

IRRITATION, IMPUDENCE, INSIGHT: A CRITICAL READING OF KNUT HAMSUN'S *PÅ TURNÉ*¹

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1. Hamsun “on tour”

It would be hard to fully appreciate the psychological uniqueness of Knut Hamsun's works, especially his greatest masterpieces of 1890's such as: *Hunger* (1890), *Mysterier* (1892), *Pan* (1894), and *Victoria* (1898), without acknowledging his theoretical literary program outlined in the series of polemical lectures with which Hamsun was touring Norway in 1891.

It was young Hamsun's dream to deliver to a wider audience his views on the condition of contemporary literature. This dream was to come true, when in 1891 he went on tour with his readings entitled subsequently: “Norwegian literature”, “Psychological literature” and “Fashionable literature”. The resulting texts comprised Hamsun's theoretical and literary manifesto, which up to the present has remained an important introduction to his early work, one which was to inaugurate a new epoch in the history of psychological literature.

Hamsun's fascination with the unconscious and the irrational first came to voice in his early article *Fra det ubevidste sjæleliv* (*From the Unconscious Life of the Mind*) published in “Samtiden” – a literary magazine based in Oslo. In a key passage he observes:

We have an old proverb: There are many things hidden in Nature. For the attentive, searching man of today, fewer and fewer of these secrets remain hidden. One after another they are being brought forth for observation and identification. An increasing number of people who lead mental lives of great intensity, people who are sensitive by nature, notice the steadily more frequent appearance in them of mental states of great strangeness. It might be something completely inexplicable – a wordless and irrational feeling of ecstasy; or a breath of psychic pain; a sense of being spoken to from afar [...].²

Many readers will be reminded of these words once they read *Hunger*, *Mysterier* and *Pan* and once they observe how obsessively Hamsun's protagonists follow

¹ A quick explanation concerning the provenance of „På turné” book and its title is needed. *På turné* functions and is commonly recognized as authored by Hamsun, as often is the case with collections of essays written by prominent authors which are gathered later, most often posthumously, by an editor, under a different title. It should be remembered, however, that “På turné” was originally a short story written by Hamsun (1886) and that it was his son – Tore Hamsun – who used this title for his own collection of Hamsun's three polemic lectures, which he published much later.

² K. Hamsun, *Fra det ubevidste sjæleliv* in; idem, *Fra det ubevidste sjæleliv. Artikler om litteratur, Etterord ved Ø. Rottem*, Oslo 1994, p. 15-16, translation comes from R. Ferguson, *Enigma. The Life of Knut Hamsun*, London 1987, p. 117-118.

the tiniest quivers of their own and the others' mental life, along with the physical signs accompanying it, such as the position of the head, blushing of the cheeks, the expression of the face, the movement of the eyes, and so on. Perhaps some readers will also agree with André Gide's opinion, that before *Hunger* was written, we had not known much about the mystery of a human being³. According to Robert Ferguson: "it was this vision of the unguessed-at complexity of the human mind – or at least, its under-representation in literature – that concerned Hamsun. He wanted a literature that would redefine normality and abnormality, that would in effect expand the known territory of consciousness and give a more vivid and accurate picture of what it's like to be a human being"⁴.

Yet for this goal to be achieved, Scandinavian literature had had to be first redirected from the vogue of interventionist realism/naturalism onto a path of a deeper psychology of an individual as seen by the writer depicting the manifold shades of the psyche. Therefore, in his struggle with realism in literature Hamsun emphasized the necessity of changing the focus of literary description: from the "unquestionable", "isolated" and "shallow"⁵ facts the literary positivism was so eager to present, to the reality of the mental and spiritual life of an individual. The most real is what is nearest to the human being, i.e. his sensitive and complicated inner life. "For literature to be realistic – as Nils M. Knutsen correctly argues – it should deal with life as people actually live it"⁶. Yet, according to Hamsun, this "inner life" is precisely what realistic literature did not manage to represent. It might be said, then, that realism has failed to meet its own premises, and Hamsun took advantage of this failure to criticize the past literature and advance his own vision of "psychological" fiction⁷. One should be aware, however, that Hamsun did not intend to completely renounce the tradition of realism. He rather called for "radicalizing" it and supplementing it with the phenomena it has hitherto ignored: intuition, introspection, dreams, fantasies, self-observation, etc⁸.

What is also worth stressing, is that Hamsun's reformatory plan was not something particularly new in the panorama of European literature at that time. It contributed to the late nineteenth-century, Europe-wide vogue of freeing literature from its entanglement in didacticism and social bias. The resistance to literature's utilitarian function was well evoked in the famous modernist credo: "art for art's sake".

³ "Devant *La Faim* on est presque en droit de penser que, jusqu'à présent, presque rien n'est dit [...], et que l'Homme reste à découvrir" – A. Gide, *Préface*, in; K. Hamsun, *Faim*, Lausanne 1961, p. 7, quoted also by: R. N. Nettum, *Konflikt og visjon. Hovedtemaer i Knut Hamsuns forfatterskap 1890-1912*, Oslo 1970, p. 9.

⁴ R. Ferguson, *Enigma...*, op. cit., p. 118.

⁵ P. Kirkegaard, *Knut Hamsun som modernist*, Medusa, Viborg 1975, p. 190.

⁶ "[...] at litteraturen skal være realistisk, den skal handle om livet slik menneskene faktisk lever det" – N. M. Knutsen, *Knut Hamsun*, Oslo 1975, p. 12.

