

# HAMSUN'S "MAL DU SIÈCLE": (RE)READING PAN THROUGH CHATEAUBRIAND'S *RENÉ*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*My paper expands on several conference themes, specifically "geographical places" and "boundaries," and will explore the elasticity and intertextual implications of both terms as they apply to national literatures and writers, as well as their porous nature in literary studies (including theory, history, and criticism, according to René Wellek's classic and still widely accepted triptych of literary studies). Specifically, I will examine the resonance of the Romantic malaise known in France as "le mal du siècle" and how it might inform a reading of Knut Hamsun's novel Pan (1894) and shed light on the more than eccentric behavior of its main character, Lieutenant Glahn. The French Romantic writer Chateaubriand (1768-1848), whose slender novel René (1802), with which "le mal du siècle" is most closely associated, represents the epitome of the Romantic hero, who evidently had not drawn his last breath when Hamsun published Pan almost one century later. Upon a closer reading of the two novels, there is more than enough to warrant a comparison. Glahn and René are archetypes of a similar malady afflicting overly sensitive, generally upper-class young men of a nervous and indeed neurotic disposition.*

## Keywords

*Crisis of comparative literature, Hamsun, Chateaubriand, Pan, René, "mal du siècle"*

"Everywhere there is connection... no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other... literatures." -Matthew Arnold (1)

## Introduction

My paper expands on several of the conference themes of the Seventh International Hamsun Conference in 2019, specifically "geographical places" and "boundaries" between countries and literary traditions. Specifically, I will examine the resonance of the Romantic malaise known in France as "le mal du siècle" and how it might inform a reading of Knut Hamsun's novel *Pan* (1894) and shed light on the more than eccentric behavior of its main character, Lieutenant Glahn. I will also examine the idea of influence and examine a possible affiliation between Hamsun and Chateaubriand. The French Romantic writer François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), whose slender novel *René* (1802), with which "le mal du siècle" is most closely associated, represents the epitome of the Romantic hero, who evidently had not drawn his last breath when Hamsun published *Pan* almost one century later. Indeed, Glahn and René might be seen as archetypes of a similar malady afflicting overly sensitive, generally upper-class young men of a nervous and indeed neurotic disposition, harbingers or descendants, respectively, of Baudelaire, Poe, Wagner, and Ibsen (Weber 12-13).

The "Romantic hero" has been a fixture in Western literature since at least the eighteenth century and embodies many overlapping and even contradictory emotions; he (and it was usually a "he"), more often than not, was a self-made outcast and rebel against social conventions; at the same time, however, this self-centered and self-indulgent, overly sensitive and proud individual was given to bouts of melancholia, introspection, self-doubt, and even suicidal fantasies. This readiness and willingness to suffer also suggests that the Romantic hero is an exceptional if not superior human being (Philippe van Tieghem 106-117; Lagarde et Michard 40). "A great soul must contain more sorrow than a small one" (Chateaubriand, *René* 551).<sup>2</sup>

In the French tradition, the names of René, Adolphe (*Adolphe*, Benjamin Constant [1816]), Obermann (*Obermann*, de Senancour [1804]), and Eugène de Rastignac (a recurring character in Balzac's roman fleuve *La Comédie Humaine* [1830-1847]) immediately come to mind and all conjure up a quintessentially romantic moment which typically centers on a self-absorbed hero defying the world. René and Glahn incarnate many, if not all, of the characteristics of this hybrid creature, and I will examine similarities as well as differences. I have chosen to focus on *René*, the quintessentially Romantic novel in the French tradition and the finest example of "mal du siècle," and a novel that inspires a fruitful comparison with Hamsun's *Pan*.

### The Problem With Comparative Literature

Comparative literature "analyzes the similarities and dissimilarities and parallels between two literatures. It further studies themes, modes, conventions and use of folk tales, myths in two different literatures or even more" (Kumar Dass 7). This commonsensical definition eludes the thorny question of collecting empirical evidence to determine affiliations; it has plagued Comparative Literature from its beginnings in the early nineteenth century. While the positivist, empirical tradition associated with the so-called French School (Paul Van Tieghem, Fernand Baldensperger, Jean-François Guyard) no longer is widely practiced, it still has its place in literary studies, as I will argue: even though clear-cut relationships may never be established, the invitation to relate two authors originates with the realization that they share important characteristics. A New Critics-inspired Comparative Literature, aka the American School, inaugurated by René Wellek and more concerned with literary criticism and close reading than with literary detective work, has opened exciting new perspectives, for example, on race, ethnicity, and gender (Bassnett). These novel approaches have this in common, that they do not obsess about demonstrating authorial affiliation and instead focus on the text(s) at hand, in keeping with the idealistic spirit of Goethe, who, as one of the early believers in Comparative Literature, hoped that the study of literature across national borders and languages would bring people closer together by reminding them of how much they had in common. Evidently, there are universal human experiences and archetypes that have left their mark on literature. According to Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, there is no original text, only misinterpretation upon misinterpretation, leading to an "anxiety of influence," making prospective authors fret over a presumed debt to a significant but unnamable predecessor. "The new culture-makers," including specifically the modernists like Hamsun, "defined themselves in terms of a collective revolt" (Schorske xxvi) against their presumptive "fathers."

