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The Cataleptic Novel: Living on with George Sand

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This article considers the representation of catalepsy—a trance-like nervous condition characterised by rigidity of the limbs that resembles death—in the literature of 19th-century France. It begins with an overview of the medical literature on catalepsy and its influence on the literature of the period, which reveals a particularly gendered aspect to the fate of the cataleptic, before turning to its primary case study: George Sand’s *Consuelo* novels (1842–44). These two texts provide Sand’s most sustained engagement with catalepsy, but they also set Sand’s depiction of the condition apart from how her (male) contemporaries represented it. While in the work of writers like Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly (1808–89), Théophile Gautier (1811–72), and Émile Zola (1840–1902) the cataleptic is generally an unstable male genius whose tale ends in death, madness, or oblivion, Sand elaborates an alternative model that allows these superior individuals to find self-actualisation (irrespective of their gender). The occult knowledge associated with the cataleptic is not to be feared in Sand’s texts; rather, it provides personal fulfilment and offers new purpose that benefits society. Catalepsy in Sand’s texts is thus endowed with political significance, representing the potential for new beginnings and a move beyond traditional ways of being. Drawing on the *Consuelo* novels as a model, this article then turns to Sand’s wider oeuvre to posit the poetics of the ‘cataleptic novel’ as inherent to Sand’s literary enterprise.



As the recent *Routledge Companion to Death and Literature* reminds us, death has provided an object of literary fascination since the dawn of literature itself, transcending genre, era, and culture (Wang, Jernigan and Murphy, 2021). If literature has long offered ways of thinking through the inevitability of death, it has also had to contend with its unknowability. Philippe Ariès locates the 18th and 19th centuries as moments of new explorations of our relationship to death in Western societies (1974: 55–56), and this manifests itself in the literature of the period, which routinely presents death scenes. Yet, as Elisabeth Bronfen cautions, death can never be anything more than a cultural construct since it lies beyond the realm of any living person's experience (1992: 54). In this light, catalepsy, as a form of living death, presents a peculiar aberration. Catalepsy is a neurological condition in which the sufferer's muscles become rigid and they cease responding to external stimuli. As such, catalepsy resembles death, and literary depictions dwell on the possible forms of knowledge such an apparent return from death might entail: as we will see, catalepsy is frequently associated with almost occult access to the beyond. The literary potential of such possible knowledge seems to have been irresistible to 19th-century writers in the West: despite the relative rarity of the condition, it holds a particular place in the literary imagination of the period.

The evolving representations and imaginative engagements with death in the literature of 19th-century France were accompanied by another crucial development that contributed to catalepsy's status in the period: the 19th century was also the golden age of French psychiatric science (Goldstein, 1987: 1). This article will offer a survey of the representations of catalepsy in 19th-century French texts to establish the various representational practices with which catalepsy was associated in the period, before focusing on the work of the century's foremost female novelist, George Sand, pseudonym of Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin (1804–76). In scholarship on Sand, catalepsy is typically considered in passing, if at all, in relation to her *Consuelo* novels (*Consuelo* and its sequel, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* [*The Countess of Rudolstadt*], both published serially in *La Revue indépendante* between 1842 and 1844), and usually evoked as a mere plot device. Placing Sand's cataleptics alongside those of her (male) contemporaries reveals that Sand's use of catalepsy is indicative of a wider narrative practice on her part; one that subverts expected approaches to death in the 19th-century novel.

In his articulation of a literary masterplot, Peter Brooks asserts that literary texts, and especially 19th-century realist texts, are underpinned by a structure that resembles Freud's death drive (1992: 90–112), an impulse Freud posited as a means of understanding our desire to repeat traumatic experiences even though this seemingly contradicts our desire for pleasure. The satisfaction associated with repeating these

traumatic experiences suggested to Freud that, in truth, what we hoped for was death. Brooks identifies a similar urge at work in the 19th-century death scene:

Whatever their specific content, and whatever their degree of tragic awareness or melodramatic enunciation, all such scenes offer the promise of a significant retrospect, a summing-up, the coming to completion of a fully predicated, and readable, sentence (1992: 96).

Death, in Brooks's formulation, provides novels with a satisfying sense of finality, one that Sand's cataleptic texts playfully undermine.

More recently, Enda McCaffrey and Steven Wilson have suggested that French literature shifted in the 20th century to explore more fully the experience of dying, a shift they identify as part of a broader socio-cultural turn. They contrast this with the representation of death in the 19th century, when it figured 'more often than not as a trope allowing for the ultimate neat ending, or a commentary on the fate of a seemingly subversive protagonist' (2021: 3). If the novel is indeed organised around the death drive, an analysis of Sand's cataleptics contrarily suggests that her novels offer a determined resistance to such narrative superstructures. This resistance has a gendered dynamic, shifting away from the tradition of death and marriage as the typical endings for women in fiction. Catalepsy, in Sand's configuration, is doubly political: the Sandian cataleptic usually returns from their 'death' to engage in acts of political resistance, but Sand's use of catalepsy itself also subverts dominant 19th-century narrative tropes by destabilising traditional narrative endings: endings that replicate models of masculine domination. This article will suggest, therefore, that catalepsy is far more than a mere plot device in Sand's texts, and that it offers a useful way of thinking through Sand's poetics and ideology, such that we might even consider her texts to be 'cataleptic novels'.

Catalepsy in the 19th-Century French Novel

He remembered the stories of catalepsy, the miracles of magnetism; and he said to himself that by desiring it fully, he might manage to resuscitate her. One time he even leant over her and softly cried 'Emma! Emma!' (Flaubert, 1945 [1856]: 187).¹

¹ 'Il se rappelait des histoires de catalepsie, les miracles du magnétisme; et il se disait qu'en le voulant extrêmement, il parviendrait peut-être à la ressusciter. Une fois même il se pencha vers elle, et il cria tout bas: "Emma! Emma!". All translations are my own.

