

THE TRANSGRESSIVE NARRATIVES OF HAMSUN'S *IN WONDERLAND*

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Sammendrag

Artikkelen fokuserer på de grenseoverskridende særtrekkene ved Hamsuns *I Æventyrland*, dvs. på bokens varierte bruk av litterære sjangre og narrative teknikker, og på fortellerens like grenseoverskridende fremstilling av seg selv. For å undersøke disse særtrekkene mer spesifikt, diskuterer artikkelen i hvilken grad Hamsuns reisebeskrivelse er påvirket av romanen som ifølge Martin Nag var avgjørende for Hamsun reise til Kaukasus, nemlig Mikhail Lermontovs *Vår tids helt* (1840). Dette vil bl.a. innebære en undersøkelse av genrelikheter så vel som likheter mellom Lermontovs hovedskikkelse *Petsjorin* og fortelleren i *I Æventyrland*, som begge blir diskutert i forhold til den russiske tradisjonen for det såkalte «overflødige menneske».

Abstract

The article focuses on the transgressive quality of Hamsun's *In Wonderland*, that is on the book's variety of literary genres and narrative techniques, and on the narrator's equally transgressive presentation of himself. To examine these qualities more specifically, the paper discusses to what extent Hamsun's travelogue is indebted to the novel that, according to Martin Nag, was essential for Hamsun's journey to the Caucasus, namely Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840). This will include an investigation of similarities of genre as well as similarities between Lermontov's protagonist *Pechorin* and the narrator in *In Wonderland*, both of whom are discussed in relation to the Russian tradition of so-called "superfluous men".

Keywords

In Wonderland, travel literature, first-person narrators, Lermontov

Knut Hamsun made it clear – though typically somewhat tongue in cheek – that he did not like reading novels, and that he preferred travel writing.¹ It is no wonder, therefore, that having written several novels, he wanted to try his hand on the travel genre as well. However, he ended up making only one major effort in this field, and it therefore assumes a rather special place in his oeuvre. On the face of it, *In Wonderland* (orig. *I Æventyrland*, 1903) is a relatively straightforward and factual travel account from the Caucasus; it provides a day-to-day and place-to-place account of the journey, starting in St Petersburg and ending in Batum with an exciting but unfulfilled promise of an onward expedition to the Orient. Also, the narrative apparently presents as a fact that the narrator is Hamsun himself, and that his travel companion, who admittedly plays a conspicuously withdrawn role throughout the journey, is his wife. Furthermore, he seems eager to encapsulate this journey within a realistic framework of the modern world; thus, structurewise, it starts

¹ See Wærp 1999, 239 and Wærp 2018, 138–39, where he refers to several of Hamsun's letters in which he discusses his literary interests. As always, such statements may have to be taken with a grain of salt.

and ends with references to “the roar of America”,² with foreign investments, oil production, noisy locomotives etc. – in short, elements that a sober, fact-oriented travelogue would naturally include.

An attentive reader, however, soon realises that this is not an altogether ordinary travelogue. Perhaps we do not need to go further than to the subtitle of the original – “Experienced and Dreamt in Caucasia”³ – to realise that we might have to think twice about the degree to which Hamsun in this work is not just playing with the reader, but also with the limits of genre. This is not to argue that the travelogue genre is generally free from fictional elements. On the contrary, Hamsun is clearly aware that it is a highly flexible form, which from its inception has thrived precisely on the somewhat blurred line between objective fact and personal experience. The gaze of the travelling subject, furthermore, has always ensured that the Other is largely portrayed in the traveller’s own image. Up until the turn of the last century, however, the genre generally found itself rather firmly on the side of non-fiction, claiming by and large to provide trustworthy accounts of actual journeys,⁴ and Hamsun clearly presents his travelogue to his readers on the assumption that this is what they can reasonably expect. Or rather: this is what he *wants* them to expect. On the other hand, Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs also emphasise how “forgery, and its respectable cousin, parody [...] have specially close, even parasitic, relationships with travel writing”, a point that is not irrelevant to *In Wonderland*.⁵

