

“GOING OFF THE BEATEN PATH: KNUT HAMSUN’S FORAYS INTO TRAVEL WRITING”


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Here I will examine Hamsun’s travel writing as a whole, from his many newspaper articles about America published before *The Cultural Life of Modern America* (*Fra det moderne Amerikas Aandsliv*, 1889)--his idiosyncratic and very personal reckoning with America--to his only real travelogue or travel book, *In Wonderland* (*I Æventyrland*, 1903), documenting his visit to the Russian Caucasus.ⁱ I do not propose a scholarly study of any one of these texts (which does not exclude an in-depth reading); rather, I will focus on some common themes as well as some fundamental and striking differences among these works, attempting to trace the evolution and scope of Hamsun’s travel writing. Although his only formal memoir, *On Overgrown Paths* (*Paa gjengrodde stier*, 1949), with its poetic title, does contain a few reminiscences about America, it does not qualify as travel writing as such because it is more fictional than autobiographical and factual and does not develop either a detailed description of a foreign land (the *sine qua non* of travel writing) or a sustained idea about the culture of the host nation. Finally, I will speculate on Hamsun’s creative use of the travel genre. As the term “foray” in my title suggests, there is something illicit and transgressive about Hamsun’s travel writing. He does not readily conform to the norms of the genre; rather, he transforms the genre to suit his own purposes by infusing a large dose of his idiosyncratic genius in everything he writes about the faraway lands he visits.

Interestingly, Knut Hamsun established himself as a first-rate author of travel literatureⁱⁱ early in his career, long before he gained a reputation as a uniquely talented, albeit eccentric, up-and-coming novelist, in 1889 to be exact, with the publication of *The Cultural Life of Modern America* (*Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*). Hamsun would be inspired by America time and again, trying his hand at myriad genres--newspaper articles, essays, novels and short stories, and autobiography--entertaining readers with his unique sense of humor and his compassionate yet psychologically insightful descriptions of everyday life and astute judgments on the distinctiveness not to say peculiarity of American culture.

Hamsun lived in the U.S. for about four years as a young man in the 1880s, in two separate stints of two years each, crisscrossing the Midwest. To be sure, Hamsun saw many different facets of the U.S., though, as Harald Naess points out, “Hamsun... spent his years in America in a pioneer district, where men and women after the struggle of the day devoted their time to nationalistic and religious trivialities” (Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 17). Small wonder that he treated American civilization “unfairly” in *The Cultural Life of Modern America* (Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 17), but why did he pursue the idiosyncrasies of American culture with a vengeance uncommon in most other European observers? Unlike his contemporary Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, whom Hamsun still admired “for his

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tremendous vitality in all things” (Quoted by Naess, *Knut Hamsun* v 5), who also lived briefly in the U.S. and was far more enthusiastic about the long-term prospects of American democracy, Hamsun had little opportunity to become personally acquainted with East coast Brahmin culture but nevertheless was a discerning observer capable of contributing original insights into the American character, still touching a raw nerve among many American readers today. Hamsun’s experiences in America were not all happy ones, which perhaps explains his sometimes frosty judgments, not to say bittersweet sense of humor tinged with an odd mix of nostalgia and disdain. In point of fact, Hamsun was one of the first Europeans to engage in this sort of love-hate relationship with the New World and to make it a central part of his literary oeuvre.

Finally, “unlike the overwhelming majority of his Scandinavian compatriots, Hamsun chose *not* to stay in the U.S. “I am a European, thank God,” (quoted by Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 17 and Nelson Current 10) he exclaimed upon his felicitous return to Scandinavia (Denmark); however, it would not be long before his feet began to itch again and he found his way back across the Atlantic. Like so many Norwegians, Hamsun was dirt-poor and aspired, quite literally, to make his fortune in America so that he could return to Norway as soon as possible and be able to live comfortably, drawing on his personal experiences in America to enrich his literary work. As we are all aware, many Scandinavians emigrated to the U.S. in the nineteenth century; by 1915 almost 800,000 Norwegians had emigrated to the New World, at a rate second only to Ireland’s in the percentage of total population. The overwhelming majority stayed. Ironically, Hamsun left Scandinavia at a time when Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians were contributing so much to world literature (Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 10). Just look at Ibsen, Strindberg, and Georg Brandes. Hamsun also wanted to defend Norwegian literature in America, in particular Bjørnson.

Hamsun went on to become a famous novelist, but much of his early writing--newspaper articles, literary vignettes, and various personal reminiscences--reflect his experiences in the American Midwest and articulate, albeit in embryonic form, several of his fundamental preoccupations, such as his deep-rooted distrust and suspicion of modernity, as well as a very pronounced taste for literary experimentation. In these pieces one also recognizes his particular brand of humor: a self-deprecating, frequently ironic, caustic and sometimes pugnacious and downright venomous wit that assails anything and anyone, be it the formidable and inimitable Mark Twain (for whom Hamsun had great respect [Nelson Current 1]) or the so-called values, i.e., national characteristics, customs, and institutions associated with America. Interestingly, both writers first made a name for themselves by denigrating the other’s culture in a hybrid form of travelogue, Twain in his thinly veiled polemic, *The Europeans*, Hamsun in the equally outspoken and sometimes vituperative *The Cultural Life of Modern America*.

Part I: America

The Cultural Life of Modern America is generically different from *In Wonderland* because it spans many years in terms of both content and actual production and reflects Hamsun’s thinking in the long term, after the fact; however, it still conforms to my

definition of travel writing. The same holds true of the selections in Richard Current Nelson's English-language collection of articles titled *Knut Hamsun Remembers America* (henceforth *KHRA*). Published in 2003, it brings together thirteen newspaper articles and stories about America, "narratives of life in America," and "later and fonder recollections of experiences in the U.S." (*KHRA* 13) from the period 1885-1949;ⁱⁱⁱ its scope covers much of the nonagenarian Hamsun's rich and multi-faceted life story.

Because *The Cultural Life of Modern America* is more well known than many of the pieces contained in Nelson's anthology I decided to focus on the latter^{iv} but let me begin by making just a few remarks about the former. Hamsun developed his early newspaper articles on America into a provocative collection of short essays titled *On The Cultural Life of America* (henceforth *CLMA*) published in 1889 in Copenhagen. After a series of lectures at the University of Copenhagen (a first version of which was given in Minneapolis in March 1888 [Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 16]), which were unusually well received by students and the general public alike, Hamsun, evidently, felt ready to go on an all-out offensive and publish his lectures. What did he have to lose? Hamsun was still struggling to succeed as an artist, and I imagine that his daily life was not at all unlike that of the protagonist described in his novel *Hunger*, so his lecture fees provided him with a small income. But a book naturally would produce great PR and help the author move to the next level. Hamsun clearly was ambitious and desperate to make the most of every opportunity. But it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which any of these essays were genuine social criticism and the degree to which they were street-smart self-promotion (*CLMA* xx). Hamsun certainly demonstrated an uncanny grasp of American publicity stunts when it came to advertising his book; however, at the same time, he overestimated the radicalism of his articles and the controversy they might stir up (*CLMA* xxi). To Hamsun's great surprise the book did not make much of a stir in Copenhagen (Ferguson 106) and he would later disavow his American articles altogether, saying that they did not reflect favorably on his reputation as a novelist, and flatly refused to have them published in a new edition (Ferguson 105). They remained out of print in any language (not counting a small Nazi-sponsored German edition that appeared during the War) and were not available until 1969, when Harvard UP brought out a complete English-language version edited by Barbara Gordon Morgridge.

