

EISZEIT. TANKRED DORST'S HAMSUN:
"ALT, TAUB, UND TOT" ¹

Tom Conner, St. Norbert College

I discovered *Eiszeit* (1973), the contemporary German playwright Tankred Dorst's powerful drama about Knut Hamsun, quite by accident while preparing an essay on the Norwegian writer's postwar memoir *Paa Gjengrodde Stier* (1949) [*On Overgrown Paths* (1967)]. I immediately became intrigued by Dorst's portrayal of Hamsun's tribulations at the hands of the Norwegian justice system after World War II and fascinated by Dorst's ice-cold but at the same time profoundly human image of the nonagenarian Hamsun. The title of the play, of course, is rife with symbolism, evoking both the sterility of the German occupation and the wretchedness of Hamsun's nearly three-year-long incarceration in the Landvik Old Age Home. Like so many of Dorst's protagonists, the old man in the play is an outcast, a loner left to his own devices. Hamsun's struggle in his old age to vindicate himself in the eyes of posterity and somehow save his reputation rather reminds one of his monumental novel *Markens Grøde* (1917) [*Growth of the Soil* (1921)] for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1920 and in which, to quote Harald Hjärne, chairman of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, the author evokes the "harsh struggle active men must in the beginning endure (in different circumstances, of course) against an indomitable and rebellious nature" (Hjärne 119).

The title of Dorst's play also reinforces the unsympathetic image of the aging writer who, like a prehistoric mammoth, lies buried in the bleak Scandinavian winter landscape--unyielding and unapologetic as regards his past actions and unforgiving of other people's weaknesses. However, in the end, when all is said and done, Dorst's Hamsun, despite his impetuous self-righteousness, despite his many quirks and idiosyncrasies, somehow moves us, urging us to forgive him, to forget the war, and, as the American saying goes, "to move on" with our lives. As Hamsun wrote in his memoir: "Another day dawns tomorrow, and I

can wait. I have time on my side" (Hamsun, *On Overgrown Paths* 147).² He was confident that his period of internal exile would soon come to an end and that in a not too distant future the ice would recede, revealing a splendid new incarnation of the celebrated Nobel laureate.

In this paper I will take a closer look at Tankred Dorst's play and show how it uses well-known motifs from the Hamsun legend and weaves them together to create a provocative new image of him. I will assume that the reader is familiar with Hamsun's biography, so I will not go into very many specifics regarding his collaborationist activities during World War II. The facts of the matter are well known even to non-specialists and hard to dispute. As everyone knows, Hamsun lent his name to the Nazi cause and paid the price after the war when he was tried for treason (though not in criminal court), convicted, and sentenced to pay a hefty fine that left him a pauper. The year before, in February 1946, the notorious Doctor Langfeldt had conducted a psychiatric examination of Hamsun and declared him to be "a person with permanently impaired mental faculties," a dire pronouncement that, although it humiliated the old writer, also let him off the hook. If Hamsun was not in full possession of his wits (and he was half-deaf as well), then one might argue in his defense that he could not take full responsibility for his treasonous actions. The cynical observer might counter that Hamsun used his fame and his money to go scot-free, literally. Not all intellectuals who had collaborated had been half so lucky. The American-born poet Ezra Pound survived D-Day but received harsh treatment at the hands of the American authorities in Italy. In France notorious collaborators such as the novelist and critic Robert Brassillach faced a firing squad. The rabid anti-Semite Louis-Ferdinand Céline was given a lengthy prison sentence, and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, novelist and editor of the prestigious literary review *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (which was co-opted by a group of pro-German French intellectuals during the Occupation) committed suicide before he could be arrested.