Thus thought Charles Bovary upon the death of his wife, Emma, in *Madame Bovary* (1856). In the throes of grief, Charles, a physician, allows himself to believe in these ‘stories’ and ‘miracles’, hoping beyond hope that Emma might possibly be resurrected. This scene is representative of the interleaving of medical science and literary representation in the period, and of the particular power of catalepsy, which fascinated both scientists and writers alike, and seemed to blur lines between science and the occult. Charles’s desperate pleas are, of course, futile.

Charles’s *bêtise* is perhaps unsurprising. Catalepsy is an uncommon condition, but it held a powerful sway over the 19th-century imagination. The term ‘catalepsy’ is derived from the Greek for ‘seizure’, though it did not become a real focus of French medical discourse until the 18th century. The illness was generally defined by the immobility it causes in the sufferer, accompanied by an inability to respond to stimuli. The definition given by Étienne-Jean Georget in an 1822 medical dictionary remained the standard definition of catalepsy until the 20th century:

[I]ntermittent and apyretic affectation of the brain, comprised of attacks ordinarily characterised by a usually complete suspension of awareness and a general or partial stiffness, as if tetanic, of the muscular system. In this state, the limbs will often conserve, for the duration of the attack, the position they had at the beginning, or the position one can make them assume (348).²

These cataleptic states would vary in terms of their duration and frequency, but were generally considered to be caused by emotional extremes. Anne Vila has shown that in the 18th century, the work of Lausanne physician and neurologist Samuel-Auguste Tissot (1728–97) refuted the strong association between catalepsy and women, arguing that cataleptics were also male (2014: 103). Yet there was a 19th-century slippage between the terms catalepsy and hysteria, another condition that became strongly associated with women. In a dictionary article published in the 1867 *Larousse*, the primary causes of catalepsy are listed as a nervous temperament and melancholic predisposition alongside a pre-existing neurosis, usually hysteria. The entry goes on to reveal that ‘these circumstances explain the greater frequency of manifestations of the cataleptic state in women and children’ (1867: 545–46).³ Vila describes two ‘destinies’

² ‘... affectation intermittente et apyrétique du cerveau, qui se compose d’attaques ordinairement caractérisées par la suspension, le plus souvent complète de l’entendement, et une roideur, comme tétanique, générale ou partielle du système musculaire. Dans cet état, les membres conservent souvent, tout le temps de l’attaque, la position qu’ils avaient au commencement, ou celle qu’on parvient à leur faire prendre.’

³ ‘... ces circonstances expliquent la plus grande fréquence des manifestations de l’état cataleptique chez les femmes et les enfants.’

for catalepsy in the 19th century: an ‘aesthetic destiny’, linked to the creative powers of the Romantic writers and the ‘ecstasies’ their characters experience, and a ‘medical destiny’ that entwined catalepsy with hysteria (2014: 110). When Dr Timothée Puel (1813–90) devoted a book-length study to catalepsy in 1856, he provided a tabular breakdown of the 150 documented cases he had found in medical literature. From this, he noted to his astonishment that ‘it is only from 1841 that the number of women predominates’ (1856: 86).⁴ In fact, prior to 1841, of the first 130 cases of catalepsy, the split was even: 65 men and 65 women. Puel does not venture an explanation underpinning this increase in frequency of female patients, but it seems clear that the rise of the female cataleptic is inexorably associated with the rise of the female hysteric, particularly given the regularity with which hysteria was confused with catalepsy, to the extent that ‘hysteric catalepsy’ [‘catalepsie hystérique’] and ‘cataleptic hysteria’ [‘hystérie cataleptique’] emerged in medical texts. These hybrid terms were rejected by Puel (1856: 80) but remained in common usage throughout the century. As we will see, the fictional cataleptics of the period bear out the twin destinies described by Vila, but in this context Sand is an exception: although her cataleptics are usually remarkable individuals, they are also (and in equal measure) male and female.

In addition to the gendered dynamic associated with catalepsy, it also had a close relationship with the fantastic. As Rae Beth Gordon writes, the supernatural descriptions of catalepsy in the work of some 19th-century French physicians ‘seems at times to foster a desire to play with these parallels’ (1988: 20). At the turn of the 19th century, the doctor Jacques-Henri-Désiré Petetin (1744–1808) published his observations of peculiar phenomena produced by catalepsy. These included the ability to ‘read the thoughts’ of others (Petetin, 1808: 41), to see through ‘opaque bodies’ (190), and the ‘transposition of the senses’, where he gives the example of a patient able to hear through their fingers or their stomach (216).⁵ While this particular brand of catalepsy (or ‘hysteric catalepsy’ [‘catalepsie-hystérique’], as Petetin called it), was opposed by medical orthodoxy, the imaginative potential of the abilities Petetin described is clear. At this time France was also still enthralled by animal magnetism, the theory of German physician Franz Mesmer (1734–1815), who posited that some form of fluid moved through all bodies and could be manipulated to induce convulsions and cure ailments. Petetin’s earlier, more fantastic variety of catalepsy seems to have fascinated the early 19th-century writers, while the more rigid understanding of catalepsy as a living death appears in the literary texts of the second half of the century.

4 ‘... c’est seulement à partir de 1841 que le nombre des femmes prédomine.’

5 ‘... lire dans la pensée des personnes qui les approchent’; ‘... corps opaques’; ‘... transport des sens’.

The cross-pollination of medical and literary texts afforded catalepsy a status that went far beyond the relative uncommonness of the condition. The Gothic novel, with its recurrent engagements with death and the occult, made catalepsy an object of real fascination to the extent that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes catalepsy as a Gothic convention (1986: 9). While the Gothic was a very British literary mode, the novels of figures like Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823) were certainly popular in France, and Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) was renowned in France as well as in Britain, helped by the translations of his work by Charles Baudelaire (1821–67). Moreover, catalepsy's popularity as a theme in France extended well beyond the Gothic, featuring in novels by writers of varying shades, from Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) and Théophile Gautier (1811–72) to Jules Barbey d'Aureville (1808–89) and Marcel Schwob (1867–1905).