Former critics of the book, such as Atle Kittang, Henning Howlid Wærp, Jørgen Haugan, Monika Žagar, Elisabeth Oxfeldt and, most recently, Karina Laugen Nøstvig, have all underlined the essential instability of Hamsun’s first-person narrator.⁶ Nøstvig, for instance, makes the useful observation that “the literary I is not necessarily equivalent to the writer Hamsun,”⁷ and Oxfeldt similarly discusses Hamsun’s “traveling persona”.⁸ Such statements open up the whole discussion as to whether *In Wonderland* is to be regarded as fiction or non-fiction, and suggest the presence of a figure with a frequently tenuous connection to Knut Hamsun himself. My main thesis in the following is, however, that Hamsun in this book is producing an even more radically transgressive narrative than has formerly been suggested, that he largely ignores the traditional genre distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, travelogue and novel, and ends up with a uniquely hamsunesque work with which there are few previous parallels.⁹

² Hamsun 2004, 21.

³ Translated by PF. The subtitle was not included in later editions, as is also the case in Lyngstad’s English translation.

⁴ See Hulme and Young (eds.) 2002, 4–5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ See Kittang 1996, 125–40; Howlid Wærp 1999, 239–61; 2006, 56–64 and 2018, 137–51; Haugan 2004, 162–4; Žagar 2009, 151–59; Oxfeldt 2005, 216–21; 2010, 58–77; Nøstvig 2019.

⁷ Nøstvig 2019, 15 (translated from the Norwegian by PF).

⁸ Oxfeldt 2005, 216.

⁹ The early twentieth century, however, witnessed some interesting experiments with the genre. One work that comes to mind from the decades *after* the publication of *In Wonderland* is Frederic Prokosch’s *The Asiatics* (1935), which is also set in the Orient and which, while on the face of it coming across as a conventional, realistic travelogue, proves to be pure fiction. But there are also obvious differences between the two works; Prokosch never even made the journey he describes, and his book does not contain any of the dream-like and irrational elements of *In Wonderland*. Both works, however, show a supreme disregard for distinguishing clearly between reality and imagination, and take their readers into highly ambiguous territory.

The question as to what might be Hamsun's motivation for this rather radical transformation of the genre will be returned to towards the end of the article. In addition, and very much as an integral part of this discussion, I will focus on the role of another literary work, Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), which is similarly set in the Caucasus, and which may have served as an inspiration not only for Hamsun's choice of destination but also for his approach to the book that resulted from the journey.

Most fundamentally, Hamsun's heretical approach to the genre he pretends to be operating within is made evident in the role of the book's first-person narrator. Whereas the traditional travelogue makes an effort to establish a rather withdrawn narrator,¹⁰ whom the reader can trust to produce a tentatively reliable, if personal, account of actual events and experiences, Hamsun immediately orchestrates his story with a narrator who is constantly in the foreground, and who, like flypaper, continuously draws attention to himself with his absurd, surprising and frequently shocking behaviour. The result is a fluid, rootless, unpredictable narrative, achieved by a narrative voice or persona that is open to the whims of the moment and prepared to go where the wind blows; who is perpetually ready to cross boundaries into new and improvised adventures, and who displays a spectrum of faces or personalities. Or: is this precisely *not* the case? Is this persona precisely *not* whimsical; are all these maverick improvisations rather all a pose, a deliberately calculated façade; in other words, not a face but a mask? Considering how important the voice and the self-presentation of the traveller cum narrator are for the travelogue as a genre, these questions are definitely worth keeping in mind during our struggle to make sense of the narrative.

In order to provide a rational – or perhaps rather quasi-rational – justification or explanation for this peculiar behaviour, Hamsun – or the narrator – introduces the so-called “Caucasian fever”, which he keeps coming back to on at least fifteen occasions throughout the book.¹¹ This illness provides not just the element of sleeplessness that Wærp primarily focuses on and mentions as a parallel with Lieutenant Glahn in *Pan*, for instance.¹² More radically, it could be seen as providing an enhanced access to the world of the subconscious, which in turn serves as a possible explanation for his numerous antics. By means of a rather seductive technique, the reader is thus invited to excuse the narrator's unpredictable behaviour, which is based almost entirely on associations and impulses. It is tempting here to draw a comparison to Edgar Allan Poe's short story “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), another first-person narrative, whose protagonist is similarly recovering from a fever, and which may well have inspired Hamsun's self-portrayal.¹³ The function of the fever could also be seen as closely related to that of drugs, which would again link his narrative to such Romantic and Victorian predecessors as Samuel

¹⁰ To give an example, out of the nearly two hundred travelogues Ruth A. Symes and the author of this article read for the project that resulted in the book *The Northern Utopia: British Perceptions of Norway in the Nineteenth Century* (Rodopi, 2003), hardly any contained a first-person narrator who flamboyantly placed himself in the forefront of the narrative. On the contrary, responses to scenery, people etc. were kept in a tone of objective observation, even when showing emotion.

