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THE ARTIST AND THE PROBLEM OF COLLABORATION:
THE CASE OF KNUT HAMSUN

Among the many problems that the Norwegian judicial authorities had to face after the liberation in 1945, the case of Knut Hamsun was undoubtedly one of the most difficult. The situation was such that the most important Norwegian author still alive, the cultural pride of the country, might have to be committed to trial on charges of treason. True enough, at the outbreak of the second world war Hamsun was an old man of 80. Everybody thought that his career as a writer was long ago finished (his last novel, *The Ring is Closed*, appeared in 1936). Yet, together with Ibsen he was Norway's only important contribution to world literature, he was a Nobel Prize Winner from 1920, with a large and enthusiastic international audience. At the time of the liberation he was almost 86 years old, he was more or less deaf, and during the German occupation he had twice suffered from minor strokes. Would it be possible to defend the writer against the politician on the basis of his old age and his general mental and physical condition, thus saving the nation's cultural honour from the disgrace of a sentence for treason? As you all know, the Norwegian authorities chose to submit Hamsun to a psychiatric examination, the conclusion of which stated that he suffered from "permanently impaired mental faculties" during the occupation, and therefore should not be made responsible for his acts after the Section 85 of the Penal Code. On the other hand, a Decree of Treason from 1944 made it possible to claim damages against him

for his membership in the NS (the Norwegian Nazi Party); after an appeal to the High Court, Hamsun was ordered to pay more or less his whole fortune in compensation to the country.

These rather dry facts reflect a dilemma which for 50 years has haunted the Norwegian cultural and social life like a trauma. With the regularity of a ritual, the debates about Hamsun's Nazism have time and again invaded Norwegian newspapers and media. The centenary for Hamsun's birth in 1959 and the publication of Thorkild Hansen's book *The Case against Hamsun* in 1978 mark the big years in the history of this collective trauma. But in between as well as after these years there have been ample occasions for both learned and unlearned to express their views. Proposals for honouring the memory of the great writer with public busts, statues, or names of streets and squares, have met with compact resistance both on a national and on a local level.

This specifically Norwegian Hamsun trauma is an interesting phenomenon, from the point of view of the history of mentality as well as from the point of view of social psychology. It is perhaps quite as interesting as the question which is its direct cause, that is, the question about Hamsun's relationship to Nazism. To some extent the trauma is rooted in a particular Norwegian myth of the Great Writer, which has accompanied the nation building process in Norway from the beginning of the last century and onwards, and which got a new and special impact during and immediately after the German occupation. Writers like Wergeland and Bjørnson contributed essentially to this Image of the Writer as a Herald of national independence and national identity; and at a certain moment, after the death of Bjørnson

in 1910, Hamsun assumed more or less heartily this very role. The fact that he failed so tragically when the opposite attitude was so urgently called for, may have given the myth a crack which all so called "good Norwegians" had to experience as an attack against the cultural identity of the nation. Through this crack another and far more disquieting relationship between literature and society than the one we wish to believe in, suddenly became visible. This conflict or this break between the writer and his society is Thorkild Hansen's main center of interest in *The Case against Hamsun*, and it may explain the agitation that his book arouse when it was published. On the other hand, it is true that Hansen appears as a far too passionate defender of the artist's rights towards society; it is not *comme il faut* in the country of Bjørson and Wergeland to be an aristocratic existentialist in the name of Art.

The most important documents from the discussions that followed in the wake of Hansen's book are collected in a book edited by Simen Skjønsberg the following year. I shall not give any summary of this interesting documentation here, which after all is more about Thorkild Hansen than Knut Hamsun. However, it is worth noticing that the book contains contributions not only from writers, literary critics and historians of literature, but also from specialists of political history, ethics, and jurisprudence. The debate engaged not only Norwegian, but Danish and Swedish participants as well. The temperature in most of the articles is just as high as we might expect, but we do not get any definitive answers to the crucial question about Hamsun's Nazism before and during the occupation. One may doubt if any

answer at all is possible, considering the complex character of the question itself.

Nevertheless, the problem concerning Hamsun's relations with nazism is often formulated as a very simple question: Was Hamsun a Nazi? Put in this oversimplified way, the question covers a judicial, a political and an ideological aspect which are not only worthy of interest, it is also possible to clarify them, at least to a certain extent. On the other hand, as soon as the problem is raised as a question about the relations between literature of fiction, political commitment, and ideological proclamations, we are immediately running into a lot of difficulties.