In his memoir, *On Overgrown Paths*, which I will contrast from time to time with Dorst's portrayal of him, Hamsun employs a conscientious strategy to plot his own posterity, as it were, so that he would be able to speak to us from beyond the grave and thus repair the damage done to

his image as one of Norway's greatest writers. This might well be one of Hamsun's finest pieces of writing, and it certainly vindicates him: not only does it prove how ludicrous Doctor Langfeldt's diagnosis was; it also helps create a renaissance for Hamsun. The old man lived to see his publisher, Gyldendal, in Oslo, bring out new editions of his books (which were advertised in the daily press). Critical and biographical studies soon followed, and before long Hamsun was elected to the prestigious Mark Twain Society, an international honorary society for great writers. 1954 saw the publication of his complete works in fifteen volumes. In 1955 admirers in Germany created an international Knut Hamsun Society (Hamsun-Gesellschaft). Clearly, Hamsun intuitively knew what every great writer knows, namely, that an author's posterity is determined not so much by the actual historical circumstances of his life as by an unpredictable blend of talent and popularity.

By way of introduction, let me sketch a portrait of Dorst, since this intriguing German playwright is not widely known outside Germany and his play about Knut Hamsun has not been the object of a thorough reading by Hamsun scholars.³ Tankred Dorst was born in 1925 in Oberlind, Thüringen, fought in World War II, spent three years in British and American internment camps after the war, and then settled in Munich, where he has lived and worked ever since, usually in collaboration with his wife Ursula Ehler. His first play dates from 1960 (*Die Kurve*), and in the last twenty years or so, Tankred Dorst has established himself as a leading German playwright with a growing reputation outside Germany, notably in Austria and German-speaking Switzerland, but also in Spain and France. Dorst has been awarded both the Gerhart Hauptmann Preis (1964) and the Georg Büchner Preis (1990) for plays such as *Toller*, *Szenen einer deutschen Revolution* (1968), *Merlin oder das wüste Land* (1981), *Parzival* (1987), *Korbes* (1988), and *Karlos* (1990), which have all enjoyed a warm reception by the German public. In addition to a dozen or so plays, Dorst has also directed three feature-length movies (*Klaras Mutter* [1973], *Mosch* [1980], and *Eisenhans* [1982]). Dorst's work, which often draws on classical mythology and situations and characters in German literature, is not so much political (and thus unlike Georg Büchner, Bertolt Brecht, or, for that matter, Jean-Paul Sartre)⁴ as existential insofar as it, to quote one critic, shows "das

Scheitern des extremen Individuums in extremen Situationen" (Stadelmaier 1),⁵ that is to say, human beings grappling with the fundamental moral issues in life. However, beginning in the late 1960s, Dorst's inspiration took a new direction, evolving from the timeless and often parable-like works of his early career into what Carsten Brandau calls "konkreten, realistischen Sachverhalten," (Brandau 1) [concrete and realistic circumstances] relating to the fate of one single and exceptional human being. As a result, Dorst's theory of drama also underwent a change, moving from a more classical conception of a play as a coherent whole with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end to a fragmentary and open ("offen" [open]) and minimalistic vision in keeping with the spirit of renewal pioneered by innovators as different as Anton Chekhov and Sean O'Casey, inviting the spectator to actively participate in the construction of meaning (Brandau 1). Although this sense of formal and thematic ambiguity heightens the realism of the theatrical illusion, since it, after all, mimics the indeterminacy of life, it also explains why the personal fate of his characters is more important than their political significance. "Wer lebt, stört" [The living disturb], one critic wrote of Dorst, presumably meaning that the sum total of a human life is not necessarily consistent and, more often than not, is a paradox (Brandau 1). There can be no doubt that Dorst stands today as one of Germany's most celebrated playwrights, continuing the proud tradition of Bertolt Brecht and Peter Weiss and equally talented but perhaps internationally less well-known writers such as Heiner Müller, Heinar Kipphardt, and Peter Handke. As one critic writes in an article on the occasion of Dorst's 75th birthday, "No German-speaking dramatic author since 1945, not even Friedrich Dürrenmatt, has invented so many varied characters from so many different time periods, or woven together with such inexhaustible productivity myth and the present, politics, contemporary events, and the individual, stories of love and family ties, or written plays dealing with historical poets and revolutionaries, such as Heine and Ernst Toller, or not yet extinct lunatics such as Herr Paul, who falls through the cracks of the grid patterns of a reunified Germany and enjoys rotting away in wild idleness, or Grimmean men and monsters, Mr. Korbes and young Mr. Karlos (Schiller's Carlos in a new guise), Poor Heinrich from once upon a time and our rich neighbors, today's lottery

