

**To Be in or Not to Be:**  
**A Critical-Theoretical Framing of Liminality, Deviance, and Reading**  
**Practices in German-Language Modernism (1890–1940)**

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**Abstract**

The article elaborates a critical-theoretical framework for the analysis of German-language modernist prose (1890–1940) by articulating a triadic nexus between the figuration of marginality (liminal and deviant subject-positions), the formal means through which such figuration is rendered intelligible (openness, indeterminacy, intertextuality, metalepsis), and the hermeneutic-historiographical regimes that have governed their reception and canonization. Drawing on Victor Turner’s concept of the liminoid and Howard S. Becker’s sociology of deviance, marginality is reconceptualized not as thematic content but as an immanent aesthetic operator that organizes narrative form and interpretive protocols. Through three case studies (Margarete Böhme, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Helene Böhlau), the essay demonstrates that the representation of deviance is structurally coextensive with formal strategies that suspend adjudication, dislocate epistemic authority, and destabilize juridical, medical, and moral discourse. Deviance emerges as a processual effect of ‘labeling’ and narrative mediation, while liminality is formalized as structural non-closure: fragmentation, parataxis, perspectival disjunction, and recursive framing produce texts that resist epistemic stabilization. In this sense, modernist form operates as an “open work” (Eco 1962; 1989) and as a site of co-constitutive meaning production (Iser 1974), wherein reading is repositioned as an ethically charged practice of negotiating indeterminacy rather than resolving it. At the level of critical methodology, the article advances the concept of ‘fake reading’ to designate interpretive regimes that instrumentalize literary texts by subsuming them under pre-given schemas, thereby enacting forms of epistemic injustice. Against such reductive appropriations, the framework integrates formalist analysis, sociological theory, and reception aesthetics into a mode of reading that is both analytically rigorous and politically reflexive. Reading is thus theorized as a site of epistemic struggle, in which the reproduction or suspension of normative categories is at stake. From this perspective, the margins of the canon are reconfigured as zones of heightened formal and epistemic productivity, where modernism’s constitutive operations – its refusal of closure, redistribution of interpretive agency, and interrogation of institutional knowledge – are



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most legible. German modernism thereby emerges not as a purely stylistic formation but as an epistemic apparatus that rearticulates the conditions under which marginality can be represented, interpreted, and known.

**Keywords:** liminality; hermeneutics; modernist form; epistemic injustice; theories of reading.

## 1. Situating marginality between theme, form, and reception

This essay proposes an interpretive framework that integrates three trajectories for reading German-language fiction around the beginning of the twentieth century: (1) the thematic representation of outsiders, liminoids, and deviants – figures whose lives unfold at the thresholds of social belonging; (2) the aesthetic and formal strategies by which such figures are rendered legible, particularly through narratological strategies such as intertextuality and metalepsis, narrative openness and indeterminacy; and (3) the hermeneutic and historical consequences of these strategies – how such works have been relegated to the margins of the canon, and how renewed critical attention to their aesthetics may illuminate persistent social questions around gender, mental health, and exclusion. Focusing on authors such as Lou Andreas-Salomé, Margarete Böhme, Helene Böhlau, the essay casts liminality not simply as a sociological condition but as an aesthetic problem: the encounter between non-conforming lives and forms that resist closure. Rather than treating literature as a transparent vehicle for social diagnosis, it argues that literary ‘outsides’ – of gender, of mental health, of legality, of class – are inseparable from formal decisions that solicit, complicate, or defer interpretive consensus. Not only the recovery of neglected authors, but also the demonstration that marginality itself is a generative aesthetic principle are at stake: the very condition modernism exploits to reconfigure form, reading practices, and cultural legitimacy, ultimately functioning as an epistemic laboratory of marginality.

## 2. Conceptual hooks: liminoid figures and deviant careers

The first conceptual hook is Victor Turner’s notion of the ‘liminoid’, a category that retains the threshold dynamics of ritual liminality while transposing them into modern, individualized, and often voluntary arenas of experience (Turner 1969, 1982). Liminoid figures “are neither here nor there,” (Turner 1974, 232) and their representation exposes the



meaning of refusing socially prescribed life-course milestones – marriage, parenthood, religious rites, and other normative ‘steps.’ Such protagonists do not “live by the rules,” (Turner 1974, 232) yet their refusal is not reducible to criminality; they inhabit a gray zone in which noncompliance may be ethically motivated, aesthetically productive, or existentially necessary. Turner built on Van Gennep’s tripartite schema (Van Gennep 1909); his re-theorization of liminality as a vital “betwixt and between” (Turner 1974, 232) can help reading threshold states not as mere passages to reintegration but as zones of heightened instability, symbolic density, and potential reconfiguration – what later criticism also names as threshold chronotopes (Bakhtin) or even interstitial ‘third spaces.’ There disorder, asymmetry, and ambiguity become productive rather than merely disruptive. As widely documented in anglophone Gothic and modernist short fiction (e.g., Woolf and others); anglophone modernist short fiction (e.g., Woolf, Moore, D’Arcy, Egerton, and others), where porous interiors dramatize threshold life where rites of passage (marriage, work, aging) are stalled or refused; domestic interiors, streets, and waiting rooms become porous thresholds; and form itself (the short story’s compression, montage, and open *pointe*) stages the volatility of being neither fully inside nor outside (Del Zoppo 2021). Against this English baseline, the German-language cases examine function as a comparative gauge: they show how marginality and liminality not only surface as themes but operate as aesthetic engines on a much broader and transcultural level – activating liminoid experience, deviance as social process, and open form as readerly address – and thus warrant a renewed literary historiography attuned to margins as generative.

The second anchor comes from Howard S. Becker’s sociology of deviance, especially his analysis of ‘deviant careers’ as multi-step processes shaped by labeling, surveillance, and public exposure. Becker underlines the difficulty of achieving a genuine ‘outsider view’ of deviance – the difficulty of seeing deviance as a social construction rather than a pre-given essence. He also shows how actors learn “techniques of neutralization” (Sykes and

Matza 1957) to justify norm-transgressing acts against internalized codes. The moment of being “caught and publicly labeled” (Becker 1963, 32) marks a pivotal conversion of private irregularity into social identity.