What were, then, the judicial foundations of the case for treason which the Norwegian judicial authorities, after some hesitation, decided to drop? Hamsun was of course not an active participant in the German occupation of Norway, he was neither an informer, nor a profiteer, nor did he participate in the cultural nazification of Norway. However, from the days of April 1940 to the German capitulation in May 1945, he published about 15 appeals and articles in Norwegian and German newspapers and magazines, he gave at one occasion an interview to the Nazi-controlled Norwegian Broadcasting, and he wrote a greeting which was presented in German at the opening of the international press congress in Vienna in June 1943, arranged by Goebbels and where Hamsun himself was present. These public interventions stretch from the open letter "Et ord til os" (A Word to Us), 19 April 1940, to the incredible obituary notice for Hitler, published on 7 May 1945, the day before the German capitulation in Norway. In

this obituary, Hitler is among other things praised as "a warrior for mankind and a prophet of the gospel of justice for all nations". Reading the text today really gives us serious doubts about Hamsun's mental faculties at the time.

There is absolutely no doubt that the content of most of these articles offered support to the occupation authorities and to the Norwegian Nazi Party, by arguing for the legitimacy of the German occupation and the legality of Quisling's puppet government. One of the earliest appeals, published on May, 4 1940, in the Norwegian Nazi paper *Fritt Folk*, even asks the Norwegian soldiers to desert: "NORWEGIANS! Throw down your rifles and go home again. The Germans are fighting for us all, and will crush the English tyranny over us and over all neutrals". But here we have to add that Hamsun himself thought he was writing a draft for an appeal which was to be signed by several other well known persons. When his text was published in *Fritt Folk* with only his own signature, he felt offended and considered himself a victim of a serious manipulation. Some months later he wrote a public letter to his former friend Victor Mogens, where he commented upon this episode, stating that he had been "nonchalantly treated in the matter", and that he did not know of "one single individual in Norway who could publish such an appeal and be personally liable for it."

Whatever lessons Hamsun could have learned from this episode, however, it is beyond any doubt that he lent his pen and his name to the support of the occupation authorities during the whole war. Even if extenuating circumstances existed, I think we have to acknowledge that Hamsun would have received a sentence

for treason if he had been tried. Such is at least the opinion of one of Norway's most respected professors of jurisprudence after the war, Johs. Andenæs. I quote from an article he wrote on this topic in 1979: "If he [Hamsun] had been 20 or 30 years younger, the case would have been clear: A case for treason and years of imprisonment. Anything else would have been impossible in the name of justice. The problem was his age."

But as we know, Hamsun was not tried for treason. Instead, he was sentenced to pay his entire fortune as a compensation to the state for his membership in the NS. Several jurists (among them professor Andenæs) were - and still are - critical to the judicial principle of collective liability for damages which was applied against the members of NS after the war. We should also notice that the sentence in Grimstad county court was not unanimous. Hamsun himself claimed that he himself had never taken the necessary steps to be inscribed as a party member nor paid any subscription, and the foreman of the jury, the Judge's Deputy, acquitted him on all charges since he had not found his membership proven. But later, the High Court confirmed by an unanimous decision the majority verdict from Grimstad county court.

If this verdict is correct, it gives a positive answer to the question which concerns us: Yes, Hamsun was a Nazi in the sense of having been proved to be a member of the NS during the German occupation. But as Andenæs also emphasizes in his article from 1979, both the question and the answer are purely formal, insofar as they only are concerned with the kind of technical conditions that have to be fulfilled if a person shall be

counted among the members of a political organisation. The real judicial question, namely to what extent Hamsun's actions during the occupation made him guilty of treason, and if he on the basis of these actions would have to be classified as a Nazi, will forever be without answer.

For us, and for the future, the case of Knut Hamsun raises a far more important question: Was Hamsun's pro-German commitment based on political and ideological attitudes and convictions that we shall have to qualify as "Nazi" convictions, and if so, are these attitudes and convictions an integral and decisive part of his literary legacy? Or to put the question somewhat differently: Does Hamsun's literary genius consist in an art of seduction which traps the readers in the nets of an ideology and a vision we have to call "Nazi"? Was - and is - the enthusiasm for the works of Hamsun a dangerous enthusiasm?

