

# KNUT HAMSUN'S "MEDITATIONS ON NANSEN" REVISITED: THE DILEMMA OF MODERNITY

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## Modern Transgressions of Boundaries

At the end of the nineteenth century the polar hero not only epitomizes triumphal achievements and the agency of progression, but also turns out to be a figuration of transgressions in several respects: as a conqueror of new land and a transgressor of extreme zones, but even in terms of a typical modern hybrid formation where different discourses encounter and allow the blurring of discourse boundaries.

Knut Hamsun's polemic against the hype around the polar hero Fridtjof Nansen is a prominent expression of this tendency of the 1890s, that decade "where sporting life challenges mental life" ("da sportslivet utfordrer åndslivet") and "the poets' hegemony in the media is threatened" ("[d]ikternes mediehegemoni er truet") (Wærp 2011, 72).<sup>1</sup>

This article takes a closer look at Hamsun's polemical critique of this hero-worship and tries to show how athletic and scientific discourses come together in the representation of the new polar hero. Given the impossibility of differentiating strictly between these discourses in polar expeditions, I want to discuss the consequences of this conflation of categories for a more general symptomatology of modernity. By means of Bruno Latour's terminology, I will highlight phenomena such as hybridity and contingency and ultimately illustrate their effects on Hamsun's literary work using text extracts from Hamsun's novel *Editor Lynge*. In this way, Hamsun's own involvement in the "dilemma of modernity" comes to the fore, and his ironic strategies become evident as an answer to the symptomatology.

## Knut Hamsun's Polemic "Meditations on Nansen"

In 1888, Fridtjof Nansen succeeded in the legendary first-ever crossing of Greenland's inland ice on skis (from the east coast to the west). When he returned from his expedition in summer 1889, he roused a wave of excitement in Norway:

Kristiania probably had never been as exultant and enthusiastic as when the Greenland travelers returned. It seems that nothing more extraordinary had ever occurred than that Nansen and his fellows actually came back again. Sixty thousand people welcomed them at the bridge, fifty thousand followed them to the hotel, ten thousand shouted ninety thousand cheers, an old pensioned colonel shouted himself even to death on the spot.

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<sup>1</sup> Knut Hamsun, "Nansen-Betragtninger," *Dagbladet* 20.6.1889. Reprinted in *Hamsuns polemiske skrifter*, edited by Gunvald Hermundstad. Oslo: Gyldendal 1998, 48–53. All English translations are my own. I want to express my gratitude to Julian Petri for stylistically improving my non-native English.

Slig Jubel og Henrykkelse har Kristiania vel aldrig før været i, som da Grønlandsfarerne kom tilbage. Der synes aldrig at have hændt større Ting i Norge end at Nansen og Kamerater virkelig kom hjem igjen. Sexti Tusend Mennesker modtog dem paa Bryggen, femti Tusend fulgte dem til Hotellet, ti Tusend raabte niti Tusend Hurra, en gammel pensioneret Oberst fra Kampen skreg sig simpelthen ihjel paa Stedet. (Hamsun 1998, 48–49)

This is the introduction of Knut Hamsun's polemical article in the newspaper *Dagbladet*, which he wrote on June 20, 1889, in response to the nationwide worshiping of Fridtjof Nansen. Hamsun himself is at that time 30 years old, has not yet published his novel *Hunger*, and still stands this side of his later fame and success. Accordingly ironic and provocative, the young polemicist derides the (in his eyes) absurd glorification of a hero who is two years his minor, and "that intense hoopla" (Hamsun 1998, 49: "denne heftige Rummel"), as Hamsun puts it, that arises just because "Fridtjof Nansen and five other grown-up sportsmen have taken a ski trip across the ice through Greenland" (Hamsun 1998, 49: "Fridtjof Nansen og fem andre voxne Sportsmennesker har gjort en Skitur tvers over Isen paa Grønland"). Already in a letter to Erik Skram (at Christmas 1888), Hamsun ironically wards off the favorable opinion he has received even though he is, after all, no sports hero: "No, I'm ashamed like a dog about all this kindheartedness from everybody; I'm a stranger and a man of no achievements. It might be defensible if I were a man who went across the inland ice; but not now." (Hamsun 1994, 100: "Nej, jeg skammer mig som en Hund over al denne Hjærtensgodhed fra alle Mennesker; jeg er en fremmed og fortjenestløs Mand. Der var lidt Rimelighed i det, hvis jeg f.E. var en Mand, som havde gaaet over 'Indlandsisen'; men ikke nu.")