⁷ See: Ø. Rottem's insightful remark: "For så vidt som realistene beskjeftiget seg med psykologi, så kritiserte altså Hamsun dem på deres egne premiser. De var ikke realistiske nok i sin menneskeskildring. For Hamsun var dette ensbetydende med at de ikke var på høyde med sin tid: de var ikke *moderne*" – Ø. Rottem, *Hamsun og fantasiens triumf*, Oslo 2002, p. 46-47.

⁸ See: Ø. Rottem, *Det ubevisste i tale (Etterord)*, in; K. Hamsun, *Fra det ubevidste sjæleliv*, op. cit, p. 93.

Beside the intention of reforming Norwegian literature, Hamsun wished also to achieve two other goals with his tour. Fascinated by the discoveries of the modern science, especially psychology, biology and sociology, he believed it was necessary to provide his literary method with a more “scientific” background: “His lectures on Norwegian literature – Knutsen writes – mark the end of a 4-year period of the continuous attempts to provide the theoretical basis for the fiction he himself wanted to create”⁹. Hence the reader of *På turné* will constantly be confronted with quite an odd language using which Hamsun intended to sound “psychological”, but which in fact was a curious mixture of positivist jargon and the writer’s own ideas of what contemporary psychology was all about. The last goal was all-too-human, one could say, and known to many a beginning artist: to become famous, to have done with the life of a vagabond always short of cash and to finally enter the world of high literature in fame and glory.

The “tour” began in Bergen, which was a reasonable decision, since Hamsun had already managed to make some significant friendships in the city’s literary circles. In 1891 he traveled with his manifesto to Haugesand, Stavanger, Kristiansand, Sandefjord, Drammen and Fredrikstad and finished the tour quite successfully in Christiania, where in the famous Hals Brothers Auditorium he was speaking to the room indeed full of audience. For one of the evenings Hamsun invited Henrik Ibsen, who attended the lecture, no doubt curious of the increasing buzz surrounding the young author and his controversial speeches which would often bring up his – Ibsen’s – name. Among the guests one could also find a composer, Edvard Grieg, and Fridtjof Nansen – the celebrated Norwegian traveler, polar researcher and diplomat.

The scenario of the meetings with Hamsun was always similar: each evening, for a total cost of 2 kroner one could listen to a series of three lectures, delivered separately, one each evening.

2. “Norwegian literature”

The first lecture on “Norwegian literature” probably abounds in the biggest number of controversial or even outrageous opinions. It is in this speech that Hamsun placed Alexander Kielland, Jonas Lie, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Henrik Ibsen “in the corner” to attack them for the poor psychology their work allegedly represented. Hamsun makes a reservation that his intention is not to form the new “literary school” but on the contrary, to criticize the schools already existing: “This evening I will be as aggressive and as destructive as possible, but I will also try to offer something instead”¹⁰ – he begins. What follows, however, are Hamsun’s bitter complaints about the national literature which up to this day have not ceased to provoke mixed feelings among Hamsun experts, as well as lay amateurs of literature.

⁹ “Hans foredrag om norsk litteratur [...] markerer slutten på en fire-årsperiode med stadige forsøk på å legge et teoretisk grunnlag for den diktning han selv ville skape” – N. M. Knutsen, *Knut Hamsun*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁰ “Jeg blir overhovedet saa angribende, saa nedrivende iaften, som muligt, men jeg vil ogsaa gøre et forsøg paa at bygge op noget istedet” – K. Hamsun, *Norsk litteratur*, in; idem, *På turné. Tre foredrag om litteratur av Knut Hamsun*, utgitt ved Tore Hamsun, Oslo 1960, p. 17.

Norwegian literature, Hamsun claims, could have appeared „only” in Norway – a country inhabited by „peasant people whose biggest ambition is to equate bourgeoisie”¹¹. It is essentially a „democratic” and „materialistic” literature; instead of focusing on the human soul it distances itself from the concrete individual for the sake of presenting social problems and describing generally prevailing customs. From the great writers of French naturalism, such as Émile Zola, Norwegian authors have learned to be interested “solely in the most simple, most common manifestations of the spiritual life, namely as it is lived by the least complicated individuals, by the mental bourgeoisie”¹². Hamsun expresses his astonishment with the fact that Zola, who fought with his pen for the improvement of life conditions of the poorest social groups, could have played such a profound role in France – a country which to Hamsun had always seemed fundamentally „aristocratic”. He understands, however, why Zola had been so popular in Norway, where the general literary stance was to produce literature for the “masses”. According to Hamsun, the target-reader of Norwegian literature is an unsophisticated individual. Therefore, even eroticism depicted by the national writers is “a quiet, rustic one”¹³, destined for those who are not interested in how dramatic and abysmal eroticism might be, but who would instead like to find out what they should do to quickly marry their beloved one. “Without a single thought about the wedding [...] Norwegian novel would not exist”¹⁴ – Hamsun writes ironically.

In Hamsun’s opinion the writer should not aspire to be a “friend” of mankind, but rather to be its connoisseur. What Norwegian writers commonly did, however, was identify themselves with the role of politicians, teachers, and reformers of the society. The novels of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, for instance, whom he has always respected but in his lecture calls “a teacher of the people”, “doctor of the society” and “a pedagogue for the big babies”¹⁵, Hamsun sees as “home aid-kits for the people in the mountains and the people at the sea, warehouses in which one can find the abundance of good things”¹⁶. They are written to amuse and educate simple folks who expect literature to give them sheer entertainment. Such a reader would probably put the book away if he encountered the protagonists who represent a higher level of psychological complication. Therefore, Hamsun argues, in order to keep the character of their protagonists at the most simple level, Norwegian authors have turned them into “types”. Such a psychology Hamsun finds “much too rough and superficial”¹⁷.

