

**TRANSGRESSION, NOSTALGIA, ORDER:
REPRESENTATION OF THE PRIMITIVE IN ÉMILE ZOLA'S *LA TERRE* AND
KNUT HAMSUN'S *MARKENS GRØDE***

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Émile Zola's *La Terre* (1887, trans. as *The Earth*) belongs among the most controversial novels of Zola's famous *Rougon-Macquart* series. The novel, which describes the disintegration of an agricultural family driven by primitive instincts, divided opinions and provoked strong disagreement soon after its publication. In an open letter published in *Le Figaro* in 1887, Zola's disciples turned against the father of naturalism, accusing Zola of abandoning his ideals.¹ According to this famous "Manifesto of the Five", *La Terre*'s brutal portrayal of peasant life with its shocking scenes of rape and parricide betrayed the naturalist doctrine; in comparison with *L'Assommoir* (1877), a novel widely held to be Zola's masterpiece, *La Terre* failed to describe the life of ordinary people convincingly.

Knut Hamsun's *Markens grøde* (1917, trans. as *Growth of the Soil*), another peasant novel from the turn of the nineteenth century, also explores rural life on the threshold of modernity. Hamsun's novel is partially rooted in the naturalistic representation of peasant life. It focuses on a simple, strong peasant couple, Isaac and Inger, who live in the Norwegian wilderness and have adapted to the natural rhythm of the seasons. As in Zola's novel, the rise of human culture amidst savage nature is not accompanied by civilized values; rather the rural people give in to their libidinous instincts and even end up committing savage crimes.

In this article I examine the representation of the primitive in Zola's and Hamsun's works. The notion of the primitive usually refers to the earliest ages of humanity or to isolated non-Western cultures, to pre-modern, kinship-based, superstitious, religious, unchanging and group-oriented societies in contrast to the modern, rational, individualist, functionalist, progressive and secular world. Despite these conventional meanings, the fascination with the primitive, which increased towards the end of nineteenth century, was first and foremost an invention by the West, intended to define the Western identity vis-à-vis other cultures. As Marianne Torgovnick states (1990, 18–23), in modernity the primitive became a metaphor for discussing otherness within the dominant culture, a projection of the culture's internal anxieties and attractions embedded in the contemporary discourses on race, heredity, gender and the animal origins of human beings. The lower classes, such as immigrants, workers, racial minorities and peasants, came to occupy the position of "primitives" in modernity.² The

¹ "Le manifeste des cinq" was published in *Le Figaro* on 18 August 1887, signed by Alphonse Daudet, Paul Bonnetain, Lucien Descaves, Paul Margueritte and Gustave Guiches.

² The primitive characters in naturalist and modernist literatures have been discussed by Gina M. Rossetti (2006), who examines representations of the working classes, immigrants and racial minorities in

popularity of the peasant novel at the turn of the twentieth century can be regarded as part of this tendency.³ The peasant novels usually posit a contrast between the primitive and the civilized and appear to be an attempt to reflect the discontent of the civilized with civilization or some facet of it.⁴

The concept of the primitive crosses a wide range of issues that were central to naturalist and decadent literature at the turn of the twentieth century, from unconscious instincts to the fascination with exotic cultures. It thus offers a fruitful medium for the comparative reading of French and Nordic fiction of the era. In my article I especially focus on analysing the diverse, representative practices of Zola's and Hamsun's works, which betray stylistic differences in their portrayal of the primitive. I suggest that by describing the primitive as a vital, transgressive force that even turns against itself – against nature – Zola's *La Terre* creates a decadent version of the primitive, which, instead of a “serious”, naturalistic portrayal of everyday life, is drawn to the brutal, instinctive primitive and uses the primitive to create vital forces of transgression. Hamsun's neo-naturalist novel, in turn, reconfigures the naturalist themes in a new form and envisions a fusion of the Darwinian, naturalistic primitive and the Romantic cult of innocent primordality, suggesting the primitive lifestyle as a nostalgic return to a pre-modern lifestyle and a turn away from the degeneration of modernity.

***La Terre*: From Naturalism to Decadence**

La Terre a paru. La déception a été profonde et douloureuse. Non seulement l'observation est superficielle, les trucs démodés, la narration commune et dépourvue de caractéristiques, mais la note ordurière est exacerbée encore, descendue à des saletés si basses que, par instants, on se croirait devant un recueil de scatologie: le Maître est descendu au fond de l'immondice (Zola, 1999, 526).

