holk's novels, indicate how the Tantalus trope already functioned as a potential symbol for the unattainability of homosexual desire. It is significant that the trope is only alluded to, without the name of Tantalus being mentioned explicitly in "Draum" and "Dagdraumen." This might indicate the strong reliance on connotation and allusion in lyric poetry as compared to prose. Sveen's poems, as well as "Holk"'s novel, then, show how a trope originally attached to unfulfilled heterosexuality might be recoded into possibly referring to homosexual relations, condemned to unhappiness in a society defining heteronormative families as the only valid path to not only individual fortune, but also to happy, strong, and healthy societies. In the poems, erotic union is achieved in a dream-like fantasy world, whereas *Et Vildskud* depicts a realistic possibility for ending the torments of Tantalus and living as an actual lesbian family. The fact that the gender of the speaker in the two Sveen-poems is never unambiguously stated, further turns the texts into "tantalizing play[s] of connotation."

### **Tantalus as Catachresis**

By way of a conclusion, I would like to come back to the idea of catachresis laid out at the beginning of this article. The rhetorical definition of catachresis is a metaphor whose original transfer of meaning has been forgotten because the metaphor is established as the common way of referring to a phenomenon. One term is "improperly" employed where a specific term is lacking, thereby suggesting a "misuse" of the original term, but also an extension, where its full potential for meaning is realized. The Tantalus trope works as a catachresis in the way that it does not necessarily fill a textual space where a term is *lacking*, but where that term, "homosexuality," is controversial. It thus eliminates the need of employing a word that would be a possible object of censorship, while simultaneously attaching homosexual misfortune to a "normalizing" tradition of depictions of heterosexual love, and evading the potentially condemnatory discourse of bio-political medicine.

Hence, this catachrestic trope also does *more* than just replace the concept "homosexuality." It is a carrier of values, and contributes to the norms of the narratives studied. In *Verwirrung der Gefühle*, Tantalus serves to create sympathy for the homosexual's fate, whereas in *Følelsers forvirring*, the mythical reference confirms the active lesbian's destiny of unhappiness. The retelling of the myth in *Et Vildskud* supports the novel's central idea that lesbianism is natural, although exceptional—indeed, it is the only text with a clearly happy ending. The two poems by Sveen are interesting in that they only indirectly allude to Tantalus, but also in their suggestion that fulfilment is only attainable in the controlled fantasy of the daydream.

A comparison of these texts thus also suggests that we are dealing with two types of *generic differences*—between genres as well as genders. There is an obvious difference between the open depictions of homosexual destinies in Zweig, Krane, and Holk, compared to the allusive, and elusive, dreams portrayed in Sveen's poetry. The generic identity of poetry as a type of texts opening a larger interpretative room is potentially more subversive; Sveen's homoerotic Tantalus-scenes are far from condemning the desire of homosexuals to live out their desire openly, as opposed to Krane's empathetic but heteronormative novel.

Concerning gender difference, the lesbian vitalism in *Et Vildskud*—like the nature imagery Björklund identifies in Swedish lesbian fiction—could be read in connection with the cultural codification of women as attached to the *natural* and *primitive*, in opposition to the

presumed civilizing force of male homosociality.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, one might identify an allusion to the discursive definition of the lesbian as gender transitive, i.e. more masculine than other women. In a vitalist context, the lesbian logically becomes an active, strong part of nature, thereby playing the same role as the idealized, heterosexual man. In addition, the socio-political movements associated with vitalism entailed aspects of female liberation, such as the ability to dress more “naturally” and use the outdoors. Certain elements of vitalism may thus have opened a new discursive space for emancipatory depictions of lesbianism that were not readily available for male homosexuality. The two poems by Sveen demonstrate how male homosexuality is somehow less mentionable than lesbianism; the ambiguous allusion is what creates the effect of homosexuality in his texts. I believe the catachrestic Tantalus trope should therefore be understood in the light of the discursive space I have outlined: The trope brings into play, but also opposes, ideas of a bio-political vitalism that sought to delimit and prevent the spread of homosexuality. In this way, it is indicative of the discursive existence of homosexuality as the unmentionable which can still paradoxically be mentioned.

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<sup>19</sup> As noted by several scholars, friendship was conceived as an elite male practice in early modern Europe, supporting the formation of modern states: “A male-gendered horizontality, in short, becomes the ground of modern civil society” (Lanser 2014, 115). The belief in homosocial male groups as a cornerstone of civilization was revived in the German 1920s, particularly by the *Männerbund*-ideologist Hans Blüher. Instead of regarding the heterosexual family as fundamental to the state, Blüher argued that the state rested on sublimated homoerotic ties (Bruns 2005, 109).

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