It is lionization and hero worship that Hamsun attacks in his article, polemicizing especially against the public enthusiasm for athletic records whose pointless absurdity he decries in his characteristically incisive and provocative style: "a daredevil, well-finished adventure, a breakneck act, a sports affair, a lucky strike" (Hamsun 1998, 52: "Et dumdristig, vel tilendebragt Vovestykke, en halsbrækkende Gjerning, en Sports-affære, et Lykketreff") has, according to Hamsun, become the cause of mass hysteria.

Jørgen Lorentzen has shown in his analysis of Hamsun's article, that Hamsun's focus on "the question about great, strong men" ("spørsmålet om de store, sterke menn") is mostly about "a constructed opposition between sports and literature" (Lorentzen 1996, 113: "en konstruert motsetning mellom sport og litteratur"). Lorentzen has demonstrated that Hamsun's polemical remarks about "the boulevard tendency in our cultural awareness" ("Boulevardtendens i vor Kulturbevidsthed") are driven by the worry that real historical personalities were being overshadowed by trifling "heroic" escapades, and that it would become increasingly difficult to make a name for oneself in areas outside of sports. Thus Lorentzen's argument culminates in the claim that Hamsun is ultimately concerned with his own aspirations to fame, which he sees endangered by such lowbrow competition (and the growing preference

for sports over literature/culture).<sup>2</sup>

I do not want to challenge this conclusion, but I think that in Hamsun's argument there is something more than just polemics against his staunchest competitor for eminence as the greatest man of Norway. Hamsun's hostility concerns two characteristic symptoms of modernity that appear to disturb him as vehemently as he attacks them: hybridity (that is, the entanglement of different categories) and contingency. I would like to illustrate what these phenomena concretely look like in Hamsun's article.



Knut Hamsun (ca. 1890).



Photo of Fridtjof Nansen by Ludwik Szacinski (Kristiania 1889/90).  
Reprinted as "Sliten (etter fotografi)" in  
Fridtjof Nansen's *Paa ski over Grønland*  
(Kristiania: Aschehoug, 1890).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Lorentzen 1996, 113: "Hamsun liker ikke store menn, som blir store bare fordi de har gjort det som forventes av dem, gjort det som alle folk vil ha. Å gjøre noe stort for Hamsun, er å gjøre noe uventet, noe annerledes, noe som bryter med det forventede"; "Møtet med Nansen er både et møte med det han forakter og et møte med en indre drøm: visjonen om å bli hyllet for å ha skrevet en roman som bryter fullstendig med det normale i sin samtid."

### Hybridity

To begin with, the most important opposition operative in Hamsun's article is less between sports and literature (as Lorentzen puts it) than between sports and science. Hamsun's implicit presupposition seems to be that science, unlike the pointless pursuit of athletic records, ideally would be guided by the aim of generating useful knowledge. The problem for Hamsun is precisely that this difference between sports and science is being effaced: science and sports both involve the meaningless and useless registration of data and records. Hamsun writes:

Mr. Nansen went across Greenland. What did he want there? Well, no stingy questions here! Of course he wanted to do research. What does it matter that Greenland is a country that still lies in the Ice Age and that may have to wait till a future eon for cultivation! Isn't it grand what use the sciences have for every least little bit of temperature and the tiniest measure of altitude? [...] It had to be marked down, collected in books, possessed and enjoyed – science finds utility in everything. The temperature that Nansen found, and the arctic desert whose existence he was able to confirm, almost certainly [...] have already been entered into the books.