## Rousseau and Hamsun

My approach is much inspired by Dolores Buttry's study of Rousseau's influence on Hamsun's *Pan*. However, Buttry does not advance much hard evidence to support her thesis beyond Hamsun's well-known letter to his German publisher Albert Langen to promote his new novel: "think of J.-J. Rousseau in the region of Nordland—with its Lapps, its 'mysteries,' its 'grand superstition' and its midnight sun—making the acquaintance of a local girl." Hamsun states that he would like to express "some of the nature-worshipping, sensitivity, overnervousness in a Rousseauian soul" (quoted by Lyngstad, *Pan* xiii and Buttry 121). Buttry draws attention to a number of textual parallels, but they apply equally well to other novels of the Romantic period: *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Pan* are just two "novels of love" written in the first person, featuring sensitive, emotional, self-indulgent, solitary, autobiographical heroes that experience the full of gamut of emotions, ranging from ecstatic rapture to suicidal depression which, when taken together, constitute a "Rousseauian soul."

Now, the idea of a sophisticated Rousseauian narrator, raised on a strict salon diet of seventeenth and eighteenth century platitudes about reason and love, "making the acquaintance of" and seducing a "Nordlands girl" is out of place because *Pan* is a sentimental extravaganza and does not reflect any of the very intellectual entanglements of the Rousseauian narrator in *Julie ou la La Nouvelle Héloïse*; nor does *Pan* sustain the same analytical tone, emotional restraint and general sense of decorum.

Upon closer examination of Buttry's article, the apparent attempt on Hamsun's part to emulate Rousseau rings just a bit hollow. To begin with, Rousseau's novel does not engage in a Dionysian and Nietzschean (Naæss 55) celebration of nature, like *Pan*. As Naæss reminds us, "*Pan* owes its Norwegian popularity less to its tale of passion than to Glahn's eloquent declaration of love of nature—in a manner closer to Nietzsche's than to Rousseau's. Glahn is not so much botanizing on the Ile de Saint Pierre as singing his wild incantations in the style of Zarathustra" (Naæss 55). What we retain in *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), is not idyllic nature *tableaux* but rather an intellectual and tortured self-analysis of the ravages of the passions. In this sense Rousseau continues the tradition of the French *roman psychologique* of the seventeenth century (e.g., *La Princesse de Clèves* [1678]), in which the main character embarks on a long trajectory of ultimately destructive self-analysis. Rousseau's characters are highly passionate but rational and therefore more firmly in control of their own destiny than Hamsun's. While Buttry does bring out some interesting parallels, Chateaubriand's René might make an even more appropriate comparison. Because of their streak of insanity, Glahn and René have more in common with each other than with any of Rousseau's characters. Glahn and Edwarda do not engage in any lengthy dialogue like Saint-Preux and Julie; their interactions trigger misunderstandings and wildly self-indulgent behaviors. Moreover, there is nothing exotic or religious about the milieu in *Julie, or the New Héloïse*; there are no natives, no sermons. Furthermore, even if Hamsun had not read René, he evidently empathizes with the Romantic celebration of nature that permeates Chateaubriand's novel, which could also be construed as an anti-Rousseauian story, refuting the commonplace idea associated with Rousseau (*Discours sur l'Inégalité* [1755], *A Discourse on Inequality*) that people in a state of nature or living far removed from city life live more honorably, more simply, and more authentically than "civilized" people. Neither René nor Glahn live happily in the bosom of nature.

## Chateaubriand and Hamsun

Before making textual comparisons, I will attempt to answer the fundamental and initially very legitimate question in Comparative Literature: how might Chateaubriand have influenced Hamsun? We do not know whether or not Hamsun (who did not know French) had even read Rousseau. Hamsun never published a voluminous journal or correspondence like so many French authors; however, we do know that Hamsun interacted with Strindberg in Paris, and had absorbed Rousseau by reading Strindberg (Næss 95). Buttry does make the very good point that "Rousseau and Hamsun represent the same phenomenon separated by space and time" (Buttry 147), which I interpret as an appeal to the Romantic *Zeitgeist* that still lingered in early modernist circles at the turn of the last century (Schorske, Weber) and created a unique outlook on life which set the late nineteenth century apart.