The nineteenth-century naturalist novels openly violated social and moral taboos of contemporary society, but among Zola's novels, *La Terre* exceeded even the tolerance of young and liberal authors from Paul Bonnetain to Alphonse Daudet. According to the authors of the Manifesto of the Five, *La Terre* was a “scatological” novel with which the master of naturalism had descended into the lowest possible filth.

The dismay aroused by *La Terre* can be explained by its nature as a hybrid text, which is attached to representative strategies of a naturalist novel, but which simultaneously

American naturalism. However, there is a lower class that has been ignored in the study of the primitive, namely, the ordinary rural people. It is they who are discussed in the present article.

³ The peasant novel was particularly popular in Nordic literature, owing to the national values attached to the topic as discussed later in this article. As Michael J. Holland (1988, 960) observes, many Nobel Prize winners of the era, from Hamsun to Selma Lagerlöf and Frans Emil Sillanpää, focused on peasant life.

⁴ See Holland, 1988, 960. According to Holland (1988, 958–960), there are primarily three categories of peasant novels in literature: political (including social realism), realistic, and the primitive. As Holland argues, the popularity of the peasant in literature is firmly anchored to the concept of the primitive.

challenges naturalism by interpreting primitive bestiality in a decadent manner. On the one hand, the novel guides the reader into the daily life of a French peasant, thereby incorporating such characteristics of the naturalist novel as the serious study of social defects and the hardships of rural living. The novel describes how an elderly farmer, Fouan, divides up his land among his three children, but instead of gratitude, the children turn against their father, refuse to pay his pension and cast him into exile. As many critics have suggested, *La Terre* shows clear intertextual relationships to Shakespeare's *King Lear*.⁵ Fouan's decision to divide up his land, like Lear's decision to relinquish power, proves to be a fatal mistake – a tragic error – that ends in death and destruction.⁶ The cruel contest for the inherited fortune leads to the ruin of the family and to a series of scandalous, violent events, including rape, incest and parricide – the murder of Fouan by his son.

Despite the tragic aspect of old Fouan, he cannot be considered a victim for whom the reader is supposed to feel only compassion, since his cruel destiny also appears as a “justified” revenge against the old tyrant, who for decades had violently and brutally dominated his family, loving only his land, and who is now punished for his past actions. *La Terre's* break with the naturalist doctrine and its turn towards a decadent style of representation is clearly evident in this kind of character narration, which modifies the conventional idea of the naturalist character as a tragic victim of society, powerless against the hereditary taint of primitive instincts. The move from naturalist primitivism into a decadent, demonic bestiality is particularly discernible in the figure of Fouan's son. The unemotional immorality and the brutal desire for land are fully personified in the son, who is nicknamed Buteau for his obstinate and rebellious nature. Never loved by his parents, subjected to his father's tyranny, Buteau is driven by pent-up bitterness and anger to commit a series of transgressions against his family. As a man motivated by instinctual, animal desires, Buteau exemplifies a “human beast” – a primitive figure, which in naturalist literature encapsulated ideas involving race, sexuality and the animal origins of the human species. This figure, derived from the natural sciences, can be identified as the “Darwinian” version of the primitive, complete with a tragic dimension. These human beasts are usually represented as inescapably influenced by their milieu, society, race and biologically inherited frailties; they are passive creatures incapable of taking life into their own hands and powerless against the onslaught of primitive desires. An archetype of the naturalist human beast is embodied in Jacques Lantier, the

⁵See Thorel-Cailleteau 1990 and Baguley 1993, 97.

⁶The tragic vision of a naturalist novel has been delineated by David Baguley (1990, 97–119), but many previous studies have also discussed the tragic aspects of naturalist fiction. In his landmark work on *La Terre d'Émile Zola* (1952), Guy Robert, for instance, emphasizes the tragic elements in the figure of Fouan. A tragic ethos is also portrayed in *L'Assommoir*, which centres on the rise and fall of the hardworking laundress Gervaise, who, despite her dedicated effort, is trapped by the misfortunes of hereditary degeneration and the uncontrollable forces of a tragedy that threatens the basis of human order. The fame and aesthetic value of *L'Assommoir*, duly acknowledged by the authors of the Manifesto of the Five, was certainly connected to this tragic vision, which engaged readers' sympathy towards and compassion for the sufferings of an ordinary working-class woman.

protagonist of *La Bête humaine* (1890), the son of the good-hearted Gervaise Macquart in *L'Assommoir*, a railroad engineer suffering from a homicidal mania towards the opposite sex.