Here then the literary stakes: if the liminoid marks a voluntary, often aestheticized thresholding of identity, the deviant career dramatizes the social and procedural capture of that threshold. The two perspectives – one emphasizing experience and form, the other institutional process – suggest that literary modernism’s preoccupation with marginality is not merely mimetic but reflexive and metapoetic: literature probes how thresholds are experienced and narrated into being. This also foregrounds and gives space to a sociological-literary approach, linking what Jérôme Meizoz (2007) calls “authorial postures”: the ways in which writers publicly negotiated their positions, shaping both their contemporary reception and later marginalization. For example, in the case studies below, Böhme’s self-positioning as *Herausgeberin* of *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* can offer a paradigmatic example of such an authorial posture, mediating scandal through editorial distance while simultaneously heightening claims to authenticity.

### **3. Gender, stigma, and the everyday dramaturgy of transgression and deviance: a corpus**

The corpus foregrounds women whose ‘outsideness’ is marked not only by the refusal or failure to marry but also by proximity to criminalized economies and stigmatized conditions: prostitution, theft, abortion, abandonment, or the burden of ‘multiple marriages.’ The case studies are deliberately limited, selected from a broader constellation I have examined elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> In Margarete Böhme, the traffic between intimacy and commerce is not an incidental plot device but a social language in which desire and vulnerability are written against the law. In Helene Böhlau, violent ruptures expose the

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<sup>1</sup> For a broader constellation of authors, including Ilse Frapan, Johanna Wolff, Friedrich Glauser, and Leonhard Frank, see Del Zoppo (2018, 2020, 2023, 2026).



gendered distribution of culpability and sympathy. In Lou Andreas-Salomé, boundary-testing through abandonment or trespassing dramatizes the costs of selfhood that refuses domestication.

From the vantage of Becker and Sykes/Matza, these narratives can be read as archives of rationalization and counter-rationalization – repertoires by which characters (and sometimes narrators) test, deflect, or repurpose the moral grammar of their worlds. Yet Turner’s liminoid lens cautions against collapsing these acts into purely instrumental defences; they may be, instead, modes of experimenting with life forms – of trying on identities that the social field makes anomalous.<sup>2</sup>

The stigmas (Goffman 1963) attached to women’s exclusion and to mental health – particularly in discourses surrounding so-called ‘manic-depressive disorder’ – are inseparable from *cupio dissolvi*, a desire for dissolution that may appear pathological, mystical, erotic, or aesthetic depending on the interpretive frame. Such doubleness makes these texts crucial for understanding how modernism stages the dramaturgy of transgression: not as a set of predictable infractions but as thresholds where identities are tested and meaning itself is negotiated and requires a dual lens. On the one hand, medicalizing languages translate suffering into diagnosis; on the other, they risk occluding agency and reducing ambiguity. The liminoid model reframes this tension, treating dissolution not as fixed pathology but as a threshold experience whose meaning depends on context. Formally, *cupio dissolvi* correlates with the texts’ own gestures toward disaggregation: episodic structures, broken chronologies, porous boundaries between letters, reports, confessions, and dreams. In these architectures, psychic disintegration is mirrored in literary design. One thinks, for example, of Isolde’s final walk into the ‘white

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<sup>2</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck’s reflections on threshold concepts – between *Erfahrungsraum* (space of experience) and *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectation) – help clarify how these texts situate dissolution at the juncture of lived suffering and projected possibility, a temporality where the self is suspended between historical experience and future-oriented anticipation.



morning' in Böhlau's *Halbtier!*: a moment in which dissolution is staged not as termination, but as threshold. Or of Irene von Geyern's image walking towards the landscape in the last story of *Menschenkinder*. Or of Thymian's diary voice fading into silence rather than resolution: moments where dissolution is staged as threshold, as liminal moments, rather than terminus, an Iserian blank rather than pathology. Yet because endings remain open, dissolution is not equated with narrative death. Instead, meaning is suspended to the reader: what forms of life remain possible in a field calibrated to exclude them? A final cadence that withholds verdict (a walk into 'white morning,' a diary's self-address that fades rather than closes) enacts dissolution as threshold rather than terminus – an Iserian blank rather than a pathology.

Sykes and Matza's classic account of "techniques of neutralization" (1957) – denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of condemners, appeal to higher loyalties – offers a vocabulary for analyzing how characters and narrators justify actions that violate convention. In this corpus, such strategies rarely appear in isolation; rather, they intermingle with confessional modes (*Beichte*), sentimental appeals, or bureaucratic discourse. Their literary interest lies in friction zones: when a justification overshoots its mark, when an "appeal to higher loyalties" (Sykes and Matza 1957, 667) exposes parasitic dependence on patriarchal authority, or when "condemnation of condemners" (Sykes and Matza 1957, 668) doubles as a sharp diagnosis of institutional hypocrisy. When a protagonist frames violence as protection of a higher law, the appeal to higher loyalties is immediately unsettled by a narrative swerve to parataxis and silence – form refusing to underwrite exoneration. For instance, as we'll see, in Böhlau's *Halbtier!* Isolde's act of shooting Mengersen is framed as 'self-defense' and a higher loyalty to female integrity – an appeal to neutralization that the narrative immediately serves the reader a moral gap, unsettles by shifting into lyrical parataxis rather than juridical justification.



#### 4. Form as ethics: openness, indeterminacy, the refusal of closure and the act of reading

A second axis of the framework concerns how modernist aesthetics – especially open or indeterminate forms – represent liminal or deviant life. As Umberto Eco argues, the “open work” interpellates readers to take a stance on meaning and ending, transforming interpretation into an active and ethically charged process (Eco 1989). In contrast to juridical forms that promise closure through verdict, the open novel suspends judgment and defers it to the reader, who must navigate the seductions of neutralization and the ambiguities of confession without recourse to stable categories. In this interval, texts reveal the politics of form, showing how justification and testimony are shaped by – and resist – normative codes. The refusal of definitive endings mirrors the protagonists’ refusal of prescribed life-courses, positioning openness as a literary analogue of the liminoid: a form that inhabits thresholds and resists premature reintegration into social scripts.