Many of the pieces in Richard Current Nelson's anthology of Hamsun's American writings have never been published before in an English translation and are hard to find. Three pieces in particular stand out: *The American Character*, *New York City*, and *Festina Lente*; they give us a good sense of Hamsun's views on America and anticipate his very public reckoning with the great land in the west in *The Cultural Life of Modern America*.

Here I would like to accomplish two things: first, recount a few specifics regarding Hamsun's American odyssey and, second, look at a few of Hamsun's main grievances. The three articles just mentioned, although quite harsh and unforgiving in their tone, are representative of Hamsun's mindset and overall opinion of America. Although Hamsun had much to say about America that was good--he was impressed with Americans' helpfulness, generosity, inventiveness, and work ethic, for example--his views overall

were more negative than positive. Moreover, I would also like to look at Hamsun's ten-page article on Mark Twain, which offers some interesting insights not only into Hamsun's views on the state of American letters but also on those American values most closely associated with Twain, among them common sense, grass roots democracy, a suspicion of high culture, a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor, and a healthy skepticism toward authority in general. In these pages Twain emerges as the quintessentially American writer, for better or for worse.

As Isaac Bashevis Singer observed, "the whole modern school of fiction in the twentieth century stems from Hamsun." Hamsun is one of the earliest and, in my opinion, most important exponents of literary modernism. Much has already been written on the subject of Hamsun's literary modernism, but his essays on America have not attracted as much attention, which is a shame because they comment incisively on the complex relationship between the artist's vocation and the evolution of society toward "modernity." To what extent do writers or artists have to engage with contemporary society in their work?

Moreover, Hamsun's reflections on America are a welcome contribution to the current debate on American "unilateralism" and the role of the U.S. at the vanguard of the Western world. How will the uncontrolled growth of capitalism known as globalization and the concomitant explosion of cynical materialism ultimately affect the evolution of core values in the West? "God is forgotten, and the almighty dollar seems to be taking His place, and machinery provides no relief for the soul" (*KHRA* 132), Hamsun exclaims in frustration and speculates that American hubris and arrogance (neither of which is in short supply in today's world) will bring down another great nation in the end, just like history teaches us: "Ancient peoples... used their power, misused it, and fell to ruin" (*KHRA* 132). America has to learn to live in the world, with the world: "No more than any other country on the planet can America stand alone. America is not the world. America is a part of the world and must live its life together with all the other parts" (*KHRA* 136).

Richard Nelson Current's book is organized chronologically, the pieces selected falling into one of three categories: *Critical Reporting*, *Memory and Fantasy*, and *Mellow Reminiscence* (which includes a selection from Hamsun's 1949 memoir *On Overgrown Paths*). The *Critical Reporting* section includes articles that appeared in Norwegian or Danish newspapers soon after each of Hamsun's two visits to America and offers his views on a variety of American subjects. One also finds an intriguing essay on Mark Twain in which the Norwegian blasts Twain's gross ignorance and sharply rebukes him for writing his naïve and misinformed travelogue *Innocents Abroad*. *Memory and Fantasy* comprises narratives of life in America, most of which are presented as personal experiences but which actually are a blend of autobiography and fiction. *Mellow Reminiscence* includes later and more positive memories and impressions of the United States, half fiction, half autobiography. The reader familiar with Hamsun's major novels will rejoice in reading the short stories and vignettes included in this section, all of them written in Hamsun's inimitable anecdotal, often disjointed, and impressionistic style.

Obviously, Hamsun was always first and foremost a story teller who delighted in telling a story and in telling it well.

Hamsun's feelings about America and American ways were complex. Generally speaking, they were more negative than positive and found their way into many of his writings--mostly in his articles but also in his fiction. In *The Cultural Life of Modern America*, his first major book, he portrayed the United States as a land of gross and greedy materialism, populated by illiterates--cretins and ignoramuses--who were utterly lacking in artistic originality or refinement. Americans, he wrote, were ogres and morons who threatened the very fabric of Western culture. Although the pieces in this collection were not all anti-American, most of them emphasized the strangeness and vagaries of life in what he smugly called "Yankeeland." Although the term is derogatory, the author does not come across as overly aggressive vis-à-vis America but rather as mellow and even resigned: Things are what they are. His memories of life "over here" were not all bad (Hamsun grudgingly pays tribute to Americans' sense of initiative and entrepreneurship); however, the average American's ignorance and pride give him pause because they prevent him from acknowledging even the smallest foreign accomplishments, for example, that the common pocket knife is actually a Swedish invention (*KHRA* 10). Hamsun clearly established himself as an early and vocal critic of America because he identified modernity as a specifically American phenomenon; in point of fact, Hamsun himself was sometimes called a "Yankee" back home (Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 28) because of his literary modernism. Naess goes so far as to compare him to Peer Gynt, "who denounced the trolls but actually wrote their motto behind his ear, and lived accordingly" (Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 28). Many of Hamsun's observations were fashionably anti-American, and they are sure to catch the eye of more than one reader today, who will see his reaction to life in an urban metropolis like Chicago or New York City as an early manifestation of a school of America-bashing or anti-American writing that culminated in France during the last decades of the twentieth century. Interestingly, both English-language editions of his newspaper articles on the U.S. (edited by Morgridge and Nelson Current) are readily available in American university libraries, so clearly, Hamsun's thoughts on America in some small way *must* be relevant to a contemporary American audience.

Here and there, Hamsun also vents his Anglophobia, which would become notorious in the period between the wars, as well as a curious but very pronounced dislike of Irish Catholics and an almost equally passionate distrust of Mormons. Among other phenomena in the New World that attracted the ire of the great man were the power of women, the omnipresence of religious life, and the relative mediocrity of education. Every subject is controversial and sure to stir up passionate feelings even today, despite the fact that we have a tendency to forgive and forget prejudice that stems from ignorance--especially in the case of an up-and-coming writer of genius such as Hamsun.

Let us look now at the article titled "The American Character." This article was first published in *Aftenposten* in January 1885, a few months after Hamsun returned from his first visit to America, and presents in embryonic form the criticisms Hamsun would later develop in *The Cultural Life of Modern America*. Here is the opening paragraph, which

sets the tone of Hamsun's article and anticipates his many grievances against the great country in the west:

On the other side of the ocean lies a country as big as twenty kingdoms and incomparably rich--America, the Millionaires' Republic. People here in Norway are acquainted with it from geography lessons, America letters, and published lectures. I have been over there and have just come back. I went as a young man full of enthusiasm for the world's freest country and people, abounding in confidence that its society was sound. By the time I left, a few years later, my enthusiasm and my faith had been badly shaken. The same thing will happen to others. We live up here in the hills that rise like a second story above other European lands. Now and then a din carries from down below, from the noisy, lively, lusty world. We feel the impact of the storm's exhilarating gust, and we are excitedly drawn along with it. This is the result of the America letters and the lectures. So we leave home--with preconceived notions and great expectations. And we are often disappointed. Not in the hope of making money, for anybody can do that over there, nor in our appetite for a lot of food. No, our disappointment is strictly a matter of morality; it comes when our eyes are opened to the base, disreputable ways, the terrible abuse of what is legally permissible. We then get a sense of the danger that arises from the mixing of different kinds of people in a free, uncontrolled, capricious environment. (*KHRA* 17)

Hamsun is frustrated by the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the potential of the American Dream, what he calls "America's principles" (*KHRA* 18), and, on the other, everyday life in America. Hamsun calls the Declaration of Independence "one of the noblest documents of history" (*KHRA* 18), not only because of its emphasis on humanity and freedom but also because it is "the first declaration in accordance with which a group of people has actually tried to practice independence, not only with respect to other countries but also among themselves" (*KHRA* 18).