In the figure of Buteau, however, Zola modified the naturalist prototype of the human beast. Instead of passive submission to the voice of his inner instincts, Buteau willingly indulges in his primitive, libidinous desires and transforms them into a force of transgression, consciously and savagely using all of his primitive energy in the battle for life. This outspoken immorality clearly separates Buteau from other primitive characters in the *Rougon-Macquart* series. In *La Bête humaine* Jacques Lantier struggles valiantly to resist the outburst of his fierce desires and is deeply shocked and upset after the violent mania attacks. By contrast Buteau shows neither remorse nor compassion for the sufferings of his victims. Rather than being a tragic victim of his instinctive desires, Buteau is a man who embodies the transgressive energy typical of “Byronic” heroes, thus creating a version of the decadent and destructive “Fatal man” with a satanic face (See Praz, 1979, 55–83). Buteau willingly spreads the curse of the Fouan family all around, and he is no longer a mere victim of social and biological conditions; his immoral action can no longer be explained in terms of the inevitable forces of hereditary degeneration. In the *Rougon-Macquart* series Buteau compares Nana to a *femme fatale*, who Zola himself called *la diable*, a figure who was supposed to represent *l'état de vice* (cited in Ripoll 1981/1, 96) and in whom the limits between naturalism and decadence are at best blurred.⁷ Like Buteau, Nana does not passively slide into destruction, but, conscious of her fatal beauty and irresistible attraction, she uses her body to climb the social ladder at any price, even destroying the men who fall for her for causing the suffering all around her.

Consequently, it can be argued that the portrayal of Buteau as a human beast marks a decisive step towards a decadent representation of the primitive. Buteau's role as a fatal man is most clearly illustrated in the shockingly brutal rape scene, set on an exposed hayrick and representing the very opposite of the gentle *locus amoenus*. Embittered by the struggle over the family property, Buteau takes revenge on his cousin and sister-in-law by raping her. The perversity of the act is underlined by the negation of all the innate, “natural” laws of family affection. Buteau's wife, Lise, restrains her sister, Françoise, while she is raped by her husband:

Lise était restée droite, immobile, plantée à dix mètres, fouillant de ses yeux les lointains de l'horizon, puis les ramenant sur les deux autres, sans qu'un pli de sa face remuât. A l'appel de son homme, elle n'eut pas une hésitation, s'avança, empoigna la jambe gauche de sa sœur, l'écarta, s'assit dessus, comme si elle avait voulu la broyer. Françoise, clouée au sol, s'abandonna, les nerfs rompus, les paupières closes. Pourtant, elle avait sa connaissance, et quand Buteau l'eut possédée, elle fut emportée à son tour dans un spasme de

⁷ I have previously described the various attitudes towards the entropic fall in terms of “dynamic” and “tragic” characters; see Rossi, 2007, 92–107.

bonheur si aigu, qu'elle le serra de ses deux bras à l'étouffer, en poussant un long cri (Zola, 1999, 439).

Jealous and upset by Françoise's expression of pleasure, which reveals her underlying affection for Buteau, Lisa pushes Françoise onto a sickle, wounding her in the belly and killing her unborn child:

À gauche de celle-ci, elle avait aperçu la faux, tombée le manche en travers d'une touffe de chardons, la pointe haute. Ce fut comme dans un éclair, elle culbuta Françoise, de toute la force de ses poignets. Trébuchante, la malheureuse tourna, s'abattit à gauche, en jetant un cri terrible. La faux lui entra dans le flanc (Zola, 1999, 441).

The unnaturalness of the rape episode is extended to succeeding events: the greedy couple goes on to commit parricide, burning old Fouan, the silent witness of the terrible rape, alive.⁸

In view of the appalling events of the last chapter of *La Terre*, the scandalized reactions to the novel are not surprising. But the “mimetic realism” of the events suggests other interpretations. The novel is in line with Zola's other works, which construct multi-layered fictional worlds whose literal veracity hides mythic and symbolic levels of meaning.⁹ With its violation of the primordial taboos of human relations, *La Terre* appears to be an anarchic novel of transgression against family values and the rule of the father – a theme which, with the advent of Freud's postulation of the Oedipal complex, encapsulates the unconscious rivalry between father and son. This theme was a central issue in another contemporary work, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) by Feodor Dostoyevsky. The Oedipal dimension of *La Terre* is emphasized by Buteau's passion for the land and its cultivation, by a sexually-laden desire for “Mother Earth”. The Earth, the true heroine of the novel, as Zola explained in his preparatory notes, appears as a primordial force of life that demands sacrifices, even driving her beloved children to commit crimes:

Et la terre seule demeure, l'immortelle, la mère d'où nous sortons et où nous retournons, elle qu'on aime jusqu'au crime, qui refait continuellement de la vie pour son but ignoré, même avec nos abominations et nos misères (Zola, 1999, 508–509).

