

MARIE HAMSUN'S MANY TRUTHS

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In his biography of Knut Hamsun, *Enigma*, Robert Ferguson writes how Marie Hamsun "unburdened herself" about her marriage difficulties with Knut during her interview with Prof. Gabriel Langfeldt on December 14, 1945 (Ferguson, 1987 396). My article will revisit the interview with Marie as reported in the now infamous psychiatric report, published in 1978 as *Den rettspsykiatriske erklæring om Knut Hamsun* by Langfeldt and Ødegaard (The psychiatric report on Knut Hamsun, henceforth, *Report*.) It will proceed by comparing the interview briefly to some statements Marie Hamsun made about her marriage in her two memoirs, *Regnbuen* (The Rainbow, 1953) and *Under gullregnen* (Under the Laburnum Tree, 1959). The purpose of this investigation is to test the hypothesis that the *Report* offers us a truer picture of Knut and Marie's life than the two biographies, especially after we peel away the elements of myth and legend from the often-demonized text by Langfeldt and Ødegaard. Marie's statements from the interview can be corroborated with what we know about the Hamsuns' lives from other sources. Since Prof. Langfeldt has been made into the main villain by both Knut in his *Paa Gjengrodde stier* (On Overgrown Paths) and by Marie in *Under gullregnen*, and most recently in the movie *Hamsun* (1996), the tendency has been to dismiss the report.

In the first place it is necessary to make a short comment on the primary source: *Den rettspsykiatriske erklæring om Knut Hamsun* was published in 1978 primarily as a response to Thorkild Hansen's book *Prosessen mot Hamsun* (The Trial against Hamsun, 1978). Hansen's book skewed the statements and findings from the *Report*, which Hansen had access to in National

Archives (Riksarkivet). Marie never disputed *what* she had said but complained repeatedly that she was promised confidentiality. The *Report* is a fine example of the genre of medical jurisprudence in which medical persons give legal evidence and/or may appear before courts of law, administrative tribunals, inquests, licensing agencies, boards of inquiry or certification, or other investigative bodies.

The two memoirs by Marie are similar in tone yet different in focus. *Regnbuen* is almost 400 pages long, and spans everything from Marie's childhood to her life with Knut until his death in 1952. *Under gullregnen* is shorter and mostly covers the postwar years although it includes a number of flashbacks. In her book *Marie Hamsun*, Birgit Gjernes details the reception of both memoirs. The reception of *Regnbuen*, Gjernes writes, was almost uniformly positive with only minor reservations (Gjernes 148), and explains that Aschehoug Publishing House deemed the description of the occupation years and the post-war trials too controversial. Marie subsequently replaced it with one sentence: "The next ten years' events are not included in this book" [De neste ti års hendelser kommer ikke med i denne boken] (Gjernes 147; M. Hamsun 1953 377). The reception of *Under gullregnen* was also very positive (Gjernes 174-79) and it was especially the style and interpersonal observations that were praised. A few critics pointed out that the book gave no indication that the Hamsuns knew, or wanted to admit, that their collaboration with the Nazis was wrong, much less did it express remorse (Gjernes 175).

Fundamentally, both texts were, and still are, considered well written yet unreliable. They are silent about certain events and skew others. *Regnbuen* opens with a moving dedication to Knut Hamsun: "And when one grows old, the wanderer becomes tired, he does not lift his head towards a new day, the path has become dusty and stony. But for my veiled gaze, all of life's broken colors gather like a rainbow across a single name – Knut Hamsun." [Og når en blir gammel, er gangeren trett, den løfter ikke hodet mot en

ny dag mer, veien er blitt støvet og stenet. Men for mitt slørete blikk samler alle livets brokete farver seg som en regnbue over et eneste navn – Knut Hamsun.] (*R*, epitaph). *Under gullregnen* closes with another utterance of devotion: “‘God reads over my shoulder,’ writes Victoria. Knut reads over mine, there will be nothing on the paper that I can imagine he would have asked me to erase.” [“Gud leser det over min aksel”, skriver Victoria. / Det er Knut som leser over min, på papiret blir intet stående, som jeg kan tenke meg at han ville ha bedt meg stryke.] (129) These utterances of loyalty indeed raise doubt about their truthfulness. The *Report* might be a better avenue for exploring the truth of the Hamsuns' marriage.