However, Hamsun is disappointed by the reality he finds in this great land across the ocean, where the morality of the American people falls short. "The principles do not deliver what they promise" (*KHRA* 18), he states rather matter-of-factly. This is due both to the selfishness of Americans, who take liberties (for example, double-parking [*KHRA* 20]) and, more importantly, to their ethnic make-up. An inscription on the base of the Statue of Liberty urges the world to give America its "poor, hungry and huddled masses," but Hamsun does not see this generosity on the part of a young nation with uncertain prospects as a source of American greatness or as anything to be proud of. Quite the contrary: he warns of the danger of "the mixing of different kinds of people in a free, uncontrolled, capricious environment" (*KHRA* 17). "The danger is all the greater in America, where shiploads of immigrants--diseased and degenerate human raw material--stream in every day from all over the world" (*KHRA* 17-18). With hindsight it

is easy to recognize in such dire predictions the racist overtones of Hamsun's later philosophy of self-reliance and wariness of modern civilization.

To Hamsun, America represents the very worst of modernity; he coins the catchy term "Machinelust" (*KHRA* 21), by which he means not only technical ingenuity ("powers of invention") but also "boldness of enterprise, and rage of speculation" (*KHRA* 21). Hamsun marvels at the extravagance of modern American city life, at the extraordinary things he sees every day (skyscrapers, streetcars, department stores, elevators, etc.) but at the same time, clearly is scared of their potential to disrupt a more traditional way of life, suggesting that technical prowess is good only if it can somehow be harnessed and not become the moral foundation of an entire civilization, a brave new world with no ties with the past. Think of the precarious position of the protagonist in *The Growth of the Soil* who rejoices over each little invention that saves him time and effort and, at the same time, is threatened by the relentless forces of modernity represented by the insatiable prospectors, who return each spring with ever more sophisticated machinery looking for more riches hidden deep in the earth.

The problem with America, as Hamsun sees it, is that the much celebrated principle of liberty translates into actual liberties, and by that Hamsun means that Americans are a "people taking liberties" (19), practicing their freedom by doing exactly as they please--with disastrous results, of course, since Americans are not *morally* prepared to handle their freedom responsibly. Americans are obsessed with the relentless struggle to get ahead in life, at the expense of their neighbor, and to make the most of every opportunity.

The Americans are a restless, ambitious people. It is as if gigantic wheels were driving their whole existence with roaring speed. Once they hit upon an idea for getting ahead, they pursue it compulsively, working as hard as a slave, with boundless hope and great leaps of faith. People in other countries may be said to be engaged in a struggle for well-being--for a kind of carnivorous, satiating existence, with the ability to afford intense sensual pleasures along with fat horses and rich food. (*KHRA* 20)

"Onward, onward! is the eternal cry, and onward they go eagerly, greedily" (*KHRA* 21). Thus Americans accumulate wealth but pay the price by remaining underdeveloped, morally speaking. Small wonder, then, that the "typical American has no real artistic sense or substantial literary, religious, political, or social interests" (*KHRA* 20). Finally, Hamsun makes this dire prediction: "It is a historic impossibility for America, *with the same kind of citizens (sic)* to survive as long as other nations" (*KHRA* 18).

The essay "The American Character" and the other pieces that make up Hamsun's American *oeuvre* offer penetrating, if not sometimes cruel, insights into contemporary American life, several of which are still relevant today, pertaining for example, to the importance of money in politics and the debate on illegal immigration. His vivid, though frequently distorted, image of America should at least make us think. Crass materialism continues to reign supreme and, if anything, money is an even greater part of politics today. Americans still argue about the outcome of presidential elections because despite

our “Machinelust” they seem to be unable to conduct them properly. Just look at Florida in 2000 or Ohio in 2004.

Moving on to “New York City” (first published on February 12 and 14, 1885, in *Aftenposten*). Unsurprisingly, the narrator is taken in by the impressive scale of everything American, which, needless to say, is the biggest in the world. In more ways than one, Americans “are the greatest on the planet” (*KHRA* 30). But unlike in the previous article, where Hamsun commits non-PC, Donald Trump-like gaffes in every other paragraph, there is not much here to pique our interest or offer additional insight into Hamsun’s thinking about America even though he remains an unwavering critic of life in the modern metropolis. Hamsun is content to offer what amounts to a bird’s eye-view of everyday life in New York City, reviewing a potpourri of basic facts readily available without going into any real detail, covering topics such as the sprawling cityscape of Manhattan, arts and entertainment, education, housing, the harsh working and living conditions of the working class, etc. Hamsun clearly is no friend of the general populace and holds the average American in low esteem, if for no other reason than that he is poor and uneducated and given to the pleasures of his class, such as alcohol and womanizing. But, like everywhere in America, it is possible to work your way up, so even if you start out as a common thief it is perfectly possible to end up a gentleman with a valuable estate and a castle into the bargain (*KHRA* 27). At any rate, nobody has any time for you in this chameleon city where fortunes can be made and broken in one day; everyone is simply too busy going about their business, determined to move up in the world.

Moreover, New Yorkers, like Americans generally, “know little about literature or art” (*KHRA* 29) and have a hopelessly romantic idea of what constitutes good literature: a happy ending where the two main protagonists “get each other” (*KHRA* 29). Small wonder that they do not recognize the genius of a Walt Whitman and make a big deal about Longfellow’s (in Hamsun’s opinion) juvenile descriptions of random trees. The future author of *Pan*, the Norwegian Rousseau, is duly scandalized by the naiveté and conventional character of Longfellow’s nature descriptions. Otherwise, the most memorable incident recorded in New York is the narrator’s encounter with a poor bum whom he tries to help in myriad ways only to be tricked in the end, as if to say that in New York City everyone is out to make a buck and you had better watch your back, illustrating that quintessentially American proverb “there is a sucker born every minute.”