kings.” [“Kein deutschsprachiger Dramatiker, nicht einmal Friedrich Dürrenmatt, hat seit 1945 so viele, vielfältige Figuren aus allen Zeiten erfunden, hat Mythos und Gegenwart, Politik, Zeitgeschichte und Privates, die Geschichten der Liebe und der Familienbande mit solch unerschöpflicher Produktivität zusammengespinnen, hat Stücke geschrieben über historische Poeten und Revolutionäre wie Heine und Ernst Toller, über nicht aussterbende Unvernünftige wie den durch die neuen gesamtdeutschen Raster fallenden, mit Wonne und wilder Trägheit dahinfliegenden Herrn Paul, über Grimmsche Männer und Monster, über Herrn Korbes und den jungen Herrn Karlos (den Schillerschen, nochmal neu verwandelten), über den Armen Heinrich von einst und unsere reichen Nachbarn, die Lotto-Könige von heute” (von Becker 1)].

On the one hand, *Eiszeit* reproduces much of what we find in *Paa Gjengrodde Stier*: the historical events themselves, as well as Hamsun’s credible but at the same time pathetic self-defense and self-justification. The play also brings out Hamsun’s unapologetic attitude towards life, as well as the wistful tone and episodic style of his memoir, which is filled to the brim with personal anecdotes seemingly unrelated to the Occupation and to his self-defense against the charge of collaboration with the Germans. On the other hand, the play also offers a novel and personal interpretation of Hamsun’s final years, of his frame of mind and outlook on life. Just like Per Olov Enquist’s five-act drama *Hamsun. En Filmløstelse* (1996), which accompanies Jan Troell’s 1995 film *Hamsun*, Dorst at times takes considerable poetic license. The play is close enough to the facts and to the psychological character of the historical Hamsun, as we know it from his memoir and letters and personal testimony, and, of course, his own literary work, for us not to be able to dismiss it as entirely fiction; and yet it is different enough to be considered a personal interpretation.

The play is set in Hamsun’s ninetieth year, i.e., 1951 (*Eiszeit* 120), the year before he dies, and the plot revolves around a fictitious encounter between the nonagenarian and a young man with the intriguing name of Oswald, who planned to kill Hamsun during the war as an act of resistance but lacked the guts. In *Eiszeit*, Hamsun is still living at the Landvik Old Age Home, to which he has been confined since his

arrest in May 1945, though his wife and son Paul are allowed to visit him daily. This scenario is sheer fantasy (the ailing writer was living at home by then), but, as we shall see, Dorst is more interested in remaining faithful to the spirit of the man and the ambiance of the period immediately following liberation than in reconstituting life *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, according to the time-honored Franco-German tradition of modern positivist history à la Ranke.

Dorst's play reproduces most of the clichés about Hamsun. There is the image of the deaf old man living in complete isolation from the outside world and only coming down for meals when his family bangs on the water pipe to let him know that his food is on the table. Dorst's Hamsun argues that no one living in such extreme isolation could know what is really going on: "In den Zeitungen, die es in den Kriegsjahren gab, konnte ich nichts finden, was mich auf mein Unrecht aufmerksam gemacht hätte. Ich sass da oben auf meinem Hof, in meinem Zimmer und habe geschrieben. Stille den ganzen Tag! Ich habe nichts gehört, ich bin taub" (*Eiszeit* 105) [In the newspapers that were available during the war years I could find nothing that might have alerted me to my error. I sat up there in my house, in my room, and wrote. It was quiet all day long. I heard nothing. I am deaf]. With the historical Hamsun's typical self-deprecating sensibility and a hint of bitterness in his voice, Dorst's Hamsun concludes: "Ich bin ein alter tauber Landesverräter" (*Eiszeit* 14) [I am an old and deaf traitor to my country]. Dorst sets out to question the extent and sincerity of Hamsun's collaboration by bringing out its ambiguity; two examples are his much-publicized visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden in 1943 and his alleged membership in the Norwegian collaborationist party *Nasjonal Samling*. Thus Dorst conforms to the conclusions drawn by scholars, who insist on the Janus-faced image of Hamsun the collaborator. On the one hand, Hamsun certainly did defend and promote the German cause; on the other, he tried hard on more than one occasion to obtain the liberation of Norwegian resistance fighters; he was never a Nazi and cannot be held personally responsible for Nazi atrocities, about which he manifestly knew nothing until after the war. In Jan Troell's film, *Hamsun*, during his arraignment in 1945, when he was confronted with footage from the concentration camps, broke down and sobbed, screaming at his interrogators to stop the projection of these