Dwelling on the works of Kielland, Ibsen, and Lie, Hamsun seeks further evidence for his conviction that none of the great homeland writers has been able

¹¹ “[...] et bondefolk med yderst borgerlige bestræbelser” – p. 18.

¹² “[...] at beskftige sig kun med det enkleste, det mest almindelige gemytsliv, det gemytsliv nemlig, som leves af de mindst komplicerede, de aandeligt borgerlige mennesker” – p. 18.

¹³ “[...] en stille, bondemenneskelig erotik” – p. 22.

¹⁴ “[...] uten en eneste tanke paa giftermålet (...) der blir ingen norsk roman” – p. 23.

¹⁵ “folkeopdrager og samfundslæge”, “pædagog for store børn” – p. 25, 24.

¹⁶ “[...] husapoteker for folk tilfjælds og folk tilhavs, varelagere, hvor en mængde gode ting findes henlagt” – p. 24.

¹⁷ “For at ‘holde’ en karakter har vore Forfattere gjort sine personer til typer. Og det er, mener jeg, for grov og for overfladisk psykologi – p. 26.

to account for the spiritual life of the hero. The mentioned authors are unable to reveal to the reader what Hamsun calls „the entrails of the soul” (*sjæls indvolde* – p. 27). Their characters always think and act in accordance with predictable schemas: if someone has unhappily fallen in love, he shall drink alcohol and shed tears so that the readers should feel sorry and pity him. If in Kielland’s novel *Else* there appears a girl, she must be „pretty, young, innocent, desirable; then she will fall, drown, go to the bottom. This is her history”¹⁸. Kielland creates defined, “full” characters, which will never do anything unexpected and will always act “typically” in every situation: “They are not torn apart and divided, constituted by intricate divergences and subtle disharmonies”¹⁹. On the contrary, they are, in themselves and for themselves, closed, consistent unities. Elaborating on Hamsun’s critical point Rolf N. Nettum supplements it with following opinion: from the work of the “Great Four” there emerges a picture of an individual who quite willingly abides by the social and ethical values of modernity²⁰. Contrary to this tendency, Hamsun will strive to create isolated individuals, alienated from the modern world as well as estranged from their own selves.

Interestingly enough, it is Henrik Ibsen who according to Hamsun is „guilty” of creating clumsily simplified characters. Hamsun does not hesitate to situate Ibsen amongst other past writers whose fiction immediately brings to mind one particular feature of a human being, one distinctive trait of personality: „Molière’s *Miser* is nothing but miserly, Shakespeare’s *Othello* is nothing but jealous, Jagon is nothing but a scoundrel. And Rosmer from *Rosmersholm* is nothing but noble”²¹. Hamsun can understand Shakespearean simplifications; his dramas have surpassed the boundaries of literature and become virtual symbols and he himself an unquestionable authority from the distant past. Yet for Ibsen, whom he saw as his “most serious literary rival”²², Hamsun will be much tougher. Although Ibsen does not live in Shakespeare’s times, he will still depict over-simplified characters. Making of his protagonists symbols of *determined* human attitudes and manners and trying to „hold” them in that exact character (as might be the case with Rosmer’s “absolute” noblesse or parson Brand’s absolutely “pure” morality and obedience to God’s will), Ibsen in fact reduces their humanity to one single feature. His protagonists are supposed to represent „concepts and ideas” of which one can speak with „great profundity”, that is, the way Ibsen himself wanted to sound. Viewed from Hamsun’s perspective, Ibsen remains yet another Norwegian “reformer of the society” and a “friend of mankind”.

The last target of the reconstructed critique is Jonas Lie. His novels, Hamsun asserts, give the reader only joy and consolation and his heroes are all alike. When

¹⁸ “[...] hun er smuk, ung, uskyldig, efterstræbt, hun falder, sinker, dukker under. Dette er hendes historie” – p. 28.

¹⁹ “De er ikke splittet og delt, ikke sammensat af dybt udviklede flerartetheder og fine disharmonier...” – p. 30.

²⁰ “Den elder diktnings skildring av karakterer [...] innebærer i siste instans at menneske er sett i sammenheng med sosiale og etiske verdier. De har kjerne av fasthet og et preg av sammenheng” – R. N. Nettum, *Konflikt og visjon*, op. cit., p. 55.

²¹ “Den gærrige hos Molière er bare gærrig, Othello hos Shakespeare er bare skinsyg, Jago bare skurg. Og Rosmer til *Rosmersholm* er bare adelig” – p. 31.

²² S. Dingstand, *Hamsuns strategier. Realisme, humor og kynisme*, Oslo 2003, p. 45.

it comes to depicting female characters, for instance, there is “no-one of them who would not be feminine”²³. Lie too writes a literature for the “simple folks”, a literature devoid of a subtler psychology. Hamsun entwines his reflections with a witty mixture of sneer and warm irony: “Jonas Lie is a dear friend, who visits us every year to entertain us with his stories in the light of the evening lamp. His psychology is equally positive and his humor is that of a good uncle; we admire him, respect him, and love him”²⁴.