The third piece in Nelson’s collection, *Festina Lente* (literally, “make haste slowly”) is more interesting than the former insofar as it is so much more revealing of Hamsun’s profound thoughts about America. Published in 1928, during the heyday of the author’s fame, it reiterates Hamsun’s well-known criticism of American materialism but also goes on to predict that eventually American abuse of power will lead to the decline and fall of American civilization. It is not immediately clear what the narrator means but one can assume that he is wary of technology because it comes at the expense of the “spirit” (*KHRA* 132), which he defines as the ability to rest content with the status quo. Once again, Hamsun’s wariness of modern civilization (of which America, naturally, forms the vanguard) asserts itself at the expense of his common sense. But with such an

attitude where would western civilization be today? Hamsun himself uses a mechanical plow on his farm Nørholm! Surely, Hamsun does not mean to say that the Berber nomads in the desert he has just described shrugging their shoulders the first time they encounter an airplane are an example to follow (*KHRA* 132). But no doubt he has a point “Progress--what is it? Is it the ability to drive faster on the roads? No, no, that would leave a deficit in the balance sheet of human accounting. Progress is the needed rest for the body and serenity for the soul. Progress is the well-being of humanity” (*KHRA* 138). After Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic, apparently many people thought that he should automatically be offered the presidency of the United States; Hamsun, politely, begs to differ, reminding readers of the obvious: Lindbergh is hardly qualified to be President just because he flew across the Atlantic solo. In America there appears to be an unrealistic expectation that a strong performance must result in an instant reward.

Next Hamsun extols Americans’ virtues, such as their generosity and helpfulness (*KHRA* 134-136) but then turns abruptly to literature and the fine arts in America, where curiously he reverses the blanket condemnations he has made repeatedly in numerous venues, suggesting that he has spent his time wisely since returning from America to read as many of the American masters as possible and somehow make up for the hopelessly naïve and unfair judgments he pronounced in his first American articles. “The arts have risen to great heights, the pictorial at being rich and full of talent, and literature flowing, in particular the recent novelistic literature, which in the States is the freshest and most original in the world, a renaissance and a model for Europe” (*KHRA* 136). To whom Hamsun is referring is unclear--he does not say--but at least he has done his homework since returning home. In 1928, Hamsun extols the *élan vital* (life force) of American literature (Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 21), confirming the obvious, namely that he was far more accommodating of innovation in literature than he ever was of radical politics and political experimentation.

Hamsun’s reflections on American letters are equally provocative, especially his essay on Mark Twain. However, Hamsun’s perceptive insights on Twain are complicated by what appears to be an inferiority complex on his part. If Twain had been aware of the up-and-coming Norwegian writer’s feelings toward him, one might talk of a rivalry; however, a literary rivalry, like in any game, assumes more than one player at the same level. As anyone who has ever read Hamsun is well aware, his impressionistic, anecdotal style emulates Twain’s. And his interest in what Cultural Studies today call “tramp life” is distinctly American and reminiscent of Twain. Why, August in the novel *Vagabonds* (*Landstrykere*) is a character straight out of *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*.

Hamsun is loath to admit a debt to Twain because he bears a grudge against him for what he, mistakenly, considers his cavalier dismissal of the Old World in his hugely successful travelogue *Innocents Abroad* (1869), a book that helped launch Twain’s career. As a young man, Twain had set sail for Europe and the Holy Land with the first organized pleasure party ever assembled for a transatlantic voyage and produced a travel book upon his return. This is an interesting parallel, which sets the stage for an imaginary rivalry between the two writers. Twain’s first success was a travel book about Europe, Hamsun’s a book of essays about America. Critics asked, “Who was Twain to

criticize 2000 years of European civilization?" But the same question could be asked of Hamsun: Who was this peasant from tiny Norway with his haughty, aristocratic demeanor to talk about America with such authority and such condescension?

Now, it is doubtful that Hamsun read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which was published the year before he wrote his article on Twain, and one wonders if he understood Twain very well in the first place. For starters, Hamsun's grasp of English was never very solid, and much of Twain's tongue-in-cheek irony therefore might have eluded him. Still, Hamsun is very well aware of the originality of Twain's language, which is "a mixture of the most diverse localism and neologisms--powerful, sinewy, audacious expressions--like new shoots on linguistic stems. He has taken up, studied, and made use of American folk language, which blends everyday speech with Indian terms and with immigrant dialects" (KHRA 56). Moreover, Hamsun's experience of what might be called *l'Amérique profonde*, i.e., Twain's America, was limited, to say the least. Hamsun was never quite the authority on America that he imagined himself to be, though many of his comments are thought-provoking and not without merit. But Twain, too, gave us many keen insights into Europe. For example, his remark that the French emperor Napoleon III might have been an *American* for all his "energy, endurance, and spirit of enterprise" (54) is right on target, though he was not the first to make that point. Let me take you through Hamsun's article and make a few points along the way. Hamsun is quite right to argue that America as a young nation has not yet had the self-indulgent leisure to pursue the arts, always being obsessed with what he calls "material interest" and "social importance and influence" (KHRA 45). Small wonder that only one American painter thus far has been awarded a gold medal at the Paris Exhibition. However, this hardly justifies Hamsun's caustic remark: "this only goes to show that, among 51 million Americans, one was finally found who could paint a picture with some content in it" (KHRA 45). According to Hamsun, American letters are hardly in better shape, having produced only three writers of any note: Longfellow, Bryant, and Whitman, and they are too influenced by English models to be able to express a distinctly American character. Not so Mark Twain, whose language is highly original and who has given "humorous writing" (KHRA 46) or American humor writing (KHRA 48) its *lettres de noblesse*. "Absorbed as the American is with his material striving, and preoccupied as he is with his busy life on the gallop, he still has time to read the newspapers--and the *humorists*" (KHRA 46), who include Twain, Bret Harte, Washington Irving, Holmes, Lowell, and Artemus Ward. Other, arguably better writers, such as Emerson and Poe, gather dust on the book shelves because the average American has neither the time nor the patience to read them as they deserve to be read. "The American in general is more inclined to the comic, to noisy fun, than to introspective meditations" (KHRA 47). Hamsun assumes that Twain reflects the shallowness and crassness of American cultural life. In all fairness to Hamsun, however, I should point out that he would later express admiration for the achievements of American arts and letters; but, as stated above, he never was interested in reediting any of his earlier writings about America.

Hamsun correctly identifies travel as Twain's main source of inspiration. Twain's keen observation, coupled with his "bold and natural truthfulness" (KHRA 50), explains his "unpredictable" and "startling" (KHRA 48) images and comparisons. And his irreverent laughter is contagious: "Twain is no introspective man, no fine ironist who stands there with a supercilious smile and makes cutting remarks; he comes out roaring with laughter--and strikes" (KHRA 49). However, Hamsun is wrong when he asserts matter-of-factly that "Twain is by no means a European author, interested in finding veiled meanings, hidden thoughts. He is simply a straightforward, fun-loving American who no doubt can mock and scoff but who knows the people he is writing for, and most of them only want to be amused" (KHRA 50). There *is* plenty of food for thought in *Innocents Abroad*. Twain's style is direct and unpolished at times, very often satirical, usually superior and condescending, but many of his observations are not entirely off the mark. Twain is an American through and through, for better or for worse. He "exposes his narrow-mindedness and his undeveloped philosophy of life, while he also shows himself to be, by virtue of his nationality, a genuine Son of Freedom, a democrat, in contradistinction to the unfree and downtrodden (and superstitious) people he meets on his travels" (KHRA 51).