However, far from tender affection, Buteau's passion for the Earth turns into a brutal desire for possession and attains extreme dimensions as does everything in his life. Buteau feels a “joie brutale de la possession”; “elle était à lui, il voulait la pénétrer, la

⁸It is not surprising that the rape and parricide were not depicted in later film adaptations of the novel; the rape and Fouan's death by arson are omitted, for instance, in André Antoine's famous silent film of 1921, which emphasizes Fouan's tragic destiny, and ends in his natural death over the land.

⁹On Zola's “symbolic realism”, see Seassau 1989.

féconder jusqu'au ventre" (Zola, 1999, 201–202). The Oedipal drama embedded in the novel even evokes ancient myths of the creation of cosmos, as David Baguley (1993, 100) has suggested, and alludes to the violent Hellenistic legend of Gaia, Mother Earth, who gives birth to a son, Chronos, who in turn rebels against his father Ouranos.

Buteau's figure thus confirms the idea of decadence as a "romanticized" vision of degeneration and primordial instincts as discussed by Mario Praz (1951) and Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau (1994). For a transgressive, fatal man life has to be felt: pain and passion are elements of the life in which we live, and sin is the normal state of nature, Praz argues (1979, 74; 148). According to Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau (1994, 417), the move from naturalism to decadence is often revealed by the author's implied attitude towards the fictional world: "Le naturaliste devient décadent à partir du moment où il reconnaît dans la décadence non seulement une loi mais une tentation, où il aime ;" a naturalist writer becomes decadent the moment he turns into a necrophile, who, instead of seriously examining his social defects, views degeneration as an ideal, excited by the allure of corruption (Thorel-Cailleteau, 1994, 417). Contaminated beauty, Mario Praz reminds (1979, 31), has been a constant feature of decadence in literature since the Romantics.

This "necrophilic" gourmandizing of degeneration in *La Terre* manifests itself in the narrator's voyeuristic fascination with primitive sexuality in a rural milieu. The peasants are portrayed as similar to animals from the very beginning of the novel: Jean Macquart falls for Françoise while helping her to mount a bull on her cow; and Françoise's sister Lise later brings her child into the world at the same time her cow gives birth to a calf. If the connection between primitivity and sexuality is in general difficult to ignore, then *La Terre* indeed underlines the supposedly animal-like sexual liberty of uncivilized people in the midst of nature, far away from the repressive, controlling constraints of society. The peasants have sex anywhere and at any time, to the point that their unashamed manners frighten away newcomers from the city.

The representation of the decadent primitive in *La Terre* is detached from the "serious" representation of everyday reality, which characterizes the archetypal naturalist texts such as *L'Assommoir*.¹⁰ The exaggeration of the peasants' bestiality even achieves parodic and carnival-like dimensions,¹¹ which strive for the reorganisation of social hierarchies and contribute to the transgressive poetics of the novel, pointing to the birth of a new society.¹² *La Terre*'s negation of the existing norms and values calls for a revolt, which, in a novel that constantly refers to the revolution of 1789, is not devoid of socialist allusions. The novel takes a critical stand on modernity. The free markets of

¹⁰"Seriousness" is one of Erich Auerbach's criteria for realism and is also characteristic of Zola's work (Auerbach, 2003, 509-515).

¹¹Besides the alluring, romantic decadence exemplified by Buteau, *La Terre* also includes carnival-like, even parodic features, especially in the description of another of old Fouan's sons, this one a profligate, lazy drunkard called Hyacinth and nicknamed Jésus-Christ, who plays the role of the buffoon and brings Rabelaisian dimensions to the novel (See Baguley, 1993,98). Hyacinth suffers from constant flatulence and is responsible for the *volée de merde* that flies from an open window in the middle of Lise and Buteau's wedding feast.