Concluding all his observations, Hamsun comes up with a harsh diagnosis of Norwegian literature. His argument is that it has consciously and uncritically imitated books which have already been written in Europe.

3. “Psychological literature”

At the beginning of his second lecture Hamsun seems more respectful of the writers whom he has just scolded so baldly. Somewhat contrary to his previous opinions, he claims now that however “popular” and excessively didactic Norwegian literature might be, this kind of production finds its justification and plays an important role in the society: “Therefore one should accept it with contentment and reverence”²⁵ – writes Hamsun wholeheartedly – yet his benevolence in this respect is not destined to last long.

Due to the lack of psychology, Norwegian literature has been unable to tackle the task of accurately depicting the modern individual, who no longer seems as simple and one-dimensional a human being as the past writers might have imagined it. The modern individual does not think, feel or fantasize the way it hitherto used to: “the universal nervousness has entered our beings and colored all our mental life”²⁶ – Hamsun writes. Let us note that the intrusion of odd terms and expressions in the cited sentence is not the first or the last time Hamsun would use such a lingo. This language is mostly borrowed from psychological books Hamsun consulted at the time. He goes on to say we have just reached „the modern tempo of the nervous life” (*moderne nervelivs tempo*) and a few pages later he contends that the human soul is like “a world of nets, cells, nooks and precipitous depths, where all is moving and changing”²⁷. Actually, one might feel relief all this positivist jargon and pseudo-scientific rhetoric do not appear in Hamsun’s first novels, where psychology is not construed as a “method” of doing literature, but lives with its own eerie and fascinating life.

In spite of all the profound changes in human’s psyche, however, nothing has changed in the Norwegian literature since Shakespeare – Hamsun asserts. Unable

²³ “[...] det er ikke af dem som ikke er konelig” – K. Hamsun, *Norsk litteratur*, in; idem, *På turné...*, op. cit., p. 38.

²⁴ “Jonas Lie er en kjær venn som besøker os hvert aar og underholder os med fortællinger, naar lampen brænder om aftenen. Hans psykologi er jævnt god, og han har et humør som en snil onkel; vi skatter ham, respekterer ham og er glad i ham” – p. 37.

²⁵ “[...] hvorvor man maatte modtage den med glæde og tak” – K. Hamsun, *Psykologisk litteratur*, in; idem, *På Turné*, op. cit., p. 45.

²⁶ “Den almindelige nervøsitet har gennemtrængt vort grundvæsen og farvet hele vort sindsliv” – p. 46 i n.

²⁷ “[...] en verden af net op og celler og afkroge og underfulde dyb, hvori alt lever og bevæges og veksler” – p. 53.

to grasp the subtleties of human's inner life comprising all those "thoughts which appear all of a sudden and shift over the tiniest impressions"²⁸, it recognizes and describes only the basic sensations "which we know by heart" and "can count on our fingers: love, wrath, fear and astonishment"²⁹.

Hamsun makes an interesting, albeit highly controversial point here. The reason for the everlasting magic and popularity of such masterpieces as Plato's *Dialogues*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Cervantes' *Don Quichot* or Goethe's *Faust* – he claims – is that their authors have generally reached out only for those four basic sentiments in their portrayal of the human soul. Naturally, they were unequalled in doing so, but still, their work may seem for this reason limited, indeed destined for the amusement of ordinary, simple readers. "Who would not like, as Faust, to know the mysteries and secrets of existence? Which merchant would not love, as he did, a beauty like Margarita?"³⁰. Someone might object here and say Shakespeare's or Goethe's tragedies reveal ever more psychological subtleties along with each new reading or staging... But Hamsun was well prepared for such an argument. He would argue it is only a director and his actors who "modernize" Shakespeare by introducing to his dramas "the nuances from their own modern spiritual life"³¹, the nuances which in fact do not exist in the original text.

What is the main point of Hamsun's critique of the greatest writers in the history of literature? Does he question their role in the history by suggesting the heroes they created are "banal" when compared to how complicated a human being really is? Of course, he does not. By way of a somewhat hasty generalization he aptly reveals the specificity of the characters who shall inhabit his *own* psychological novels. Hamsun does not want to diminish the role the past masters had played in literature. Instead, he intends to forge and promote his *own* authorship and views on literature and he realizes this goal at the expense of other writers' works. And in a way, he does manage to compel us to rethink the literary tradition in a new light.

Hamsun dreamed of the elitist literature, intended not just for "anybody", but for the chosen individuals, of whom he assumed they were "mature, nervous and refined people"³². Irritated with psychological "types" populating Norwegian fiction, Hamsun announces vigorously that "he will make his hero laugh, where reasonable people think he ought to cry"³³. Hamsun remains at the core an enthusiast of literature as a means of revealing in a human being the delicate shades of the *psyche* which even science has not been able to account for. Science, he claims, wants to express the subtleties of the soul by use of a "mathematical formula" (*matematisk formel*, p. 52), although they do not simply let themselves be seized and petrified in a scientific theory or pattern.

²⁸ "Tanker opstaar og skifter ved de svageste indtryk" – p. 68.

²⁹ "[...] vi kender dem udenad, vi kan tæle dem paa fingrene: det er kærlighed, vrede, rædsel og forbausele" – p. 47.

³⁰ „Hvem vilde ikke gerne som Faust vide tilværelsens hemmeligheder og gaader? Hvilken trælsthändler kunde ikke gerne han elske en dejlighed af Gretchens art? – p. 48 n.

