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ROBERT SCHNELLE

Unforgettable, Unforgiven: A Poet King's Abdication

Knut Hamsun fled an arctic dirt farm at age fourteen and looked back in wonder. He starved, he drifted across several continents, he wrote narratives of keen intensity. The charged, unadorned prose that brought two dozen novels to life earned him a Nobel Prize in 1920, but at heart he remained an unschooled peasant. The young Hamsun cobbled shoes, peddled housewares, worked on road-building crews. As tram conductor, copyist, and navvy, he survived on poverty wages into his forties. Strangely for one so poorly connected, he also made a pastime of provoking people; his travels from North Dakota to the Caspian Sea could be mapped with scarlet pushpins for the quarrels he waged. But this was a man who thrived on adversity. Diagnosed with tuberculosis at age 25, he rode the roof of a rail car from Chicago to New York, gulping lungfuls of air on the way and surviving another 67 years. His pub crawls were excessive even for a writer, but they helped fuel a dynamo of literary production. Like Thoreau, Hamsun renewed himself in the woods; like Orwell he lived down and out in Paris, and his fictions put generations of youth in a trance. ^{But} And then, when Hitler invaded Norway late in his life, Hamsun supported the Nazis. Since the war's end, his name has all but vanished from literary history.

Say what you will about art and politics, there's no doubt that Scandinavia's greatest novelist buried his own work. In siding with the fascists he banished himself, not only from polite company but also from the reading lists and reprint schedules that keep literary reputations alive. The clutch of books he wrote in the 1890s are as hypnotic as anything later written by Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, or Thomas Mann—all of whom claimed Hamsun's influence (Ferguson 1; Naess, "Preface" n.p.). Today, his works are difficult to find, often available only in dubious translations. No scholarly edition of Hamsun exists in Norwegian or English, and for almost forty years after his death in 1952, he had no biographer. Novels like *Hunger*, *Mysteries*, and *Pan* were midwives to

Modernist culture, yet they bear the mark of Cain. The most gripping love story I have ever read is Hamsun's *Victoria*, a 1969 edition of which occupies my university's library stacks like unsold merchandise, innocent of the check-out stamp. The author himself eludes apology—whether despite of or because of his politics—but explanations are what any appreciative reader wants to provide.

In an 1890 manifesto, Hamsun described his subject as “the delicate life of fantasy held under the magnifying glass, the meanderings of these thoughts and feelings out of the blue; motionless, trackless journeys with the brain and heart, strange activities of the nerves, the whispering of the blood, the pleading of the bone” (qtd. in Naess “Preface” n.p.). Such are the concerns we expect of a modern psychological novel, but outside of Dostoyevski, neurasthenic heroes were an unfamiliar breed before *Hunger* came along. In his first mature work, Hamsun conjured a dreamscape of urban destitution mediated through the amped-up musings of a hypersensitive loner. This narrative records several months in the life of this anonymous provincial, an aspiring writer who adopts the pen name of Andreas Tangen. Determined to make good despite his yokel origins, “Tangen” scavenges the streets of Kristiania (now Oslo) like a post-adolescent *Oliver Twist*. As he struggles to sell his work—pawning possessions down to the buttons of his jacket—the narrator is frequently “drunk with starvation” (18); we don't quite know how to take his oddball behavior. In one erratic spell, he folds a rejected manuscript into an imitation money pouch and drops it on the street to bait a passing patrolman. Later, he accosts a socialite on the sidewalk, telling her she has dropped a book and insisting on helping her to find an item they both know doesn't exist. He exhausts himself while scribbling in a cemetery, swoons in the middle of a downpour, but blames his weakness on having eaten a loaf of bread that morning. “I couldn't tolerate food,” he insists. “I just wasn't made that way” (38). (Kafka would admit a debt to Hamsun for his great story “The Hunger Artist.”)