There are bound to be persistent echoes from the depths of European Romanticism in Hamsun's works for the same reason that it is widely believed that Hamsun influenced posterity and left a mark on the work of Kafka, Thomas Mann and Paul Auster, among others (von Schnurbein 81). Thomas Mann stated that Hamsun was "a disciple of Dostoevski and Nietzsche" (Næss iii), and Isaac Bashevis Singer claimed that Hamsun was "the father of the modern school of literature" (Næss iii). Indeed, many critics have suggested that Hamsun is a "neo-Romantic," like so many other turn-of-the-century writers, artists, and musicians, even though his genius took a distinctly modernist bent early in his career.<sup>3</sup> Writers contribute in meaningful ways to a *Zeitgeist*--a concept associated with Herder, Goethe, and Hegel, what J.S. Mill called the "characteristic of the age"--which means that Hamsun did not necessarily have to have been personally familiar with Chateaubriand's work to absorb an influence that was culturally prevalent at the time (as was the case with "le mal du siècle" in fin-de-siècle France) any more than he had to explicitly pay tribute to Rousseau, Strindberg, or Munch, or to anyone else he likely was influenced by.

Let's look first at the historical context before going on to examine the textual evidence. Chateaubriand and other French Romantics were translated into several Nordic languages almost immediately,<sup>4</sup> and before setting out for Paris, the cosmopolitan Hamsun had lived in the Scandinavian equivalent of Paris, Copenhagen. Hamsun's Parisian sojourn lasted for several years, from the spring of 1893 to the summer of 1896 (Klette 12, Kolloen 73-78, Zagar 50), which raises a number of interesting points relevant to my comparative perspective here. While in Paris we know that Hamsun actively participated in expat literary and bohemian communities (Kolloen) and must have absorbed the literary conversations and gossip of the day.

Hamsun gave up on learning French after only a short time,<sup>5</sup> but continued to work on *Pan* during his Parisian sojourn and the novel was published in 1893 and shortly thereafter in both French and German translation; its socially awkward and autodidact author quickly became more widely known. Still, Naess concludes that Hamsun did not learn "anything interesting about the French" (Naess 18). Ferguson concurs: "Paris ... left little physical trace on his writing" (Ferguson 162), which is hard to believe if for no other reason than because Hamsun lived in a literary bohemia and also interacted with avant-garde writers and artists, such as Strindberg and Munch.<sup>6</sup>

It is doubtful that Hamsun was ever happy in the City of Light: he did not have the money to support his lifestyle. Besides, he felt like an outsider and socially inferior. Confiding in another Scandinavian expat, Hamsun exclaims:

You speak the language, you've read about the art and life here, you have it all at your fingertips. Things are different for me, you see. I'm a barbarian, I lack the education (Kolloen 75).

This statement casts doubt on the extent of Hamsun's general literary culture. Does he ever say that he has read the French classics? Has anyone been able to ascertain to what degree Hamsun was familiar with, say, Rousseau? Indeed, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that he acquired his French literary culture through conversation with his Scandinavian peers in the café culture in Paris, most notably in the café de la Régence where the Scandinavian expat community had taken up quarters.<sup>7</sup>

But Hamsun was an avid reader; why, in 1892, had he not been accused of plagiarizing Dostoevsky's short story *The Gambler*? While living in Paris, Hamsun also interacted with the poet Paul Verlaine and the painter Edward Munch. Finally, Hamsun and Strindberg became acquainted in Paris and maintained a friendly relationship until their strong personalities clashed. The general public and scholars alike will be pleased to one day be able to examine Hamsun's personal library at Nørholm, which is extensive and apparently counts more than 6200 books, 750 of which have authors' dedications to Hamsun (Hovstø 16). But the contents of this vast personal library are still a matter of conjecture since the titles have not yet been made public.

### **Chateaubriand**

Chateaubriand is generally considered as one of the founders of French Romanticism, though literary historians would argue that technically he is a "pre-Romantic," since Romanticism proper in France asserts itself relatively late (compared to England and Germany) and does not officially begin until 1820 when the poet Alphonse de Lamartine published his *Méditations Poétiques*. In 1830 Victor Hugo staged his controversial play *Hernani*, which, according to mainstream literary historians (Darcos, Lagarde Michard, Peyre, Philippe Van Tieghem, et al) marked the triumph of French Romanticism. According to well-known historian Peter Gay, "Chateaubriand dominated the literary scene in France in the first half of the nineteenth century" (Gay). Chateaubriand's two short novels *Atala* (1801) and *René* (1802) invite us to call him an early Romantic since these works expose a plethora of typically Romantic themes: personal lyricism, daydreaming, strong emotions, the sensual appeal of nature, exoticism, and the shattering of sexual taboos, among others.

### **The Post-Romantic Hero**

Literary historians argue persuasively that the Romantic hero later metamorphized and found new life in fin-de-siècle art and literature, specifically the Decadent movement (Humphries 785-788); Weber 9-26). In France, authors as disparate as Gauthier, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Huysman paved the way for this new literature, leaving us with a disillusioned, cynical, erratic, overly self-conscious, grotesque even, borderline insane, protagonist, disgusted in equal measure by the world and by himself, who took pleasure in turning the world upside down, his own and that of others, not only for his own pleasure but also to create a novel art which, some would argue, coincides with a general decline in cultural values in the West leading up to World War I. In Norway, too, this worldview found resonance in the "Norwegian literary culture of the 1890s, a decade often described with labels such as *nyromantikken* (neo-romanticism) and *decadence*" (Bigelow 1).