That's quite something. All the world has known for a long, long time that inner Greenland is an arctic wasteland. Though it was just a supposition, at a pinch people knew it with enough certainty for modern geology's doctrine of glaciology to rely on it. [...] Then Nansen comes back from Greenland and says loud and clear: Yes, he says, Greenland's inland *is* an arctic desert, he says. And his countrymen get so excited about the fact that Nansen says the same thing as their childhood school books and as geologists have been teaching for generations that they shout: Gosh, do you hear that! Can you imagine? He says that there is ice in Greenland!

Hr. Nansen gik over Grønland. Hvad vilde han der? Ingen usselige Spørsmaal her! Han vilde naturligvis forske. Hvad gjør det, om Grønland endnu er et Land, som ligger i Istiden, og som først engang i kommende Jordperioder kanske kan bebygges! Er det maaske ikke storartet, hvilken Nytte Videnskaben har af det mindste Stykke Temperatur og det bitteste Gran af en Højdemaaling? [...] Det skulde skrives op, haves i Bøgerne, ejes, nydes, – Videnskaben har Nytte af alt. Den Temperatur Nansen fandt, og den Isørken, han kunde konstantere Tilværelsen af, er ganske sikkert [...] allerede bogført.

Det er noget, Alverden nu har vidst lang, lang Tid, at Grønlands Indland er en Isørken. Ihvorvel det blot var en Antagelse, vidste man det dog til Nød saa sikkert, at den moderne Geologis Lære om Glaciere saa at sige er bygget derpaa. [...] Saa kommer Nansen tilbage fra Grønland og siger højt og tydeligt: Jo, siger han, Grønlands Indland *er* en Isørken, siger han. Og hans Landsmænd blir saa begejstrede over, at Nansen siger det samme, som Skolebøgerne sagde i deres Barndom, og som Geologerne har lært i Generationer, at de raaber: Død og Pine, hør! Tænk, han siger, at der er Is indover Grønland! (Hamsun 1998, 49–50)

What is the essence of this passage? Firstly, Nansen's findings are – scientifically – nothing new. Secondly, his results – “every least little bit of temperature and the tiniest measure of altitude” (“det mindste Stykke Temperatur og det bitteste Gran af en Højdemåling”) – are relatively useless, at least for science. “What does it matter that Greenland is a country that still lies in the Ice Age,” Hamsun asks (“Hvad gjør det, om Grønland endnu er et Land, som ligger i Istiden”). All this would not be a problem if Nansen were seen as a sportsman with a remarkable athletic feat to his credit. It becomes problematic (and this is Hamsun's main point of criticism) only insofar the athletic act is marshalled for scientific purposes, and insofar the boundaries between Nansen as a sportsman and Nansen as a scientist and zoologist get blurred:

Nansen went on a skiing tour, which required a personal audacity that every sports expert will appreciate. In the meantime, the world got the idea that Nansen returned from a scientific expedition – in Greenland! [...] Nansen himself has always declared that this is wrong. He came from a skiing tour. It is excusable that he had something vaguely in mind, before he set out, about dissecting a couple of animals in Greenland, maybe even botanizing a little bit in the ice. For the man is after all a scientist. But that this was his reason for taking the trip – no! For the man is a sportsman.

Nansen gjorde en Skitur, hvortil der krævedes en personlig Dristighed, som alle Sportskyndige er villige til at knæle for. Imidlertid fik Verden istand, at Nansen kom fra en videnskabelig Opdagelsesrejse – paa Grønland! [...] Fra dette Land kom Zoologen Nansen efter en videnskabelig Opdagelsesrejse! Dette har Nansen selv stadigt væk erklæret at være urigtigt. Han kom fra en Skitur. At der før han drog ud kan have foresvæved ham noget som at dissekere Grønlands Indlandsdyr under Rejsen, maaske endog at botanisere lidt inde paa Isen, var tilgiveligt. Thi Manden er altsaa Videnskapsmand. Men at det først og fremst var derfor han rejste – nej! Thi Manden er Sportsmand. (Hamsun 1998, 51)