Hamsun is right, though, in asserting that Twain was ill-equipped to judge the peoples and civilization of Europe. Says Hamsun: "[Twain] came from a remote part of a country itself remote, from his beloved miners, ...uneducated, hard-fisted bandits... Now he was sailing out into the world to look at European life and art! How did he react to the new and great things he got to see? Quite consistently, as a humorist and an ignoramus" (KHRA 51). On the other hand, the same charges of prejudice and xenophobia could be leveled against Hamsun who, just to quote one example, described the English as "old, rude, arrogant, decadent, and kept from pederasty only by their fear of a young Germany" (Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 93).

However, as even a cursory reading of *Innocents Abroad* suggests, Twain did appreciate much of what he saw (especially in France and Italy, but much less so in the Holy Land). At times he did make fun of his hosts and he lacked the "education, experience, and perspective to judge" (KHRA 52) European civilization. But, he did admire the Raphaels in the Vatican Museum, which is more than can be said about his Italian-born guides who had nothing but scorn for Raphael, considering him one notch above the barbaric painters of the Middle Ages. So Hamsun is not quite fair when he states that Twain was "utterly incapable of appreciating the art" (KHRA 52) of the Old World. Nor is it accurate to suggest that "if lava should bury an American city (like it did Pompeii), we would hardly find a single ruin of any significance under the ashes" (KHRA 53). America is not without culture, though for obvious reasons there are no authentic Gothic cathedrals in "Yankeeland."

The bottom line is still that Twain could not do justice to Europe. Hamsun rightly concludes that Twain's travel book is full of humor and spirit, witty thoughts and paradoxes, but is marred by poor observation, unclear thinking and bad polemic (KHRA 54). Although Hamsun may be right in dismissing Twain's critique of America as shallow and superficial, he could have expressed himself with a little more grace and

empathy. Perhaps it is Hamsun's attachment to the Old World that explains his anger toward Twain; perhaps it is a sense of professional jealousy and entitlement as a bona fide intellectual European. Whatever the reason, Hamsun does not readily acknowledge that one can learn anything from Twain's European odyssey. However, at the same time as he was preparing his article on Twain, Hamsun was hoping to deliver some public lectures of his own and was curious about Twain's success as a speaker; he seldom attracted more than a handful of sometimes very drunken Scandinavian farmers to his own lectures in the American boondocks. Is this why Hamsun dismisses Twain the public speaker? "Twain's speeches are entertaining but have absolutely no content" (KHRA 55). Nevertheless, Hamsun did not lose the opportunity to see Twain in action and attended one of his public lectures in New York.

Part II: *In Wonderland*

Turning to *In Wonderland* (henceforth *IW*)^v let me speak first about the trip itself before going on to address some issues raised by this fanciful and unusual text, which one authority rather dismisses, as it were, and simply calls Hamsun's "Georgian work" ("georgiske verk" [Loria 22]). Much like the play *Queen Tamara (Dronning Tamara)* about Georgia's famed queen, Kahaber, Loria considers *In Wonderland* a work of pure fiction and a miscalculation of sorts due primarily to the author's financial difficulties. In point of fact, Hamsun would never reread the work or, for that matter, produce another major travel work. As Kahaber Loria states in his authoritative article on the subject, Hamsun remains popular in Georgia but not on account of his Georgian writings but rather thanks to the purely fictional works that earned him the Nobel Prize in literature (Loria 31). Loria reluctantly agrees that to some extent this is still a travel journal (Loria 35) but nevertheless insists that *In Wonderland* is most definitely more fictional than autobiographical and calls it a mysterious "poetiske komposisjon" (Loria 37) that has more in common with Hamsun's novel *Mysterier* than with a bona fide travel journal, such as the one by world-famous Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) titled *Gjennom Kaukasus till Volga* (1929). Nansen actually visited the same countries as Hamsun but in reverse order (Loria 36).

In 1898, Hamsun and his new wife, Bergljot Goepfert (née Bech) settled in Finland, in the capital of Helsinki (Finland became a part of Russia in 1809), where Hamsun gave an occasional lecture and where they had friends in intellectual milieus, such as Adolf Paul, Birger Mörner, Elias Kuhlefelt, and Karl Adolf Tavastjerna (Kolloen 92) but not, I should add, the composer Jean Sibelius, who, unlike the others, was known worldwide (it appeared that they had gotten off on the wrong foot). By then, the 38-year old Hamsun had received a literary scholarship (Ferguson 181; Kolloen 93) from the Norwegian government, allegedly in the name of science (or so Hamsun writes at the beginning of his travelogue, where he claims that he was expected to write what he calls a "scientific report of his travels," including photographs, perhaps in an attempt to reinforce his credentials as an author. Henning Waerp presents strong evidence that the fellowship of 1500 Norwegian crowns was from the Ministry of Church and Education^{vi} (Waerp 240, 245- 247) and that the fellowship came without any expectation to write

any kind of report. At any rate, the fellowship was a godsend to the destitute author but Hamsun decided, oddly enough, to begin his foreign sojourn in the cultural backwaters of Finland of all places, and in the middle of winter, which he might have spent in a much more temperate place, such as Paris or Munich. Instead of enjoying the good life on the Left Bank or in the Englischer Garten he lived on a remote island in the outer harbor of Helsinki, in Råholmen (Kolloen 94), where his wife found herself washing clothes in a “groove cut in the ice” (Ferguson 182). His marriage had been on the rocks for some time, and the trip East, to which he had been looking forward to for so long, did nothing to repair the relationship. Throughout, he simply refers to his wife as “my travel companion,” and never includes her point of view, likes and dislikes. No one should be surprised that the couple eventually divorced in 1906.

The Hamsuns set out for Russia in early September and crossed the Russian border unmolested. Hamsun had recently published an article critical of the Czar’s plans to further Russify Finland, and he feared that he might not be admitted or worse (Hamsun, *IW* 101). A Leitmotif in the book, in fact, is our Norwegian traveler’s continuous harassment by a man who says he is with the Russian secret police but turns out to be a scam artist intent on scaring Hamsun into paying a bribe in order to escape arrest for subversive activity.

From St. Petersburg the Hamsuns travel to Moscow and on to Tiflis (present-day Tbilisi, capital of Georgia) before reaching their final destination, Baku, situated further east on the Caspian Sea. The Hamsun’s continue to Constantinople from where they return home. The trip lasts less than a month and the couple is back in Copenhagen, the unofficial but nevertheless *de facto* cultural capital of Norway, by the end of September of that year.

Hamsun’s travel writings are as much about the places he describes as about himself (Hamsun, *IW* 13). As Robert Ferguson writes in his 1987 biography of Hamsun, this “is probably one of the most highly subjective travel books ever written” (Ferguson 182). To be sure, Hamsun feels obliged to pay tribute to the travel genre and describe the occasional church or castle; however, as Ferguson rightly states, it is clear that he does not give a hoot about the conventions of the travel genre (Ferguson 187) and only wants to do what he does best, which is to write. The real pleasure for the reader is the encounters, both real and imaginary, which the narrator makes along the way and which spur some of his finest creative writing.^{vii} Moreover, this is his only “real” trip (“den eneste Rejse jag har gjort i mit Liv” [quoted by Waerp 241]) as his travels to both Paris and America in large part came about for other reasons. As Henning Waerp writes, quoting Hamsun: “I Amerika var han vagabond og løsarbejder, og i Paris var han kunstner, det var ikke reisen for reisens skyld some hade drevet ham till disse stedene” (Waerp 241).