After Knut Hamsun was arrested in May 1945, he was soon transferred to the Psychiatric Clinic for observation in order to be declared fit or unfit to stand trial. Knut refused to answer the questions about his marriage, but Marie, who was brought in from the Arendal prison, decided to cooperate. Prof. Langfeldt wanted to know more about their long and, by then, troublesome relationship. Marie writes that she saw the interrogation as an opportunity to “save what could be saved for my family. For me as well, but for the most part, for my family. And above all, for Knut.” [...til å rede hva reddes kunne for mine. For meg også, men mest for mine. Og fremfor alt for Knut.] (Marie Hamsun 1959 78).

After first having met Prof. Langfeldt briefly, she spent the night in the Oslo prison in Åkebergveien, where she worked on her “plan of action” (slagplan) for the interview the next day, on 14th December, 1945. Her plan of action was based on Prof. Langfeldt's signals that his defense of Knut would be based on the notion of senility. She writes: “I have often before read in reports from the law courts that people who had committed the most brutal crimes have not been automatically sentenced according to the letter of the law. The psychiatrist entered the picture. Heritage, environment, especially the experiences from the childhood were of importance when the individual would be placed face-to-face

with society; the psychiatrist would evaluate everything before a fair sentence could be pronounced.” [Jeg hadde ofte før i tiden lest i referater fra rettssalene at folk som hadde gjort de groveste ugjerninger ikke uten videre ble dømt etter lovens bokstav. Psykiateren kom inn i bildet. Arv, miljø, særlig opplevelsene i barneårene teller med, når individet skulle plaseres vis-à-vis samfunnet, alt skulle psykiateren ta stilling til før en rettfærdig dom kunne felles.] (79).

Before answering questions from Prof. Langfeldt, Marie wanted assurances that her answers would remain confidential. She presumed that some of the questions would be about intimate details. She writes later about how she expressed her fears to Langfeldt: “I said: if my husband gets to know that I had told you anything about this, then I would not be able to live under the same roof with him any longer!” [Jeg sa: Hvis min mann får vite at jeg har fortalt Dem noe om dette, så kommer jeg ikke til å kunne leve under tak med ham mer!] (*UG*, 81) Prof. Langfeldt assured her that nobody except the Attorney General would see her answers. She then started talking. Her statements became part of the official report in the case of defendant Knut Hamsun.

Unfortunately for Marie, Knut Hamsun had the right to see the documents in his own case, and he received them in May 1946. His reaction was extreme. He refused to talk or write to her, banished her from his life, and punished her with economic depravity: he changed his will and willed Nørholm and the rest of his wealth to his children (Kolloen 2004 389). Thus in those post-war years Marie had many issues with which to contend: her own trial and the subsequent imprisonment, her separation from Knut who considered her interview with Prof. Langfeldt a betrayal, and sheer survival issues in war-torn Norway. When she finished serving her prison term in fall 1948, she had no home of her own because Knut had, in essence, disowned her. She lived with her son Tore in Oslo and later with her daughter Cecilie in Copen-

hagen until Knut took pity on her in spring 1950 and allowed her to come back to Nørholm.

Marie's Explosive Statements in the Report?

Marie's interview in the *Report* (officially termed the "spouse section") barely exceeds three pages Langfeldt and Ødegaard 35-38). To the average reader as well as to the Hamsun scholar, it contains *nothing* that would warrant Knut's harsh reaction, even if we take into consideration Knut's extreme sense of privacy. There are no intimate or sexual details either although Prof. Langfeldt contradicts himself. He claims both that only one sentence has been removed from the report (Preface), AND that some sensitive statements have been taken out for personal consideration (Summary and Evaluation 98). The style of the reported interview is objective and without comments. Today's reader can be puzzled over the inconsequential statements by Marie in the *Report*.