Let us set this down: Hamsun is primarily concerned to maintain the separation of discourses and to distinguish strictly between the athletic and the scientific achievement. However, everyone who knows a little bit about polar expeditions knows that their motives and agendas cannot easily be marked off into separate spheres and that a division of discourses is quite impossible. Around the turn of the century, almost all polar expeditions are declared scientifically indispensable, if only for financial reasons, while the polar heroes' actual aims, as Roald Amundsen freely admitted, is the hunt for records, national pride, prestige and the glory of a triumphant return.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Amundsen expressly emphasizes “that the third trip with Fram overall would be an expedition for science and would not engage in hunts for the record” (“at den tredje Fram-færd i ett og alt vilde bli en videnskabelig ekspedition og ikke befatte sig med rekordjagt”, Amundsen 1912, 138). But he goes on to reveal just the opposite, for his concern, he then admits, is “primarily for the Pole” (“gjaldt Polen i



“Marsjen over innlandsisen. Grønland, august–september 1888”.  
 (“The March across the Inland Ice. Greenland, August–September 1888”)  
 Photography by Fridtjof Nansen. Owner: National Library of Norway.

While the geography, the constitution of the ice, and the meteorological conditions are meticulously measured and recorded, the polar explorers’ dreams first and foremost centre on satisfying their thirst for adventure, for achieving the impossible, and for being the first and only ones to tread upon an untrodden part of the earth. Thus they are driven by a typically sportive ambition for trumping their predecessors. But it is only the emphasis on the *scientific* value of such adventures that secures financial support.

First, then, the link between the sportive and the scientific aspects of polar exploration is the economic discourse; accordingly, around 1900, nearly every big business establishment with high ambitions takes on sponsorship of a polar expedition of national importance. Hamsun refers to this kind of commercialization in his article: “In this way, they have started with Nansen-oranges in Messina, H.A.

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første række”, Amundsen 1912, 139): “My aim was [...] to concentrate all our energy on the only goal – to reach the Pole” (“Min hensigt var [...] at koncentrere alle vore kræfter omkring det ene maal – at naa Polen”, Amundsen 1912, 146). Cf. also Heitmann 2001, 110, and Robinson 2006.

Olsen in Lærdal advertises Nansen trouser buttons, and in Hedemarken they say there has appeared a brand new sort of flies – Nansen flies.” (Hamsun 1998, 51: “Saaledes har man nu i Messina begyndt med Nansen-Appelsiner, H.A.Olsen paa Lærdal averterer Nansen Buxeknapper, og opover Hedemarken skal der være kommet en spliterny Sort Fluor – Nansenfluor.”)

Hamsun even treated this subject in literary form, in his novel *Editor Lynge* (*Redakteur Lynge*), written in 1893, where the protagonist dreams about the economic boom of his newspaper: “In his mind he saw his newspaper as the biggest in the country with ten thousands of subscribers, with its own telegraph, its own railway, a discovery expedition at the Pole, and branches in all continents...” (Hamsun 2007, 133: “Han så i ånden sitt blad som det største i landet med titusener av abonnenter, egen telegraf, egen jernbane, en ekspedisjon på oppdagelser ved polen, filialer i alle verdensdeler ...” [emphasis mine]).

The second factor linking together sports and science in the field of polar exploration is the very rhetoric of crossing boundaries.<sup>4</sup> Crossing the boundary of the known world is one of the great *topoi* in the history of discoveries. It is simultaneously a form of heroism and transgression. Since ancient Greek mythology, the pillars of Hercules with their inscribed prohibition “nec plus ultra” (and no further) represent both a geographic and an ideational boundary of human ability and human knowledge – a touch-stone for explorers and innovators. Fridtjof Nansen himself often uses the *topos* of boundary transgression. Many polar explorers refer to the pillars of Hercules: though they were in fact located at the Western end of the known world, they have been mobilized as a geographically universal symbol of the interdiction of *curiositas*, of the admonition “non plus ultra.” “Thus far and no further:” what was in ancient and medieval times a “taboo of determent” (Bloch 1959, 887: “Tabu der Abschreckung”) has been transformed in modern times into a celebration of the transgression of boundaries and the expansion of the horizon by consciously disregarding and breaking the limits. This comes along with agitation, thirst for knowledge, and movement, all of which are indicators that Aleida Assmann has investigated in connection with the transgression of the “non plus ultra,” and which she has called “the signature of modernity” (Assmann 2011, 216). She writes:

Overstepping the world's boundary constituted, in Dante's time, a transgression, a metaphysical offense; in modernity it has become a positive value, indeed, an imperative. [...] In our culture, self-assertion and the unbroken drive to know are taken not as vices but as heroic virtues. Breaking out from contexts as they have naturally developed, shattering the fetters of tradition, the courage to set out for unknown realms – these are the marks of the modern archetype of the explorer, conqueror, and entrepreneur.

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<sup>4</sup> In his article about polar literature and the avant-garde, Henning Howlid Wærp even discusses the transboundary character of polar expedition reports in respect of genre classifications (see Wærp 2011, 74).

Die Überschreitung der Weltgrenze, die zu Dantes Zeiten einer Transgression, einem metaphysischen Frevel gleichkam, ist seit der Neuzeit zu einem positiven Wert, ja zu einem Imperativ geworden. [...] Selbstbehauptung und ungebrochener Erkenntnisdrang werden von der Kultur nicht mehr als Laster, sondern nunmehr als heroische Tugenden verbucht. Das Ausbrechen aus gewachsenen Bezügen, das Sprengen der Fesseln der Tradition, der Mut in unbekannte Gefilde aufzubrechen kennzeichnet den neuzeitlichen Typus des Entdeckers, Eroberers und Unternehmers. (Assmann 2011, 217)

The use of the *topos* of transgression in the expedition reports of the polar explorers, especially when it comes to trumping a predecessor's achievement, testifies to the place of the athlete in this "modern archetype." Since, with the rise of Alpinism (Ott 2015) the passion for pushing limits – a kind of transgression – found a particular outlet in extreme mountaineering and skiing, the polar explorer of the late nineteenth century combines the heroism of scientific progress with that of physical achievement (and that means scientific with athletic innovation). Progressive aspirations thus become linked to the mere chasing of records. This blurring of the boundaries between athleticism and science, a hybridization that particularly irritates Knut Hamsun, should be understood not only in terms of socio-political and economic conditions, then, but also in terms of a contemporary rhetorical and metaphorical tradition.

What is so troubling about this blurring of boundaries? For one, as others have shown,<sup>5</sup> Hamsun probably sees the conflation of these particular categories (science and athleticism) – and the concomitant valorization of athletic achievement – as a sign of cultural and intellectual decline. However, Bruno Latour has also described the conflation of categories *as such* as the dilemma of modernity. According to Latour, modern forms of argumentation are structured by the "Great Divide" (Latour 1993, 12) between nature and culture, the natural and social sciences. But, paradoxically, this sharp division and separation into distinct realms is the precondition of the subcutaneous and secret production of hybrids and nodes, which – hidden from view by the "Great Divide" – pose an internal threat to the intellectual constitution of modernity. As an example of the dilemma of modernity, that is, the overt assertion of sharp divisions and categories and the simultaneous, involuntary and hidden, formation of hybrids, Latour points to the blending of discourses in newspapers: the sharply defined rubrics that newspapers seek to impose on the material turn out to be wholly inadequate; the same topics therefore appear under the most diverse headings (see Latour 1993, 1–3). What Latour calls the "proliferation of hybrids" (Latour 1993, ch.1.1) is just this breakdown of categories, which leads to paradox and aporia and threatens the modern principle of symmetry and order. It is thus the unacknowledged side of modernity.

Paradoxically, when Hamsun published his first novel *Sult* (Hunger) a year after his polemic article about Nansen, in 1890, he refused to use the subtitle "roman"

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<sup>5</sup> See Gunvald Hermundstad's short introduction to Hamsun's article (Hamsun 1998, 48) and Lorentzen 1996.