³¹ „[...] nuanser til af sit eget moderne gemytsliv" – p. 47.

³² "[...] det modne, nervøse, forfinende menneske" – p. 49.

³³ "[...] jeg vil bringe min helt til at le, der hvor fornuftige folk finder, at han burde græde" – p. 50.

The most important part of the second lecture brings the famous statement, quoted in almost every critical study devoted to Hamsun. Contrary to the representatives of “The Great Four”, who have consciously decided to marginalize or dismiss contradictions in the psychological picture of their protagonists so that “the harmony and transparence of their character would not be disturbed”³⁴, Hamsun demands from literature that it present “human types whose inconsistency is literally a fundamental trait of their character; this trait being not the only one dominant, but central and definitive”³⁵. In the course of 1890’s Hamsun was much preoccupied with the idea of “inconsistency”, perhaps because he regarded himself as a person full of contradictions and constantly experiencing sudden shifts of thoughts and moods. Once we read *Hunger*, *Mysteries* or *Pan* we shall see how thoroughly Hamsun has applied the cited words to the creation of his main protagonists; how he “illuminated and questioned their soul”³⁶, which under his “loupe” really seemed to pulsate with thousands of “vague movements”, “most delicate palpitations” and sounds³⁷.

Hamsun concludes his second lecture by expressing hope that perhaps there will come a time for Norway to produce its own original psychological novel. It will only happen when – Hamsun once again could not escape his irony here – “the audience like ours will want it” (*et publikum som vort faar trang til den* – p. 70).

Hamsun’s third speech, devoted to the “Fashionable literature” (*Modeliteratur*), basically develops the points already made in two previous lectures, therefore it is unnecessary to focus on this one in details. Perhaps it is only worth noting the reader will also find here biting reproaches against Hamsun’s literary rivals, sometimes served in the form of droll *bons mots*: “The typical trendy novel of our times has only one message for the reader: you shall not love your own wife!”³⁸. As we can see, Hamsun was quite inventive when it came to finding ways to ridicule Norwegian audience’s allegedly unrefined taste and its will to read only about the most simple events taken from the every-day life, the events “which one does not need to motivate, but just invents and writes down”³⁹.

4. Critical Assessment

After having reconstructed Hamsun’s ideas on the Norwegian and psychological literature I will pass on to the critical assessment of this theoretical endeavor. While Tore Hamsun claims the lectures provoked “fierce reactions” in

³⁴ “[...] for ikke at forstyrre deres karakters harmoni og klarhed” – p. 62.

³⁵ “[...] menesker hos hvem inkonsekvensen bogstavelig er grundkaraktertræk, men det eneste, ikke det herskende grundkaraktertræk, men det meget fremtrædende og meget bestemmende” – p. 63.

³⁶ “[...] som moderne psykolog skal jeg belyse og forhøre en sjæl”, p. 66 n.

³⁷ “[...] jeg skal spidde den vageste rørelse i den paa min naal og holde den op til min luppe, og jeg vil netop med forrørlighed undersøge de fineste zittringer, jeg vil banke mig frem og lytte til hver sagte lyd” – p. 67.

³⁸ “Vor tids typiske moderoman gør i det ene bud: du skal ikke elske din egen hustru!” – K. Hamsun, *Modelitteratur*, in; idem, *På Turné*, op. cit., p. 80.

³⁹ “[...] som man ikke behøver at motivere, men bare finde op og skrive ned” – p. 81.

Kristiania⁴⁰, Nils M. Knutsen holds a different view: “[Hamsun’s] attempt at creating the program of the new art attracted little interest [...], since around the year 1890 similar ideas were voiced by other Norwegian poets and writers”⁴¹. Indeed, Hamsun’s theoretical project concurred with a debate in Norway over the status and functions of literature. The questions taken up during the discussions were the following: should literature – as Georg Brandes put it in his famous formula – “set the issues under debate”, that is: engage in solving socio-political problems of its times such as: marriage crisis, free love, women rights, relationship between the state and the church, reform of the educational system or improvement of life-conditions of the poorest people? Or should it be liberated from the sense of “social duty” and “mission”? Should the writers be like prophets and saviors of their nation or should they remain free spirits who abandon the domain of public service and create “art for art’s sake”, which only advanced readers will know how to appreciate? As it was emphasized, this debate was not something new in Europe at the time and Hamsun was but one of its representatives, albeit a very cocky one.

If Hamsunian fiery speeches might be said to have realized their main goals: to promote his conception of “psychological literature” and to make the young author famous, then one should agree that they managed to do so thanks to the very controversy they raised. The mechanism of “becoming popular” has always been the same: there is no better way to become a celebrity in artistic circles than to make controversial points, and Hamsun must have been perfectly aware of that. What has also aided young Hamsun in his rising to prominence, was his being an extremely absorbing person himself; one should bear in mind that he knew just exactly what to do, to have the listening audience at his knees (especially women).

The press, however, was generally critical of Hamsun’s endeavor. Knowing well Hamsun was still not universally recognized artist, some papers suggested wryly that the young author was probably much better in self-promotion than in writing books. This bitter lesson of how it feels to be negatively received by the critics, Hamsun was to remember for all his life. Even in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, when his fame was at its peak, he was terrified to hear that someone was preparing a critical study of his work or writing his biography.