Robert Musil's epic novel *A Man Without Qualities*, set against the final years of the Habsburg Empire, brilliantly evokes this ambiance of cultural decline in early twentieth century Europe, specifically Vienna, and provides the cultural backdrop for a new Zeitgeist which had subdued much of continental Europe beginning in the late nineteenth century. At one point the main protagonist exclaims: "For a long time there had been a faint air of aversion hovering over everything that he did and experienced, a shadow of helplessness and isolation, a universal disinclination to which he could not find the complementary inclination. At times he felt just as though he had been born with a gift for which at present there was no function" (Musil 64-65). This sounds like a reincarnation of the "mal du siècle" and any intellectual artist living in this environment, at the turn of the last century, including Hamsun, must have reacted to this feeling of disempowerment and loss.

In retrospect, in France, this period became known as the Belle époque, roughly speaking, 1871-1914, from the Franco-Prussian War until the outbreak of World War I. It has been immortalized by Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past* but is generally considered to inaugurate a national decline (Weber 9-26). However, as Carl Schorske suggests: "out of a crisis of political and social disintegration so much of modern art and thought was born (Schorske xviii, Schaffer 3)." Writers and artists, among others, mounted a "generational rebellion against their fathers and a search for new self-definitions" (Schorske xviii; Bloom) and ushered in age of a-historicity. Ironically, in France, the term "belle époque" only gained currency after World War I when it came to suggest a nostalgia for a Golden Age when France allegedly was secure and prosperous and Paris was still the capital of the world of arts and letters (McAuliffe, Meyer, Shaffer, Weber). In reality, France was still reeling from the Dreyfus affair and her economic might was posited on a system of social injustice that would be seriously called into question in the period between the wars.

While Hamsun wrote in many registers, his early modernistic novels, *Hunger* (1890), *Mysteries* (1892), *Pan* (1894), by every critical account, unequivocally celebrate the post-romantic, decadent hero, in the word's moral, material and social connotations (Weber 13), even though they do this in a way that defies easy categorization. As Von Schnurbein has suggested, "[O]gså i Hamsuns senere verk blir lignende 'perverse' erotiske mønstre og oppløsningen av klare kjønnsidentiteter skildret som forutsetninger for et moderne liv og en moderne kunst—en modernitet som blir forkastet som *dekadent* (my italics), men samtidig tolket som (kunsterisk) produktiv, noe man ser f.eks i figurene August i *Landstrykere* eller Eleseus i *Markens Grøde*" (Von Schnurbein 83).

### "Le vague des passions" and "le mal du siècle"

For my purposes here, I will limit myself to Chateaubriand's idea of "le vague des passions," or "vagueness of the passions" which appears in the preface to *René*, a vague but crippling feeling of melancholia, lethargy, and passivity that overwhelms the Romantic hero and leads him to despair, and worse, to contemplate suicide. The term "vague des passions" is associated with Chateaubriand and first appeared in his two-volume apology for Christianity titled *Génie du Christianisme* (1802). His celebrated novel *René* was an illustration of the new affliction and ostensibly intended to justify its condemnation in volatile, post-revolutionary France: "le mal du siècle." The word's Latin etymology ("vacuus") also conjures up the existential "emptiness" and "indefiniteness" that find expression in René's life situation and worldview (Richard 9). In post-

revolutionary France this kind of emptiness was a sentiment that reflected the deep sense of loss experienced by many in a world set adrift atop a turbulent sea.

Chateaubriand maintained that while the imagination was rich, the world was cold and empty, and that modern civilization had robbed men of their illusions. Strong emotions continued to haunt humankind; however, the passions no longer had an object to focus on:

It remains to speak about a state of mind that has not been very well observed: I mean the one that precedes the development of the great passions, when all the faculties, young, active, complete but contained, only have exercised themselves on themselves, without purpose and without object. The more civilized people become the stronger this vagueness of the passions; and something very sad then happens: the large number of examples one has under one's own eyes and the multitude of books that study humans and their feelings make you clever without having any experience... The imagination is rich, abundant and marvelous, life poor, dry, and disillusioned. One inhabits, with a full heart, an empty world and without having experienced anything one is disillusioned by everything. (Chateaubriand, *René* 540-541)<sup>8</sup>