Here, let me speculate on Hamsun’s reasons for writing this book. The question before us is: “Why travel?” As far as Hamsun is concerned, the answer, not surprisingly, is to escape the tedium of everyday life at home but also to find the peace of mind necessary to think, to reminisce about places in his past, especially in his childhood (Kolloen 92, 95) of which he is reminded, and, last but not least, to find himself... elsewhere. And

that is the paradox of the travel genre. As is the case with Jack Kerouac and others like him, who enjoy the novelty and, oddly, the security of being on the road, the trip itself is more important than the destination. “On the road again. Goin’ places that I’ve never been. Seein’ things that I may never see again. And I can’t wait to get on the road again,” sings Willie Nelson in one of his most famous songs and no one could agree more than Hamsun. The narrator of *In Wonderland* confides: “Again I roam the streets, but I don’t know where I am and what direction to take to my hotel. It’s a wonderful feeling; I’m lost—nobody who hasn’t experienced it knows how delicious it is. I have, on my own, taken advantage of my legal right to go astray” (Hamsun, *IW* 30). And again: “I feel at home here, being away from home and accordingly in my element (Hamsun, *IW* 32). Like the mountain climber who feels compelled to ascend a mountain simply because it is there, Hamsun travels because he has to, because he cannot resist the inner urge to embrace what I would venture to call the Baudelairean Other: “Mon enfant, ma soeur, songe à la douceur d’aller là-bas” (Baudelaire, “L’Invitation au Voyage”). Admittedly, this desire is hardly original. “When people ask the reason for my journeys, I usually reply that I know what I am getting away from, but not what I am looking for,” Montaigne wrote back in the sixteenth century.

What makes Hamsun’s account interesting is not only the window it provides on Hamsun’s evolution as a writer and a human being--producing what Ferguson rightly calls “self-portraits” (Ferguson 188)--but also the fact that readers delight in recognizing the various techniques and topoi associated with Hamsun’s brand of genius, chief among them the uncanny ability to successfully go off on a tangent without losing the thread. The only other writer with a similar mastery of the art of digression I can think of is Mark Twain who, of course, was a favorite of Hamsun’s and, I believe, influenced him deeply. Through a cleverly inserted digression here and there Hamsun is able to sneak in, through the back door, as it were, what he really wants to talk about, which is himself and to give free expression to his hyperactive imagination and share with us his wildest daydreams. Just listen to this account of how he goes AWOL from a small overnight station somewhere in the Caucasus, on his way to Tiflis (Tbilisi), steals a horse and, like the Greek hero Bellerophon on the magnificent winged horse Pegasus, rides off into the mountains where he meets with incredible adventure:

Restless and unable to sleep one night, he wanders around the small overnight station where they have just arrived. Some distance from the village, he comes across a group of men standing around a fire on which horse flesh is roasting, and some sort of alcoholic concoction brewing. They offer him the meat to taste, but he refuses, explaining he has a fever. Somehow or other they contrive to understand him, and assure him that horse flesh is actually precisely what he needs if he wants to be rid of his fever. He bites away at his steak, and takes hearty swigs of the unknown brew offered him, and then wanders on. Later in the evening, still restless, he steals a tethered horse, and rides it up into the mountains. Coming to a small, remote farm he disarms the suspicious farmer with his usual gesture of friendship, the offer of a cigarette, and presently is

being shown round the house. Ridiculous ideas come into his head. He imagines himself a very serious, scientific person come to make a serious investigation of the house. A great desire to investigate the kind of roofs to be found in such houses overcomes him; but the sight of two women sleeping up under the roof distracts him, and he begins to fantasize about these two women. One of them is the farmer's favorite wife, actually a beautiful and alluring woman; he resolves to steal her from the farmer. But she refuses to go with him; she says he isn't her type. He avenges himself by making fun of her husband's hat, calling it the most ridiculous hat he's ever seen. In the midst of all this fantasizing the farmer shows him into a room where two bear cubs are lying curled up in a nest of bracken, and offers to sell him one. 'From curiosity over the price of Caucasian bears,' Hamsun engages in a kind of bargaining with him. The man's last offer is fifteen scratches in the ground with his knife. 'Fifteen scratches in the ground for one bear cub? Never!' cries Hamsun, and closes the adventure in disgust" (Ferguson 84-185; the same passage is related on pages 84-93 *In Wonderland*).

The frequent fever attacks that beset the narrator explain the exalted character of his dreams; on the other hand, the author of *Hunger* and *Pan* hardly needs any "paradis artificiels" (Baudelaire) to compose, so there is likely no cause and effect relationship between fever and literature, as some readers have argued.

In Wonderland raises several important issues. While some readers may object to this work being called a travel book because of the imbalance between fact and fiction *In Wonderland*, nevertheless, constitutes a travel journal. Just like there exists a category of autobiography that is intellectual rather than strictly personal and intimate and skips over the author's childhood and coming of age, so too there ought to be room for a fanciful travel genre that glosses over strictly factual details in favor of an imaginative account of a foreign land's power to stir the traveler's imagination or, as is the case with Hamsun's American articles, his critical thinking. Henning Waerp, quoting Dennis Porter, suggests that the author of a travel narrative need not observe a strictly organized and referential narrative and be free to focus on that which he finds interesting (Waerp 244).

In point of fact, Hamsun was not one to fret over genre and frequently violates or at least transgresses the boundaries set by theoreticians, such as Philippe Lejeune, whose monumental work on autobiography clearly establishes that there exists a wide gamut of autobiographical writing, from the very traditional to the experimental. The only requirement is that the author clearly acknowledge what he calls a "pacte autobiographique," that is, an explicitly avowed bond among author, narrator, and main character (Lejeune 15). *On Overgrown Paths* is not a formal autobiography any more than *In Wonderland* is a formal travel journal; the former does not contain an account of Hamsun's childhood and adolescence (required components of a classical autobiography); and the latter is far removed from the kind of works typically found under the rubric "travel writing."

Second, everything suggests that Hamsun succumbed to an “eastern attraction” early on in life, reinforced by his reading of the Russian classical authors, such as Tolstoi and Dostoevski (Waerp 241). In the most recent biography of Hamsun, Ingar Sletten Kolloen writes that Hamsun’s fascination with Russia can “be traced back to his childhood in northern Norway during which fishermen who brought Russian grain to be ground at his father’s mill had the most fantastic stories to tell about the Russian empire,” precisely the kind of stories that might make a mark on a sensitive and precocious child. Hamsun longed to visit this mysterious land that extended far beyond Europe into Asia (Hamsun, *IW* 7) and covered more than 1/6 of the earth’s landmass. Hamsun’s Orientalism, if that is what it is, is as much about seeking inspiration in the Orient as it about using the Orient as a polemical contrast to the decadent, overly rational and materialistic West. Either way, the result is a polarization of differences between East and West, real and imagined.