In *På turné* Hamsun has managed to forward his vision of psychological literature in the way that was both absorbing in its merits and fairly entertaining in style. From the methodological point of view *På turné* remains to this day an essential reading for Hamsun scholars as well as for those Hamsun enthusiasts who want to read his first great novels with more critical attention and understanding. Both the creation of the protagonists as individuals extremely inconsistent in thinking and acting, and the narration Hamsun spins in these novels find their validation in the radical poetics he introduced in 1891. According to Rottem, the radicalism of Hamsun’s program lied first of all in “the

⁴⁰ “Reaksjonen i Kristiania på Hamsuns tre foredrag var voldsom” – T. Hamsun, *Knut Hamsun – min far*, Oslo 1987, p. 135.

⁴¹ “Forsøket på å skape et nett kunstnerisk program vakte mindre oppmerksomhet [...] dels fordi liknende synspunkter var blitt satt fram av andre nordiske diktere og literater i tiden omkring 1890” – N. M. Knutsen, *Knut Hamsun*, op. cit., p. 11.

demand for a new style, a new literary form, that would correspond with the ‘modern’ reality and with the modern man the way he is”⁴². Thanks to this “new literary form” human unconscious was finally to become something alive, immediate, spontaneous, and not only a formal postulate. One should be aware, however, that “to regard all Hamsun’s works through the prism of his 1890s’ poetics does not account for his later novels and reduces him to the caricature of his former self”⁴³.

Many opinions expressed in the manifesto are still up-to-date and thought-provoking, as for example Hamsun’s warnings concerning the stupefying consequences of belonging to “literary schools” or the perils of the writers’ succumbing to the clichés and “trendy” modes of literary expression. The attacks on the mediocrity and simplicity of psychology in the works of the leading Norwegian authors were at times harsh or even too aggressive. But one is led to admit, on the other hand, that it is precisely controversial assertions that most often occur to be the most inspiring. They force us to rethink and re-evaluate our literary heritage which, in spite of its nobility, should remain open to criticism. Having evidenced four general “sins” of Norwegian literature – the social bias, the reformatory spirit, the claim to “objectivity”, and sticking to an outdated picture of man by means of construing psychological “types”⁴⁴, Hamsun contributed to the development of a new critical consciousness of literary modernity in Norway.

It would be difficult, however, to fully agree with the following opinion of Robert Ferguson: “Taken in their entirety, they [Hamsun’s lectures – *M.K.*] are balanced and reasonable, and every outrageous judgment is well and wittily defended”⁴⁵. Even though Hamsun’s main objective was to criticize the literary *status quo*, not to praise or justify it, and in spite of the fact that at the beginning of each of his speeches he made reservations as to his “benevolence” toward modern fiction, one cannot escape the impression that he simply exaggerated in his harsh evaluation of Norwegian literature. He did not subject Ibsen, Bjørnson, Lie and Kielland to a reasonable, objective criticism, but simply construed them as quite entertaining caricatures. It goes without saying that caricature is *supposed* to exaggerate and push to the limits the ridiculed shortcomings, but its aim is also to bring out the essential features of a given work/person⁴⁶. The point is that Hamsun’s caricatures seem to have failed to fulfill the latter function.

Ola Thommessen – the influential critic and editor of “Verdens Gang” journal – was merciless in his evaluation of Hamsun’s theoretical project and did not

⁴² “Kravene til en ny stil, en ny litterær form, som korresponderer med den oppfatning av ‘moderniteten’ og det moderne menneske som han ønsket å formidle” – Ø. Rottem, *Det ubevisste i tale (Etterord)*, op. cit., p. 94.

⁴³ “Men å lese hele forfatterskapet med 1890-årenes poetikk som premissleverandør er lite dekkende for Hamsuns senere romaner og reduserer ham til en karikatur av sitt tidligere jeg” – S. Dingstad, *Hamsuns Strategier...*, op. cit., p. 41.

⁴⁴ See: Ø. Rottem, *Det ubevisste i tale (Etterord)*, op. cit., p. 91.

⁴⁵ R. Ferguson, *Enigma...*, op. cit., p. 124.

⁴⁶ See S. Dingstad’s opinion: “Hamsuns kritikk av realistene i norsk litteratur tar form av en karikatur. Karikaturen overdriver det allerede tydelige, men viser i sin overdrivelse også en forståelse for det vesentlige ved objekt” – S. Dingstad, *Hamsuns strategie*, op. cit., p. 42.

hesitate to refer to it as “critical-psychological charlatanism”. “A full, three-hour course of ignorance, superficiality, and impudence is too much”⁴⁷ – he wrote irritated. There is much truth in these words. For instance, how can one argue Ibsen *always* effaces contradictions in his protagonists in order to “maintain” the transparency of their character, if it was Ibsen’s creation of the title hero of *Peer Gynt* or Nora from *A Doll’s House* that still fascinate contemporary readers with their complexity and have been interpreted in hundreds of different, often mutually excluding ways? Parson Brand from the drama under the same title may indeed be seen as a quite “monolithic” character, but can one really say the same about tragic and at the same time laughable Hjalmar Ekdal from *The Wild Duck* – certainly one of the richest characters Ibsen has ever created?