In the works of many of these figures, catalepsy offers a means of accessing knowledge that would otherwise be foreclosed. Balzac's Louis Lambert, in the 1832 novel that bears his name, descends into madness following a cataleptic attack that lasts for 59 hours. Lambert is a genius, one Balzac has Madame de Staël declare a 'true seer' ['un vrai voyant'] (Balzac, 1875 [1832]: 9), and following a dream-state, pens his *Traité de la volonté* [*Treatise on the Will*]. In another of Balzac's stories, *Les Amours de deux bêtes* [*The Love of Two Beasts*] (1842), Jules Sauvel loves the daughter of a naturalist professor to whom he is apprenticed. Anna Granarius, we are told, is 'taken by love into the abysses of this ecstasy that verges on catalepsy' (1842: 252).⁶ Her cataleptic states endow her with abilities she seems to lack in her waking state; she retains a perfect memory of what happened during her episode, but is unable to explain how she was able to climb walls and, recalling the descriptions of Petetin's patients, see through opaque objects. Reinforcing the links between catalepsy, the fantastic and the occult, Anna's condition is posited as a form of magical power granted to her by the fairy Extasinada, 'to which we owe our poets, our greatest dreams, and whose existence is vehemently critiqued at the Academy of Sciences (medicine section)' (1842: 244–45).⁷ Unlike *Louis Lambert*, which is often read autobiographically, *Les Amours de deux bêtes* is parodic, rewriting Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* [*Paul and Virginia*] (1788), with the protagonists transformed into anthropomorphised insects. Among the targets of Balzac's satire are writer Victor Hugo (1802–85), naturalists Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772–1844) and Georges Cuvier (1769–1832), and he mocks none other than George Sand. At the same time, although parodic, Balzac's text inserts itself into 19th-century debates around Mesmer's theories of animal magnetism. But as in *Louis*

⁶ '... emmenée par l'amour dans les abîmes de cette extase qui frise la catalepsie'.

⁷ '... à laquelle nous devons nos poètes, nos plus beaux rêves, et dont l'existence est fortement compromise à l'Académie des Sciences (section de médecine)'.

Lambert, cataleptic states give way to new, fantastic abilities and knowledge. Catalepsy, a condition that hovers between life and death, that suspends the sufferer's motion and sensibility, reduces the sufferer to a state akin to pure thought, with all sense of corporeality removed. Such an interpretation is seemingly confirmed in *Onuphrius*, published by Théophile Gautier in 1832, the same year that Balzac's *Lambert* lost his mind. The text is a parody of the notion fashionable at the time that reading the work of German Romantic author E T A Hoffmann would drive you mad. Gautier was a friend and admirer of Balzac, and they shared an interest in mesmerism (Darnton, 1968: 153). The protagonist, an artist, suffers an attack of catalepsy in which he experiences himself as pure thought, able to exist and move independently of his static body, to the extent that at the end of the novel he believes the Devil has stolen his body, and that he no longer possesses either a shadow or a reflection (1880 [1832]: 68). While Balzac's text seemingly exalts the cataleptic genius, in Gautier's text the effect is more ambivalent, and seems to offer a warning against what we might well call *overthinking*, as the mind begins distorting even everyday, regular, occurrences, as a consequence of 'having looked too long through a magnifying glass' (1880 [1832]: 69–70).⁸

Elsewhere, representations of catalepsy privilege its connection to extreme emotions over its association with genius. Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly incorporated catalepsy into his novel *Un prêtre marié* [*A Married Priest*] (1864). Calixte is the beautiful and devout daughter of Sombreval, the novel's eponymous married (former) priest. Calixte suffers from a mysterious illness that doctors fail to comprehend, though Sombreval's wet nurse, La Malgaigne, attributes the cause of this illness directly to Sombreval's apostasy. The illness presents itself in the form of cataleptic attacks that are invariably linked to emotions. When the young Néel de Néhou declares his love for her, she falls into a cataleptic state, and her final, fatal attack occurs after she learns her father's conversion back to Catholicism is a pretence to preserve her fragile health. In addition to her cataleptic states, she experiences a somnambulist state in which she walks along the edge of ponds and climbs the walls of their château. Her somnambulism is described as more frightening than the catalepsy, since catalepsy

simply figures death, a natural phenomenon, whereas somnambulism, in which death presents all the characteristics of life and even a superior life, is the inversion of all natural phenomena (1881 [1864]: II, 107).⁹

⁸ '... pour avoir trop regardé à la loupe'.

⁹ '... figure tout simplement la mort, qui est un phénomène naturel, tandis que le somnambulisme, où la mort présente tous les caractères de la vie et même d'une vie supérieure, est le renversement de tous les phénomènes naturels'.

While for Barbey death is little more than a natural rite of passage, the apparent access to ‘a superior life’ returns us to the association between catalepsy and the ineffable. What has changed in this case is the cataleptic’s gender: no longer is catalepsy linked with genius, which was itself pathologised in the 19th century along gendered lines (genius was, of course, male). Instead, it is directly connected with an incurable suffering to atone for the sins of the father. Indeed, as Willemijn Don reminds us in the anecdote that inspired Barbey’s text, the child of the priest was male. In this, Don explains, Barbey ‘follows the majority of texts on vicarious suffering’ (2014–15: 83). There is an irony to the form of Calixte’s suffering here, since the loss of control over her own body is not as a result of her own actions, but those of her father. Her catalepsy therefore represents a double loss of agency.