Openness thus functions as an ethical demand, requiring readers to adjudicate between competing claims under conditions of partial knowledge. Narrative gaps, perspectival shifts, and paratactic structures deny any sovereign vantage point, compelling participation in meaning-making. Where institutions demand classification – innocent or guilty, sane or insane – modernist form insists on suspension. As Eco emphasizes, the absence of closure resists juridical authority while exposing the reader’s complicity in desiring resolution. Such openness is not aesthetic caprice but a politics of form. As Peter Bürger argues in *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974), modernist techniques intervene in the institution of art itself: withholding closure turns the text into a laboratory where form and social praxis collide. Fragmentation, montage, and perspectival plurality distribute authority across conflicting registers, producing a pedagogy of interpretation. Modernism’s refusal of closure thus becomes a form of resistance, training attention to thresholds rather than dissolving them into verdicts and making these texts a privileged site for investigating marginality and reception.





“The ideal reader must be found” – a famous Iser’s concept is decisive here. After examining English novels in *The Implied Reader*, Iser develops his position in *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*. He insists that a literary work involves not only the text but also “the actions involved in responding to that text.” (Iser 1972, 279) It therefore has two poles: the ‘artistic’ (the text by the author) and the ‘aesthetic’: the “realization accomplished by the reader” (Iser 1972, 279). The work lies “half-way between the two” and comes into being only through their convergence (Iser 1972, 280). Reading activates the text’s “inherently dynamic character” (Iser 1972, 280), filling gaps that stimulate imagination yet are delimited by textual strategies. Iser’s phenomenology of reading conceives meaning as co-produced: the text offers ‘blanks’ and ‘gaps’ that summon readers to complete patterns without ever securing a sovereign vantage point. In contexts of marginality this labour becomes ethically fraught. Readers must decide how to interpret silences around stigmatized acts, how to weigh competing genres of evidence – rumor, confession, dossier, testimony – and how to register that official discourses (medical, juridical) narrate only partial stories. The ‘ideal’ (implied) reader is therefore not merely competent but attuned to the demands of uncertainty, willing to hold judgment open where closure would simply ratify power’s categories.

This is precisely where the sociological and the aesthetic touch. Becker (1963) reminds us that deviance is ‘made’ by social reaction – by the very labels and procedures that sort persons; Iser (1972, 1974) reminds us that meaning is ‘made’ by interpretive action – by how readers negotiate gaps and distribute credibility. Together, they foreground reading as a site where categories are either reproduced or suspended. Reading these works is never passive consumption: it risks reproducing the labels the texts expose, or, alternatively, suspends them long enough to perceive other possible narratives of personhood. In this suspended interval, produced by formal openness, the ethics of interpretation becomes inseparable from the politics of representation.

## 5. Canon, criticism, and the politics of legibility and endings

‘Intelligible criticism’ often emerges from outside the canon: the historical consolidation of modernism has left substantial seams of women’s writing and ‘popular’ or documentary forms either misread or excluded. What has frequently been treated as mere sociology or biographical document (fallen women, criminal ‘types,’ madness) or dismissed as sensationalism (seriality, documentary frames, melodrama) are in fact the technical means by which liminality and deviance become thinkable. Here ‘testimony is form’: to recover these works aesthetically is not to deny their social testimony, but to recognize that the social is encoded in choices of voice, structure, and pacing. As Paul de Man reminds us: “Criticism is a metaphor for the act of reading” (de Man 1971, 107) and what we are doing while we wave canons is recognizing different ways of readings, which are of course obliged to the text and the narrative strategies. Also, as Hans Robert Jauss reminds us, canons are mediated by changing horizons of expectation (Jauss 1982); the texts we examine show how those horizons were narrowed by suspicion and widened by later readers attentive to formal complexity. Conversely, when formalist readings evacuate the social, they miss how form functions as a pressure point where the social world imprints itself on narrative design.

This is also a question of disciplinary ‘memory.’ Poetology, comparative approaches and literary history must be held together: literary self-understandings and institutional historiographies interact to regulate the boundaries of the canon. Together, they authorize – or block – access to interpretive authority. An integrated method restores legibility where canon-making had produced silence or even, through “fake readings” (Del Zoppo 2026), epistemic cancellations. An integrated method restores legibility where canon-making has produced silence or, through ‘fake readings,’ forms of epistemic cancellation. The concept of ‘fake reading’ designates not simple misinterpretation, but a recurrent critical reduction that turns literature into a prop for pre-established positions, thereby obscuring its formal



and epistemic complexity.<sup>3</sup> Early responses to authors such as Böhme or Böhlau often enacted this reduction, treating their works either as sociological documents or as sensational trivialities. In this sense, fake reading can be understood in relation to epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), insofar as it suppresses the interpretive resources required to render a text's mode of knowledge production intelligible. It may produce testimonial injustice by discrediting marginal voices, and hermeneutical injustice by lacking the conceptual frameworks needed to understand them. By reducing textual processes to familiar categories (such as theme or representation), it generates a hermeneutic gap in which the text's reconfiguration of perception and agency remains unrecognized. This is not a general critique of critical practice, but an account of moments in which interpretive frameworks become restrictive rather than enabling – particularly in the reception of marginal or non-canonical texts. In this context, fake reading names a structural limitation within regimes of interpretation that constrain what can be known and perceived through literature. Interpretive practice – especially intertextual reading (Del Zoppo 2026) – thus becomes a form of epistemic reparation, restoring intelligibility to marginal texts that reductive frameworks have rendered opaque or misrecognized.

From this vantage, the 'use' of literature must not be neither purely instrumental nor merely decorative. It is diagnostic in a phenomenological sense: literature shows how a world feels and reasons when power scripts the meanings of bodies, desires, and acts. As Rita Felski argues in *Uses of Literature* (2008), suspicion is only one mode of engagement; literature also works through recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock, inviting readers into forms of attachment that exceed ideology critique. Incorporating such

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<sup>3</sup> This concept does not aim to dismiss existing scholarship as a whole, but rather to identify a recurrent interpretive tendency. By 'fake reading' I refer to a performative mode of interpretation that approaches literary texts through pre-established ideological, ethical, or identity-based frameworks, thereby foreclosing their formal and epistemic complexity. Rather than engaging with ambiguity, indeterminacy, and the dynamic operations of narrative form, such readings tend to stabilize meaning prematurely, transforming literature into an instrument of confirmation.



perspectives reinforces the claim that reading practices must preserve formal and experiential complexity rather than collapsing texts into scandal or pathology. Suspicion has long been a motor of criticism, but it can easily harden into reflex. On one side, moral suspicion reduces difficult texts to dossiers of vice or pathology; on the other, ideological suspicion reduces them to unacknowledged complicities. Both modes flatten formal complexity. The antidote is not naïveté but a doubled literacy: to read institutions as producers of deviance, and at the same time to read form as producer of insight.