Armand Hoog pointedly wrote that “of all the literary or moral notions circulated by French Romanticism, that of the “mal du siècle” is perhaps the most revealing and the most enduring. It expresses a profound spiritual crisis and indicates the misery and anguish of several generations--of Chateaubriand, of Musset, of Baudelaire” (Hoog 42). In point of fact, The French poet and playwright Alfred de Musset coined the term in his autobiography *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (*Confession of a Child of the Century*, 1836). The term “mal du siècle” expressed the existential boredom, ennui, and melancholy afflicting a whole generation of young European males in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Le “mal du siècle” was a new type of existential boredom, producing a melancholia of an aristocratic type, a hitherto never seen precocious apathy which appeared to justify a laissez-faire attitude of disgust with life, in fact, a distaste for living altogether. In the melancholic subject, the will to live appeared to be paralyzed by the passive contemplation of the ongoing struggle of life all around. Faith and a sense of duty also were absent. Man felt himself abandoned, “possessed, tormented by the demon of his heart” (Chateaubriand, *René* 555).<sup>9</sup> Morbid sadness was mistaken for the suffering of a proud and superior mind. As Victor Hugo famously proclaimed: “La mélancolie, c'est le bonheur d'être triste” (the “melancholy happiness to be unhappy”). René appears to enjoy himself in a perverse kind of way, exploring the shallows of his ennui and then writing about them into the bargain.

*René* takes place in the decades leading up to the French Revolution and contains many autobiographical allusions. René, the aristocratic hero of the eponymous novel, is a sensitive, solitary, and melancholy youth brought up, as Chateaubriand himself had been, in the deepest solitude of nature with only the close companionship of his adored elder sister, Amélie.<sup>10</sup> She, realizing that her love for René is more than sisterly affection, seeks refuge from her criminal passion in a convent. René does not learn the reason for her sudden flight until the day she takes her vows. Ironically, it is only after discovering the truth about his sister's incestuous passion that he realizes that he now has real reason to be unhappy. Grief and horror drive him to the wilds of North America. Now he knows

what true disillusionment feels like, making him ripe for the French missionary Father Souël's moralizing sermon at the end of the novel: renounce daydreaming ("les rêveries inutiles") and return to society! We never do find out if René does in fact change his ways because he is killed in an Indian attack shortly thereafter.

On a beautiful morning in May, in the month that the natives call "la lune des fleurs" ("the moon of flowers"), René, Chactas, and father Souël meet up under a sassafras tree on the banks of the Mississippi river to hear the young man's confession. Nature cradles him as though he were in a temple; in such sublime surroundings, he is truly in the presence of God:

Towards the east, in the background, the sun was rising among the jagged peaks of the Appalachians, drawn like figures of azure on the golden reaches of sky; in the west, the Mississippi's waves rolled by in magnificent silence, and with inconceivable grandeur formed a boundary to the picture. (*René*, trans. Kline 3)<sup>11</sup>

Like Rousseau, René opts for confession as a last resort in order to get a hold on his chaotic life and perhaps atone for his own sins, which include shunning his sister and rejecting outright any responsibility or even prior knowledge of what happened between them. In his opinion, he has done nothing wrong and is a victim, not only of his sister's criminal passion but also of the uncertainty of the times, which has jaded his outlook on life and not prepared the young generation of which he is unwittingly a part for the onslaught of the passions.

As hard as it may be today to believe, Chateaubriand's short novel had an incredible impact on young readers in France, not unlike the enormous success of Goethe's tragic love story *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* (1774) in Germany. Literary historians consider the novel to be the illustration of "le mal du siècle," and Chateaubriand himself considered *René* to be his finest piece of writing.

### **Glahn's "mal"**

Next I will try to relate several scenes in *René* to a few singular episodes in Hamsun's novel *Pan* to determine to what extent "le mal du siècle" factors into the psychology and behavior of Lieutenant Glahn. A sense of mystery pervades both novels. No one knows much about the origin of the protagonists. No one knows why Lieutenant Glahn has left his post in the military and has gone to live in a hut in the woods any more than why René suddenly left for the wilderness of North America. Glahn lives in close communion with nature and to begin with seems quite content insofar as his desires do not exceed his means to fulfill them. Yet it is perfectly clear that he has a melancholy bent and exults in feeling excluded from society and suffering the brunt of all the contradictory pent-up emotions he can feel brewing inside himself. Once the enticing but enigmatic Edwarda has entered into the picture, his many vulnerabilities come to the fore; it is clear that he has been struggling with some kind of inner demon all along. Edwarda exposes his old life wound, which is never explained, but in the long term will lead him to suicide of a sort. One day several years later, after he has left Norway and gone on an extended hunting safari in faraway India, he, too, just like René, receives a life-shattering letter from the old world; it is from Edwarda who has married his rival in the meantime but now dares to propose to him (*Pan* 118). Glahn enters a state of deep despair and shortly thereafter provokes his travel and hunting companion to "suicide" him. The ever



capricious Edwarda also is a bundle of contradictions: on the one hand, rebellious, headstrong, and ambitious, on the other, insecure, impulsive, manipulative, and even sadistic, just like Glahn.