¹¹ Wærp claims ten times (Wærp 1999, 250), but in Lyngstad's edition the fever is mentioned or clearly referred to on the following pages: 57, 58, 76, 82-83, 96, 117, 125, 132, 151, 152, 174, 176, 177, 178, 183.

¹² Wærp 1999, 251.

¹³ It has not been possible to ascertain whether Hamsun may have been familiar with this particular story by Poe, but in *From the Cultural Life of Modern America* he shows an extensive knowledge of American literature, and he also mentions Poe specifically as one of the few American writers that deserve a measure of respect (Hamsun 1969, 33).

Taylor Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey, Wilkie Collins and others.¹⁴ In many of his works, Hamsun is deeply preoccupied with the workings of the subconscious, but it would be difficult to find another example of his work that offers a more persistent display of sudden and irrational impulses than *In Wonderland*. It is almost as if the main structural element – the journey – is running the risk of being suppressed, while the reader is taken on a helter-skelter ride reminiscent of the impulsive and improvisational quality of jazz, the music that was emerging in the United States at the same time. This quality thus also adds to the distinctly twentieth-century features of the story.

With regard to the genre specifications of the book, Hamsun effectively creates, as already suggested, a narrative that on the surface is a rather conventional travelogue, but under whose lid simmers a hotchpotch of strange and multi-faceted ingredients. In his introduction to the English translation, Sverre Lyngstad characterises the book as an example of a “hybrid piece of literature”.¹⁵ As we shall soon see, this is rather an understatement. In the following, I would like to present a catalogue of the main elements that Hamsun might be said to be employing in the course of the book. It should be noted, however, that several of these elements are not to be regarded as genres or sub-genres in their own right, but rather narrative techniques and typographical devices that as a whole contribute to a twisting and turning of the traditional travelogue genre into a new and original work.

First of all, and rather importantly, he uses what might be called the *fragment*, that is loose, disconnected pieces of information. One example of this is a brief passage, in the first chapter of the book, where he mentions, in passing, meeting “an acquaintance of mine on the streets of St. Petersburg” (21), whereupon five pages later there is a similar reference, this time to a “Captain Tawaststjärna”, which may or may not be a reference to the same person and the same incident. However, no explanation is provided, and the man is never mentioned again. Similarly, he mentions a collage of disconnected stories from the Swedish newspaper *The New Press* – a technique Hamsun also uses in *Hunger*. In addition to this, there is of course a large number of other stories that simply emerge out of the blue, more or less like apparently unmotivated ideas from the depth of the subconscious.

However, more interestingly – and as has been commented on by Wærp as well – Hamsun’s first-person narrator makes a persistent use of rounding off a particular observation with ellipses, letting the episode in question literally run out of words, or leaving it to the reader to finish it (so-called aposiopesis).¹⁶ This effect is particularly striking in the passage about Captain Tawaststjärna, which is already hanging in mid-air. This typographical detail also poses an interesting example of the importance of comparing editions. In the English edition there are only thirty-six examples of this phenomenon, against fifty in the original 1903 edition. The original, in other words, makes an even more persistent use of this effect, in addition to marking the ellipses with

¹⁴ Several critics have commented on the very last sentence of *In Wonderland* – “For I’ve drunk from the waters of the Kura River” (184) – but nobody seems to have noticed the parallel to the last lines of Coleridge’s Oriental poem “Kubla Khan”: “For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise”. This allusion to a famously drug-induced text seems appropriate in a book whose subtitle is “Experienced and Dreamt in Caucasia”.

¹⁵ Lyngstad in Hamsun 2004, 15. Later page references to this edition will be given in the text.

¹⁶ Wærp 1999, 261.

five dots rather than Lyngstad's three.¹⁷ In view of the fact that Hamsun generally uses four-dot ellipses, this is not a major point, but together with the considerable number of instances, it does become a conspicuous feature of the book. A similar effect of leaving the narrative dangling is the repeated use of the expression "Enough of that" (83, 87, 88).