¹²On transgression as a dynamic force of revolution, see Lyytikäinen 2004, 22–26.

capitalist society and global commerce entail aggressive price competition, which has driven traditional agriculture into crisis and compelled the peasants to hunt greedily for money. The idea of transgression as a force of recreation is also inscribed in the mythical dimension of the novel, in the Oedipal drama between Buteau, old Fouan and “Mother Earth”. The parricide at the novel’s end novel evokes contemporary theories about the initial stages of human society, which, according to Darwin and Freud, emerged in the primal horde with a son’s killing of the patriarch.¹³ But despite the devastation, life goes on. In line with the cyclic vision of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, the novel’s end suggests a revival of a new era after the violent struggle for life, when Jean Macquart, witness to the ruins of the peasant tragedy, leaves the village:

Il partait, lorsque, une dernière fois, il promena ses regards des deux fosses, vierges d’herbe, aux labours sans fin de la Beauce, que les semeurs emplissaient de leur geste continu. Des mort, des semences, et le pain poussait de la terre (Zola, 1999, 509).

Hamsun: Nostalgia for the Romantic Primordial

Émile Zola was undoubtedly the most renowned author in late nineteenth-century Europe. His novels were translated into numerous languages, and his theory on the experimental novel attracted attention all over the continent and across the Nordic world.¹⁴ Although Zola’s novels and theories generally received enthusiastic admiration in the Nordic countries, authors in the Far North adapted the French doctrine to their own aesthetic purposes and developed new forms of naturalism anchored in culturally and nationally significant genres and styles. Hamsun, for example, was consciously challenging Zola; as early as 1888, he declared the rise of “a new period in literature”.¹⁵

Owing to this “cultural adaptation”, a decadent peasant novel in the sense of Zola’s *La Terre*, describing peasants as social rabble, would never have been possible in the Nordic literature of the era.¹⁶ In Nordic literature the figure of the peasant became an essential feature in imagining and narrating national self-identity, and the peasant novel belonged to the literary genres laden with great national value. In Nordic literature, nineteenth-century romantic nationalism was firmly rooted in a vision of ordinary people living in harmony with nature, and thus the peasant represented important elements in national self-perception. The peasant family, headed by a hardworking, God-fearing farmer with his virtuous homemaker of a wife who safeguarded the family morals, even became a

¹³ See Freud 1960, 141–142.

¹⁴ On the influence of French naturalism in Nordic literature, see Rossi 2007.

¹⁵ “I feel on every nerve in my body that we are now standing before a new period in literature. Zola waits, Strindberg waits – we stand before a new epoch. A new spring is unfolding, new forces are emerging, an endless renewal, a spring morning with every new generation! Now comes ours!” Knut Hamsun to Yngvar Laws in 1888. See letter 045, Hamsun 1990.

¹⁶ The idea of the peasant as the lowest class of society recurs in Zola’s *La Fécondité*, the novel in which praise for agricultural society does not include the native peasants. Rather the heroes of the rural milieu are the newcomers from Paris, while the local farmers are described as rabble, who have let their farms go to wrack and ruin.

symbol of national integration.¹⁷ When *Markens grøde* earned Hamsun a Nobel Prize in 1920,¹⁸ the Nobel committee compared Hamsun to Hesiod, described his novel as an “epic of labour” and praised it for its nationalistic values, including Isaac’s “heroic struggle” and “manly sacrifice for his country”.

Markens grøde begins with the genesis of a primitive culture: Isaac, a simple-minded man without a past, arrives from nowhere, settles in no-man’s land¹⁹ and begins farming and building.

The long, long road over the moors and up into the forest—who trod it into being first of all? Man, a human being, the first that came here. There was no path before he came. Afterward, some beast or other, following the faint tracks over marsh and moorland, wearing them deeper; after these again some Lapp gained scent of the path, and took that way from field to field, looking to his reindeer. Thus was made the road through the great Almenning—the common tracts without an owner; no-man's-land.²⁰

Isaac sends out a message via a wandering Lapp that he is looking for a woman, and presently Inger comes to him over the mountains. She is a woman disfigured by a hare-lip, but she is a strong and hard-working homemaker, and together they establish the settlement known Sellanraa. On the one hand, the colonisation of the wilderness evokes the Viking myth, which strongly affected the representation of peasants in Norway, who were seen as recipients and followers of the Viking heritage (Maure, 1996, 65), bold “warrior-conquerors” setting out for unknown and inhabited regions. On the other hand, the settling down of a “patriarch” and his wife has clear biblical allusions and evokes the paradise myth included in the romantic version of the primitive, expressing nostalgia for