A luckless, indomitable prankster on the order of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, *Hunger*'s hero engages our sympathies in spite of his egoism. It's a question of fatal innocence, an obstinate insistence on agency, which dooms people like Tangen. Still, we admire their vitality. As Arthur Miller's salesman would later do, Tangen charms us with his delusional pathos. At one point, he patches over an eviction by telling himself, “The room wasn't furnished with an eye to intellectual pursuits, and I did not intend to keep it any longer” (31). Indeed, a tenderness softens him at times. He weeps with fellow-feeling for his shoes, ruined in a street accident. Witnessing the rage of an urchin, maliciously spit on from a tenement window, he later places sweets on the boy's customary stoop. Just as often, though, the narrator caves in to mania. A half-blind pensioner he

accuses of provocation is merely struggling to read his newspaper. He threatens a pitying store clerk for giving back extra change. Beggars repel him, though he is conscious of his own miserable appearance. Humiliation breeds hostile fantasies. By the end of the book, Tangen has learned nothing much and changed even less. Following a whim, he ships out on a cargo vessel, mockingly bidding "Goodbye for now to the city, to Kristiania, where the windows shone so brightly in every home" (197).

For much of the decade leading up to his breakthrough novel, Hamsun lived like his own character, not only in Kristiania but in Copenhagen, Moscow, Chicago, and other cities. In letters, he describes the practice of stuffing his clothes with newspaper (for warmth) and chewing matchsticks as a way of dulling the appetite. Despite his ploughman's frame, Hamsun became such a scarecrow that the editor who would publish *Hunger* (*Sult* 1890) handed him five kroner the moment he entered his office. It is easy to identify Hamsun with Andreas Tangen, just as we sometimes feel that Ishmael *is* Melville or that Jim Burden *is* Willa Cather. In fact, many sensations recorded in the novel—the need to write with rag-wrapped hands "because I couldn't stand the feeling of my own breath on them" or his "cold stabs of pain" (99) caused by a barking dog—derive from the author's letters. Curiously, however wretched his condition or volatile his state of mind, the narrator of *Hunger* remains unfazed. Deprivation had been Hamsun's calling card since youth.

Born Knud Pedersen in 1859, in Norway's fertile Gudbrandsdal, he moved as a small child to Hamsund, the far-northern location from which he eventually adapted his name. His father Per Pedersen was a likeable but feckless tailor who could not feed his growing family; soon after arriving in Nordland County, he farmed Knud out to a bachelor uncle, the local postmaster and owner of a dry goods store. What followed for the boy were years of isolation, beatings, short rations, and grim Lutheran piety. Imagine Nicholas Nickleby's boarding school as filmed by Ingmar Bergman, and you have a notion of young Hamsun's surroundings. Yet there's more: according to the novelist Johan Borgen, Hamsun hinted at having once been molested by some English sportsmen while working his uncle's store counter (Ferguson 236); this would explain the man's life-long anglophobia. Still, if it was not ideal for spawning literary culture, Hamsun's childhood bred in him the habit of invention. That and a fierce will to prevail.

Thus, a class-climber's ambition crystalized in Lieutenant Glahn, the aristocratic, forest-dwelling narrator of *Pan* (1894). A Rousseauian refugee who, for unexplained reasons, has chosen exile near a coastal Nordland town, Glahn enjoys both the grace of privilege and the earthy instincts of a yeoman. A borrowed hut, his hunting dog Aesop, a shotgun, and a fishing net provide for his material needs; roaming the hills and

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ruminating are his spiritual meat. He's also a lady-killer, the kind whose "feral" eyes (118) set pulses racing. Much of the novel's appeal, which was legendary for over half a century, depends on its lacerating eroticism. What modern bourgeois could resist Glahn's emotional alchemy as he turns from woodland trysts with goat girls to fraught encounters with Edvarda, the wealthy trader's daughter he loves (and is loved by) but resists (and is resisted by)? Frank sexual pursuit and surrender beneath the white skies of Scandinavian summer nights—these are heady ingredients. Yet Pan has more going on than the "symbolic . . . conflict between the sexes" noted by Isaac Bashevis Singer (viii). Like many an artistic fever dream, the novel feels *sui generis*.