ghoulish images of death, swearing that he had known nothing of the Holocaust. In all likelihood he did not.

The play unfolds against the series of hearings conducted by the board of inquiry (*Untersuchungskommission*) that investigated charges of collaboration brought against Hamsun. The relationship between the arrogant defendant and the unsympathetic board is tense. Both sides have reason enough to be bitter and aggressive, but Hamsun appears to gain the upper hand on more than one occasion thanks to his dry humor. For example, when the board ceremoniously announces that its members would like to know more about Hitler, the old man curtly responds that they by now know more than he does. Hamsun's ironic defiance is noteworthy: "Die Herren möchten etwas von mir über Hitler erfahren. Aber Sie wissen doch schon alles über Hitler. Sie wissen ja mehr als ich!" (*Eiszeit* 105) [You gentlemen want to learn something about Hitler. But you already know everything. You know more than I]. True enough! In the best of times, Hamsun never showed much interest in contemporary events and spent the war years in growing isolation from the outside world.

In fact, Hamsun did visit Hitler, but he came away very disappointed by Hitler's personality, though he never said so in public. Hamsun did not find Hitler worthy of his position; the Führer, he thought, was a vulgar commoner and out of place in Hamsun's patriarchal scheme of social organization ("Der ganze Mann war mir unsympathisch, --ein Mann der Masse" (*Eiszeit* 106) [Everything about the man was unappealing to me, --a man of the masses]. The 1995 Swedish-Norwegian film shows Hamsun criticizing the Führer, who walked out on him in disgust when the rambling old man raised his voice as deaf people often do when they think they are not making themselves heard. This is fact, as numerous memoirs published after the war by the participants involved make perfectly clear (Hansen, *Prosesser mod Hamsun* 153-156).

Another charge of the prosecution focused on Hamsun's membership in the pro-German collaborationist party *Nasjonal Samling*. Was he or was he not a member? According to Party rolls he was, and the *Untersuchungskommission* in Dorst's play states that he even received (and presumably wore) the party insignia, the infamous *solkors*. But Dorst's

Hamsun claims he never signed any membership application (even though he, according to all accounts, received one). Then suddenly he pulls something out of his pocket that the commission for a moment thinks is the ignominious *Parteiabzeichen* [party insignia]. Instead, it turns out to be a promotional pin for Mercedes-Benz, which Hamsun received as a gift from the janitor at the old people's home. In reality, Hamsun never joined the party, and a photo of him wearing the *solkors* that was used against him at his trial turned out to be a forgery.⁶ However, I do not think that Dorst is suggesting that the *solkors* Hamsun on several occasions was seen wearing in reality was a Mercedes pin. That would be deceitful on Dorst's part and would undermine his credibility altogether.