In other texts, catalepsy is presented in a much less fantastic framework, and seemingly functions as little more than a plot device. Alexandre Dumas’s *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* [*The Count of Monte Cristo*] (1844–46) presents such a case. The cataleptic attack of abbé Faria initially prevents Edmond Dantès’s escape from the Château d’If, but Faria’s subsequent death following his third cataleptic attack in turn facilitates Dantès’s flight. In *L’homme voilé* [*The Veiled Man*] (1891), a short story by Marcel Schwob, a train passenger suffers a cataleptic attack that leaves him aware of his surroundings but unable to move or act. In this state, he witnesses one of his fellow passengers murder the third traveller in their carriage. Meanwhile, in a short story by Émile Zola (1840–1902), *La Mort d’Olivier Bécaille* [*The Death of Olivier Bécaille*] (1879), the eponymous Olivier is in a cataleptic state when the text opens, and the first-person narrative allows an interrogation of what death is: ‘So was this death?’ (1976 [1879]: 803); ‘Was this really death?’, Olivier asks (804).¹⁰ Yet for Olivier, catalepsy does not provide any knowledge of what death is. If, by the end of the text, he no longer fears death, this is not because he understands it but because he feels he has no reason to live, as he returns from the dead to discover that his wife does not love him and has already found a new suitor. While the cataleptic experience provides knowledge of his personal situation, death itself remains out of reach: ‘death no longer frightens me; but it seems to no longer want me, now that I have no reason to live, and I fear it may forget me’ (1976 [1879]: 830).¹¹ Zola’s tale recalls an earlier work by Balzac, *Le Colonel Chabert* (1832), which depicts a colonel in the Napoleonic army believed dead at the Battle of Eylau and who is buried in a mass grave, only to recover from ‘a crisis analogous to an

10 ‘Était-ce donc la mort?’; ‘Était-ce bien la mort?’

11 ‘... la mort ne m’effraie plus; mais elle semble ne pas vouloir de moi, à présent que je n’ai aucune raison de vivre, et je crains qu’elle ne m’oublie’.

illness I believe is called catalepsy' (1994 [1832]: 78).¹² Like Bécaille, he returns to find his wife remarried, and is eventually held in an asylum.

Chabert and Bécaille's live burials exploit a widespread fear in the 19th century, one so common that, in 1891, Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli named it 'taphophobia', and this term quickly appeared in medical annals in France. What unites these cataleptics is, on the one hand, their gender: surprisingly, given the cultural, literary and medical associations between catalepsy and hysteria, most of these figures are men. But what also unites them is the irrevocable change that death brings to the characters involved. While these cataleptics approach the condition from a variety of angles, in most cases (Barbey's Calixte offering the notable exception) this form of living death offers access to knowledge; a discovery of some sort that usually instigates the plot's *dénouement*. However, these individuals are not offered any kind of fulfilment: death, madness, or mediocrity consumes them in the end. Only Balzac's Anna is able to use the knowledge afforded by catalepsy to a positive end and evade the pull of Thanatos, but she is a character firmly rooted in parody. Sand's cataleptics therefore represent an important (and political) modulation of the cataleptic trope: they subvert the usual gendered dynamics of the 19th-century cataleptic, with both male and female sufferers appearing in Sand's works, and their cataleptic experiences are valorised as a means of accessing knowledge that can, in turn, be used for the betterment of humanity.

The Sandian Cataleptic

The extent of Sand's understanding of catalepsy is difficult to determine. The catalogue of her library at her home in Nohant, central France, does not list any of the major texts on the subject and, surprisingly, lists few texts of a medical nature. In her correspondence, Sand makes no mention of catalepsy, though she does refer to its close relative, hysteria. In a letter to Flaubert from January 1867, Sand writes:

What does it mean to be hysterical? Perhaps I have been, perhaps I am, but I know nothing about it, having never looked further into it and having only heard about it without studying it. Is it not a malaise, a torment, caused by some impossible desire? In any case we are all affected by this strange illness, when we have imagination (1985: 297).¹³

12 '... une crise analogue à une maladie nommée, je crois, catalepsie'.

13 'Qu'est-ce que c'est aussi que d'être hystérique? Je l'ai peut-être été aussi, je le suis peut-être, mais je n'en sais rien, n'ayant jamais approfondi la chose et en ayant ouï parler sans l'étudier. N'est-ce pas un malaise, une angoisse, causés par le désir d'un impossible quelconque? En tout cas nous en sommes tous atteints, de ce mal étrange, quand nous avons de l'imagination'.

This passage suggests that Sand had not read as widely within the medical sciences as her male contemporaries, though I would contend that the link she detects between the symptoms of hysteria and those who engage in the work of the imagination, like herself and Flaubert, reflects the connection between genius and catalepsy. Instead, her awareness of these terms seems to be more general; a reflection of their currency at the time. Nevertheless, Sand certainly held an interest in the developments of some aspects of French psychiatry, even if they were perhaps more esoteric. She famously attended the Paris salons of Dr Pigeaire, whose experiments on his daughter, Léonide, sought to prove Mesmer's theories, and Zéphyr-Joseph Piérart's *Revue spiritualiste* contends that she also attended some of the esotericist Baron du Potet's experiments in magnetism at the Hôtel-Dieu hospital in Paris (Lamothe, 1860: 304). Piérart started his career as editor of du Potet's *Journal du magnétisme* before founding the *Revue spiritualiste*, which focused on the soul and its immortality, as a rival to Allan Kardec's *Revue spirite*. Sand was a figure of fascination for Piérart, and he sent her monthly copies of the journal until she wrote a letter asking him to stop in 1863 (Piérart, 1864: 368).

Unsurprisingly, given the 19th-century perspective that hysteria was a female pathology, the presence of hysteria in Sand's work and life has been a focus of sustained analysis, most notably in the work of Evelyne Ender (see Ender, 1995). Yet here, too, there is no mention of catalepsy. Nor do we find the malady named in Mireille Bossis's examination of illness in the novels produced in the first half of Sand's career. In fact, when Bossis discusses *Consuelo*, she describes Albert de Rudolstadt's illness simply as 'madness' ['folie'] (1976: 602) and ascribes to it a purely narrative purpose. This proposition that illness serves a narrative function in Sand's texts rests on Bossis's assertion that Sand seldom explicitly names the illnesses she depicts, preferring to refer to them in more abstract terms (1976: 603). However, Sand *did* name catalepsy, repeatedly, which suggests this malady has a particular significance to which we should attend: we read of 'dreadful catalepsy' (Sand, 2004a [1842-43]: I, 264), 'cataleptic insensibility' (I, 282), catalepsy that 'took hold of all his limbs' (I, 323), 'cataleptic crises' (Sand, 2004b [1843-44]: 388), a 'cataleptic state' (411), and an 'attack of catalepsy' (543).¹⁴ These cataleptic experiences ultimately lead to a new, more politically engaged life for the affected individual.