Crucially, literature stages how scripting can be inhabited and how it can be refused. It does so ‘as art’ – through deliberate choices of voice, structure, and pacing that neither mirror reality nor escape it, but refract it until new angles of regard become available. Given all the complex theoretical infrastructure, this framework proposes a set of reading protocols that track life-course scripts (Turner; Becker 1963), map repertoires of justification (Sykes and Matza 1957), read for epistemic form (Eco; Iser), and historicize suspicion (Jauss 1982; Felski 2008). Together, these approaches show how marginality operates simultaneously as aesthetic form, social process, and site of interpretive contestation, resisting reduction to sociological evidence, trivial spectacle or moral judgment.

## **6. Case-cluster heuristics: from plot engines to epistemic forms**

Before turning to individual examples, it is useful to note that the following section develops three synthetic case studies. Each case illustrates how the thematic figures of marginality, the formal strategies of openness, and the dynamics of reception converge in specific texts. Taken together, these clusters are meant not as isolated readings but as interconnected demonstrations of the broader framework proposed above. Rather than offering exhaustive readings of each author, the framework proceeds these ‘case-clusters’ heuristics – illuminating some configurations across the corpus that clarify the traffic between theme and form.

## 6.1. Transactions and ledgers: Böhme and beyond

The broad literature on autobiographical and diaristic fiction has already elucidated about intimacy: mediated by money or documents – letters, diaries, police files – the narrative literalizes the ledgers by which people are rendered legible or disposable. Such forms promise transparency while distributing opacity: who writes, who edits, who redacts? In Margarete Böhme's *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (1905), this dynamic becomes the organizing principle.

### a) Liminality, stigma, open form

Böhme's *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (*Diary of a lost one*) was one of the German-language blockbusters of the early twentieth century – sensational, endlessly re-mediated, and long misread. Its contemporary allure derived not only from subject matter (often reduced to: a young woman's descent into prostitution) but from a calculated play with 'documentary' form: Böhme presented herself on the title page as editor (*Herausgeberin*) of a diary "by a dead woman" (Böhme 1907) staging authorship and authenticity as contested zones. That paratextual gambit both distanced the writer from scandal and charged the text with truth-effects that shaped its reception – and its misreception. In turn, Böhme's formal experiment becomes legible as a case of liminal narrative: a fiction that inhabits thresholds between document and novel, victimhood and agency, domesticity and street, death and afterlife. Read this way, *Tagebuch* sits squarely with our essay's triad – marginality, deviance, openness – and adds a corrective to the critical record.

### b) From 'fallen woman' to stigmatized subject: labeling and self-narration



The diary protagonist, Thymian, is labeled in the classic sense of labeling theory: a ‘fallen’ (*gefallene*) girl, then a prostitute, later a kept woman – each label reassigning her social legibility. Böhme makes the label visible and historically specific: a bourgeois moral order that polices female desire and punishes sexual nonconformity as deviance. Plotted as entries of intimate address (“Wenn ich Freude oder Schmerz empfinde, bist du meine Freundin...”, Böhme 1905, 5), the diary turns stigma into a practice of self-narration. The ‘documentary’ pose intensifies the ethical claim: this is not a case; it’s a voice.

Two moves matter here. First, Böhme’s self-positioning as editor withdraws ‘authorial’ responsibility while heightening plausibility; second, the text organizes an affective economy in which pain outranks pleasure – the performative aesthetics of *Lust* and *Schmerz* (desire/pain) anchors the diary’s claim to authenticity and its critique of moral law (Schönfeld 2015). The novel maps a theatre of thresholds: reform school, brothel, rented rooms, clinics, cemetery. As argued elsewhere (Del Zoppo 2023), the grave emerges as Thymian’s only secure ‘home,’ once reintegration into bourgeois domesticity proves structurally impossible. These spaces register what Turner calls the liminoid condition: suspended, ritual-like states without stable re-entry paths. The narrative contract is equally liminal: the fiction of editorial mediation and the sequel (*Dida Ibsens Geschichte*), together with later film adaptations, repeatedly reopen the storyworld. Openness here is systemic rather than episodic: frames, sequels, and aftertexts refuse definitive closure. The logic of stigma and narrative self-positioning is already prefigured in the novel’s opening, where Thymian frames her own act of writing in terms of belatedness and ambivalence:

Tante Lehnsmann brachte mir gestern das Tagebuch als verspätetes Konfirmationsgeschenk. Es sei sinnig für ein junges Mädchen, sagte sie. Und so billig, dachte ich. Aber nun es einmal da ist, will ich es auch benutzen. Vielleicht entdecke ich dabei noch schriftstellerisches Talent in mir.<sup>4</sup> (Böhme 1905, 5)

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<sup>4</sup> “Yesterday Aunt Lehnsmann brought me the diary as a belated confirmation gift. ‘It is quite suitable for a young girl,’ she said. ‘And so cheap,’ I thought. But now that I have it, I shall use it. Perhaps I may even



This passage stages writing not as authentic self-expression but as a socially mediated practice. The diary is already an object – gift, commodity, moral instrument – before becoming a voice. The ironic distance (“Und so billig, dachte ich”) signals an early awareness of the gap between prescribed femininity and subjective experience. From the outset, narration is caught between compliance and resistance. The formation of subjectivity is further shaped by a dense network of social observation and judgment, as the small-town environment imposes legibility through constant surveillance:

Die Straßen sind alle schnurgerade und sehr sauber. Gras wächst nicht zwischen den Steinen und die Häuser laufen auch sehr akkurat auf dem Pflaster umher. Die Häuser sehen alle so geschniegelt und glatt aus wie Männer, die eben vom Barbier den Bart abgenommen bekommen haben. [...] Abends sitzen die Leute auf Bänken vor der Tür und schwatzen mit den Nachbarn über den Nachbarn. Und wenn die anderen Nachbarn dann dazu kommen, reden sie wieder über andere Nachbarn.<sup>5</sup> (Böhme 1905, 18)

Here spatial order becomes moral order. The obsessive cleanliness and repetition produce what Foucault would call a microphysics of discipline, but crucially, the narration registers this as estrangement. Thymian’s gaze does not naturalize this world; it renders it excessive, almost grotesque. This is where the Antigonean dimension emerges structurally: not in explicit defiance, but in the inability to fully inhabit the normative space.