René's life story is unusual. After his father's death, increasingly disillusioned and frustrated but also overly self-indulgent and naive, René travels abroad, to Italy, to escape from himself as much as to broaden his horizons and complete a much-abbreviated European grand tour. One day, he visits Mount Etna and sits on top of this active volcano "weeping over the destiny of mortals" (Chateaubriand, *René* 550) and rejoicing in his own unhappiness. The hot lava boiling deep down under his eyes, ready to erupt at any moment, evokes the force of the contradictory emotions seething within him and his "ardent désir" ([ardent desire] Chateaubriand, *René* 552) as well as his extreme solitude:

Upon returning to France, René withdraws to the countryside, where he constructs a hut (Chateaubriand, *René* 553) to live in, not unlike Lieutenant Glahn in *Pan*. Like Glahn, René is desperate to find a life companion and screams out his frustration from mountaintops (Chateaubriand, *René* 554). He is desperate for a female companion and in his wild reveries conjures up a future lover<sup>1</sup>:

I climbed mountains, summoning with all the strength of my desire the ideal object of some future affection. (Chateaubriand, *René*, trans. Kline 115)<sup>12</sup>

What Buttry observes about Rousseau and Hamsun's heroes also applies to René: "the passion for Hamsunian heroes and for Rousseau preceded its apparent object" (Buttry 140). They desire far more than they are ever likely to find in this life. The evocation of nature speaks volumes about their inability to form lasting relationships and illustrates their existential ennui. Like Glahn, René enjoys a close relationship with nature; he delights in powerful storms, reaching a quasi-orgasmic state of pure bliss:

Rise, swiftly, longed-for storms that will bear René into the realms of another life!" So saying, I strode along, my face burning, the wind whistling through my hair, feeling neither rain nor frost, bewitched, tormented, as if possessed by the demon in my heart. (Chateaubriand, *René*, trans. Kline 117)<sup>13</sup>

René and Glahn both invest themselves fully in nature, in a series of descriptive passages that verge on personal invocations devoid of much detail, illustrating the romantic idea that interior and exterior landscapes mysteriously correspond: a mood can find expression in a storm, for example, as we have seen above. (Van Tieghem 11, Richard 7, Darcos 61, Lagarde and Michard 10, 112). René is sensitive to the slightest change in nature. He broods and indulges in the occasional reverie: "On one occasion I took pleasure in stripping the leaves from a willow branch above a stream, and granting an identity to each leaf that the current carried onwards" (*René*, trans. Kline 18).<sup>14</sup> And: "How little was needed to prompt my reveries: a dry leaf that the wind drove before me" (Chateaubriand, *René*, trans. Kline 19).<sup>15</sup>

Glahn, being a true "son of the forest" (*Pan* 23), experiences a much closer, more authentic communion between man and nature than René, and this relationship is

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* Chateaubriand calls this imaginary, erotic creature his "sylphide;" Hamsun, in *Hunger*, names her Ylajali. In *Pan*, and again in *Victoria*, she reappears as the legendary female figure Yselin.

described more realistically, in more physical detail than anything to be found in *René*. It is easy to see why Hamsun has been called a Scandinavian Rousseau even though this image of Rousseau is largely cliché and based on picturesque nature tableaux which the university establishment in France has long held up as exemplary (Lagarde et Michard, Darcos). It took scholars, such as De Man and Starobinski, to remind readers of the complexity of Rousseau's style, including his portrayal of nature. What French scholars call "lyrisme de la nature," appears extravagant in most of Hamsun's novels, but is far more sensitive, sensual, and intense than anything readers are accustomed to in Rousseau. The only true exception in Rousseau's oeuvre to which *Pan* might be compared is his unfinished *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782) where the portrayal of nature takes on a contemplative and quasi-religious character, signaling a communion between man and nature where all borders between the human and the natural are dissolved.

Glahn delights in hearing the birds sing and does not need a watch to tell the time of day. By following the sun's path in the sky he knows intuitively when it is time for him to return home to his hut together with his faithful dog, Aesop. At times *Pan*, like Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, is very much a pantheistic celebration of man's integration with nature: "I felt as if I lay face to face with the very bedrock of the world, my heart beating warmly against that naked bedrock and being at home there" (*Pan* 10).

There are no dramatic storms in *Pan*, as there are in *René*; the closest equivalent to such an intimate bond between narrator and nature is Glahn's account of his three "Iron Nights" (*Pan* 81-86). His experience on those nights has been much studied and need not preoccupy us here except to underscore that Glahn's every emotion is reflected in his description of nature. For example, his melancholy personality is closely mirrored in the evocation of his innermost feelings as they find expression in this sublime natural setting. Like René, he feels at peace in the bosom of nature; at last he is able to set his weary and troubled mind at rest by contemplating and rejoicing in the harmony he finds all around him; however, at the same time his brooding mind is working hard to find parallels between his inner self and his peaceful surroundings, and his meditation gradually takes on an increasingly spiritual, quasi-religious tone:

A toast, ye men and beast and birds, to the solitary night in the forest. A toast to the darkness and to God's murmur among the trees, to the sweet, simple harmony of silence in my ears, to green leaves and yellow leaves. (*Pan* 82)

I give thanks for the solitary night, for the mountains, for the roar of the darkness and the sea that echoes in my own heart! ... Listen to the east and listen to the west, just listen! It's God eternal! The stillness murmuring in my ear is Nature's seething blood, God transfusing me and the world. (*Pan* 82)

Evidently, Chateaubriand and Hamsun commune in an uncanny sense of pantheism<sup>16</sup> that gains in power with each passing moment. Who needs the Church or religion, for that matter, when man can communicate one on one with God in privileged moments like these:

The wind calls me and my soul bows to answer to the call. I feel myself lifted out of my sphere, pressed to an invisible breast, my eyes are moist with tears, I tremble--God is somewhere near looking at me. (*Pan* 85-86)

Nevertheless, the sense of loss is acute in such early novels as *Pan*, *Hunger*, *Mysteries*, and *Victoria*. Traditional society was breaking down as Norway moved into the age of the Industrial Revolution. The individual struggled to find his place in the new society and sometimes lost himself, as most of the protagonists in Hamsun's early novels do. The miller's son Johannes in *Victoria* is, like Glahn, a "bundle of changing emotions, soul, rising and sinking moods" (Lyngstad, *Pan* xiii). They both look for ways of their own to tame the forces not only of the industrial economy but also of their own minds and look to nature, to love, to dreams, and to literature to overcome their alienation in modern society. The very same sense of loss is acutely present in *René*, making of Chateaubriand (and of many Romantics) an early modernist in his own right.

In his essay on the unconscious *Fra det ubevidste sjæleliv* (1890), Hamsun stated in no uncertain terms that he wished to show the power of the unconscious. So, in *Pan*, he created a character that illustrates modern man's struggle against strong emotions and extreme mood swings. Chateaubriand and Hamsun both describe us mortals as irrational bundles of contradictory emotions prone to gratuitous acts and prisoners of obsessive-compulsive behavior. Glahn, of course, does himself in at the end of the novel, but René, too, is tempted to kill himself to put an end to his unhappiness and to a life of unfulfilled dreams.

In terms of personality, there are similarities and differences. On the one hand, both René and Glahn are confused about who they are and have a strained relationship with reality. Glahn appears to be far worse off than René and often comes across as a lunatic. The latter passively succumbs to the vicissitudes of life, whereas the former actively participates in his own self-destruction and even finds a gleeful sense of self-fulfillment and joy each time he digs himself a little bit deeper into his own grave by further alienating Edwarda and the other inhabitants of the vilage. Glahn is socially awkward, eccentric to say the least, overly proud and incredibly impulsive, not to mention neurotic, as incomprehensible to himself as he is to others. Glahn comes across as the ultimate sadomasochist who delights in torturing the women he becomes involved with but also enjoys suffering the consequences. The single most memorable fact about him, I think, is the "crazy" things he does. Without explanation, he flings Edwarda's shoe into the water and spits in his rival the baron's ear. French novelist André Gide (1869-1951), who was also inspired by Dostoevsky, just like Hamsun, would later name this kind of inexplicable behavior an *acte gratuit* (gratuitous act). Glahn cannot comprehend why he does what he does, but everything he does ultimately leads to his own downfall.

## Conclusion

Despite many similarities, ultimately the two novels are also quite different, displaying significant discrepancies in their articulation of "le mal du siècle." To be sure, Hamsun is the superior nature poet, but Chateaubriand is more articulate in formulating the existential dilemma facing René, using the voice of Father Souël to make him see the errors of his ways and to offer him a way out. Hamsun, as ever, is playful and lyrical, almost to a fault, thereby failing to express a definite opinion one way or the other. "Le mal du siècle," while very real in *Pan*, initially is not as obvious as it is in *René*. Glahn is

far too aloof and debonair, at least aloof to begin with. It is only after he has become smitten with Edwarda and after that relationship deteriorates that he begins to seriously question the purpose of his existence. Then he wavers, and at that point it is as if his entire world begins to come apart at the seams. Suddenly, the melancholy and largely passive attitude associated with "le mal du siècle" as described in Chateaubriand's novel is transformed into a destructive force. Glahn does inexplicable things for no reason at all because he cannot control the urge not so much to shock bourgeois society as to obey his inner demons. Like René, he has been living under the illusion that man creates his own destiny--and then it gradually dawns upon him that powerful emotions have gotten the better of him and that he cannot do much more than passively sit by and watch his own self-immolation. It is never clear to the reader what exactly ails him, and I suspect that Glahn does not understand the full extent of his condition either. There has been much speculation that Glahn's problem might be sexual in origin. Von Schnurbein pioneered a queer reading of the novel in an article published in 2001 and neatly summarizes Glahn's pathology which includes everything from a poor self-image and self-denial to impotence, latent homosexuality, fetishism, sadomasochism, and fear of "de skremmende erotiske fordringene de hamsunske kvinnene konfronterer dem med" (Von Schnurbein 82). He also studied the problem of manhood in *Pan* and suggests that "Glahn's troubled identity of manhood and his violent but futile struggles...also reflect[ing] on the relationship between masculinity and Norwegian modernity" (He 39).