And what about Rosmer from *Rosmersholm* drama? Is he, as Hamsun would claim, “nothing but noble”, if after his wife’s death he is tortured by an obsessive feeling of guilt which makes him uncertain of every decision he makes? After having rejected conservative views and the teachings of the Church in which he was raised, Rosmer not only cannot escape his dependence on the social opinion, but also experiences feelings of constant dissatisfaction and existential failure. What is more, his newly accepted “liberal” views seem to enter a deep psychological conflict (recall Hamsun’s words about alleged lack of psychology in Ibsen’s protagonists!) with his “human, all-too-human” morality which triggers in him a destructive mental imbalance eventually leading him to suicidal death. Similar mechanism operates in his female friend’s case, Rebekka West, who joined Rosmer in his struggle against the society’s reactionary beliefs. Towards the end of Ibsen’s drama she is not confident of the ideals she had fought for. It seems, then, that it is Hamsun who makes of Rosmer an over-simplified character to promote his own creativity at the expense of Ibsen. As Knut Brynhildsvoll fairly contends:

It is not difficult to share Hamsun’s view if one accepts his premises. Hamsun’s concretization of his perception of Ibsen is, however, an illustrative example of his wicked argumentation strategy. First he constructs a simplified and one-sided Rosmer in order afterwards to make Ibsen responsible for the figure he has himself reduced to a ‘type’ or ‘character’⁴⁸.

One could find a lot more of such hasty generalizations and “wicked argumentation strategies” in Hamsunian lectures. The main heroes of Alexander Kielland’s *Skipper Worse* (1882), to give another two examples, could not be easily squeezed in one of Hamsun’s flat formulas. Nor could be David Holst from Jonas Lie’s *The Visionary* (1870) – a work full of “mysticism and nervous anxiety”⁴⁹. He surely is not a uniform character. Endowed with a “second sight”

⁴⁷ “Et kursus i uvidenhed, overfladiskhed og frækhed paa hele tre timer er for meget”, quoted by: T. Hamsun, *Knut Hamsun – min far*, op. cit., p. 135.

⁴⁸ K. Brynhildsvoll, *Hamsun contra Ibsen – From Polemical Provocation to Aesthetic Programme: A Misunderstanding and its Cementation in Literary History*, <http://ibsen.net/index.gan?id=18185>.

⁴⁹ S. Lyngstad, *Jonas Lie*, Boston 1977, p. 33.

and an ability to foresee the future, Holst is rather, according to Lie's own words: "the psychic picture of Nordland"⁵⁰ – he is full of contrasts and contradictions: bright dreams of a happy normal life struggle in him with the fear of dark and mighty forces he is possessed by.

It is one thing to claim that the protagonists of Ibsen, Kielland, Bjørnson or Lie differ from those of Hamsun's in that they generally represent some *determined* aspects of human's existence more than they represent the others (whereas Hamsun's heroes are embodiments of pure mental chaos and indeterminacy⁵¹). But it is quite another thing to claim – as Hamsun does – that they are *always* harmonic, unified and deprived of contradictions. At this point Hamsun fails to keep a necessary critical balance, although, by means of a caricature, he does manage to draw our attention to the very problem of overexploited thematic and narrative patterns of European realism/positivism. Reading Hamsun's critique, one may become weary of numerous unfair and harmful assertions which seem to derive from the critic's animosities and purely subjective impressions the celebrated Norwegian artists have made on the author of *Hunger*. To give yet another example: in his third lecture entitled on "fashionable literature" Hamsun alludes to Hans Jæger (1854-1910) and Christian Krogh (1852-1925), calling them "fashionable authors". Not only does this label sound unpleasantly contemptuous in his mouth, but it is quickly supplemented by another mean remark saying that in fact "one cannot classify them as fashionable authors in the full sense of this term, since none of them is really a writer"⁵².

Was this far-fetched irony necessary? Indeed, Krogh was not a writer *per se* but one of Norway's most outstanding naturalistic painters, known for his remarkable representations of female figures. In the history of Norwegian literature, however, Krogh is remembered for his famous novel *Albertine* (1886) devoted to the problem of prostitution in Oslo to which he referred also in his painting *Albertine at the Police Doctor's Waiting Room* (*Albertine i politilægens venteværelse*). The novel aroused great confusion and became quite popular in Norway. It was confiscated by the police as scandalous, yet its influence at the time was profound. Hans Jæger was the author of another renowned novel entitled *From the Christiania Bohemians* (*Fra Kristiania bohemen*, 1886) – an autobiographical story, much in the vein of Henri Murger's *Scenes from the Life of Bohemians* (*Scènes de la vie de bohème*, 1847-1849). Jæger vigorously criticized the conduct of Norwegian metropolitan bourgeoisie and in particular its false sexual morality. The publication of the book led him twice to prosecution and imprisonment. Now what makes Hamsun's odd remarks addressed to Jaeger even more malicious, is the fact that apparently he could not admit that he himself was influenced and inspired by Jæger's novel in his creation of the anonymous protagonist of *Hunger* who roams the streets of Kristiania, desperately trying to survive⁵³.

⁵⁰ J. Lie, Letter to Jacob Hegel, 25 April 1904, quoted by: S. Lyngstad, *Jonas Lie*, op. cit., p. 27.

⁵¹ See: M. Kruszelnicki, *Thomas Glahn & Johan Nagel: Towards the Abyss of Life's Tragic Indeterminacy*, „Nordlit. Tidsskrift i Litteratur og Kultur”, 2009, nr. 25 (*Hamsun-nummer*), p. 123-146.

⁵² "Man kan ikke regne dem til de egentlige moddeforfattere, fordi de egentlig ikke er forfattere nogen af dem" – K. Hamsun, *Modeliteratur* in; idem, *På Turné*, op. cit., p. 92.

⁵³ See also: R. Nettum, *Konflikt og visjon...*, op. cit., p. 58.