("novel") and thus to give his book a distinct genre classification. In a letter to his publisher Gustav Philipsen (from July 1890) he named a German psychiatrist who had written to him and proposed publishing the book as a scientific paper (see Hamsun 1994, 179).

### **Contingency**

Following Latour's argument, we can read Hamsun's polemic against the "Nansen humbug" (Hamsun 1994, 138–139) as a typical symptom, and an incisive testimony, of modernity. The surface operation of strict dichotomies (nature/culture, science/athleticism, masculine heroism/feminine admiration, etc.) masks an underlying network of interconnections, confluences, and boundary-crossings. The resulting hybrid formations lead to absurd consequences and induce important changes. And these changes are highly contingent. "When Nansen [...] returned," Hamsun writes,

the cheering could be heard from the citadel in Kristiania to the landing bridge in Kongsberg. And Nansen was quite surprised. For he did not know that the world had changed, while he was gone, in its behavior towards great men. Henceforth, it will honor athleticism as well as science.

Da [...] Nansen kom tilbage, jubled man slig, at det hørtes fra Fæstningen i Kristiania til Bryggen paa Kongsberg. Og Nansen undred sig saare. Thi han vidste ikke, at i den Tid, han var borte, havde Verden forandret sig mod sine store Mænd. Fra nu af vil den paaskjønne saavel Sport som Videnskab. (Hamsun 1998, 52)

Hamsun precedes this statement with a list of parallels to other "great men" who received no cheering for their heroic deeds, be they thinkers like Giordano Bruno, Sars the zoologist, or the skier Axel Paulsen. Why Nansen in particular? Only the combination of science and athleticism, Hamsun continues in his polemic, guarantees fame of mythic proportions, even though this combination is marked by the highest degree of contingency:

Again and again during the celebrations, genuinely great Norwegian scientists expressed the suspicion that Nansen's journey had served the sciences far more than he himself surmised, that he had made observations that for him – the zoologist – were meaningless but were all the more important for geologists and meteorologists; in other words, that he had made discoveries altogether obliviously. [...] The scientists whom Nansen served as if in his sleep – that is, unconsciously – were equipped by this trek across Greenland with the material for discoveries of which Nansen himself has no idea.

Rigtig store norske Videnskabsmænd har Gang paa Gang insinueret under Festlighederne, at Nansen ved sin Rejse har tjent Videnskaben langt mér, end han selv har Anelse om, at han har gjort Iakttagelser, som for ham – Zoologen – ingen Betydning har, men desto mér for Geologer og Meterologer, at han altsaa rent ubevidst har gjort Opdagelser. [...] De Videnskabsmænd, som Nansen nu har tjent isøvne, d.v.s. ubevidste, er altsaa ved Skituren over Grønland bleven meddelt et Materiale til Opdagelser, som Nansen selv ingen Anelse har om. (Hamsun 1998, 50)

By foregrounding the obliviousness with which discoveries, as it were, are forced upon Nansen by other scientists, Hamsun emphasizes the absurd and adventitious dimension of a science that finds “utility in everything” (Hamsun 1998, 50: “Nytte af alt”). Even though Nansen emphasized that he had made a primarily athletic achievement, “they [the scientists] continued to bombard him with the insult that he had discovered things about which he was ignorant, that is, that he had struggled through Greenland in scientific unconsciousness” (Hamsun 1998, 51: “Tvertimod vedblev de uafbrudt at bombardere ham med den Fornærmelse, at han havde opdaget Ting, som han ikke vidste om, d.v.s. at han altsaa havde maset videnskabelig bevidstløs paa Grønland.”)

Insofar as Hamsun presents the contingent dimension of Nansen’s success story as a historical and social problem, we can see here the beginnings of a diagnosis of “modernity as an established culture of contingency” (see Makropoulos 1998). To develop this diagnosis fully, however, would unfortunately go beyond the scope of this essay.