Another and closely related element is the use of digressions and improvisations, which perhaps plays on the idea of the improvised journey itself. This provides an apparently erratic movement from one unexpected scene to the other, a pattern that again seems to be connected with the subconscious. From the minutest detail or incident, the narrator is able to unravel, or rather conjure up, an entire story: from the loss of a green button, via the dripping of wax on his jacket, to the repairing of his watch. All along, however, there is a peculiar mixture, or rather a balancing act, between being *in* control and being *out* of control. For instance, he loves being lost: "[...] 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" (30). At the same time, however, there seems little doubt that with a tiny effort he could have *avoided* getting lost; in other words, he constantly surrounds himself with a kind of carefully orchestrated chaos.

In line with this general behaviour, he tends to report about his own actions as if they are completely unpremeditated: "Walking down the street, I notice that a great many people go into a house and walk up the stairs to the second floor. There might be something worth seeing, so I follow suit" (29). This apparently sudden impulse, which might well be in breach of common courtesy, brings him to a tavern, where "[a]s though by magic, I begin to feel very happy" (*ibid.*), and he ends up buying drinks and having, because of the language barrier, a rather ineffectual conversation with the other guests. A little later, in another restaurant, where he ends up eating the leftovers from a family that has left the neighbouring table, he acts on yet another impulse: "Suddenly I get up and walk over to the icon", and "I begin to hum without intending to offend anyone, just to please myself" (32). But again, this appears to be no more than a pose. This narrator is not ignorant of what he is doing, and he even admits as much himself: "Then I catch myself thinking that this is motivated by a false theatrical psychology, and I don't give in to any further impulses" (*ibid.*), which really confirms that this is an act, a pose, and that he is in control if he wants to.

The fact that the narrator finds himself in a new and challenging language environment is, furthermore, used on purpose to create an almost slapstick effect, and seems to serve as a parallel to his enjoyment, mentioned above, of being lost. In a similar fashion, he also gets lost in languages, so that the outcome of the situations he is in becomes a matter of chance. In the tavern mentioned above, for instance, his preference for conducting the conversation in Russian (which he hardly knows) rather than French (which he knows marginally better) may even be taken to suggest that he actively prefers the Babylonian confusion, as is also suggested by Kittang.¹⁸ And haggling with the Armenian Jew a bit later on during the journey, he boasts of his ability to speak Russian, even though his own account of the situation makes him look like a fool. In one and the same situation, in other words, he inflates and deflates his own self-image. He even turns quite demonstratively to speaking his mother tongue in a context where it is clearly absurd: "[...] I stretch to

¹⁷ To be exact, five dots are used in forty-one of the fifty cases, suggesting that five dots are the standard Hamsun intended throughout.

¹⁸ Kittang 1996, 128.

my full height and, acting the big shot, recite in Norwegian a big speech, a fat speech, words of affluence” (63). Finally, a shopkeeper he buys some lap robes from for the journey “may in fact be a German” (62), but is later referred to as “the damn German, who may even be a Frenchman” (ibid.). All in all, it is as if the narrator here deliberately creates a confusion with regard to languages, nationalities and identities that makes rational communication impossible.

In Wonderland, however, also includes a whole spectrum of elements from other and more specific literary genres. The most comprehensive of these is perhaps the diary, because in a sense the entire book is a diary, which is a genre that in many respects is close to the travelogue. Both forms are usually characterised by a chronological, first-person account of the experiences of one particular individual. But Hamsun is also playing with and undermining the diary genre, by creating another slapstick effect, namely the diary within the diary. At the beginning of chapter 12, the reader discovers that what is presumably Hamsun’s diary-like account from the journey is actually being read by his own travel companion, that is his wife, while Hamsun himself is “wretched with fever” (132). What follows is a rather hilarious interrogation of him by his wife, in which she clearly casts serious doubts upon the credibility of some of the incidents described in previous chapters, and ending with her rather dismissive characterisation of the entire account as containing “too many trifles” (ibid.). This allegation, of course, is largely true, or even an understatement; “trifles”, after all, suggests an element of realism, whereas his diary is more likely a collection of dreams and incidents from the narrator’s imagination. And again, by including this episode, Hamsun deliberately weakens his own position as a reliable observer, which would be the normal or expected role of a travel writer.