¹⁷ In the Nordic countries iconic images of peasants were created in Finnish Romanticism, particularly in the works of the poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–1877). Runeberg wrote in Swedish and established a reputation throughout the Nordic world. His *Elgskytterne* (*The Elk Hunters*, 1832) has been hailed as the first Nordic literary work to describe peasants; his poems, written in hexameter and imitating antique idylls, represented a positive version of the primitive. He described Finland’s rural inhabitants as humble, hardworking and God-fearing tenant farmers, who lived in harmony with nature as well as with the landowning classes.

¹⁸ See the Award Ceremony Speech by Harald Hjärne, Chairman of the Nobel Committee: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1920/press.html?print=1

¹⁹ The unoccupied “no-man’s land” refers to the region inhabited by the Sámi people: Isaac and Inger settle in Sellanraa, just as the nomadic people used to do until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Norwegian authorities put pressure on the Sámi culture with attempts to make the Norwegian language and culture universal.

²⁰ The English translations by W.W. Worster. The original text in Norwegian reads: “Den lange, lange Sti over myrene og ind i skogene hvem har trukket op den? Manden, mennesket, den første som var her. Det var ingen sti før ham. Siden fulgte et og andet dyr de svake spor over moer og myrer og gjorde dem tydeligere, og siden igjen begyndte en og anden lap at snuse stien op og gaa den naar han skulde fra fæjld til fæjld og se til sin ren. Slik blev stien til gjennom den store almenning som ingen eiet, det herreløse land (Hamsun, 1963, 145).”

the primordial, “Adamic” human condition, for the purity and originality of the first man on earth.

As the narrative goes on, romantic primordiality is combined with the naturalist, Darwinian primitive. By comparison with civilized, urban society and with the middle-class characters described in *Markens grøde*, Inger and Isaac represent lower creatures driven by their instincts. They neither reflect on their lives nor on their love, but they experience a wild and passionate desire for each other. They do not speak like human beings either. Isaac’s speech resembles the “coarse voice of a beast”, and Inger only hisses through her cleft lip. Inger’s first daughter is born hare-lipped like her mother and, prey to a superstitious fear, Inger kills the baby and hides it in the woods. The secret is revealed, and Inger is sentenced to prison. Infanticide recurs later in the novel, when a young neighbourhood maid kills her two newborns.

In an interesting way, Hamsun’s novel illustrates how the definition of the primitive is affiliated with the social structures and how the judgements of the primitive vary according to circumstances. The primitive may include various layers of otherness and different kinds of juxtaposition of the lower and upper classes. The primitive tells us what we want it to tell us, Marianne Torgovnick (1990, 9) writes, describing the ambivalent nature of the concept. Although Isaac and Inger exemplify naturalist animality, at the same time, as “original” Norwegians they appear superior to the ethnic minority in the novel, the Sámi, who represent a primitive “other” besides the peasant figures. The Sámi are depicted in contradictory terms: they are magic-wielding shamans full of admirable wisdom, but they are also irritating beggars, thieves and evil gossipers who trespass on private property. In *Markens grøde* the Sámi people function as an enigmatic power behind the scenes, playing decisive roles in many events in the novel. They build the first road to Sellanraa; they send Inger to Isaac; they bring Inger a dead hare, which she considers to be a curse that causes the hare-lip of her newborn daughter.

The description of the Sámi in *Markens grøde* places the figures of Isaac and Inger in a new light and shows how the peasant as a national symbol was also a question of Norwegian ethnic identity. Hamsun grew up in Hamarøy, an area inhabited both by the Norwegians and the Sámi, whose national status and rights to their own territories became a burning issue at the turn of the twentieth century. The questions of race and ethnic origin were major concerns, not only in central European scientific research, but also in Nordic medical psychiatry, pathology and criminology. As the end of the nineteenth century drew near and Norway was developing into a modern state with political independence on the horizon, the national imagery championed the idea of the purity of the white Nordic race, which, as Monica Zagar (2009) has shown, also influenced Hamsun’s conceptions of race and gender.²¹ As Torgovnick (1990, 6) reminds us, images of the primitive were used in Fascist slogans of the “folk” and in discussions of “blood” and “fertility”, but these concepts were interpreted in various ways. The