### **The Modern Dilemma in *Editor Lynge***

Instead, then, let us take a concluding look at the literary use to which Hamsun puts the peculiarly modern elements of hybridity and contingency found in the “Nansen humbug” in his novel *Editor Lynge (Redakteur Lynge)* of 1893. This novel, as already mentioned, explicitly refers to “a discovery expedition at the Pole” (Hamsun 2007, 133: “en ekspedisjon på oppdagelser ved polen”) as an aspect of the dreamed-up economic boom of Lynge’s newspaper. An ironic sense of megalomania, as well as a politically and morally questionable attitude in the newspaper editor, who will take any path toward success and reputation, are clear from the dubious characterization of the protagonist Lynge. At the same time, it is of course a sign of the modernity of newspaper journalism – in its celebration of what is *new* – that the polar expedition is mentioned in the same breath as industrial innovations (telegraph station, railroads). But even on the level of detail, hybridizations and contingency play a decisive role. Even the first sentence in the novel expresses contingency par excellence: “So much, so much can happen in the world...” (Hamsun 2007, 9: “Så mangt, så mangt som kan hende i verden...”).

Part of editor Lynge’s recipe for success is the newly introduced sports section, in which the city’s “Knights of the Bicycle” receive particular attention. But what is the real reason for the introduction of such a section? It is the editor’s desire to lavish a particular young lady with his attention and to pay her public compliments:

For one reason or another, the Gazette suddenly began to develop an interest in sports. It had long telegrams about races, and the names of the winners stood with explanation points in its columns and took up space so obtrusively that they had to be read by all. The ten or twelve cyclists of the city, all those who could ride anything at all, found in the Gazette their warmest friend, who ably defended them against all abuse; they got their own section in the paper, an official sports news section that was always studded with names of the racers. This was a new realm, a great new land that Lynges was making his own; every bicycle-riding retailer became his sworn-in subscriber, and pale teachers began to swing their arms and sway their shoulders as they made their round up and down the park. They looked terrifically sassy. One day the Gazette brought the piquant story that the daughter of a Norwegian colonel N.N. was seen in Copenhagen sitting on the coach box with her equipage driving four horses. What extraordinary youth! Two times already, the paper had had the chance publicly to admire Charlotte Ihlen on her bicycle.

Av en eller annen grunn begynte Gazetten også plutselig å interessere seg for sport, den hadde lange telegrammer om vedderitt, de seirendes navn stod med utroperbokstaver i dens spalter og gas en så påtrengende plass at de måtte leses av alle. Byens ti tolv sykkelmennesker, alle som kunne ri på noe, fant i Gazetten den varmeste venn som forsvarte dem overlegent mot enhver miskjennelse, de fikk sin egen rubrikk i bladet, en formelig sportstidende som alltid struttet av kappløperes navn. Dette var et nytt område, et stort, nytt land som Lynges slo under sig, hver syklende handelsbetjent ble hans svorne abonnent, og bleke lærerinner begynte å slenge med armene og vugge med akslene på sine turer opp og ned over Slottsbakken. De så overmåte kjekke ut. En dag bragte Gazetten den lille pikante nyhet at den norske oberst N.N.s datter var sett i København sittende på bukken av sin ekvipasje og tøyende fire hester. For en fremragende ungdom! Allerede to ganger hadde bladet også hatt leilighet til offentlig å beundre Charlotte Ihlen på sykkelen. (Hamsun 2007, 66)

In just this way, Hamsun again and again ironically deflates the fads expressed in the newspaper and reveals the underlying banal and profanely personal motivations of the editor: his strivings for economic success, the push for subscriptions, and his sexually oriented narcissism. Indeed, the inspiration behind most of the editor Lynges's business-ideas is his hankering to get a young lady laid: "This man [...] whose firmness of principle had been proverbial for a long time [...] this man tottered in his soul at the sound of a woman's voice" (Hamsun 2007, 125: "Denne mann [...] hvis principfasthet i lange tider hadde vært et munnhell [...] denne mann vaklet i sin sjel ved klangen av en kvinnes røst").