Marilyn Mallia (2018) has demonstrated how Sand's early works are influenced by the Gothic novel. Since catalepsy is a common Gothic trope, it should not be surprising that catalepsy plays a significant role in the *Consuelo* novels. Varyingly proposed as a

14 '... la catalepsie foudroyante' (Sand, 2004a [1842-43]: I, 264); '... insensibilité cataleptique' (I, 282); '... la catalepsie s'emparait de tous ses membres' (I, 323); '... crises cataleptiques' (Sand, 2004b: 388); '... l'état cataleptique' (411); '... attaque de catalepsie' (543).

Gothic novel or as a novel of initiation, *Consuelo* follows the journey of a young singer as she travels across Europe and overcomes a series of tribulations, until she is at last united with her lover Albert de Rudolstadt. The sequel, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, presents a new series of obstacles she must overcome following Albert's death, until Consuelo is welcomed into a secret society that works toward the betterment of humanity. Set in the 18th century, the two texts feature historical figures including Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), Maria Theresa of Austria (1717–80), Frederick the Great (1712–86), and Nicola Porpora (1686–1768), the composer and singing teacher who acts as the instructor of the eponymous heroine. The text was published in instalments in *La Revue indépendante* between 1842 and 1844, a form that lent itself to the myriad twists and turns of the plot, and it has long been considered one of Sand's greatest novels. The *Consuelo* novels represent, for Isabelle Naginski, 'a *summa litteraria*, in which the author was able to rewrite and reinterpret certain traditional literary plots' (1991: 204). Naginski presents the texts as a combination of mythic, Gothic, and initiatory narratives, with the journey of initiation—in this case, descends beneath two châteaux akin to Dantean descents into hell—that instigate a form of metamorphosis. Catalepsy is not mentioned by Naginski, but it is central to this process of metamorphosis.

There are two cataleptics in the *Consuelo* novels: Albert de Rudolstadt and his mother, Wanda. *Consuelo* introduces us to the sickly Albert, who believes in metempsychosis (the transmigration of the soul from body to body after death), and is convinced that in a previous incarnation he was Jan Žižka (c.1360–1424), a follower of Protestant martyr Jan Hus (c.1372–1415). He believes that his current suffering is a result of their historic crimes in the Hussite Wars (1420–c.36). *Consuelo*, after her flight from Venice following her first love's betrayal, takes the post of music tutor to Albert's cousin, Amélie. While the local doctor Wetzelius sees Albert as 'mad, ultra-mad, and almost frenzied' (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: II, 116), *Consuelo* sees beyond this.¹⁵ She is able to discover some of the 'secrets of his mental illness' (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: I, 323) and as Albert struggles with a rising cataleptic episode, it is noted that she 'understood what was happening inside him' (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: I, 323).¹⁶ I have argued elsewhere that Sand's texts frequently present medical professionals in a negative light, promoting instead a more empathetic approach to illness than the objective medical gaze allows (Illingworth, 2019). *Consuelo*'s ability to see Albert beyond his illness when the local doctor cannot provides yet another manifestation of this tendency. The same can be said of *Consuelo*'s interactions with Zdenko, Albert's peculiar companion, who is treated with derision by other members of the household. *Consuelo*, by contrast, demonstrates an openness to

15 '... fou, archi-fou, et quasi-enragé'.

16 '... secrets de sa maladie mentale'; '... compris ce qui se passait en lui'.

those rejected by society and thereby represents an ethics of care. In this context, the very name Sand chose for her heroine is revealed as significant: according to Goldstein, consolation is

the presentation of true and solid reasons for accepting suffering; it did not aim at suppressing pain but rather at helping the spirit to bear pain by renewing or expanding hope and fortifying courage (1987: 203).

This is the purpose Consuelo fulfils for both Albert and Zdenko. Indeed, when Consuelo first arrives at the Rudolstadt estate, she adopts the pseudonym Zingara. However, when Albert first meets her, he cries out: ‘O Consuelo, Consuelo!’, a name he explains thus: ‘I call you consolation ... because a consolation was promised to my sorry life, and because you are the consolation God finally accords to my solitary and miserable days’ (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: I, 243).¹⁷ Zdenko, too, feels the benefit of Consuelo’s presence, and repeats ‘Zdenko has consolation, consolation, consolation!’ (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: I, 263).¹⁸ Sand’s text therefore represents a different approach to the cataleptic. In the works of her male contemporaries, the sufferer is condemned, ostracised, and parodied. Consuelo adopts an alternative approach, one that chimes with the development of 19th-century French psychiatry as charted by Goldstein. As she notes, what came to be known as the ‘moral treatment’ (1987: 200) of mental illness under physicians such as Philippe Pinel (1745–1826) was, in truth, a secularised form of Christian consolation. It is difficult to say whether Sand was conscious of these developments, but the coincidence is striking. In her own syncretic way, Sand charts an approach to the insane that sets aside prejudice and seeks an understanding of the sufferer that reflects and even anticipates developments in psychiatric medicine. In line with the association between catalepsy and genius, Albert is a superior individual. His creativity is connected to his sporadic disappearances, during which it is revealed that he would retreat to a hidden network of caves beneath the mountain known as the Schreckenstein. In what has often been interpreted as a reworking of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice (Laforge, 1984; Lewis, 2003: 49; Naginski, 1991: 205–07), Consuelo descends into these caves when Albert disappears while she is employed as tutor to Albert’s cousin, Amélie, at Riesenburg. The Schreckenstein is a space explicitly linked with artistic creation, as the hidden caves are lined with books and old Slavic music scores, and it is here that Consuelo hears Albert play the violin ‘so perfectly’

17 ‘Je t’appelle consolation ... parce qu’une consolation a été promise à ma vie désolée, et parce que tu es la consolation que Dieu accorde enfin à mes jours solitaires et funestes’.

18 ‘Zdenko a de la consolation, consolation, consolation!’.