One damning piece of evidence against Hamsun was his inopportune eulogy of Hitler, written after the Germans had surrendered in May 1945. However, Dorst uses this incident not so much to condemn Hamsun as to highlight his consistency of character and conduct: Hamsun did not have to write a eulogy, but a decision not to compose one would have meant that his collaboration had been opportunistic. On the contrary, Hamsun was sincere. While he later admitted that he was wrong about Hitler, he still felt that he had a moral obligation to honor Hitler because in so doing he was also honoring his own chivalric quest for a new and, in his eyes, better Norway. In short, he was just being a gentleman. "Dieser Nachruf auf einen Besiegten war eine Geste der Ritterlichkeit" (*Eiszeit* 107) [This eulogy for a deceased man was an act of chivalry]. On this particular occasion, in Dorst's play, Hamsun is wearing a black ribbon to show that he is in mourning. "Jawohl! Wie Sie sehen, trage ich Trauer" (*Eiszeit* 13) [Yes, as you can see, I am in mourning]. It happens to be the same day Hitler committed suicide, April 30, and Hamsun's interrogators naturally assume that this is yet another sign of Hamsun's defiance and loyalty to the Führer, not knowing that the mysterious youth Oswald has just died by his own hand. By manipulating history and creating circumstances such as these, Dorst heightens the singularity of Hamsun's behavior, adding to the already ambiguous picture of the historical figure and offering his own explanations.

During the play Hamsun's irony sometimes goes unnoticed by the board, but so does most everything else he says to defend himself. It is

obvious that no one on this board is buying his defense; in reality we know that this was not the case. Hamsun got off easy, as it were. Official Norway went out of its way to find extenuating circumstances and attributed Hamsun's collaboration to what it called his "permanently impaired mental faculties." In real life the president of the board actually voted for acquitting Hamsun altogether. But in the play Hamsun's judges are more severe and demonic and rather remind the reader of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. One judge, a man with the ominous name of Reich (as in *Third Reich*), in response to Hamsun's confession of guilt, triumphantly exclaims much the same way Freissler, the notorious Nazi Volksgericht judge, might have done: "Consistency is the virtue of fools" (*Eiszeit* 107), mistakenly attributing this intriguing insight to Shakespeare. The judge's German name might suggest that the Norwegian authorities are conducting themselves no better than German magistrates examining a similar case during the war. At any rate, Hamsun does not seem to care one iota what the judges think. His nonchalance stems from resignation, I believe, but is unfortunate for him because his actions during the war were not all bad; however, they were consistent with the principled albeit unsympathetic persona that Tankred Dorst is trying to mold for Hamsun. Hamsun did intervene with Hitler on behalf of Norway, trying in particular to get Hitler to recall the unpopular Reichskommissar Terboven from Norway. He used his position as the most well-known Norwegian of his day to intervene on behalf of numerous resistance fighters and was a constant thorn in the side of Terboven, so much so that the Germans soon became quite weary of dealing with him period. Besides, the old man was quite deaf and did not know German in the first place. All his dealings with the Germans went through his manipulative and much more pro-German and pro-Nazi wife (who, unlike Hamsun, served a long prison term).

As mentioned above, the play opens some time after the war ["nach dem Krieg"] (*Eiszeit* 6) [after the war], at an old people's home in the Norwegian countryside, where the aging writer has been taken by the authorities and is about to undergo a series of psychological tests to determine whether or not he is fit to stand trial. As we know, these tests did take place--in February 1946, not in 1950. Why Dorst chooses to distort the chronology by four years is not immediately clear. Moreover,

the setting of an old people's home seems almost incidental and contributes little to the action of the play, which unfolds on a philosophical plane. In any case, just as in real life, Hamsun submits to a battery of psychological tests and is then interrogated by a panel of judges (*Untersuchungskommission*) whose verdict is still out when the play ends, as if to suggest that the play is not really about Hamsun's legal dilemma at all but rather about the Nietzschean challenge that springs from the curious encounter between *der Alte* (as the stage directions refer to Hamsun) and a young man and potential assassin with the ominous and inauspicious name of Oswald.

The play, of course, is post-Dallas; it dates from the 1970s, which were a time of doubt, of conflict between generations, of suspicion, and of self-recrimination everywhere. Indeed, it is hard to believe that the name Oswald is an accident and does not point to Lee Harvey Oswald, the quintessential and most well-known (putative) assassin ever. This historical echo, I believe, reinforces the thematic dynamic and dramatic effect that Dorst is trying to create. The name "Oswald," (or "Osvald" in its Norwegian form) while once not unusual in Norway, was at this point hardly common, ever since Ibsen's play *Gengangere* (1882) [*Ghosts* 1890], which tells the story of a syphilitic young man whose mother ends up killing him out of mercy. No one in their right mind would subsequently have named their offspring Oswald. So is Dorst suggesting that Hamsun is engaging in a mercy killing by constantly challenging the insecure Oswald, making him realize his worthlessness and pushing him to the brink of suicide? Dorst could have used any name he wanted to. The reasonable assumption is that he chose the name "Oswald" for a reason, namely, to add to the symbolic power of Hamsun's mysterious young friend.