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discover a talent for writing in myself.” Although I list the English edition in the bibliography, I have preferred to provide my own translations. The published English translation is, inevitably, influenced by the interpretative choices of the translator and the editors and, for this reason, is not suitable for the purposes of my analysis.

<sup>5</sup> “The streets are all perfectly straight and scrupulously clean. No grass grows between the stones, and even the houses seem to proceed with meticulous order along the pavement. They look as sleek and polished as men who have just had their beards shaved by the barber. [...] In the evenings, people sit on benches outside their doors, gossiping with neighbors about neighbors. And when those neighbors join them, they begin talking about others in turn.”





### c) Reading 'with' Antigone

Antigone's isotopies – burial, law's violence, sisterly care, stigma – saturate the diary. Thymian's gravitation toward graves prefigures death-as-home; the subtitle *By a Dead Woman* literalizes that isotopy. The editor who survives her performs an Ismene-like function, curating and witnessing. The scandal of the diary lies less in sex than in sepulture: who is permitted re-entry into civic life and who must remain unburied, socially erased. In embracing the mark of 'fallen,' Thymian mirrors Antigone's gesture of accepting outlawry to expose the law's violence. In Goffman's terms, Thymian both suffers the discrediting mark and seeks to manage its exposure; but, crucially, she also inhabits the mark to speak from it, anticipating readings of stigma as resource that our Antigone strand foregrounds.

### d) Causality without verdict: ethics at the reader's edge

In the broader theoretical frame (Becker; Turner; Eco; Iser), *Tagebuch* can be restated as an experiment in causality more than a thesis about guilt. How are 'lostness' and 'fallenness' produced and maintained? Böhme writes a sequence of institutional encounters – family, school, clinic, reform institute, brothel – in which the 'lost' subject is processed. The novel's epistemic tension is particularly visible in scenes of accusation, where labeling precedes understanding and speech is overridden by institutional authority (also signaled by the alternance *du/Sie*):

Kommen, Thymian! Du bleibst hier bei mir, Fräulein ... Und sie wollte mich beim Schlafittchen packen, aber ich, schnell wie der Wind, retirierte und über Gläser und Flaschen und Dessertteller weg aus dem Saal. [...] Wenn deine anständige Mutter das wüßte...<sup>6</sup> (Böhme 1905, 9)

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<sup>6</sup> "'Come along, Thymian! You will stay here with me. Miss, have you no shame, standing there so improperly – go back inside at once...!' She tried to seize me by the collar, but I, swift as the wind, slipped away and fled across glasses and bottles and dessert plates, out of the hall. [...] 'If your respectable mother knew of this...'"



Already in the opening pages, Aunt Frieda registers that the child is being drawn into troubling dynamics: while Thymian perceives her as prudish and overbearing, the reader recognizes her awareness of the sexualized positioning imposed by both the father and his apprentice Meinert, whose later coercion is thus prefigured. This early dissonance – between childish perception and readerly recognition – does not absolve Frieda’s complicity within patriarchal structures, but foregrounds a moment of epistemic injustice, in which the interpretive resources available within the narrative fail to fully render the situation intelligible, thereby requiring an ethical stance from the reader – one the text presupposes as available to its contemporary audience. From the protagonist’s psychological perspective (internal focalization), these moments dramatize the immediacy of moral classification: shame is imposed before any narrative of causality can emerge. Thymian’s flight – physical and narrative – interrupts this fixation into stable identity; what matters is not the event itself, but the speed with which social discourse stabilizes its meaning. The diary resists this through fragmentation, hesitation, and movement. Such gaps (ellipses, temporal leaps, muted transitions), intimate address to a silent second person (“dear diary”), and slippage between diarist and editor install Iserian blanks that compel the reader to complete the ethical meaning. The form withholds a verdict; the reader must supply it – and confront the complicity of moral law in producing the deviance it punishes. *Tagebuch* thus performs liminality both thematically (Thymian’s suspended, unreintegrable existence) and formally (diary/novel thresholds, editor/author blend), with domestic interiors mapping social permeability. The grave as “last dwelling” (Del Zoppo 2023) closes the circle: the city offers no home; only sepulture does. Closure is displaced from verdict to address, distributing judgment to readers and culture. Alongside this narratological openness, the novel’s pain aesthetics – the weighting of injury over eroticism – stage affect as cognition, producing a

pedagogy of inference that trains ethical attention without resolving ambiguity into moral cliché.

**e) Reception, 'fake reading' and the aftertext: recognizing liminal authorship as corrective stance**

Also, the openness goes beyond the representation: *Dida Ibsens Geschichte* reactivates Thymian within another woman's narrative; Oswald's 1918 and Pabst's 1929 film versions supply competing codas for different publics. These afterlives testify to the book's systemic openness: culture itself could not decide its ending. What emerges is a text that insists on readerly and cultural labor to complete its meaning. The reception of *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* extends significantly into cinema, where its three adaptations – the lost 1912 version, the 1918 film by Richard Oswald, and especially the 1929 adaptation by Georg Wilhelm Pabst – function as 'aftertexts' that reconfigure the novel's legibility. While the earlier films tend to reduce its complexity to moral melodrama or social document, Pabst's version, starring Louise Brooks as Thymian, restores its formal and epistemic dimension, transforming adaptation into a site of modernist experimentation. In this sense, the shift from novel to film is not merely a medial translation but a process of epistemic redistribution, in which meaning is rearticulated across forms: cinema becomes a laboratory for new modes of interpretation, confirming that reception itself is integral to the production of knowledge.