The meta-perspective or Chinese box effect provided by the diary is further underlined by repeated references to other travelogues and to guidebooks, some of which are being used to supply perfectly rational and factual information. Against the far less convincing diary, these passages almost serve as a foil, which ultimately enhances the reader’s confusion as to what is real and what is not in the book as a whole. In chapter 12, for instance, the morning after his travel companion has read his diary and thus exposed the narrator’s unreliability, he apparently finds a copy of a Baedeker (the standard tourist guidebook) on a table in the hotel, and offers a lengthy quote from it, which contains almost excessively dry and factual information about Tiflis, the city they are in (133–4). The juxtaposition of the two incidents is hardly coincidental; it is essentially part of the author’s deliberate and seductive manipulation of the reader.¹⁹

With regard to literary genres represented in the book, it should also be mentioned that the narrator on several occasions and with considerable emphasis insists that the ultimate purpose behind his journey is to do anthropological fieldwork. As hardly any readers would take this information seriously, it provides instead a quasi-academic dimension that contributes to the farcical and burlesque quality of the work. Most prominently, this is exemplified by the ride in the night in chapter 7, which remains something of a conundrum. Does it actually take place, or is it nothing more than a dream or a product of the author’s literally feverish imagination?²⁰ The latter possibility is even explicitly suggested by the author’s companion when later on she takes the liberty of reading his

¹⁹ The guided tour by the lieutenant of the khan’s palace in Baku towards the end of the book has the same factual guidebook quality.

²⁰ Can we even trust him with regard to the fever? Perhaps that, too, is just a pose?

diary. However, in his description of the episode, in which he thinks he has discovered that a shepherd he meets has a harem in his house, the author rather grandly assumes the role of the travelling researcher: “Then I take out my diary and note down what I’ve already seen, to show him that my purpose is purely scientific” (87).²¹ But the academic interest soon fades into the background: in a rather carnivalesque or travestied manner, the harem proves to be nothing but the shepherd’s blind old mother. But this disappointing discovery does not in any way prevent the author from being completely convinced that the shepherd has at least two wives on the roof of the building, and he wants to “rehabilitate them and shower them indiscriminately with copper coins” (89). And not just that: his awakening of the shepherd’s favourite wife “could give the impetus for an entire little women’s movement in Caucasia” (ibid.), and he envisages how he will seduce her, thus placing himself at the greatest peril from the shepherd’s revenge. The whole scene proves to contain no dramatic potential at all; once again, the air goes out of the balloon. Admittedly, he claims that “I could report home that I was bringing copious scientific results, adding that I would need at least four years to work them up” (93), but this too only contributes to a report that essentially ends in nothing. The theme of his anthropological research, however, continues to be mentioned throughout the book.

Another literary genre, briefly suggested by Lyngstad,²² which is found scattered across the pages of *In Wonderland*, is the detective story. For a while, Hamsun seems on the brink of introducing the reader to an almost Sherlock Holmes-like mystery.²³ However, this subplot too only adds to the general confusion, as it is impossible to establish such basic genre ingredients as who is the culprit and who is the detective, and what is the exact nature of the crime. It begins in the first paragraph of chapter 5, where Hamsun mentions a German official, who “explains to us that all the government horses will be busy for the next six days” (59). The same person then reappears in chapters 9 and 10, where he becomes the focus of attention for about ten pages. Because the man threatens the narrator with arrest as well as hints vaguely at a possible solution, without providing an explanation for his mysterious behaviour, the narrative creates an intense uncertainty around the identity of the man and his intentions, and both the narrator and the reader are left with the open question as to whether the man is a swindler or a police officer, or possibly both. The situation, which has a surreal and almost Kafkaesque, though ultimately comical, quality, and which escalates in tandem with the narrator’s Caucasian fever, brings him on the verge of a breakdown, until an officer and two gendarmes appear and arrest the man. As with the ride in the night, it is difficult to decide whether the whole story is real or a figment of the narrator’s imagination, because in this case too, the travel companion appears almost completely unaware of the situation, of her husband’s almost manic agitation, and even of the man’s arrest. However, as she has just gone “into the field to pick some flowers” (124) moments before it takes place, the reader is once again dependent solely on the narrator’s account.

²¹ Thus his scientific notes, too, contribute to the general Chinese box effect of the book: they also take the form of a diary within the diary.