The reported interview opens with the information on Knut's brain hemorrhage, which perhaps signals the goal of the *Report*. "Fruen" was in Germany when her husband's first hemorrhage occurred, either in 1941 or 1942. The focus then shifts to Knut's changed behavior. Marie said that at the age of 78 he changed dramatically. He became unbearable. He moved to *Bondeheimen* hotel in Oslo where he stayed for a year. He was very aggressive towards Marie, and accused her of being power-hungry. He used to be jealous when she was young, but no longer. He blamed her and the children for everything, and was terribly stubborn towards her.

After Knut had moved to Oslo, there was no trust between them. He threatened to shoot himself but felt she was not worth it. It was her fault that the children did not amount to anything. He accused her of not allowing him to eat enough food or meat. He became terribly upset over his increasing deafness yet he refused to use notes as a means of communication. They discussed divorce several times. She had left him several times but he came and

retrieved her. She did not give him enough space in the house and was power-hungry. During their engagement he built castles in the air—wanted to live in Rondane—“wishful thinking to keep her in quarantine” [Det var en ønskeforestilling idet han vilde holde henne i karantene]. He did not admit that he was jealous but claimed she tarnished his name. He became mother-fixated and pointed out sacrifices that his mother made for children, and he wanted that type of a woman. Marie realized that she was a disappointment, especially because she used to be a teacher, and an actress before they met. Knut felt constantly humiliated because she made herself conspicuous. Had hated actors before he met her and she thought it was because he could not write drama. His jealousy separated her from her friends. These are the main although not all points from Marie’s interview.

It is easy to see that Marie is an astute observer who understands clearly the essence of their relationship as well as those facets of Knut’s personality that were problematic from the very beginning of their relationship. Many scholars of Hamsun’s life and work corroborate Marie’s claims included in the *Report*. For instance, Trygve Braatøy wrote as early as 1929 about Knut’s fixation on a strong mother figure. Robert Ferguson and Harald Næss in their respective books detail Knut’s jealousy and his injured sense of propriety in relation to Marie. I have written about Hamsun’s plays and novels and shown how his judgmental attitudes towards women are echoed in his female protagonists. Finally, it is in general accepted that Hamsun detested theater and was not a good playwright. There are no secrets revealed in this *Report*, no racy details about their intimacy, no new insights about his writing.

The *Report* and Marie’s interview were supposed to serve the goal of proving or disclaiming Knut’s senility for the purposes of the trial. Webster dictionary defines “senility” as “of, or typical of, or resulting from old age,” and “showing the marked deterioration often accompanying old age, esp. mental impairment characterized

by confusion, memory loss.” The absence of statements in the *Report* about symptoms of forgetfulness, aphasia, cognitive troubles, speech problems, etc. is glaring. Instead, Marie either totally misunderstood the situation and its premises, or more likely, was under such emotional pressure that she truly unburdened herself. In that “unburdening” the key adjective is “unbearable”, but that is different from “senile.”

In their Summary and Evaluation section (94-101), Langfeldt and Ødegaard often refer to Marie’s statements, and to statements by those who stood Knut nearest. One could argue that their statements received a disproportionate weight. However, this section too contains no new information about Knut’s personality or his life. The fact that Knut in 1943 gave his Nobel prize medal to Joseph Goebbels would have been a revelation to most Norwegians at the time. However, Langfeldt and Ødegaard refer to the German Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment as “a German” (en tysker) and consider Knut’s gesture as proof of his poor judgment (101).

While I’m sure there are many reasons why Knut reacted as he did—from his sense of privacy to his sense of being betrayed by his spouse because she aligned herself with his enemy— his realization that he could control neither Marie nor her speech any longer must have played a major role.