I would argue that the main thrust of the play lies in its Nietzschean and Darwinian appeal. These terms have been much abused generally and, in the case of Hamsun's oeuvre, normally refer to the quixotic psychology of early novels such as *Hunger* (1890) and *Pan* (1894). According to Harald Naess, Glahn, the eccentric protagonist in *Pan*, is a Nietzschean character because of his unstable and unpredictable behavior, what Naess calls the "gradual unbalancing" (Naess 55) of his mind. Dorst takes the Nietzschean dialectic a step further by

incorporating a Hegelian and existential twist with a Sartrean touch of the absurd that catches us off guard but that we ultimately find most appealing because it seems so true to the psychology of Hamsun as we know it from his memoir. Oswald calls them “ein komisches Paar” (93) [a comic couple] but must be ironic. If anything the situation is “tragic,” absurd even, since from a Nietzschean perspective there are only winners and losers, masters and slaves. The foolhardy youth Oswald has dared challenge the old fox, but is no match for *der Alte*. Not able to assassinate the traitor, Oswald puts the gun to his own head and pulls the trigger.

Deafness in the play is symbolic, and Dorst exploits its full ironic potential. As you probably know, part of Hamsun’s defense was that he was stone-deaf [“stocktaub” (*Eiszeit* 33)] and could not stay in touch with the outside world. The newspapers he received were all pro-German, and he seldom ventured very far from his estate at Norhølm. No one any longer stopped by to chat, and even if they had, he could not have heard what they said: “Ich habe die letzten dreißig Jahre auf meinem Hof gesessen, alt, taub und tot” (*Eiszeit* 109) [I have spent the last thirty years sitting in my house, old, deaf, and dead]. But at the same time, in a curious play on words, he admits that he has *heard* (“gehört”) of sabotage by the resistance (*Eiszeit* 35). During his incarceration after the war people gave him the silent treatment, and Hamsun, ironically, could hear nothing even if he had wanted to, because people would not speak to him, even refusing to answer when spoken to.

Clearly, Hamsun was not stone-deaf. In the play he obviously hears well enough to carry on a conversation with Oswald even though there are practical problems: “Sie reden so leise und ich bin taub, das ist unser Drama” (*Eiszeit* 81) [You speak so softly and I am deaf; that is our drama], Hamsun says to the youth, perhaps not realizing that Oswald is simply pretending to speak by moving his lips just to annoy him. Oswald also speaks into the old man’s deaf ear for the same reason. Hamsun hears out of his right ear (*Eiszeit* 66), he says, but is quite deaf in the other. Indeed, it would be difficult not to read a measure of political symbolism into Hamsun’s deafness: he hears from the right, in his right, pro-German, proto-Nazi ear, but is quite incapable of understanding anything coming from the left, in his ferociously anti-Communist left ear. How convenient! Hamsun could hear what he wanted to hear. All he had

to do was turn his head this way or that. Presumably, he could make a similar adjustment in life and see what he did not want to see and close out anything that did not sit well with his political sensibilities; the symbolism of Hamsun's deafness is perhaps the gist of Dorst's play in the first place. Deafness can suggest an unwillingness to become involved or even to stay informed, though certainly this quality was not limited to Hamsun. Psychological deafness is a rejection of responsibility and perhaps a rejection of life, too. Curiously, Oswald also longs for deafness, as when he stuffs his ears with tobacco to shut out the old man's mocking accusations that he is a weakling (*Eiszeit* 79, 103) unable to carry out his mission to kill the traitor who stands before him.