In sum, it might be said that Hamsun ultimately failed to keep the balance between communicating the idea of “tolerance in literature” (although in some places he pretended to approve of “the Great Four’s” achievements) and *sounding* as if he himself knew best how “good literature” should look like. Secondly, accusing both past and modern writers of not realizing the tenets of a new, deep psychology, Hamsun falls under the charge of naïve presentism: he evaluates and criticizes the past from the perspective of contemporary cultural conditions. Thirdly, the historians of literature might reasonably feel confused with Hamsun’s unjust evaluations of such mighty authors as Ibsen.

If one were to assess *På turné* from the perspective of time, one might be surprised to see that after several years Hamsun himself became interested in writing precisely this kind of fiction he was once so dismissive of. In *Children of the Age* (*Børn av tiden*, 1913) and *Sagelfoss Town* (*Sagelfoss by*, 1915), for instance, he reaches for the narrative schemata of the nineteenth century realistic novel. In Hamsun’s subsequent novels one can find motives, characters, and situations very similar to those depicted by Kielland, Bjørnson or Lie: balls, funerals, suicides of unhappy lovers, the world of simple folks and nature, and so on⁵⁴. In the monumental *Growth of the Soil* (*Markens grøde*, 1917) the writer seriously engages in the problem of abortion and infanticide. Ironically, then, in the course of time Hamsun came to contradict and renounce his former neo-romantic and youthfully militant views, and instead of creating “art for art’s sake”, he assumed the position of one of the greatest moralists in the history of Norwegian literature! Once fighting with literature’s reformatory spirit, the “later” Hamsun obsessively tried to convey his personal “message” to the readers: “return to the roots!”, “flee from the modern civilization back to the simple life on your own land and experience a genuine communion with nature”! And along with this clearly didactic pose came also Hamsun’s tendency to morally judge his protagonists. Some critics believe this tendency deprived Hamsun’s work of much of its greatness. As James A. Simpson has rightly argued: „Hamsun’s world is, in its very best, an ‘unjudged’ world [...] because the poet Hamsun knows no standards by which it should be judged”⁵⁵.

Finally, it is difficult not to see a dark irony in the fact that the stance of a radical individualist and a literary rebel Hamsun adopted back in 1890s, has in the course of years hardened into „a moral and intellectual paralysis”⁵⁶ radicalizing into the callous mania that was soon to make of him a fanatical defender of the fascist regime. An insightful artist who used to ridicule stereotypes, pick on the simple, “rustic” morality of Norwegian literature and promote “inconsistency as a fundamental trait of a human being”, has ultimately supported a monstrous ideology that was – ironically again – essentially “bourgeois” in its disgraceful vulgarity and populism.

⁵⁴ This inconsistency has been observed by Tore Hamsun in his *Forword* to Hamsun’s *På turné*, op. cit., p. 12, Rolf N. Nettum in *Konflikt og visjon*, op. cit., p. 57, and Ståle Dingstad in *Hamsuns strategier*, op. cit., p. 42, 70.

⁵⁵ J. A. Simpson, *Theme and Narrative Perspective in Knut Hamsun’s „Landstrykkere”*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1969, p. 235.

⁵⁶ R. Ferguson, *Enigma*, op. cit., p. 348.

If, however, Hamsun's *På turné* were *not* to be regarded from the perspective of its author's shameful political sympathies, one could be led to conclude that its main weakness lies in the discrepancy between Hamsun's declarations as to his openness to the "diversity" in literature and the fragments presenting Hamsun as dismissive of other views on literature and passing for an inventor of the only one psychological fiction worth following. The said weakness deprives the text of much of its value and makes of *På turné* rather a literary oddity, or at best a cunning provocation – certainly important for Hamsun's experts, but otherwise only interesting due to its smooth style and ambivalent remarks on the role of the writer and our attitude to literary heritage. Subject to both internal and external critique, it does evoke mixed feelings.*

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Summary

The article brings the critical reading of Knut Hamsun's *På turné* – the collection of Hamsun's three polemic lectures entitled: "*Norsk litteratur*", "*Psykologisk litteratur*" and "*Modelitteratur*". These texts make up Hamsun's theoretical and literary manifesto (1891), which up to the present has remained an important introduction to his early and most acclaimed work. In two first sections of the text I follow Hamsun's scornful arguments against Norwegian realistic literature (as represented mainly by "the great four" writers: Bjørnson, Ibsen, Lie and Kielland) in an attempt to concisely present Hamsun's reformatory plan according to which Norwegian literature should be freed from its entanglement in didacticism and social bias and redirected onto a path of a deeper psychology. The final part of the article presents a critical assessment of Hamsun's endeavor. I believe some of Hamsun's opinions in the matter of literature are still up-to-date and thought-provoking. These insights, however, have to be separated from Hamsun's hasty generalizations concerning the work of Bjørnson, Lie, Kielland, and Ibsen which I defend against Hamsun's malicious argumentation. In the final part of the paper *På turné* is assessed with regard to the ways of how Hamsun's *oeuvre* has evolved in time. This approach enables one to grasp some of *På turné* paradoxes, e.g.: the discrepancy between Hamsun's early literary stance (neo-romanticism and militant, anti-bourgeois views) and the shape his work assumed later on (didacticism, the tendency to morally judge his heroes, support for the vulgar ideology of fascism, etc.).

Keywords

Knut Hamsun, *På turné*, critique, Norwegian literature, "the great four", realism, psychology