Then there is the fatalism and “stoic attitude toward life” (Hamsun, *IW* 9), coupled with a passivity which one normally associates with the East and which some biographers trace back to the “equally fatalistic religion of (Hamsun’s) childhood” (Hamsun, *IW* 7). In a Russian context, this same passive attitude toward life is sometimes called Tolstoyian and presumably helps explain the Russian peasant’s historic acceptance of suffering and social injustice, his “grin-and-bear it” attitude. Hamsun disliked Tolstoy intensely, as evidenced in *Mysteries* and elsewhere, remaining forever suspicious of the patrician idealism of the Brahmin-like Tolstoi. As Abraham Coralnik writes: “Hamsun can see no sense in delving into problems, in moralizing, in hand-wringing, in preaching” (Coralnik 312). On the other hand, Hamsun appears to be influenced by Tolstoi’s portrayal of the simple man and is commonly regarded as the bard of the so-called “simple” way of life (that is, twelve or more hours of back-breaking labor in the fields to eke out a living unless he loses it all to what we today would call venture capitalists). This nostalgic vision of virtuous peasant life is intimately associated with his 1917 novel *Markens Grøde*, which won Hamsun the Nobel Prize for literature in 1920, but this epic novel can also be more fruitfully explored as a violent contrast to that other Hamsun persona, by which I mean the inveterate critic of the highly industrialized and largely uncultured America (of which England was only a more civilized avatar). In his American travel writings almost three decades earlier Hamsun had decried the modern way of life, a public stance that would lead him right into the arms of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and make of Hamsun not only the most well known Norwegian but also the most prestigious intellectual anywhere to collaborate with the Nazis. When the narrator finally arrives in the oil city of Baku what does it remind him of if not America? He condemns American-style modernity that he sees as a nihilistic abomination, which ruins any and every tradition in the name of profit:

The noise of machinery wasn’t originally part of this place; America has desecrated it and brought its roar into the sanctuary. For here is the seat of the ‘eternal fire’ of Antiquity. There is no place hereabouts where one can escape America: the drilling method, the lamps, even the distillate gasoline--it’s all

America. The Maccabees burned ‘the thick water’ only for purification of the temple. And when we have become tired of the noise and half blinded by the natural gas and prepare to leave the place, we go back a Robert Fulton kind of boat. (Hamsun, *IW* 162-163)

To think that this supposedly was the “spot from which Christianity received its poetic notion of the ‘eternal fire’” (Hamsun, *IW* 163) upsets Hamsun greatly, who feels outraged by the scandalous transformation of Baku from religious shrine to industrial hub.

Speaking of Russian literature, of course, Hamsun was far less influenced by Tolstoy than by Dostoevsky and his notion of the so-called “gratuitous act.” Lieutenant Glahn in *Pan* is a modernistic avatar of Raskolnikov, a twenty-something overly emotional youth who unceremoniously throws the beautiful Edvarda’s shoe into the water on a boating trip if for no other reason than because he felt like it and could.

Finally, there is Hamsun’s well known anti-Semitism which rears its ugly head time and again in this short work. As Sverre Lyngstad writes in his magisterial introduction to *In Wonderland*: “Although racial and national stereotypes are often laced with humor, no stylistic niceties can redeem the cruel, atavistic stamp of these passages” (Hamsun, *IW* 10). In addition, the question of Hamsun’s collaboration with the Nazis is never far away and remains a problem for many readers (not all of them avid readers of Hamsun), witness the controversy surrounding the sesquicentennial of his birth in 2009.

In Wonderland is an anomaly in Hamsun’s oeuvre because it is his only shot at the real thing, at a “real” travel book (even though he went on to publish a little-known sequel of sorts a year later titled *Under the Crescent Moon* and “published in a collection of stories in 1905” [Ferguson 6]). *In Wonderland* is a more traditional travel journal in the “diaristic” sense of the term but, although more coherent chronologically--recounting an experience that took place over a very limited time frame--lacks the complexity and scope of Hamsun’s articles about America. It is Hamsun’s only “official” foray into travel writing, but falls short of the high standards he had set for himself more than a decade earlier. *In Wonderland*, though not lacking in occasional passages that are vintage Hamsun--true explosions of the sublime^{viii}--still lacks consistency, as well as a truly personal voice compatible with Hamsun’s peculiar literary genius. Third-person narration, though typical of much travel writing, does not bring out the best in Hamsun. By and large, *In Wonderland* holds limited interest for the general reader; however, thanks to its most obvious shortcomings, it helps scholars to better understand the nature of Hamsun’s genius, namely the intermingling of the whimsical and the serious, the lyrical and the prosaic, “his joie de vivre and sense of adventure” (Sverre Lyngstad, *IW* 10), coupled with the droll, the bizarre, and the outlandish even, a veritable *mélange des genres* that characterizes not only *The Cultural Life of Modern America* and the English-language edition of two dozen or so articles and reminiscences about America titled *Knut Hamsun Remembers America*, but also extraordinary, visionary novels, such as *Hunger*, *Mysteries*, and *Pan*, and explain why Hamsun would go on to win the Nobel

prize for literature. In the end, the pieces all fit together and explain why Hamsun is still to this day one of the most read Nobel laureates.

Before long Hamsun finds himself back home without enough research to be able to produce any kind of scientific report, as he intended to do at the end of what I am tempted to call his “furlough” from Norway. One morning Hamsun catches his wife reading his travel journal and she criticizes many of its most obvious shortcomings, especially his tendency to include too many “trifles,” as she calls them, to say nothing of the many incredible characters. She obviously believes they are just figments of his overactive imagination (Hamsun, *IW* 14). This may well be a way for Hamsun to critique himself and maybe a hint that Hamsun himself does not feel that this is his best work; however, more importantly, this is also a way for him to draw attention to the very things that posterity has recognized as a hallmark of his genius and as his greatest contribution to modern literature, namely his incredible and (some would say) overactive imagination. At any rate, we are left with a motley mess of fact and fiction. The first edition of the book carried the subtitle “Experienced and Dreamed in the Caucasus” (“Oplevet og drømt i Kaukasien”) but it was eliminated from subsequent editions. It certainly helps readers to organize their impressions into these two neat categories -- fact and fiction, *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*--without having to choose one or the other; my guess is that *In Wonderland* is mostly fiction. The one question I have at the end is why Hamsun did not take another stab at the travel genre. He would live until 1952 and to my knowledge never again indulged in the inherently nostalgic travel genre. Maybe he felt that closure was an expectation in travel writing, making it impossible for someone like himself to be a credible travel writer since in most of his writing he seemed to insist on the unusual and the indecisive, on what Freud would call the “uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), that is to say, the startling coexistence of the familiar and the strange. For example, an incident stands out but at the same time, for some reason, triggers the memory of another incident that happened elsewhere. On the other hand, he clearly delights in exploring the realm of the unknown--be it America or Russia--which can be greatly facilitated by leisurely travel to an unknown land and inspire the greatest works of literature.

Conclusion

How do these texts, widely disparate in chronology and focus relate to each other? What do they tell us about Hamsun? Several of the pieces contained in *Knut Hamsun Remembers America* clearly anticipate *The Cultural Life of Modern America* and contain most of its grievances, albeit in embryonic form, ideas that would inspire much of his literature as well.