Many great writers of the twentieth century have hailed Hamsun as a great writer (Paul Auster, Thomas Mann, André Gide, among others) but also as a privileged member of a very small circle of authors who have made the great leap to the shores of posterity. Chateaubriand did not quite make it--for a variety of reasons--and although Hamsun no longer commands the same degree of recognition as he once did, the quality of his literary oeuvre confirms his place in world heritage literature. Reading Chateaubriand alongside Hamsun from a comparative, new, world literary perspective suggests that *Pan* is part of the Romantic tradition in Western literature and enriches our understanding of Hamsun's novelistic masterpiece.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> "Une grande âme doit contenir plus de douleur qu'une petite" (Chateaubriand, *René* 551).

<sup>3</sup> As Zagar writes: "Hamsun fikk sitt litterære gjennombrudd i 1890 med den modernistiske roman *Sult*" (Zagar 71)

<sup>4</sup> *René* was translated into Swedish in 1803 (*René eller Passionernas verkningar*. Trans. Per Anders Stenkula. Groth och Petré, 1803). A Danish translation appeared the same year.

<sup>5</sup> By all accounts Hamsun was a poor linguist, and his English was not much better than his German. At the first plenary Congress of the Presse Internationale in Vienna, in 1943, a propaganda event organized by Goebbels, Hamsun's address was in English. Buttry reminds us of his "very imperfect English"

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(Buttry 121). His French was virtually non-existent, though Hamsun did make a small effort--for a month or two at the beginning of his Parisian sojourn--to learn the language (Ferguson 144).

<sup>6</sup> While in Paris Hamsun also witnessed a street riot, which he detailed in a short story titled “En gaderrevolution,” published in *Kratskog* (1903), in which he blends the “autobiographical, the documentary and the literary” (Klette 17).

<sup>7</sup> Hamsun lived at no 8, in the ritzy rue Vaugirard, in the neighboring sixth arrondissement, but could only afford a garret in what today is the four star Hôtel Le Sénat. The French government honored Hamsun with a plaque that records his solitary sojourn in the City of Light: “Knut Hamsun (1859- 1952). Écrivain norvégien. Prix Nobel de littérature 1920 vécut et travailla dans cet immeuble entre 1893 et 1895.”

<sup>8</sup> “Il reste à parler d'un état de l'âme qui, ce nous semble, n'a pas encore été bien observé ; c'est celui qui précède le développement des passions, lorsque nos facultés, jeunes, actives, entières, mais renfermées, ne se sont exercées que sur elles-mêmes, sans but et sans objet. Plus les peuples avancent en civilisation, plus cet état du vague des passions augmente [...] On est détrompé sans avoir joui ; il reste encore des désirs, et l'on n'a plus d'illusions [...] On habite, avec un cœur plein, un monde vide ; et, sans avoir usé de rien, on est désabusé de tout.” (“Le cadre philosophique” in Chateaubriand, *René* 540-541).

<sup>9</sup> “[T]ourmenté, et comme possédé par le démon de son cœur” (Chateaubriand, *René* 555).

<sup>10</sup> In his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, the autobiographical narrator retells a life story that closely resembles René's and describes in tantalizing detail his close relationship with his elder sister Lucile.

<sup>11</sup> “Vers l'Orient, au fond de la perspective, le soleil commençait à paraître entre les sommets brisés des Appalaches, qui se dessinaient comme des caractères d'azur dans les hauteurs dorées du ciel; à l'occident, le Meschacebé roulait ses ondes dans un silence magnifique, et formait la bordure du tableau avec une inconcevable grandeur” (Chateaubriand, *René* 542-543).

<sup>12</sup> “[Je] m'élévais sur la montagne, appelant de toute la force de mes désirs l'idéal objet d'une flamme future” (Chateaubriand, *René* 554).

<sup>13</sup> “Ainsi disant, je marchais à grands pas, le visage enflammé, le vent sifflant dans ma chevelure, ne sentant ni pluie ni frimat, enchanté, tourmenté, et comme possédé par le démon de mon coeur” (Chateaubriand, *René* 555).

<sup>14</sup> “Un jour je m'étais amusé à effeuiller une branche de saule sur un ruisseau, et à attacher une idée à chaque feuille que le courant entraînait” (Chateaubriand, *René* 554).

<sup>15</sup> “[Q]u'il fallait peu de chose à ma rêverie, une feuille sèche que le vent chassait devant moi” (Chateaubriand, *René* 555).

<sup>16</sup> For an in-depth discussion of pantheism in Hamsun's work, see Sæbø.

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