Early readers and important critics (Del Zoppo 2023) took the diary-frame at face value and consumed the book as social documentary or scandalous confession; others dismissed it as 'popular' melodrama, unworthy of formal analysis. Both postures flatten the novel's formal liminality (diary/novel, editor/author, voice/frame) and miss the rhetorical craft that makes reading ethically arduous. It was not misreading as productive tension but performative reduction: the text becomes a prop for a predetermined position (reformist



pity or moral condemnation), which then feeds canon gatekeeping and ‘benevolent discrimination’ toward women’s fiction. Re-centering form – focalization, paratext, narratorial metalepsis, and seriality – repositions Böhme within modernism’s experimental field rather than outside it. A corrective reception can do three things. First, it recognizes the editorial fiction as a deliberate aesthetic device, part of a tradition of women’s ‘liminal authorship’ as an authorial posture. Second, it revalues readability and melodrama as political technique – a maieutic accessibility designed to reach a broad audience. Third, it integrates *Tagebuch* into modernism’s genealogy of openness, not despite its success but because of it, showing how women’s bestsellers shaped the turn to seriality and multivocality.

## **6.2. Trespass and boundary policing: Lou Andreas-Salomé – *Menschenkinder* as an Antigonean laboratory of liminality, open form, and corrective reading**

Narratives of abandonment and trespass in Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Menschenkinder* (1899) dramatize the erotics of crossing and the sanctions that crossings trigger. The cycle’s circular architecture and open endings displace closure from the plot to the reader, so that blame remains unclaimed by any single discourse. Here an Antigone isotopy surfaces not as citation but as structure: deviance becomes chosen visibility, a refusal of reintegration into normative domestic or civic scripts.

### **a) Architecture of reading**

To read Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Menschenkinder* as mere ‘illustration’ of her philosophical or psychoanalytic prose is to miss how rigorously these novellas stage the tensions our essay tracks: liminality, deviance as visibility, and the ethics of indeterminacy. The cycle’s compositional logic – its circular pacing, its distributed motifs, its metalogical clues – does not simply exemplify a set of theses; it ‘produces’ them by making the reader enact a mode



of reading that refuses closure. This is where Salomé becomes method, not topic: the fiction instructs us in how to read women's writing when it disallows disciplinarily neat endpoints. In doing so, it offers a strong 'corrective' to those reception habits (the 'fake readings') that have long kept Salomé on the edges of the literary system as a biographical anecdote – Nietzsche's muse, Rilke's lover, Freud's friend – rather than as a major experimental prose writer.

A first orientation: *Menschenkinder* is a *Novellencyklus* whose internal cross-references and echoic naming practices create a retrospective unification; only at the end do earlier elements click into a pattern. Contemporary witnesses and subsequent editors sometimes dismembered the cycle, printing single pieces that 'work' on their own as plot, but that choice actively sabotages the cycle's formal program. A key payoff of reading the unit whole is the figure of Irene von Geyern (the last text's protagonist), who retrospectively reframes earlier heroines and stabilizes an Antigonean contour: a liminal subject who withdraws rather than reconciles, the outline of a young woman refusing reintegration into civic or domestic scripts. The cycle's unity thus relies on 'rereading': its 'message' sits twice enclosed – once by the circular architecture, once by each novella's final volte – so that recognition is structurally deferred. That deferred recognition is not a gimmick; it is Salomé's ethics of form.

The opening tableau of *Vor dem Erwachen* – the first story – already installs a grammar of thresholds in which perception precedes judgment. The train compartment is not merely a setting but a suspended social field in which roles are both legible and unstable:

Die Waggonfenster sind von der Januarkälte so beschlagen, daß man das Hereindämmern des Morgens kaum gewahr wird [...] Von den drei Insassen des Coupés erster Klasse hat nur die alte Dame ihre Morgentoilette schon beendet [...] während sie mit schlecht verhehltem Interesse das Paar ihr gegenüber beobachtet [...] Der Herr [...] ist halb gelähmt [...] und sie kommen aus dem



Süden [...] die Tochter [...] in einer fast unmöglichen Lage [...] augenscheinlich vortrefflich geschlafen hat.<sup>7</sup> (Andreas-Salomé 1899, 9)

This scene stages visibility as already mediated: bodies are read, classified, and narrated before they act. The fogged windows literalize epistemic opacity, while the observing gaze introduces a proto-juridical framing. Salomé thus displaces causality into perception: what matters is not yet what happens, but how it is pre-read. As the text itself demonstrates – “Die Waggonfenster sind...” – perception is already mediated and structured by acts of observation that precede understanding. Likewise, moments such as the one in which Edith chooses not to stay and sleep with the man who presumes to be her lover: “‘Ihr Ernst? ... Sie wollen nicht übernachten?’ Sie schüttelt den Kopf. ‘... und warum nicht? ... Was ist geschehen?’ – ‘Nichts. Ich habe die Lust verloren’”<sup>8</sup> (Andreas-Salomé 1899, 20) interrupt the possibility of causal explanation, producing precisely the hermeneutic gap that reductive readings attempt to close, while Ediths slips categorization (lover, passive woman and so on).

Within this architecture, Antigone is not merely cited; she operates as what we call mute hypotext (Genette 2018): an ethical-rhythmic constellation that arranges relations among law, kinship, and inner necessity without theatrical declamation. Early tales already hint at Antigone through emblems: a girl “buried alive” in a building for a transgression that is also a murder; a young woman who “tells herself” what being a woman means only to slip away from that self-telling in the end, even a love between an adoptive brother and a girl and her affection for the memory of him, who died young leaving her with the adoptive

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<sup>7</sup> The carriage windows are so clouded by the January cold that one can scarcely perceive the slow dimming of the morning light. [...] Of the three occupants of the first-class compartment, only the elderly lady has already completed her morning toilette [...] while, with poorly concealed curiosity, she observes the pair seated opposite her. [...] The gentleman [...] is half-paralyzed [...] and they come from the south [...] the daughter [...] in an almost impossible position [...] yet she appears to have slept exceedingly well.

<sup>8</sup> “‘You’re serious? ... You don’t intend to stay the night?’ She shakes her head. ‘... And why not? ... What has happened?’ – ‘Nothing. I have lost the desire.’”



family, and of course the gorgeous scenario of the last story, which is a proper rewriting of the Sophoclean tragedy. The isotopy is not thematic alone; it is structural. Deviance becomes chosen visibility: the Antigone gesture survives as a refusal to let juridical, domestic, or medical discourses monopolize guilt. The stories end open, not because Salomé dithers, but because closure would mean outsourcing judgment to a single discourse. The Antigonean structure becomes more explicit in moments where language itself oscillates between play, desire, and classification, without stabilizing meaning:

“Nach der Weichheit Ihrer Bewegungen nach könnten Sie es schon sein...” “...die Kätzchen... die an den Weidenbäumen hängen... zart, flaumig, blaßgelb... wer sie berührt, dem bleiben Duft und Farbe an der Hand zurück, wie von einem Schmetterlingsflügel... Vorfrühling.”<sup>9</sup> (Salomé 1899, 19)

Here metaphor replaces judgment. The discourse slides between erotic insinuation, aestheticization, and deflection. Crucially, no single code – moral, medical, or social – secures interpretive authority.