²² Lyngstad 2004, 14. The role of the alleged policeman is also discussed, but without reference to the genre of the detective story, in Kittang 1996, 127–28 and Nøstvik 2019, 29.

²³ In the years prior to the publication of *In Wonderland*, Arthur Conan Doyle had made Sherlock Holmes “the most famous character in English literature” (quoted in Knight 2010, 55), and only two years before Hamsun’s work, Doyle had published his famous novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The detective story, in other words, was very much in the air at the time.

Hamsun's use of strictly straightforward and factual information alongside the rest of the narrative has already been touched upon, the most conspicuous example of which is a lengthy passage in chapter 12. Like so many others, the passage seems to be inspired by a coincidence. Reading a Baedeker that he comes across in the vestibule of his hotel in Tiflis, the narrator begins with what seems to be a summary of the book's description of the city. In this description appears also the name of the Russian writer Alexander Griboyedov, whose tomb is situated near the monastery, and about whom the narrator seems to possess further knowledge (134). More importantly, however, this brief aside on Russian literature soon expands into an eight-page discussion of Russian literature in general, very much along the same lines as Hamsun's discussion of American literature in *The Cultural Life of Modern America*. It amounts to a highly interesting and powerful account, but is entirely different from the rest of the book in terms of style and genre. The same could be said about a similar passage containing an essay on religion in chapter 16.

As has been suggested above, *In Wonderland* contains a wide array of genre elements, producing a sense of confusion and ambiguity on the part of the reader to the extent that the work seems to end up not just transgressing the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, but also largely demolishing the travelogue genre. Thus it emerges as a deeply original and experimental work of art. Clearly, for readers familiar with Hamsun's novels, the first-person narrator at the centre of this account is not radically different from such well-known characters as Glahn and Nagel. In the present work, however, we are actively invited to accept this voice as being that of Hamsun himself. Whereas in the novels we may suspect, despite the writer's efforts to the contrary, an amount of overlap between the writer and his protagonists, here the tables are almost turned: it is Knut Hamsun himself who is trying to ensnare us into the belief that he – Knut Hamsun – is actually this character who page by page seems to become more and more fictional, and less and less rooted in reality. *In Wonderland*, in other words, is perhaps even more deceptive and more confusing than the novels. After all, a novel only insists on *aping* reality, or on describing something that *could* have happened, whereas a travelogue claims to faithfully *reproduce* reality. This is where Hamsun creates an elaborate smokescreen, in which his true identity escapes us, or as Karina Laugen Nøstvig puts it: the narrator is operating with “two forms of Hamsun, the writing author and the literary traveller”.²⁴

Before returning to the central question of the book's first-person narrator, however, it might be of relevance to turn to a work that may prove to be of some significance for an understanding of this alleged self-portrait. It seems that Martin Nag is the only critic who has drawn attention to the connection between Hamsun's *In Wonderland* and Mikhail Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time*. Most importantly, Nag discussed it, though rather briefly, in an article in the newspaper *Verdens Gang* on 10 February 1967.²⁵ It should also be mentioned that Hamsun *does* mention Lermontov in *In Wonderland*, but only in passing, and almost off-hand, in connection with his above-mentioned essay on Russian literature: “Other Russian writers who have been here in Tiflis come to mind, such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, and many more” (134). Rather than focusing on *In Wonderland*, however, Nag's article primarily discusses *Pan*; he sees Glahn as a “Norwegian Pechorin”, i.e. the protagonist of Lermontov's novel, and runs through a list of rather striking similarities, especially to the postscript in *Pan*, “Glahn's Death”. He

²⁴ Nøstvig 2019, 30 (my translation from the Norwegian).

²⁵ See Nag 1967. It is also discussed briefly in Nag 1998, 51–52.

also mentions another interesting fact, namely that Hamsun must have known that Georg Brandes was a great admirer of Lermontov, having “in his earliest youth let himself be bowled over by Lermontov’s Byronism” (Nag 1967, 10).

Essentially, Nag argues that Hamsun’s decision to direct his journey to such an obscure destination as the Caucasus is not a coincidence; on the contrary, he is really on a pilgrimage in the footsteps of a literary hero who may have inspired *Pan* as well as *Mysteries*, a hero who, implicitly, may have provided Hamsun with much of the distinctive narrative voice that we would normally consider to be uniquely that of Hamsun himself. What Nag does *not* suggest is that this inspiration may also extend to *In Wonderland*, the very book describing this pilgrimage. But Lermontov’s novel, which was written more than half a century before Hamsun’s travelogue, presents in fact a setting, a structure, an atmosphere and a protagonist that are strikingly Hamsunesque, and strikingly similar to what we find in his travel account.