Marie’s Writing

There is nothing truly controversial in Marie’s two memoirs that Knut would have wanted erased. Everything is evened out in the end, conflicts and tensions are magically absorbed into “life” and “love,” and smoothed out. There are no accusations resembling those found in the *Report*, no astute observations of real deficiencies in character, no persistent issues of power and control. If tensions appear, they are temporary. Marie is a master of self-censorship.

Even about her own desire to write, she writes in humble terms, refers to her own writing as “small things.” It is worth mentioning that both of her memoirs were bestsellers that provided, along with her books for children, a substantial source of money. While she dutifully mentions Knut as the contributor to *Regnbuen*, she also observes a change in his attitude toward her writing: “I told him that I would want to try to write something, this or that...I was actually afraid to mention it. Many years ago he had asked why? Now he’s become so much meeker, he did not ask. But when I left him and went into my own room, he came after me and sat down right by me. It was as if he got interested in my work. I had to tell him about the book’s sequence, and one day he came with a sentence that he invented for me. Just for fun, he said. It was written with a thick carpenter's pencil, crooked letters and uneven lines. It's in *The Rainbow*, part of the book’s mosaic.” [Jeg fortalte ham at jeg ville prøve å skrive noe, et eller annet ... Jeg var egentlig redd for å nevne det. For mange år siden hadde han jo spurt hvorfor? Nå var han blitt så meget mer føyelig, han spurte ikke. Men da jeg gikk fra ham og inn til meg selv ... så kom han etter og og satte seg like ved meg. ... Men etterhånden var det som han fikk interesse for arbeidet mitt. Jeg måtte sette ham inn i bokens gang, en dag kom han med en setning han hadde spekulert ut til meg. For moro skyld! sa han. Den var skrevet med tykk tømmermannsbylant, ruglete bokstaver og skjeve linjer. Den står i *Regnbuen*, innfelt i bokens mosaik.] (125-26)

It seems that the two texts are her final concession to Knut, creating a similarly revengeful narrative against Prof. Langfeldt as Knut created with *Paa gjengrodde stier*. Focusing on Langfeldt as the main villain, and stressing the victimization of the Hamsun family, Marie touches on the issue of collaboration during the war yet does not reflect on it in any serious way. But the echo of her own words to Prof. Langfeldt and the bitter truth of her uneven relationship with Knut must have lingered in her mind. We can catch glimpses of her bitterness in her correspondence with her

daughter Cecilie. With her own death approaching, the tone of her writing is different. She writes to Cecilie, "I'm thinking about Knut Hamsun and actually with much bitterness after all this" [Jeg tenker på Knut Hamsun og i grunnen med megen bitterhet nu efter det hele](quoted from Haugan 401). Note that he is no longer "my Knut" [min Knut] but rather Knut Hamsun. It is in this context that we should see her last wish, namely to be buried in Eide cemetery next to her grandson Esben rather than with her husband. At the time it was extremely unusual for family members to be buried separately.

Asking Marie about her choice of grave, Gjernes formulates her question this way: "Would it not have been more natural under the laburnum tree?" [Ville det ikke være mer naturlig under gullregnen?] Marie answers: "No. that is Knut's place. It should be his alone. I had wanted this all along, that he should rest at Nørholm. The place that waits for me is by the church wall together with Esben." [Nei, det er Knuts plass. Den skal han ha alene. Det har jeg villet hele tiden, at han skulle hvile på Nørholm. Plassen som venter på meg, er ved kirkemuren sammen med Esben.] (Gjernes 183) It is interesting that she articulates this as her own wish rather than Knut's, and uses first person singular. As if she finally wanted to assert some control over her own life and death, and create distance between him and her.

There are many interpretations and opinions about Marie and Knut's stormy relationship and their collaboration with the German occupiers. This is not least due to their own, post-1945 writing. Her choice of her final resting place, however, is perhaps as close as we will get to the truth. It was foreshadowed in Marie's unburdening herself to Prof. Langfeldt.

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