Contingency shows up not only in Lynges's political fickleness, but also in the consequences of his arbitrary use of his power: for example, the professional fortunes and misfortunes of those whom Lynges hires, fires, and defames as demanded by his private interests. The conservative young Fredrik Ihlen, for instance, is the

exemplary victim of this arbitrariness, which, moreover, involves a form of hybridization, that is, the very blending of different rubrics that Bruno Latour used in order to demonstrate the “dilemma of modernity”. A scientific article by Fredrik Ihlen about species of berries is printed only because the left-leaning editor Lynge expects it will improve his own chances of success with Fredrik’s attractive sister Charlotte on the one hand, and on the other hand, with new readers or subscribers from the conservatives. He gives Ihlen’s article political charge by adding the subtitle “a national question”; and the biologist Ihlen is temporarily hired as a political journalist but fails miserably.

The modern dilemma – that is, the menacing conflation of natural science and society that results paradoxically from the “Great Divide” (the very condition of modernity’s success) – becomes clear not merely in the example of the newspaper but also in the individual fortunes of Hamsun’s literary characters. Their success and failure are highly dependent on the capriciousness of powerful individuals, which in turn is a consequence of the entanglement of political events and news releases with private proclivities and rivalries.

If varieties of berries become “a national question of two million” (Hamsun 2007, 54) and a charming “revelation” in a blue sports dress on a bicycle (Hamsun 2007, 51) causes the invention of a new section in the newspaper, Hamsun’s novel gives an ironic example of a hybrid and contingent modern institution that finds “utility in everything” (Hamsun 1998, 50). And if irony can be qualified as a strategy of “confusion, that is, the amalgamation of differential positions” (“Konfusion, also der Verschmelzung differenzieller Positionen”, Hammel 1996, 16), it appears to be the appropriate answer to the modern dilemma of the confusion of categories. Hamsun thus finds literary utility in the vehement denunciation of modern tendencies of hybridity and contingency – in the dilemma of modernity he himself is embroiled in.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have tried to show how Hamsun polemically criticizes the conflation of categories (especially science and athleticism) in modern polar hero-worship, and to what extent his polemic is a consequence of what Bruno Latour calls the dilemma of modernity: the attempt to maintain sharp divisions and categories that are undermined by an ineluctable formation of hybrids and boundary-crossings. My aim was to illuminate these main points of Hamsun’s irritation – hybridity and contingency – as typical symptoms of modernity, and to examine how they gain enhanced literary value by being reflected in his literary work (exemplified in his novel *Editor Lynge*).

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**Summary**

Knut Hamsun's polemic about the Norwegian Nansen cult round 1889 (on the occasion of Fridtjof Nansen's ski crossing of Greenland), which he published in a newspaper article titled "Meditations on Nansen" ("Nansen-Betragtinger"), was mainly directed against the public enthusiasm for sportive records as a typical modern trend, whose pointless absurdity Hamsun shows in an incisive and specifically provocative way. His critique is primarily aimed at a kind of hero worship that in his opinion is out of all proportion to the uselessness of the expedition's results. Thus, "a daredevil, well finished adventure, a breakneck act, a sports affair, a lucky strike," as he outlines Nansen's venture, becomes the basis for a mass hysteria whose driving forces are invested in the signatures of modernity. The fascination of crossing the line and of extreme forms of progress in "both sports and science", their entanglement as an example for the "proliferation of hybrids" (Latour 1993), and the contingent dimension of success stories are symptoms of modernity that Hamsun is polemically engaged with. In conclusion, I investigate to what extent Hamsun ironically refers to these symptoms in his novel *Editor Lyngre (Redakteur Lyngre, 1893)*. My argument is supported by the assumption that Hamsun's vehement denunciation of such tendencies is owed to the fact that he himself is embroiled in them.

**Keywords**

Arctic enthusiasm, Knut Hamsun, Fridtjof Nansen, Bruno Latour, transgression, modernity, hybridity, contingency, *Editor Lyngre*.