With regard to genre, too, *A Hero of Our Time* offers the same fundamental ambiguity with regard to fiction vs. non-fiction as does *In Wonderland*. Lermontov’s frame narrator insists the book is a travelogue and not a novel: “I must remind you that I am writing travel notes, not a story, and so I cannot make the captain tell his tale before he in fact did so” (Lermontov 2001, 28). Thus what appears to be a travelogue with a number of stories from reality interspersed, might just as well be – and most likely is – a fictional frame narrative containing a number of fictional sub- or short stories. As in Hamsun’s book, too, there is a focus, rarely found in other examples of the travelogue genre, on the process of writing and note taking itself, and on its complications: “The only luggage I had on my cart was one small portmanteau with travel notes on Georgia. Luckily for you most of them have been lost [...]” (Lermontov, 5). This gives the book a playful and rather confusing quasi-documentary quality, just like Hamsun’s; *A Hero of Our Time* even contains a mysterious Preface in the third person, which is followed by Pechorin’s first-person journal, which is preceded by a bewildering foreword by an unidentified frame narrator, who thus takes on the role as the story’s editor. The narrator, furthermore, is keen, like Hamsun, to provide an impression of *improvisation* or that the literary product is essentially unplanned, a product of haphazard circumstances: “Reading over this page, I see that I’ve wandered a long way from the point. It doesn’t matter. After all, I’m writing this journal for myself, and anything I care to put in it will one day be a precious memory for me” (104).²⁶

Similarly, when Pechorin begins his story to Maxim Miximych, he proves to be a fundamentally unreliable narrator²⁷: “He led me a dance all right [...]” (11). Almost precisely like Hamsun’s narrator, he pays scant attention to the distinction between truths and lies: “I was in a good mood and told them a number of improbable stories made up on the spur of the moment” (108). He even admits that “I was born with a passion for contradiction” (77). Because of the multitude of such statements, however, the reader eventually does not know whether to believe in *anything* of what he says. Or rather: it almost comes to the point where the reader’s default reaction is to doubt *everything* he says. Thus when Pechorin says about one of his lovers, Vera, that “[s]he is the one woman in the world I could never deceive” (89), one may be close to certain that that is precisely

²⁶ Ref. the beginning of *Pan*, in which the first-person narrator similarly insists that he is just writing for his own pleasure.

²⁷ Even Maxim Maximych’s identity – and thus reliability – is unclear: «Just call me Maxim Maximych, if you don’t mind” (10–11).

what he will do. In sum, Lermontov and Hamsun both create, step by step, an attitude on the part of the reader that is characterised by a kind of amused scepticism or even outright disbelief.

Lermontov's and Hamsun's protagonists could perhaps be regarded as a type of individual connected with the Romantic phenomenon of *ennui*, and that in the course of the nineteenth century also emerged as a type of literary figure. Paul Foote, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *A Hero*, finds the origins of this figure precisely in Russian literature:

Onegin [the hero of Alexander Pushkin's verse drama *Eugene Onegin*] and Pechorin are the first in a line of literary heroes characterized in nineteenth-century criticism as 'superfluous men' and found in the novels of Turgenev, Herzen and Goncharov that followed in the 1840s–50s. Their common feature is that they are misfits, men who are aware that they are above the mediocrity of their society and aspire to something better. They fail – the 'something' to which they aspire is too vague to become a practical goal, conditions of the day provide no scope for them to realize their potential, and, as a rule, they are anyway too feeble of will to achieve anything. A necessary qualification for the role of 'superfluous man' is *consciousness* of one's superfluosity – self-obsession and self-questioning are standard features (xvii).

He also describes Pechorin as “a psychological type, the dual character in conflict with himself, torn between good and evil, between idealism and cynicism, between a full-blooded impulse to live and a negation of all that life has to offer” (xx).²⁸ This characterisation seems very much to describe the way Hamsun, or rather the first-person narrator of *In Wonderland*, presents himself. This persona will be discussed in more detail below, but it is as if, with his powerful interest in Russian literature, Hamsun has created his own distinctive version of the “superfluous man”. He is also a representative of the kind of psychology that he explores from the essay “The Unconscious Life of the Mind” and *Hunger* onwards.