First there is the abrupt shuffling of narrators, as Glahn moves from subject to object in the novel's closing section, a move that parallels its scenic shift from northern Norway to a jungle in India. The practice of unexpectedly switching from past to present tense also marks Hamsun's prose, building urgency even as it spotlights the writer's sense of his own formal freedom. ("Admit it," we tell ourselves: "you follow him no matter what he does.") Yet unlike some postmodernists, Hamsun never forces technique to be the point. The comma-spliced onrush of his clauses is not only acceptable in written Norwegian but also in service to the psychic conditions he explores:

Summer nights and still water and endlessly still forests. Not a cry, not a footfall on the path, my heart was full as of dark wine. . . . But now, in the night hours of the forest, great white flowers have suddenly opened out, their chalices spread wide, and they breathe. And furry hawk-moths bury themselves in their petals and set the whole plant quivering. I go from flower to flower, they are in ecstasy, I see their intoxication. (*Pan* 51-52)

As this passage makes clear, nature imbues the novel with a transformative power. In a typically spooky passage, Glahn rows to a distant offshore island where he passes the day wolfing raspberries and gazing at pelagic birds. No other animals are there, and he fancies himself the first human visitor as well. "But the sea enclosed me on all sides as if in an embrace," he says, and the swirl of sea swells on rock coexists with an inner silence, "muffling [him] in a veil of sound" until he gives in to beatitude. "In this hour," he says, "I want to be merciful to my bitterest enemy, and tie the bands of his shoes" (91).

Those who experience such "spots of time" (as Wordsworth called them) may debate their significance. Thirty years ago, during a student year in Norway, I had no reservations on the subject. Hitchhiking in the western fjord country or scrambling on the peaks of Jotúnheimen, I pored over Hamsun just as stateside friends were taking their cues from *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*. In fact, the Beat connection is instructive.

Kerouac's heroes, wandering bohemian outcasts like Dean Moriarty and Japhy Ryder, find antecedents in several of Hamsun's novels. Both sets of characters are "mad for life" (Kerouac's words), and both are determined to "sing" the autonomous self as Whitman suggested. Furthermore, both Hamsun and Kerouac fulfill Strindberg's 1890 prediction that autobiographical documentary would shape the novel of the future. As for contrast, the failure of relationships that dogs Kerouac's Sal Paradise is for Lieutenant Glahn a perverse effort of will. He never feels sorry for himself because he insists on having chosen defeat, at least in retrospect. And what calls for romantic treatment in Kerouac comes across with killer irony in Hamsun. Whereas Kerouac is confessional, Hamsun is dialogic, an analyst of the splintered, prismatic self whose alienation is largely internal: "I . . . took in each word I spoke as if it were coming from another person," says the narrator of *Hunger* (164).

Inevitably, perhaps, as Hamsun found popular success, his novels became more conventional. *The Growth of the Soil* (*Markens grøde* 1917), which is often cited as Hamsun's masterpiece, champions the life of rustic simplicity. Its hero is "a lumbering barge of a man" (5) who pioneers a valley on the Swedish border, bridging the gap between *Hunger*'s urban hell and *Pan*'s wild nature with the compromise of a family farm. Isak Sellanraa is meant to be a paragon. He confirms Hamsun's rejection of a Europe where bombs rained on cities, but as a character he is psychologically uninteresting, a staunch agrarian who "never for a moment had . . . left his natural place on the earth, on the soil" (428). While the novel's realistic plot and detailed natural description make for a good read, there is never any question about its mythologizing impulse. Nobel committees of the time looked kindly on ideals and epic sweep, so Hamsun delivered the goods. Anyway, by the advent of the Great War, he himself had become a family man and gentleman farmer, a boot-strapper who'd earned his right to an acre of happiness however blandly featured. Hamsun's opus needs no justification. Still, returning to *The Growth of the Soil* after many years, I found it tendentious; apart from the itinerant Geisler, I missed the edgy surprise of characters with variable motives.