['si parfait'] (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: I, 318). On the one hand, Albert's talent offers a manifestation of the cataleptic genius but, on the other, it also reminds us of the connection between catalepsy and music: Mesmer employed music in his treatment, but it was also used by neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–93) to induce cataleptic states in his patients (see Pesic, 2020).

Following Albert's death at the end of the second volume, Consuelo follows yet another series of trials in the sequel, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*. Linda Lewis and Marilyn Mallia have both pointed out the structural parallels between *Consuelo* and its sequel (2003: 42; 2018: 191–201). Just as at the start of *Consuelo* our heroine is the delight of Venice's music halls, at the beginning of *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* she is performing in Berlin. In the sequel, she is followed by a mysterious Liverani, who helps her escape imprisonment at Spandau by Frederick the Great. Liverani eventually leads Consuelo to the Château du Graal, where she is introduced to the secret society of the Invisibles. It is here we discover that Liverani is none other than Albert in disguise, and that his death at the end of *Consuelo* was a misinterpreted cataleptic attack. Catalepsy is associated with both difference and knowledge, posing a challenge to the life/death binary. Thus, Albert's cataleptic flirtation with death has given his life new meaning, which allows him to serve a new political purpose within the Invisibles.

Léon Cellier suggests that there are three 'ecstatics' ['ecstatiques'] in the texts: Albert, Zdenko, and Gottlieb, the somnambulist son of Consuelo's jailer in Spandau (2004: lxxv). Consuelo's approach to Gottlieb echoes her interactions with Albert and Zdenko. Gottlieb's appearance is deformed and peculiar, his own mother comparing his face to a 'badly peeled turnip' ['navet mal épluché'] (Sand, 2004b [1843–44]: 197). While Consuelo is initially wary of him, they strike a friendship that goes some way towards his rehabilitation, and he is ultimately admitted to the Invisibles. Cellier's analysis of the novel's 'ecstatics', however, dismisses Wanda, Albert's mother, entirely (2004: lxxv), yet Sand clearly frames Wanda's catalepsy in similar terms to that of her son; indeed, his cataleptic condition is hereditary. During a cataleptic episode, she too was mistaken for dead—by the same 'ignorant and self-important' ['ignorant et vaniteux'] (Sand, 2004b [1843–44]: 391) doctor who misdiagnosed Albert—and was buried alive, but she was able to escape. It is here that Sand provides her fullest description of the cataleptic experience, one reminiscent of the cataleptic scenes of other 19th-century novelists discussed earlier. Wanda's breathing is imperceptible, yet she is fully conscious and able to hear the prayers of her chaplain and the laments of her family, including the harrowing cries of her son. As happens to Zola's Olivier Bécaille, her eyes are closed even though she is still awake, and like Bécaille, she wonders 'if that

was death' (Sand, 2004b [1843–44]: 391–92).¹⁹ In this context, the letter Sand sent to Flaubert cited earlier is significant, for in it she claims 'there is only one sex', agreeing with Flaubert that hysteria is surely gender neutral: 'why should such an illness have a sex?' (1985: 297).²⁰ Sand's objection to the increasingly gender-dimorphic approaches to hysteria are reflected in her depictions of catalepsy, since cataleptics of both genders are equally valorised. Wanda's illness is not, as Cellier implies, a mere result of her feeling trapped in a loveless marriage to Albert's father. Rather, it marks her out as a similarly superior individual, and she uses her new-found freedom to express her utopian philosophy: her complaint goes beyond her own situation to articulate a broader experience of the struggle against the subjugation of the male gaze and, above all, the institution of marriage, which she describes as a 'sworn prostitution' ['prostitution jurée'] (Sand, 2004b [1843–44]: 384). Naginski has emphasised the significance of Wanda as a mouthpiece for Sand in this novel, stating that 'it is through Wanda that Sand asserts her own philosophy' (2007: 236).²¹ Wanda's feminism and her politics are evident, but it is through her cataleptic experience, her apparent rebirth, that she can put herself to a politically engaged use. Although Wanda initially presents herself as a man, as the confessor and spiritual guide of Consuelo, when she removes her mask, wig, and false beard, she assumes her true role of Sibyl, high priestess of the Invisibles. Through this secret society, she works for the betterment of humanity: 'our war is intellectual like our mission. We are targeting the mind. We act through the mind' (Sand, 2004b [1843–44]: 365).²² Indeed, in Sand's alternative 18th-century history, the Invisibles under Wanda, it is strongly suggested, were instrumental in precipitating the French Revolution (2004b [1843–44]: 516–17).

The Consuelo novels clearly offer a markedly different approach to the cataleptic from the texts of Sand's contemporaries, who reserve death or alienation as the fates of their cataleptics. Sand's text also suggests a broader role for the cataleptic state that extends beyond those individuals whose condition is named as catalepsy. While Consuelo herself is not a cataleptic as such, she suffers what might well be described as a cataleptic episode after her ordeal in which she seeks Albert beneath the Schreckenstein. As she and Albert leave the caves she collapses, and Albert returns her to the château. Consuelo continues in a feverish state until they call a doctor who is concerned at the severity of her condition. In her delirium, she sings a stanza of Handel's *Te Deum*, and we are told that 'never had her voice had more expression and more brilliance.

19 '... si c'était là la mort'.

20 '... il n'y a qu'un sexe'; '... pourquoi une telle maladie aurait-elle un sexe?'

21 '... c'est donc bien à travers Wanda que Sand affirme sa propre philosophie'.

22 'Notre guerre est tout intellectuelle comme notre mission. Nous nous adressons à l'esprit. Nous agissons par l'esprit'.