Who, then, is this first-person narrator in Hamsun's Caucasian travelogue, this figure he, once again, insists is himself? What does he want to achieve with this pose, which proves to be so obvious that even the most naïve reader will realise it is not a realistic self-portrait? The question clearly takes us to the heart of the whole enigma surrounding both Hamsun himself and his most famous protagonists, and one should, therefore, not have any expectations of finding a single and final answer. It does not seem farfetched, however, to claim that there is something fundamentally uncertain about this character, and that he is profoundly estranged from the world in which he lives. This persona is also characterised by a peculiar combination of self-confidence and the lack of it, of self-aggrandizement and self-belittlement. As we have seen above, he constantly plays cat and mouse with the reader; we can never trust him to be serious, and to really mean what he says; there is always the possibility of an underlying irony. Like Nagel and Glahn before

²⁸ In his postscript to the Norwegian translation of Lermontov's novel, Erik Egeberg similarly describes the author as representing “the origin of the Russian psychological novel” (Lermontov 2004, 208; translated from the English by PF). See also Chances 2001, 111–22 for a detailed discussion of «the superfluous man» as a literary type. Interestingly, she also mentions, in addition to many others of Hamsun's Russian literary heroes, Alexander Griboyedov, whose tomb in Tiflis the narrator of *In Wonderland* mentions (see above).

him, he is an anti-hero who deliberately lies and deflates and denigrates his own image. Thus he may be characterised as a *subversive* figure, who, with his general stance, implies a rather fundamental critique of an increasingly regulated, interfering and controlling society at the turn of the century. He is more than an anti-hero; he is a jester figure, a calculating fool, who constantly hides his true self behind a mask of self-irony, clumsiness, cowardliness, and unreliability. Whereas most travel narrators work hard to seem credible and convincing, the very strategy of this narrator seems to be the very opposite. Thus more so than Wærp, for instance, I would argue that Hamsun is pushing the genre almost to its limits, and attempting to give it a new function and a new purpose.²⁹ There is, in other words, something not only picaresque about the whole character; it also seems appropriate to read him in light of the Bakhtinian *carnivalesque*: He somehow neutralises traditional structures and turns the world upside down; it is not what it purports to be, as when the narrator on his ride at night meets the man he is convinced has a whole harem, and what he ends up with is the man's blind old mother.

At the same time the characteristics mentioned are also a strategy for survival; a way of coping with reality. Rather than fight a losing battle against the uncertainty and unpredictability of existence, he transforms himself into a kind of *homo ludens*, who is consistently capable of escaping from anything that might define him or label him. He is, in other words, a transgressive and slippery character. As soon as the reader suspects he might get a grasp of him, he does something unexpected that undermines this impression. What this strategy ultimately ensures or achieves, then, is some sort of freedom, an existential elbow room, which might be imagined or real, depending on one's point of view. Once again, however, it is not as intuitive or irrational as it may seem. He tries, for instance, to convince the reader that he is a compulsive liar, which in fact is not true. He is, on the contrary, a perfectly *controlled* liar. Like a conman, he creates for himself a range of identities, which again provide him with a considerable freedom and flexibility. What he seems to desire – or at least accept – is precisely a *relative* universe, where he can manoeuvre as he pleases. The fact that he draws the wrong conclusion about one thing after another only creates a wider space in which to operate; whether it is true or false does not really matter, as long as he can move on. The point is that this is a *deliberate strategy* that works under cover of being haphazard and coincidental.

Perhaps this brings us closer to Hamsun's archetypal character – the wanderer – the modern descendent of Fielding's and Sterne's picaresque heroes, the asocial bohemian, the individual who never settles, who never needs to take on ordinary, every-day, humdrum responsibilities. This is also what characterises Lermontov's Pechorin character; he is fundamentally elusive. Still, few writers have portrayed this figure more consistently than Hamsun in his fiction, and perhaps – all things considered – he never did it with greater intensity than in the figure he presented as his himself on his Caucasian journey. Somehow that would be the ultimately ironic message from Hamsun to his readers, a message reminiscent of Churchill's description of Russia in 1939 as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”.

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²⁹ See Wærp 1999, 245.

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