Not only the relations between ideology and the art of literature, but even those between ideology and political reality, are indeed very complicated. Ideology, understood as the propagandistic or rhetorical face of politics, always presents itself as a beautiful face - a face made so as to persuade, to create legitimacy, to announce as convincingly as possible the borders between the Good and the Evil, friend and enemy, justice and injustice. It may be that the ideology of Nazism permits the political realities to appear more clearly than in other ideologies; brutality, racism, the cult of war and of the vitality of youth, the appeal for revenge and national resurrection, all these topics were brutal traits in the ideological face

of Nazism since the publication of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. But there were other traits too: the spirit of community, the sentiment of nature and of natural relations in politics and economy, the critique of the alienating and nivellating aspects of capitalism, the resistance against cultural and political decay. To be fascinated by an ideology means as a rule to be entranced by its positive face, and especially by those traits where one is able to rediscover one's own ideals and values.

Hamsun's earliest open support of Hitler's politics dates from July 1934, when he published a short article in *Aftenposten*. This text, as well as the attack on Carl von Ossietzky one year later, constitute above all a defense of Germany against the victors of the First World War, and express only indirectly a support to Hitler's new politics. In other words, Hamsun's Nazi commitment is from the beginning a pro-German commitment, and as such it is a logical consequence of a political stance which dates at least from 1910.

A great deal has been written about Hamsun's love for Germany and also about his hatred against England, which forms the negative pole of his general geo-political vision. This simplified vision in black and white is, in other words, much older than his support of Hitler and Quisling, and can probably be explained (at least in part) by biographical circumstances. It is a fact that his international reputation rested on the enthusiasm that he was met with in Germany (and let me add, also in Russia), whereas the British audiences never felt any particular fascination for his work. When Hamsun during the years after 1910 developed his geo-political view of Germany's

situations and rights, which later was to be found in Hitler's claim of Germany's rights to expansion and "Lebensraum", this view is closely connected with his idiosyncratic evaluation of the two central European powers at the time. Another of his idiosyncracies, namely his disgust for old age and a corresponding cult of youth, is in a significant manner associated with this England/Germany polarity. In Hamsun's political mythology during the First World War, Germany is the young nation with a legitimate claim of expansion and development, whereas England represents the disgusting and decaying old age which blocks the natural development of youth.

It is not my intention to reduce Hamsun's geo-political vision by claiming that it is the direct result of such idiosyncracies. After all, Hamsun's views were shared by many other writers and intellectuals, who, however, did not follow him when Hitler began to show his true intentions in the 1930s. We also have to add that Hamsun during this period came to develop a very critical attitude towards the direction and dynamics of social, cultural and economic evolution in general, which led him to an ideological stance that we without hesitation have to qualify as reactionnary. The central elements of this critical view of modern society can be summarized as anti-capitalism, anti-industrialism, anti-democratism, a nostalgia for the feudal relations in politics and morals, an idealization of nature, of agrarian economy and of the "natural" bonds between people and their surroundings - all this very close to a right wing romanticism of "Blut and Boden". Such attitudes and values are also to be found as traits in the positive face of Nazi ideology.

It is therefore a reasonable guess that Hamsun's sympathy with the political experiment which Hitler started in 1933 was triggered and reinforced by a certain feeling of "community of values".

On the other hand, it is far more difficult to find any trace in Hamsun's social criticism and political proclamations of what is considered today as the negative core of Nazi ideology, that is, its racism, its anti-Semitism, and the general brutality which characterizes Nazism's vision of man. True enough, in an article from 1977, "Knut Hamsun's Anti-Semitism", the American Hamsun scholar Allen Simpson has studied very carefully Hamsun's literary and other writings, reaching the following conclusion about the writer's anti-Semitism:

His anti-semitism consisted in the fact that, regularly throughout his fiction and non-fiction, he created negative caricatures of Jews, showing them as destructive aliens on the soil of the host country. It is not that certain characters in his writings who happen to be Jewish are physically ugly or morally flawed, but that certain characters are physically ugly or morally flawed, because they are Jewish. This is the nature of anti-Semitism.