Never had she been as beautiful as in this ecstatic state' (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: I, 357).²³ This condition soon gives way to a statuesque position that evokes the medical descriptions of the cataleptic and their death-like pose: 'she fell backwards, pale and cold like marble, her eyes still open but empty, her lips blue and her arms stiff', leading the chaplain to declare 'It is death' ['C'est la mort'] after failing to find a pulse (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: I, 358).²⁴ That same doctor who sees Albert as a mere madman and who is strongly criticised by Wanda in *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, again opines that there is nothing to be done. Albert knows better, though, as 'he had studied upon himself ... the effect of the most vigorous stimulants' (Sand, 2004a [1842–43]: I, 359).²⁵ Sand never uses the term catalepsy in association with Consuelo herself, but Albert's ability to recognise the symptoms and subsequent treatment because he himself has experienced them implies such a connection—as does Consuelo's sublime, ecstatic performance that recalls Albert's musical genius, as well as the broader association between catalepsy and genius. This suggestion is reinforced when Consuelo endures what can be likened to a cataleptic attack during her final test, which enables her own initiation into the Invisibles at the end of *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*. This ordeal entails her passage through an ossuary, a prison, and a torture chamber that were all used as part of the Spanish Inquisition. At the end of the torture chamber Consuelo encounters a large bronze bell designed to encase its victim. The sight of a tuft of bloodied grey hair, left behind by one of this implement's victims, and the thought of the suffering this metonymically represents overwhelms her, and she falls 'straight and stiff onto the stone like a statue detaching itself from its pedestal' (Sand, 2004b [1843–44]: 469).²⁶ Her very own Dantean descent into the afterlife leads to her own form of catalepsy, one from which she re-emerges 'Pale as a ghost, her eye fixed and voice faint'. Sand further notes that 'a concentrated exaltation filled her breast, the feeble respiration of which was imperceptible to Liverani' (Sand, 2004b [1843–44]: 473).²⁷ This initiation ceremony, culminating in a cataleptic moment, opens Consuelo to new forms of understanding and completes her journey: she is now able to join the Invisibles in their work to create a new, utopian world order. In other words, these cataleptic experiences, these journeys through various enactments of death, in turn allow Wanda, Albert and

23 '... jamais sa voix n'avait eu plus d'expression et plus d'éclat. Jamais elle n'avait été aussi belle que dans cette attitude extatique'.

24 '... elle tomba à la renverse, pâle et froide comme le marbre, les yeux encore ouverts mais éteints, les lèvres bleues et les bras raides'.

25 '... il avait étudié sur lui-même ... l'effet des révulsifs les plus énergiques'.

26 '... tomba droite et raide sur le pavé comme une statue qui se détacherait de son piédestal'.

27 'Pâle comme un spectre, l'œil fixe et la voix éteinte ... Une exaltation concentrée remplissait sa poitrine, dont la faible respiration n'était plus appréciable pour Liverani'.

Consuelo to put their bodies to a political use. Consuelo remarries Albert in an alternative wedding ceremony free from the shackles of Christian marriage rites; they form their own enclave in Bohemia, reflecting Saint-Simonian ideals of free love and equality. As we discover in the novel's epilogue, this community believes in a 'Human Trinity' ['Tétrade humaine'] comprising 'sensation, sentiment, knowledge' ['sensation, sentiment, connaissance'], a philosophy Sand borrows from philosopher Pierre Leroux (1797–1871) (Sand, 2004b [1843–44]: 565). Such a philosophy encapsulates the cataleptic experience this text describes: psychological and physiological experiences that lead to new forms of knowledge.

In his reading of Sand's *Lélia* (1833), Nigel Harkness argues that, in French realist texts, female characters undergo forms of petrification, a process by which their bodies are fixed and reified by the male gaze. According to Harkness, Sand's novel brings into question the binaries upon which the realist signifying system depends; binaries that define bodily experience based on gender difference. As he explains, 'the heroine's denial of embodiment deprives the male gaze of definitional power, difference dissolves and signification begins to collapse' (2005: 162). This resistance to petrification through a destabilisation of binaries occurs throughout Sand's texts, and we might argue that death is the ultimate form of petrification, further mirrored in the statuesque death-like states of the cataleptic. Therefore, the cataleptic model Sand provides in the *Consuelo* novels can be seen as a means of undoing this fixity that other (male) writers projected onto 19th-century characters, especially women. If, as Brooks posits, the novel is structured by a death drive, by a yearning to return to a point of stasis, Sand's *Consuelo* novels break radically with this convention. The political charge of this reworking is doubled when one acknowledges the gendered dynamics of this paradigm: the petrification Harkness has delineated. Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar recognise the buried self as a trope in Romantic poetry, exalted by male poets. They note, however, that this is differently formulated in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), and write that '[i]nstead of seeking and celebrating the buried self, [Brontë's female characters] feel victimized by it; they long, instead, for actualization in the world' (2000: 402). The ending of Brontë's novel is famously ambiguous, with the narrator-protagonist Lucy Snowe's beloved implied to have died in a shipwreck, and that her yearned-for actualisation—a life with Paul Emanuel—remains off-limits. In Sand's *Consuelo* novels, however, Wanda rails against the victimisation of women, and through her supposed death and accidental burial she *does* achieve actualisation, freeing herself from the shackles of a loveless marriage and forging a new political path with the Invisibles. As Mallia has written, the ending of *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* represents a refusal of the traditional Gothic endings of either death/dystopia or marriage (2018:

229). What Mallia does not mention is the importance of the cataleptic experience to the novel's conclusion. Thus, catalepsy in the Consuelo novels serves a double political purpose: it allows Sand to subvert the traditional masculine plot, but the experience of death also provides access to knowledge that would otherwise be foreclosed that, in turn, can be put to political ends for the betterment of humanity.