This perspective shifts the argument from a matter of recognized intertextuality to one of critical reparation. Here, deviance appears not as transgression of a rule but as an excess of signification: a visibility that cannot be contained within naming. The ‘mute hypotext’ of Antigone operates structurally, not referentially. Reading the hypotext does not merely add interpretive depth; it restores intelligibility to what reductive readings have historically neutralized. As the afterword emphasizes, three elements are decisive: the centrality of *Menschenkinder* within Salomé’s narrative production; its structural sophistication, articulated through intertextual play, dramatic dialogicity, and metanarrative devices; and

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<sup>9</sup> “‘From the softness of your movements, one might almost think you were...’ ‘...the little catkins... hanging from the willow trees... delicate, downy, pale yellow... whoever touches them finds their scent and color lingering on the hand, like the dust of a butterfly’s wing... early spring.’”



the necessity of an analogical and participatory mode of reading grounded in rereading, precision, and a refusal of contingency.

It is precisely at this juncture that the hermeneutic recognition of Antigone as hypotext operates as a form of reparative justice in the face of epistemic injustice. Not because it definitively ‘explains’ the text, but because it reopens an interpretive field where reception had produced a hermeneutic gap – reducing Salomé’s writing to biographical, psychological, or gendered document. In this light, recognizing Antigone as a mute hypotext is not an ornamental gesture but an act of restitution: it renders legible once more the cycle’s formal logic, its minimal tragic rhythm, its structure of deferral, and the non-reconciled subjectivity of its protagonists. To read *Menschenkinder* in this way is to withdraw it from a tradition of reductive reception and restore it to its full aesthetic and conceptual function, where intertextuality, structure, and knowledge converge.

## **b) Circularity as openness**

Formally, the cycle’s open endings are a signature device. Muriel Cormican (2009) makes the point broadly for Salomé’s narrative practice –women who ‘move too much,’ endings that do not seal – but *Menschenkinder* translates that tendency into structural method: the text requires the reader to build coherence by crossing stories, not by extracting morals from them. That is why the concluding recognition of Irene von Geyern matters so much: it is less character revelation than metanarrative instruction to reread. In this light, the oft-lamented ‘indeterminacy’ in the cycle registers as ‘ethical indeterminacy’. The uncertainty around culpability (is there a murder here? could there have been?) returns the reader to Becker’s labeling dynamics: who gets named deviant, by whom, for what social purpose? A medicalized glance makes one kind of culprit; a domestic one, another; a juridical one, another still. Salomé’s prose makes these glances audible ‘as’ glances; it does not promote



any to the rank of truth. The false promise of full transparency is what the text is designed to break.

Two stylistic aspects sustain this ethics. First, the narrative voice oscillates between closely focalized free indirect discourse and a cooler observational register. The effect is double: interiority is granted without confessional guarantees, and exterior description resists documentary solidity. Second, intertextual placements remain deliberately oblique. The sequence is thick with allusive ‘links,’ in Gisela Brinker-Gabler’s sense – memory as a productive condition rather than as mere content – so that the reader moves through an image-based epistemology that keeps ‘mastery’ undesirable. This is Salomé’s wager against instrumental ratio and her invitation into a plural, participatory sense-making (Brinker-Gabler 2001). A brief second look at *Vor dem Erwachen* (the opening tale) clarifies the mechanics. Its train-car scene and Lübeck winter – its scraped windows, staged triangles, the hotel’s liminal ‘sitting room’ between rooms – compose a physical grammar of thresholds. The episode’s erotic choreography (petals raining, the ambiguous passivity of Edith, the hand that is both paternal and predatory) is written to hover just below declarative naming. The point is not whether we can decide who ‘did’ what; the point is how social scripts of guardianship, marriage, and desire write pre-narratives of blame that readers must either inhabit or resist. In classical terms: the ‘scene of burial’ is here displaced into the ‘scene of staying’ – a chosen visibility in the very posture of withdrawal. The novella’s permissive dreaminess is neither innocence nor guilt; it is the literary condition for reopening judgment.

Because the cycle builds coherence through spatial and onomastic recurrence (names that echo across stories, locales that return transfigured), it is especially vulnerable to reception that prefers the biographical legend to the crafted artifact. That reception reduces Salomé’s prose to symptomatic ‘document,’ a form of cultural erasure or epistemic cancellation. Restoring *Menschenkinder* to the domain of form yields a different placement:



not an eccentric appendix to modernism but a contributing laboratory. The rhetoric of outline (*Umriss*) that Brinker-Gabler isolates – image as a way of knowing rather than a mere ornament – identifies also what our larger essay names as liminality: an art that inhabits thresholds (self/other, law/affect, visibility/invisibility) without asking to be ‘integrated.’ Two further intertexts consolidate this reading. First, Antigone’s afterlife in women’s prose: *Menschenkinder* belongs in that cartography not as an analog but as a model instance of what a ‘mute’ hypotext can do. Second, the *Novellencyklus* tradition (still insufficiently studied) clarifies Salomé’s special twist: the cycle does not only unify discrete stories; it retrofits them into a meta-narration that rejects moral finality. Both lines argue for a recognized repositioning: when we read ‘otherwise,’ we place ‘otherwise’.<sup>10</sup>

### 6.3. Catastrophe and culpability: Helene Böhlau’s *Halbtier!*

Helene Böhlau’s *Halbtier!* (1899) epitomizes this nexus of marginality, openness, and reception. Known for her satirical Weimar sketches, Böhlau shocked readers with a novel combining naturalist textures, feminist protest, and experimental narration. Contemporary critics read it as polemic against marriage; later scholarship has emphasized its role in the genealogy of the women’s novel. In both views, form negotiates stigma and suspends closure where institutions would impose it. This logic culminates in a radical rejection of normative life-forms, articulated not as despair but as an alternative existential stance: “...dann gar nichts – aber auch gar nichts! ... das ist auch eine Welt! Aber nicht so wie wir!”<sup>11</sup> (Böhlau 1907, 357). Also what emerges here is an Antigonean posture: not

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<sup>10</sup> Finally, a word on translation and access. The cycle is available in German in historical scans and reprints, and in English as *The Human Family*, which has helped push criticism beyond biographism toward form and reader response. That shift matters for our essay’s politics of reception: attending to Salomé’s experimental design lets us see how deviance and openness intersect as literary methods in women’s prose – and why the canon must be redrawn from the inside of form, not appended from the outside of sociology.