However, it is difficult to disagree with Sten Sparre Nilson when, in a reply to Simpson, he points out that Simpson reads Hamsun with very little consideration for the contexts in which such remarks and characterizations appear. The casual comments on Jews which are to be found in f.ex. Hamsun's travelogues, belong to the commonplaces of early 20th century, and Simpson overlooks the fact "that also the French, the British and the

Japanese get it good and proper, and that the Germans are even more hardly treated than the Jews."

As far as Hamsun's articles from the war years are concerned, they are, with one notable exception, devoid of anti-Jewish remarks. The exception is a long article published in German in the magazine *Berlin-Rom-Tokio* in February 1942, where president Roosevelt is referred to as "a Jew in Jewish service". We do not possess the original Norwegian manuscript of this article; it is therefore impossible to know whether the expression really is Hamsun's own or whether it has been cynically added during the work of translation. But it is certain that such remarks are in no way representative of what Hamsun wrote during the occupation, neither are they representative of what we know about Hamsun's attitude towards Jews and the Jewish question. In a couple of letters from 1933 and 1935, to the German-Jewish bookseller Arthur Meyerfeld and to the Rabbi Samuel in Oslo, Hamsun shows how difficult it is for him to reconcile his respect for the Jews and his defense of the German policy; the solution he ends up with, is to support the Jewish claim of a Palestinian state, which was also the official sionist policy, as we all know. I would say that on this question there is a remarkable difference between Hamsun's stance and that of other great writers of our century, f.ex. Ezra Pound and the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline.

This very brief outline permits us to conclude that Hamsun's political attitudes appear to be fundamentally determined by two factors: his love for Germany (and correspondingly, his hatred for England), and his general reactionary social views and

values. There can be no doubt that these two factors, together with Hamsun's stubbornness and his lifelong, deeply rooted need to go against the majority, blinded him to the political realities of Nazi Germany. Neither is there any doubt that these factors, which are as psychological as they are ideological, contribute largely to the explanation of the support he lent to Hitler and Quisling. But in my opinion, this is not enough as a foundation for the claim that Hamsun was a Nazi in the political and ideological sense of the word.

To this picture of Hamsun's political view we have to add another trait - maybe the most pronounced one - namely, his patriotism, his love of his country.

Patriotism seems to appear as a fundamental value for the first time in a lecture that Hamsun delivered in Helsinki in May, 1899. This lecture tells a lot about his views upon the function of literature at the turn of the century; he castigates any attempt to turn literature into didactic proclamations, using as before Ibsen and Tolstoj as negative examples. The art of literature ought to be song, flights of imagination, poetry, of which Villon and Verlaine, the two vagabonds and outsiders, are the true symbols. There is only one value to be proclaimed by the real art of literature, and that is the love of one's country. This mission is in decay among writers today, Hamsun states, but perhaps, in a less pessimistic age, the writer will once again become a patriot.

The lecture was delivered at a moment and under circumstances where the patriotism of the Finnish people was on the top of the agenda, only a few months after the "coup d'état" of the

Russian governor-general Bobrikov. However, we should not interpret Hamsun's appeal merely as a gesture of politeness towards his Finish hosts. 50 years later, in Grimstad County Court, when Hamsun explains his actions during the war, he refers to the love of his country as his main motive force. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity at this point of his defense. But it is of course ironic that the political circumstances which formed the background of the Helsinki lecture (the Russian occupation of Finland), were the same as the Norwegian situation during the German occupation, whereas Hamsun's place in the conflict has turned 180 degrees from 1899 to 1947.

Hamsun's lecture in Helsinki - his last lecture on literature - shall also serve as the point of departure for the last theme of my discussion here, namely, the relationship between Nazism (or Fascism) and Hamsun's work of fiction. Can Hamsun's literary work in any reasonable sense of the word be said to be fascist or Nazi? This question implies another one which directly engages us as readers: Is the fascination we still feel when we read Hamsun, intimately connected with a vision of life that we at least have to call *fascistoid*?