A more satisfying later novel, *Chapter the Last* (*Den siste kapitел*, 1923) may seem to be working familiar ground, but at age 65 Hamsun had returned to form. The setting is a backcountry health spa where, as in Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), civilization's discontents present themselves in various forms of illness. Members of different classes and nationalities compete for status in their alpine fishbowl, a place where guests can embroider their identities, conduct romantic intrigues, and languidly defend pet philosophical notions. The backdrop for all this leisure, of course, is death, but it haunts the Torahus sanatorium with a virulence unwarranted by mere disease. A crime of passion, which resolves the story's pivotal love triangle, is only one of its violent fatalities. Yet

Hamsun regards most of his characters as small change, dull-minded refugees from a neurotic milieu. "The people of this world are ordinary and petty," the narrator dryly observes (305).

More nuanced, and perhaps more revealing of Hamsun himself, is the strange relationship between "the Suicide" and a leper named Anton Moss. Among the patients at Torahus, these two men are set apart by their verbal agility and a taste for raillery. The former, Leo Magnus, is a caustic cuckold—he admits it was his total ignorance of sex that drove his wife to adultery, and he proposes suicide as a kind of Nietzschean triumph. The only thing holding him back, Magnus says, is the lack of a means sufficiently dignified for the deed. A tormented spirit in a sound body, the Suicide pairs inversely with Moss, who is as personable as he is outwardly deformed. Everyone save Magnus handles Moss with solicitude, referring to his physical decay as a symptom of "barber's itch" (169). Between them, the two cronies wage a competition of invective, one in which affection masquerades as abuse. A particularly touching moment precedes Moss's departure when he must leave the sanatorium at last for a leper colony:

The one who found it most difficult to say good-bye to Moss was assuredly the Suicide. He too tried to slip some money into the blind man's pocket, but on being foiled he abused him at great length. It was no trifle in the way of recrimination and insult that he heaped upon his friend: "I can't imagine what God wanted with a man like you here on earth. And if I call you a man, it's only so as not to go too far, but it doesn't express what I really feel."

"Go ahead!" said Moss.

"No, I won't be bothered to go ahead," replied the Suicide . . . "As I have said all the time, you're full of gall, gall and spitefulness and obstinacy. It wouldn't surprise me if you were tickled to death at the idea of quitting a world you can no longer see, while the rest of us are doomed to stop here amid the beauties of nature. That would be like you. Where is it you're being taken now? God knows if they won't drive you straight off to jail."

Moss, grimly: "Is that intended as a feeble hint of something to my discredit?" (170)

The scene is poignant—and Hamsunesque—because it documents the upside of human perversity. Doomed comrades wrangle "in order to save themselves from collapsing," or, as Hamsun adds, "they nursed their bitterness so as not to whimper" and "gnashed their teeth so as not to burst into tears" (149). Moreover, since both men recognize the rules of their game, neither is hurt by it. Each finds it so engaging that they carry on, exchanging poison-pen letters long after parting. Hamsun shows that we are not *just* ordinary and petty. We are resourceful, sometimes even noble.

Perhaps it is such a mixture of traits that renders Hamsun's turn to the Dark Side understandable, if not excusable. For, unlike the typical Nazi sympathizer, he was no troll. Indeed, he used his influence to plead clemency for Norwegian partisans, saving several lives. At any rate, certain facts of the case stand out. Even before the Germans occupied Oslo, Hamsun began writing newspaper editorials in which he urged resisters to lay down their arms. The real enemy, he argued, was not Germany but Britain, the power that had taken imperial aggression to its furthest extreme. Aligning itself with Germany (where, coincidentally, Hamsun had always found his widest readership and greatest publishing success), Norway would gain influence; with England, dependency. He never joined the Norwegian Nazi party, but he polemicized on its behalf. His broadsides having met with German approval, Hamsun was invited to a 1944 congress of Axis Pooh-Bahs. There, in Vienna, he was given a private audience with Hitler, whose appearance he likened to that of "a common laborer" and whose wrath he courted by demanding Norwegian autonomy; Hitler subsequently ordered his aides to keep "people like that" away from him (Ferguson 379). In May 1945, though, Hamsun published a eulogy for the fallen Führer. It was as if, having misjudged reality, he could not go back on his word. Having betrayed his admirers, he could not betray himself by admitting folly.