Beyond Death

The Consuelo novels provide Sand's most sustained engagement with the cataleptic, but catalepsy is a term that recurs across her oeuvre. Daniel's unrequited love for Laure in *Adriani* (1854) is described as an 'ecstatic passion' ['passion extatique'] (Sand, 1869a [1854]: 47) and these unreciprocated feelings leave him in a state akin to a 'catalepsy' ['catalepsie'] (Sand, 1869a [1854]: 51). A cataleptic attack is hypothesised as a possible cause for Mouny-Robin's fatal accident (Sand, 1869b [1841]: 276). In her autobiography, Sand even describes her grandmother as having suffered a form of catalepsy in her final two years (Sand, 1971: 765). A more extensive depiction of catalepsy occurs in *Les Sept cordes de la lyre* [*Spirit of the Lyre*] (1839), a peculiar text that presents itself as a play never intended to be performed. In it, Héléne is under the tutelage of Albertus, a philosopher who has forbidden Héléne from engaging with music, which he considers to be useless and antithetical to reason. Héléne, however, possesses a magical lyre that has come to her from her grandfather, and whose music only she can hear. It transpires that Héléne has more to teach Albertus more than her instructor has to teach her; by the end of the text, Albertus is able to hear and understand the music of the lyre, though Héléne chooses to ascend to the heavens with the Lyre's spirit, and from there she continues to protect Albertus from the malign intentions of Mephistopheles. Throughout the text, Héléne is presented as a sickly figure, one prone to fits of madness. As Albertus explains, 'This is the cataleptic crisis she falls into every day, at the same time, after having played the lyre' (Sand, 2013 [1839]: 105).²⁸ Like the tam-tam used by Charcot with his patients, the lyre can induce cataleptic crises in Héléne, but these are states that Albertus cannot comprehend. Once again, Sand's representation of the cataleptic runs counter to that of her contemporaries. During Héléne's cataleptic experiences we hear her spirit, which over the course of the text begins to engage with the Spirit of the Lyre. Héléne is thereby given access to knowledge that ultimately enables her to fulfil the higher purpose of protecting Albertus. As David Powell has stated, Sand 'does not consider Héléne's condition to be an illness, but rather a state of enlightenment that departs from the standard conception of reason' (2001: 174). Although Héléne dies

²⁸ 'Voici la crise cataleptique où elle tombe tous les jours, à la même heure, après avoir fait résonner la lyre.'

at the end of the text, unlike Consuelo, her death is not presented in negative terms. On the contrary, as Albertus declares in the final scene, ‘Hélène is cured!’ [‘Hélène est guérie!’] (Sand, 2013 [1839]: 169).

Although it is true that catalepsy only expressly appears in a handful of Sand’s works, these texts share a resistance to dominant narrative modes that seek to fix and reify their subject. Claudine Grossir has noted Sand’s resistance to closure, her tendency to use the endings of her novels as openings, encourages further reflection (2006; 2007). Catalepsy, in its simultaneous imitation of and resistance to closure, might therefore be considered a fundamental principle of the Sandian text, such that we might even describe her works as ‘cataleptic novels’, whereby the cataleptic model provides a means of subverting dominant (masculine) representational modes. The apparent suicide at the end of Sand’s first major solo novel, *Indiana* (1832), and the miraculous (and controversial) survival of her protagonists who are revealed in the novel’s epilogue to be working to free black slaves on the Île Bourbon (now Réunion Island), might well be considered emblematic of this ‘cataleptic’ model. We find the same undoing of death as closure at work in *Jeanne* (1844), in which the eponymous heroine astonishingly survives her leap from the tower at Montbrat after Léon Marsillat abducts and attempts to rape her. Although Jeanne does eventually succumb to her injuries, in the meantime she prays, and Sand again enacts the statuesque vocabulary so often associated with catalepsy: she writes that Jeanne was ‘frozen, and her limbs were stiff like those of a statue’ (Sand, 2016: 304).²⁹ The doctor bleeds her, which causes a brief revival, one long enough for her to instruct two of the other characters, Sir Arthur Harley and Marie de Boussac, to marry and convey to the community her utopian message that the local myth of a secret ‘treasure’ [‘trésor’] (Sand, 2016 [1844]: 37) is, in truth, a generosity of spirit associated with socialist values. Finally, in the case of *Mauprat* (1837), we might also consider Edmée de Mauprat’s illness—following Antoine de Mauprat’s attempt to assassinate her—akin to a cataleptic state. Her condition recalls Georget’s description of the cataleptic as she exists in a state of ‘complete inertia’, in which ‘she would often doze but without really sleeping’ (Sand, 1969 [1837]: 283), her hand like alabaster (257), and her doctor fearful of tetanic episodes (263).³⁰ She too recovers from her illness, however, at which point she pronounces her love for Bernard and becomes a fervent supporter of the French Revolution. As with Consuelo and Hélène, these heroines return from an apparent death to set political acts of resistance in motion.

29’ ... glacée, et ses membres étaient roides comme ceux d’une statue’.

30’ ... un état d’inertie complète. Elle sommeillait souvent, mais sans dormir tout à fait (1969 [1837]: 283); ‘... comme un morceau d’albâtre’ (257); ‘... une violente irritation du cerveau ... faisait craindre le tétanos’ (263).

As this article has shown, catalepsy served as a common trope in the literature of 19th-century France, occurring with a frequency in fiction that does not reflect its rarity. We find cataleptics in novels by writers from across the century, and although there are some constants between the Sandian cataleptic and those of her contemporaries (the association between catalepsy and genius, and the associated unknowability of death), the cataleptics who appear in her texts stand apart for multiple reasons. In Sand's conception, the cataleptic is not shunned or parodied. Rather, she voices an ethics of care that valorises the cataleptic experience. Moreover, this experience endows the sufferer with new forms of knowledge which then allows them to serve a politically engaged purpose that benefits society. Sand's representation of catalepsy is also distinct from a gendered perspective. Even though catalepsy, in medical discourse of the period, became particularly associated with women, there are remarkably few female cataleptics in the fiction of the period. When the cataleptic is female, the condition is linked to emotional extremes rather than an excess of genius. This is not the case for Sand, whose cataleptics (irrespective of gender) are able to find personal and social fulfilment. In combination, these aspects represent a means of destabilising dominant narrative norms, especially as they pertain to death and gender. Brooks suggests that the 19th-century novel is structured by the death drive; Sand's cataleptic novels, in their refusal of this particular form of closure, subvert this traditional plot. Catalepsy instead provides a means of overcoming the finality of death, and the Sandian cataleptic is able to overcome gendered and narrative expectations to use their 'afterlife' for political purposes.

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