The criticism of ideology represents a strong and very important tradition in Hamsun criticism. It started with Leo Löwenthal's classical study from 1937, "Knut Hamsun. Zur Vorgeschichte der autoritären Ideologie" (Knut Hamsun. On the Prehistory of authoritarian Ideology), and it was renewed in the 1970s, both in Norway and in Denmark. Contrary to other trends in Hamsun criticism, which separates the young and the mature

Hamsun, the innovating psychological novels of the 1890s and the more traditional social novels from 1910 and onwards, the criticism of ideology emphasizes the ideological continuity of Hamsun's work. The main thesis is that all his books, from *Hunger* to *The Ring is Closed*, are organised around a fundamental ideological structure, an ideology of "late liberalism", which expresses the conflictual life experience of the lower middle classes, and which may be described as an "ideology of submission". The central element of this ideological pattern is the myth of Nature, expressing the desire of the petite bourgeoisie for a place of refuge far away from the conflicts of social reality. Around this center Löwenthal reorganizes some of the vital points of Hamsun's fictional universe - the cult of youth, the individual's attraction towards submission, fatalism, the idealization of country life, etc. Even Hamsun's style is interpreted from this viewpoint. Its peculiar rhythm and captivating repetitions makes it thematically suggestive as a kind of mimesis of the smallness of the individual and its submission to the biological rhythm of life. Thus the style reinforces the reader's movement away from the real and towards the ideological dream of Nature.

This critical interpretation offers an important contribution to a coherent understanding of some of the dimensions of Hamsun's work. Löwenthal and his followers in the 1970s have made visible the ideological pattern that actually runs through the entire oeuvre, and which at some essential points corresponds to the "meanings" proclaimed by Hamsun in his articles and polemical interventions. But the results of the criticism of ideology

depends on a theory about the relationship between literature and ideology which is highly disputable. Literature, and Hamsun's work in particular, have to be understood as the expression of a "false consciousness", as a coherent misinterpretation of human existence stemming from a certain social class and from the real conflicts that this class wants to run away from. Literature thus becomes an art of seduction which traps the readers into the networks of illusory values and myths.

In my opinion this general view on the relationship between literature and ideology is erroneous, and as far as Hamsun is concerned, the literary reality is far more complicated. In order to substantiate my contention, I will venture some brief comments on two of Hamsun's most important novels from the period between the two wars, namely *Konerne ved vandposten* (The Women at the Pump) from 1920, and *Landstrykere* (Vagabonds) from 1927. If I choose this period in Hamsun's work, it is because it is dominated by great novels that have been generally read as versions of social criticism based on a reactionnary ideology - as attacks on the "modern time" and as ideological defenses of an idealized past.

Such elements are of course to be found in the novels, but in a rather peculiar and, if I dare say so, distorted manner. As a rule, the ideological proclamations are taken care of by some of the minor characters, most of which become in one way or another victims of what I would call the irony of Hamsun's writing. In *The Women at the Pump*, it is the local postmaster who expresses some important themes of Hamsun's own ideology and morals. But this character is in no way depicted as an heroic

character. On the contrary, he appears as an isolated dreamer, remote from life, and Hamsun ends the postmaster's life with an absolutely destructive irony. Far from being the novel's moral consciousness and the mouthpiece of Hamsun's own social views, the postmaster thus becomes an ironic symbol of a deeply rooted dissonance: the conflict between illusion and reality, theory and practice.

This brings me to the main character of the novel, the castrated sailor Oliver Andersen who, after his accident at sea, settles in the little coastal town, marries, and gets children even if he physically unable to do so, etc. This monster has been read as a grotesque symbol of all the abnormality and degeneration of the "modern time" that Hamsun hated so bitterly, and such a symbolism may very well have been in Hamsun's mind when he wrote the book. But Oliver Andersen belongs to another context as well, being one of the many outsiders of Hamsun's work, and sharing with such relatives as the hero of *Hunger*, Nagel in *Mysteries*, Thomas Glahn in *Pan*, August in the late vagabond trilogy, etc., the same fascination and intricate sympathy that characterize Hamsun's relations to all his outsiders and vagabonds. Thus Oliver appears not only as a grotesque symbol of modernity, but even as a real hero and - in the last instance - as one of several versions of the Artist in Hamsun's work. He represents, in fact, the powers of imagination, or to put it more precisely, the victory of imagination over life. Because he is castrated - empty, hollow - he has to build his daily existence on a system of illusions; only in this way can he keep on living. Thomas Mann was the first critic to note this essential aspect of *The Women*

at the *Pump*; he wrote as early as in 1922 that the novel is, essentially, a novel about art, about life as art, about art as a last resort.