<sup>11</sup> “Then nothing at all – but also a nothing! This is a world too! But not the way we are!”



negotiation within the existing order, but the assertion of a different horizon of value. The refusal is total, yet generative – it opens the possibility of a life beyond the structures.

At the level of plot, *Halbtier!* stages the story of two Munich sisters, Marie and Isolde Frey. Their conflict revolves around talent, marriage, and the claims of art. Isolde, the younger, is drawn into the orbit of her brother-in-law, the celebrated artist Henry Mengerssen. His “predator’s gaze” gradually becomes a claim to her body, culminating in a final assault. Armed with a revolver given to her “for protection,” Isolde shoots him. The novel’s last pages refuse juridical aftermath: there is no trial, no sentence. Instead, Böhlau shifts to a lyrical meditation on dawn and death, where Isolde names herself “Herrin über Leben und Tod” and walks into a white morning, promising to “return strong, with the power to redeem” (Böhlau 1907, 364). This refusal of juridical closure functions as an institutional critique in Bürger’s sense, exposing how aesthetic form can challenge the very structures of legal and social authority. The ambiguity lies not in whether she kills – she does – but in how the novel withholds the machinery of law and leaves the reader suspended between metaphysical promise and narrative disappearance.

From the perspective of Howard Becker’s sociology of deviance, the scene dramatizes the moment of public labeling: the cry “Mörderin!”<sup>12</sup> (Böhlau 1907, 365) flashes like a brand. Yet Böhlau complicates this process, as Isolde does not deny the label but accepts it, transforming stigma into stance. This Antigone-like gesture (Del Zoppo 2018) refigures outlawry as agency: stigma, to use Goffman’s terms, becomes chosen visibility rather than imposed degradation. The refusal of normative frameworks emerged at the very beginning in Isolde’s handling of a skull, where boundaries between human, animal, and object collapse: “Wir haben ja doch alle so einen unter dem Gesicht... ‘Schön ist er doch!’”<sup>13</sup> (Böhlau 1907, 16). By normalizing the skull, Isolde neutralizes the categories that enable

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<sup>12</sup> “Murderess!”

<sup>13</sup> “We do all have such one under our face, it is indeed beautiful.”



judgment, resisting medicalization and moralization alike. This gesture is one of the recalling of the Sophoclean Antigone, which is also here not only thematically but structurally an hypotext: the Isolde/Marie dyad mirrors Antigone and Ismene, while the ending – after the assumption of the ‘murderess’ label – stages a withdrawal from visibility. Crucially, Isolde’s act produces a short circuit with an earlier scene of structural causality: a woman seduced by her brother, rendered pregnant and unemployable, is expelled from both labor and care, and encountered only in the morgue, dead with her dead child upon her – an image exposing a gendered double standard and the asymmetrical distribution of culpability.

Animal imagery reinforces this reversal: ‘Halbtier’ names women’s condition, Mengersen’s gaze is predatory, and Isolde executes him “‘wie einen Hund!’ – schrie sie”<sup>14</sup> (Böhlau 1907, 349). Denied the maxim “Ein Kind und Arbeit!,” her final gesture redistributes survival through work, echoing Honig’s Antigone as survival-giver (Honig 2013). Ethical indeterminacy is encoded in the novel’s affective vocabulary, where guilt appears as ambivalent intensity – “ein Gefühl der Schuld, so geheimnisvoll anziehend”<sup>15</sup> (Böhlau 1907, 365) – rather than juridical attribution. The violent act thus functions less as climax than as an experiment in causality: which exclusions prime catastrophe? Already in the opening – “Über dem ganzen überspannten, überhitzten Menschentum lastet”<sup>16</sup> (Böhlau 1907, 1) – social life appears as compression, displacing causality from individual intention to systemic constraint. Indeterminacy here is ethical, refusing to let medical or juridical discourses monopolize blame.

Formally, fragmentation and parataxis produce partial knowledge, resonating with Iser’s blanks and requiring ethical interpretation. Thematically, the comparative reading with Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbeville*, enlightens – among other things – the uselessness of

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<sup>14</sup> “‘As a dog!’, she cried.”

<sup>15</sup> “A sense of guilt, so strangely and irresistibly alluring.”

<sup>16</sup> “Over the whole of this overstrained, overheated humanity there weighs.”

law: in *Tess* law closes the narrative, here Böhlau suspends judgment, entrusting it to the reader. Reception has oscillated between scandal and feminist recuperation, but this very openness marks the novel's modernist centrality: not vagueness, but ethical address.

## 7. Conclusion: moving borders and living margins

This investigation invites a revisionary view of German modernism. If we center liminoid lives, deviant careers, and open forms, modernism emerges less as stylistic revolt than as a laboratory for rethinking belonging. The 'modern' is not an abstract temporal break but a re-scripting of thresholds: between legality and illegality, sanity and its administrations, intimacy and contract, testimony and surveillance. The canon's peripheries – women's writing, documentary modes, crime narratives – prove to be central sites where these re-scriptings are worked out with formal ingenuity. To insist on their aesthetic intelligence is to insist that the history of German literature is also a history of how societies imagine their borders. From this perspective, German-language modernism emerges as an epistemic laboratory of marginality. Through formal indeterminacy – its refusals of closure, its gaps, its suspended judgments – these texts do not merely represent marginal lives but reorganize the conditions under which they can be known. In doing so, they enact a form of epistemic redistribution that displaces the authority of juridical, medical, and moral discourses, and reassigns interpretive agency to the reader.

To read these works accordingly is therefore not only an interpretive choice, but a reparative practice: it responds to forms of epistemic injustice by restoring the intelligibility of experiences that have been historically reduced, misrecognized, or excluded. In this sense, modernist form does not resolve marginality but transforms it into a site of knowledge – one that resists closure and demands sustained critical attention.

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