What Dorst has done is to retain the basic facts, on the one hand, but recast them in a different mold, on the other, and in so doing create a novel situation that is both provocative and original but also faithful to Hamsun's character as we know it from all available documentary evidence. This is an imaginary life embedded in a real one. Why not just create a fictional character, one might ask, and not be bothered by questions of historical accuracy and credibility? This is a question that all authors of historical romance must struggle with. Situating a story among well-known facts enhances its appeal by stressing its historicity, on the one hand (if not historical exactness, which is not the same thing), and amplifying its thematic thrust, on the other. We are fascinated with the unknown, and the truth of the matter is that Hamsun's life story still contains many unanswered questions capable of inspiring a play such as Dorst's.

Conclusion

As his wife is quick to point out, in the play, Hamsun's posterity is assured. "Sie wollen ein Denkmal stürzen" (*Eiszeit* 46) [You want to tear down a monument], she says, referring to the *Untersuchungskommission*. "Er ist einfach so gross für Sie" (*Eiszeit* 47) [He is simply too great for you]. Hamsun will be remembered long after he is gone, she says; but who will remember the pathetic human beings who make up the *Untersuchungskommission*? In fact, Hamsun has nothing to be ashamed of. He has lived his life to the fullest, remaining faithful to his commitments to the end, even though he knows that he sometimes was wrong. Dorst's

Hamsun comes across as unapologetic and unforgiving, thereby reinforcing the image of the historical Hamsun as a fiercely independent spirit--albeit a misanthrope. For better or for worse, this is an old man waiting to die who does not make any excuses for his life. As anyone knows who has read Hamsun's memoir *Paa Gjengrodde Stier* (of which, curiously, there is no mention in the play), Hamsun was anything but a man with "permanently impaired mental faculties." His memoir is a literary *tour de force* and a lasting monument to the timelessness of his style. While his reputation no doubt suffered a setback in the immediate postwar period, Hamsun rebounded, showing that equal measures of strong character, well-deserved reputation for excellence, and good fortune were enough to ensure his survival. It did not appear to matter in the long run if he had been wrong all along.

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Endnotes

¹ An early version of this article was first given as a presentation at the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies (SASS) in Minneapolis in May 2003. All translations from the German are my own. I dedicate this essay to the memory of my maternal grandfather, who was interned at Grini.

² "Der kommer vel en dag imorgen også, og jeg kan vente. Jeg har tiden for meg" (Hamsun, *Paa Gjengrodde Stier* 155).

³ In his comprehensive study of Hamsun's life and work, Naess briefly analyzes Dorst's play (155-156).

⁴ As Brandau poignantly writes in a poignant essay entitled *Wer lebt, stört*, "Ein politischer Autor ist Dorst auf keinen Fall. Weder in dem einen Sinne, dass er sich in seinen Dramen—wie z.B. Rolf Hochhuth—mit der grossen Politik, mit den politischen Momenten der gegenwart, mit Ölkrise und Krieg um Öl, mit Gen-Technologie und künstlicher Befruchtung auseinandersetzt; noch in dem anderen Sinne, dass er—wie z.B. Heinar Kipphardt oder Peter Weiss—seinem Publikum politische Thesen unterdübeln, dass er seine Zuschauer belehren will. Nein. Der Autor Tankred Dorst, der seine Dramen seit 1970 zusammen mit seiner Frau Ursula Ehler erarbeitet, steht für den Vorrang des Privaten vor dem Politischen" (Brandau 1). [In no way is Dorst a political author, neither in the sense that in his plays he, like Rolf Hochhuth, for example, deals with politics, with present-day political issues, such as the oil crisis or the war for oil, gene technology, and artificial insemination; nor is he political in the sense that he, like Heinar Kipphardt or Peter Weiss, for example, plugs his audience with political theses or tries to teach his spectators something. No. The author Tankred Dorst, who, since 1970, has been writing plays together with his wife Ursula Ehler, defends the supremacy of the private over the political].

⁵ "the breakdown of an extreme individual in an extreme situation."

⁶ See, for instance, Nils Rømning, "Fotobevis mod Hamsun var retujert." *Aftenposten*. September 6, 1998. www.dagbladet.no/kultur/1998/09/06/130451.html.