Some have found evidence of fascist leanings in the novels. *The Growth of the Soil*, for instance, with its emphasis on peasant virtues and discipline, not to mention its distrust of intellect, was read with great enthusiasm by Joseph Goebbels. But as the critic Harald Naess has pointed out (118), we find no celebration of race identity in the book or, I believe, elsewhere in Hamsun. Nor would one think that the author's humor found favor in Nazi circles. That rural life should appear as ridiculous as admirable, the way Hamsun showed it, seems contrary to the Nazi spirit of blood and soil. I doubt whether Holocaust survivors would give Hamsun a pass. But I. B. Singer noted his positive influence on Hebrew and Yiddish literature and said that Hamsun had simply "deceived himself" and "allowed himself to be taken in" by the Nazis (x-xi).

Whatever Jewish perspectives might add, "mental incapacity" provided the restored Norwegian government an excuse to deal gently with Hamsun. Though his estate was confiscated, he avoided capital punishment, the usual penalty for treason. He was a very, very old man at the time of his sentencing. For more than a decade he had been almost totally deaf. Yet senile he was not, as his final book, the memoir *On Overgrown Paths* (*På gjengrodde stier*, 1949) makes clear. "No one told me that [my political] writing was wrong," he states (186), addressing the issue head on. In titling his 1988 biography *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun*, Robert Ferguson chose well.

It's tempting to leave our assessment at that. An archival newspaper cartoon, however, offers further perspective. The occasion was Hamsun's fiftieth birthday in 1910, in honor of which the author was depicted as a sort of Gulliver. Towering over Lilliputian rivals of the day, forgotten scribblers like Falkberget and Wildenvøy, he gazes tolerantly at the mortals in waiters' aprons who bow and scrape before him. One offers a roasted boar's head on a platter; another, a silver tray bearing champagne and a nymph with outstretched arms. Most telling is the midget on a stepladder who presents the author with a crown (Ferguson 219). For as the drawing suggests, popular opinion had asserted Hamsun's new status as *dikterkongen* or "poet king." We in the English-speaking world have had our laureates, but no exact equivalent exists for the role of Great Personage that small, out-of-the-way countries sometimes thrust upon their highest achievers. The Norwegian press idolized Hamsun. The man who began as an autodidact with herring scales on his boots had become an ambivalent national spokesman. For the rest of his life he was expected to have grand opinions and hold forth in public. This he did, with devastating results.

Or yet again: maybe Hamsun's blunder was longevity. Rebel artists who survive middle age often become self-parodies. Like Wordsworth, they sometimes linger through decades of creative decline; or like Ralph Ellison, they dry up. Happiest are career miscreants like Henry Miller, whom long life and a relaxation of censorship laws remade as a guru of the Sex Revolution. Hamsun himself wrote powerful works into his seventies when he might have traded on his singed-wings image and died a beloved eccentric. Had he passed in 1939, say, at the ripe age of eighty, his place among the worthies would be secure. His originality would still dazzle, and undergraduates would read *Hunger* just as they read Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" or Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Instead, a wayward genius and world-heritage novelist ended up as *that fascist Knut Hamsun*, a historical curiosity.

That a man who celebrated joy and freedom in his fiction could have blundered so badly in life is tragic. For solace, a sympathetic reader looks to the closing pages of his memoir. Referring to the as yet uncertain outcome of his trial, Hamsun remarks, "I can wait. Time is on my side" (*On Overgrown Paths* 193).