This tension between illusion and reality, this analysis of the ambiguous but necessary role of imagination in human life, also constitute one of the main themes of *Vagabonds*. The introduction of this novel belongs to Hamsun's most wonderful pages. On a dark winter's evening Polden, the community of Edevart and August, is visited by two itinerant jugglers who present their little show of puppets and barrel organ and throw some pale light of imagination over the poverty and the boredom. At the same time they play a little theater in their own right, which deceives Edevart at first, but which he succeeds in demasking afterwards. This experience is to become a kind of fundamental pattern in Edevart's life - during his many voyages to and from Polden together with the adventurous and mendacious August, and especially during his love affair with Lovise, which forms as it were his main lesson of disillusionment. The novel certainly has its part of ideological preaching, where the rural life of the farmer is contrasted with the rootlessness of the two vagabonds. But the energy and the dynamic force of the novel, which is the energy and force of narrative imagination, is nevertheless intimately connected with vagabond life. The novel's power of fascination concerns Edevart and August and their restless oscillations between illusion and disillusionment, not the stable and reactionary values of Hamsun's ideology.

These brief examples from Hamsun's work between the two wars may serve as the basis of the following conclusion concerning the

relations between literature and ideology in Hamsun: Ideological norms and patterns constitute a necessary dimension in Hamsun's books - necessary, that is, for the irony to be able to operate. The novels communicate certain moral and ideological values which at once are being undermined or deconstructed. Hamsun's ironical and extremely mobile writing thus functions as a practical critique of its own myths and ideologies. Both in *Mysterier* and in *Pan*, in the vagabond novels from the first decade of this century and in *Vagabonds*, the idyllic images of nature, of natural Eros and of natural social existence, are permanently undermined by a movement of disillusionment. And vice versa: situations and characters that immediately lend themselves to a negative interpretation (f.ex. Oliver and August), appear upon a closer look to carry positive elements, above all because they thematize the fundamental fascination in Hamsun's universe: the fascination of a power of imagination which has its source in lack and emptiness. It is my contention that we have to seek the real direction of Hamsun's literary project on this level, and that the relations between ideology and literature have to be understood from this very perspective.

It has been said that Hamsun's definitive surrender to Hitler and Quisling takes place when his career as a writer has come to an end. This is biographically correct, but explains nothing. Two other interpretations are possible. On the one hand one may say that Hamsun's support of Nazi-Germany is an escape from the existential conflicts and abysses that the writer has been exploring from *Hunger* to *The Ring is closed*, an escape, that is, into the myths and ideological patterns which are presented

and deconstructed in his books. Thus, the ideological temptations which in different ways are inscribed into his work, become the last place of refuge for the ageing writer. On the other hand, it is possible to consider the existential core of Nazism as fundamentally related to Hamsun's fascination for emptiness and disillusionment - this "death instinct" which has found so many expressions in his work. Thus, one may point to a continuity between the writer and the politician - not on the basis of a community of ideological values, but rather on the level of psychology and existential philosophy.

I cannot adopt any of those views. I am convinced that there is no simple explanation of Hamsun's pro-Nazi commitment, and certainly not in terms of a primitive ideological conviction. Probably we have to take into account a complex mixture of personal idiosyncracies, sheer chance, psychological oddities and the mental rigidity that belongs to old age. On the other hand, what makes his literary works so outstanding, are not the idyllic cult of Nature and Youth and their fundamental pessimism, which appear side by side, presupposing each other as it were, but rather the distance and the mobility that belong to the order of irony and reflection, being the very bulwark against any irreflective approval of authoritarian ideologies. If literature - and that also means Hamsun's literary work - has any political "power", it is not by what it proclaims, but because it is capable of creating a distance towards its own proclamations, of deconstructing its own "messages", thus offering to the readers what I would like to call a lesson in that very peculiar type of thinking which is proper to art. From such a viewpoint, Knut

Hamsun's work might very well constitute a protection against any ideological temptations, in spite of the old writer's own tragical reverence to Goebbels and Hitler. The condition is, however, that we read him with both our eyes, carefully, and without succumbing to all the positive and negative myths that surround this enigmatic writer.