The reason I spell “Amerika” with a “k” above, in the title of Part I of this paper, is not to flatter my Norwegian readers but rather to remind readers of Franz Kafka’s wonderful novel *Amerika*, the first part of his timeless fresco on the absurdity of modern life, which bears many uncanny similarities to Hamsun’s America.^{vii} Not that anything Hamsun writes evinces the dreamlike, often nightmarish and fantastic qualities one normally associates with the author of *The Trial* or *The Castle* (the other two installments of

Kafka's immortal trilogy dedicated to the travails of modern man), at least not directly. Rather, Hamsun's experience of the megacity New York is more naïve and immature but still reminiscent of Kafka's novel, and specifically of one of his more endearing characters, the earnest and likeable but naïve sixteen-year old lad Karl Rossman, a "poor boy of sixteen who had been packed off to America by his parents because a servant girl had seduced him" (Kafka 1). Both are like Hamsun's vagabond heroes, many of whom roll with the punches and seldom, if ever, are in full control of their own lives. Karl is like something straight out of Hamsun, a well-intentioned, earnest, and generous sort of fellow, who may be gullible to a fault, but who is essentially good. His adventures, which amount to an obstacle course that takes him half way around the globe, initiate him into the evil ways of the modern world, symbolized by America, an experience that makes him indignant at first and then submissive, as he is gradually co-opted and forced to buy into the so-called system, as the hero of *Vagabonds (Landstrykere)* ultimately does. Karl's only escape from his self-imposed exile on this lonely planet is his imagination, just as Hamsun turns to literature for consolation. Just like Karl, the twenty-something Knut Pedersen Hamsund arrived in New York harbor and--for all we know--just like Karl Rossman, might have observed the Statue of Liberty and reflected on its allure, the romantic exhortation "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to be free" and then noticed that the Statue of Liberty stretches aloft an ominous and unwelcoming arm holding not a torch but a weapon, what appears to be a "sword" (Kafka 1). Unlike Kafka's hero Karl, Hamsun has more luck deciphering the world around him and arrives at the conclusions adumbrated above, chief among which is that America is a young republic in need of self-discipline so that it may avoid the excesses of pride and self-confidence and assume its rightful place in the concert of nations. For America is a great nation, make no doubt about it. America may well be the greatest nation ever, says Hamsun, but why do Americans always have to remind you of that?

In Wonderland appears deeply rooted in Hamsun's way of thinking of the world and provides us with a good sense of his main concerns: the deep divide between old and new and his across-the-board condemnation of the brave new world that was slowly emerging all around him in the wake of the French and the Industrial Revolutions.

Hamsun's travel writing evinces a visceral distrust of modernity and the threats contained in it, even though Hamsun himself was one of the foremost harbingers of modernity in his literary work. That will be the enduring paradox of this enigmatic writer who gave us some of the most stirring and moving passages in modern literature and yet at the same time embraced the thinking of the extreme right, going so far as to let himself become involved with the Nazi invader of his native Norway in 1940. In "Festina Lente," Hamsun uses Twain's words to call himself "an innocent abroad" (KHRA 132). No doubt he, too, could have profited from the Ancients' wisdom and heeded the aphorism attributed to the emperor Augustus and not leap to conclusions. Hamsun's staunchly conservative outlook on life led him astray on more than one occasion and to this day give his many readers and admirers pause, though most would

agree that Hamsun's writing is far more interesting and of more lasting value than his misguided politics.

Endnotes

ⁱ It appears that Hamsun had intended to also include a section on Persia and Turkey ("I'll be traveling to Caucasia, the Orient, Persia, and Turkey on a government grant [Hamsun, *IW* 20]) but *In Wonderland* ends in Batum, in southwest Georgia. In 1905, in a short account titled *Under the Crescent Moon (Under Halvmånen)*, he finally gets around to sharing his impressions of Constantinople, which is as much of Turkey as he has time to see. Hamsun also publishes a few travel articles from Turkey in *Aftenposten* in the spring of 1903 (Waerp 242).

ⁱⁱ I define travel literature in the broadest possible terms, as a genre of creative nonfiction primarily concerned with the narrator's travels to foreign lands and his reflections on the experience. "What raises travel writing to literature, is not what the writer brings to the place, but what the place draws out of the writer. It helps to be a little crazy" (William Zinsser).

ⁱⁱⁱ Let me add that *Knut Hamsun Remembers America* (2004) is an amazing collection of thirteen essays and stories, including the famous articles published under the title *Fra Amerika*, and deal with Hamsun's experiences in the U.S. as a young man. Many of these pieces have never been published before in an English translation, though the editor seems to ignore Sverre Arestad's 1970 translations of four early stories by Hamsun. At any rate, none of Hamsun's newspaper articles is readily available anywhere today.

^{iv} As Richard Current Nelson points out (*KHRA* 153), the newspaper articles titled "The American Character" and "New York City" were first published under the title "Fra Amerika" in *Aftenposten* on January 21 and February 12 and 14, 1885 (*The Cultural Life of America*, edited and translated by Barbara Gordon Morgridge, xxv.) They were later published by Lars Frode Larsen in Denmark in a volume titled *Knut Hamsun. Over Havet: Artikler og Rejsebrev*. They have since been reissued in Norway by Gyldendal in 1990. The article on Mark Twain appeared in *Ny Illustreret Tidende* in three installments, on March 22, 29 and April 5, 1885.

^v Sverre Lyngstad made the first published translation of *In Wonderland*, but Naess mentions an unpublished translation titled *In a Wondrous Land* (Naess, *Knut Hamsun* 168).

^{vi} Until the 1970s this was the official name of what was, in fact, the Department of Education. In former prime minister Sweden Olof Palme once held the post as Minister of Education (Ecklesiatsikminister) 1968-1969.

^{vii} In a letter to his German friend and publisher Albert Langen he calls *In Wonderland* "det beste han har no gjort" (quoted by Loria 35).

^{viii} I am not in the business of proving any affiliation between the two writers, not that such a relationship, if it exists, proves anything in the first place. Hamsun clearly did not read Kafka until after his death, when his first works finally became available to an international audience, which means that Hamsun's American writings (articles and novels) could not very well have been influenced by Kafka; nor do I believe the opposite, that Kafka worshiped Hamsun (his diary entries seldom are dated and talk more about his travels than about the books he reads). However, I do believe that reading Hamsun and Kafka side by side, as it were, can open our eyes to a novel dimension of the modernist theme of alienation, which is not to say that there are not fundamental differences between the two writers.

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Summary:

This paper examines Knut Hamsun's travel writing, from his many newspaper articles about America published before *The Cultural Life of Modern America (Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*, 1889) – his idiosyncratic and very personal reckoning with America – to his only real (i.e., formal) travelogue or travel book, *In Wonderland (I Æventyrland*, 1903), documenting his visit to the Russian Caucasus. The article focuses on some common themes as well as striking differences among these works, so as to highlight Hamsun's creative use of the travel genre. As the term “foray” in my title suggests, there is something illicit and transgressive about Hamsun's travel writing. He does not readily conform to the norms of the genre; rather, he transforms the genre to suit his own purposes by infusing a large dose of his idiosyncratic genius in everything he writes about the faraway lands he visits.

Biographical note:

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America, autobiography, capitalism, Caucasus, globalization, Hamsun, materialism, memoirs, Russia, transgression, travelogue, travel writing.