²¹ Hamsun’s prejudices against racial minorities grew during his journey to America; his letter written after visiting Indian camps there do not indeed give a very flattering portrayal of the native Americans, whom he even calls “half-apes.” (See Zagar, 2009, 83)

Aryan folk represented a positive purity and vitality; Jews and Gypsies represented the negative animality that marked them for death camps. In the same way, in *Markens grøde*, Hamsun's fascination with Isaac's primitive life in harmony with fertile nature can be considered a Fascist admiration of the lifestyle of a "pure" and "original" race, whereas the degenerated Sámi represent the primitive in a negative sense. Nor does Hamsun's conservative primitivism avoid misogynist features, as his message about primitive nostalgia is articulated most clearly for women: return to nature and natural cycles and turn away from progress and degenerating modern lifestyles (Zagar, 2009, 71).

The narratives about the primitive often prove to be allegories for modernization, Marianne Torgovnick states (1990, 224). Zola's *La Terre* and Hamsun's *Markens grøde* illustrate how the economic and technological progress of modern society challenged the traditional rural lifestyle, but the novels draw different conclusions. In Zola's decadent vision globalization drives the traditional agricultural society into crisis and contributes to the collapse of human values, while *Markens grøde* suggests nostalgia for a primitive community and expresses the wish to escape the entanglements of modern life. The escape from modernity is emphasized by Isaac's satisfaction with his simple lifestyle. Unlike Zola's greedy peasants, Isaac is not interested in money, the symbol of modern society. He does not search for an economic advantage in nature, and he does not even understand the worth of his land, which is rich in copper. He sells it to the government for a ridiculously cheap price. On the other hand, Isaac does not resist modernity's progress either, but sends his children to school and adopts labour-saving machines. However, if Isaac is to be considered a symbolic figure with a message for modern man, what is striking about him is that he is free from the maladies of modernity, such as compulsive self-reflection and the restless longing for new experiences. He neither reflects on his lot nor does he compare himself to the neighbouring peasants. He calmly accepts the misfortunes of life, such as Inger's crime and adultery. Once he has settled down on his farm, Isaac is free from the need to search for the new by constant travelling, by contrast to the restless figure of Geissler, the enigmatic former *Lendsmand* (the sheriff) to whom Isaac owes a great deal of his success. Geissler, who suddenly appears and disappears to carry out his business affairs in Sellanraa, is a vagabond figure typical of Hamsun's works, modifying the primitive "nomadic" lifestyle to fit the needs of modern society.

The anti-modern search for the authentic can be considered a constant of modernist literature, of which Hamsun was one of the founding fathers with his breakthrough work *Sult* (1890, trans. as *Hunger*). According to Gina M. Rossetti (2006, 25), within the modernist movement the primitive became a means of artistic escape from the modern era's deadening culture. In *Markens grøde* modernity is indeed described as the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Inger's degeneration begins in the city. When Inger returns from prison in Trondheim, the hardworking homemaker has changed. Her hare-lip has been corrected by a simple operation. She speaks with elegance and style, but she has also become restless, impatient, and she wants a maid. Sellanraa has changed, too, and Inger now has several affairs with engineers who work in the area. Isaac forgives Inger,

who gradually begins to adapt to rural life again. The fate of Isaac's prodigal son, Eleseus, repeats modern civilization's menace to human happiness. Like Inger, Eleseus too carries out a disastrous flirtation with the city and is compelled to change. At the end of *Markens grøde*, Eleseus leaves for America, whereas Isaac's other son, Sivert, is faithful to his father's values and remains in Norway to continue his father's work. The prodigal son's departure for the New World can be interpreted as sealing his degeneration: Hamsun was one of America's harshest critics, portraying the country as a place of material greed, mass mediocrity and shallow values, the epitome of the dark side of modernity (Zagar 2009, 33).

A significant motivation for primitivism in modernity was a new version of the idyllic, utopian primitive: the wish for "being physical" within familial and cultural traditions that both connect with the past and allow for a changing future (Torgovnick, 1990, 245). The positive, vital version of the primitive thus suggests a continuity of life across generations, an ideal of sacred eternity, which sanctifies the fundamental physicality of family bonds. In Nordic literature many authors voiced a nostalgic search for the peasant idyll. August Strindberg, for example, inspired by Rousseau's ideas, admired the rural people, considering them unspoiled children of nature in contrast to the artificial upper-class culture.²² The cult of the familial primitive is also illustrated in *Markens grøde*, which, towards the end of the novel, increasingly portrays Isaac and Inger with mythical allusions and depicts their marriage as a sacred union. Despite his simple mind, Isaac the heroic settler takes control of the earth with the force of his own body and makes the farm flourish by respecting nature. By the end of the novel, Isaac is described as a man of the future, who rules the Earth with a priestess of the heart, Inger, "a Vestal tending the fire of a kitchen stove"²³:

A tiller of the ground, body and soul; a worker on the land without respite. A ghost risen out of the past to point the future, a man from the earliest days of cultivation, a settler in the wilds, nine hundred years old, and, withal, a man of the day.²⁴

Markens grøde thus ends in a lyrical vision of man's pantheistic assimilation into nature, representing a harmonious contrast to the chaos of modernity, a world in which everything is in order: "Forest and field look on. All is majesty and power—a sequence

²² In the preface to *Giftas* (trans. as *Getting Married*, 1884) Strindberg extended the peasant ideal to the Woman Question and posited a contrast between the cultured woman, who represented decadent civilization, and the peasant woman, who represented the return to innocent nature; in Strindberg's anti-emancipatory view, the peasant woman, unlike her emancipated, civilized sister, understood her original role as a mother; see Strindberg, 1972, 31–32

²³The original text in Norwegian reads: "en vestalinde som gjør op ild i en kokeovn." Hamsun 1963, 397.

²⁴ The original text in Norwegian reads: "Han er markbo i sind og skind og jordbruker uten nåde. En gjenopstanden fra fortiden som peker fremtiden ut, en mand fra det første jordbruk, landnamsmand, ni hundrede år gammel og igjen dagens mand (Hamsun 1963, 396)."

and purpose to things.”²⁵

As we have seen in the analysis of Zola’s and Hamsun’s novels, in literature the representation of the primitive is an issue with many facets and interpretations. Zola’s *La Terre* betrays the underlying energy of the primitive, and by contravening the fundamental taboos of sexuality, turns savage instinct into an anarchic force of transgression that questions both primitive and modern values, from patriarchy to globalization. Hamsun’s *Markens grøde*, in turn, cherishes an ideal of the primordial in order to interrupt the dynamic changes wrought by modernity; instead of transgression, it searches for a nostalgic harmony and re-establishment of a “neo-primitive” society that would re-embrace patriarchal values. Furthermore, both novels reveal the ambiguous interconnectedness of the primitive with the modern. Paradoxically, modernity does not exist without its primitive otherness, without the archaic images of an instinctive, superstitious, religious, group-oriented and unchanging humanity lurking behind the modern ideals of individuality, rationality and progress. And the primitive itself is constructed by modernity and reflects the different needs and changing values in modern societies.

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²⁵ The original text in Norwegian reads: “Skogen og fæjldene staar og ser paa, alt er høihet og vælde, her er sammenhæng og mål (Hamsun 1963, 396)”.

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Biographical note

Riikka Rossi is docent of Finnish literature at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research centers on the history and theory of literary realism and naturalism in Nordic and French literature, literary genres and comparative study. She is currently working on a project on the representation of the primitive in Finnish literature.

Summary

This article examines the representation of the primitive in two peasant novels, Émile Zola's *La Terre* (1887, trans. as *The Earth*) and Knut Hamsun's *Markens grøde* (1917, trans. as *Growth of the Soil*). The concept of the primitive crosses a wide range of issues that were central to naturalist and decadent literature at the turn of the twentieth century, from unconscious instincts to the fascination with exotic cultures. It thus offers a fruitful medium for the comparative reading of French and Nordic fiction of the era. I especially focus on analysing the diverse, representative practices of Zola's and Hamsun's works, which betray stylistic differences in their portrayal of the primitive. I suggest that by describing the primitive as a vital, transgressive force that even turns against itself – against nature – Zola's *La Terre* creates a decadent version of the primitive, which, instead of a “serious”, naturalistic portrayal of everyday life, is drawn to the brutal, instinctive primitive and uses the primitive to create vital forces of transgression. Hamsun's neo-naturalist novel, in turn, reconfigures the naturalist themes in a new form and envisions a fusion of the Darwinian, naturalistic primitive and the Romantic cult of innocent primordially, suggesting the primitive lifestyle as a nostalgic return to a pre-modern lifestyle and a turn away from the degeneration of modernity.

Key-words

primitivism, naturalism, decadence, transgression, Émile Zola, Knut Hamsun, peasant novel