

Žagar, Monika. 2009. *Knut Hamsun: The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 352 pages. ISBN: 978-02959889457.

Kolloen, Ingar Sletten. 2009. *Knut Hamsun: Dreamer and Dissenter*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 384 pages. ISBN: 978-0300123562.

Two recent books offer the English-speaking world a deeper view into the troubling relationship between Knut Hamsun's literature, life, and politics. Taken together, Monika Žagar's *Knut Hamsun: The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance* and Ingar Sletten Kolloen's authoritative biography *Knut Hamsun: Dreamer and Dissenter* present the reader with a substantial understanding of Hamsun both as a Nobel Prize-winning author and a fascist thinker who supported Hitler. While Hamsun's collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War has long been a known fact, which has spurred extensive public and scholarly debates in Scandinavia, the most incisive and detailed treatment of the subject in English until now has been Robert Ferguson's 1987 biography *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun*. Kolloen's biography, here made available in a translation of the abridged Norwegian version, is a major touchstone of recent Hamsun research; it is replete with the need-to-know facts, events, and samples of text that will aid any scholar and general reader in their understanding of Hamsun and his ignoble fate. Kolloen's work is less tendentious than Jørgen Haugan's recent *Solgodens Fall: Knut Hamsun - En litterær biografi* [The Fall of the Sun-God: Knut Hamsun—A Literary Biography], as it prefers to let the readers draw their own connections among the mass of biographical and historical facts. For a supplementary interpretive argument, readers can look to Žagar's critical study, which makes the case that Hamsun's notions of race and gender connect his wide-ranging literary production and his repellant worldview.

Žagar, by utilizing interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to analyze Hamsun's fiction and politics, makes an important contribution to Hamsun studies. Her book might seem to fall in line with the tradition of ideological criticism of Hamsun's fiction (most of which is not available in English), in that Žagar refuses to disconnect the author's adored literature from his reactionary and eventually fascist politics. Yet, unlike the shopworn Marxist readings of Hamsun's politics and literature, Žagar directs attention to Hamsun's views on race and gender as elements of his fiction that are connected to his cultural and political allegiance to Nazism. Her critical stance thus owes more to recent academic discourses in gender studies and postcolonial theory than to any recognizably Marxist critical

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framework. By employing “the bifocal lens of race and gender” (11) and by including less canonical Hamsun texts, Žagar offers a persuasive account of Hamsun's ideological position and illuminates his career-long participation in reactionary, racist, and patriarchal discourses.

Žagar adds to the discussion of Hamsun's racial and ethnic attitudes by contextualizing them in early twentieth-century discourses of racial science, eugenics, and degeneration. Her chapter on “Discourses of Race and Primitivism in Scandinavia” offers a useful view of this overlooked context, including proponents of “racial hygiene” such as the Norwegian Jon Alfred Mjøen. Hamsun admired the Danish doctor Konrad Simonsen's 1917 book *Den moderne mennesketype* (39), which was influenced by the Austrian anti-Semite Otto Weininger and the German polymath Walter Rathenau. Simonsen's cultural critique of modernity opposed the liberal belief in Western progress, arguing that “material gains in Western modernity entailed a loss in intuition and soul, transforming forever the character of mankind” and that “modern Western man is a restless, empty, and soul-less creature” (39). These ideas obviously chimed with Hamsun's neo-romantic dissatisfactions with modernity, especially as represented by the Anglo-American world. Further, Simonsen lamented “the decline of the Germanic civilization,” decrying the mixing of races in urban areas and the sin of sexual contact between races. Žagar argues convincingly that Simonsen's work “contains much the same racial imaginary that informs Hamsun's texts, an imaginary that attributes sexuality, promiscuity, and a lack of civilized self-restraint, as well as slyness and cunning, to so-called primitives” (40). Race mixing was for Hamsun a negative aspect of urban (and American) modernity; immigration and racial contact were unfortunate results of the increase in communications and migration in industrial society. Although Hamsun was also fascinated by aspects of modern mobility, his representations of racial others “create an image of general degeneration” according to Žagar (32).

In a chapter called “Hamsun's Women as Scapegoats for Modernity's Sins,” Žagar argues that Hamsun's insecurity about modern progress motivated his antagonism towards women's liberation and increased gender equality. In his fiction and plays, Hamsun projects his suspicion about this aspect of modern social change onto the female figures, showing how this chaotic element of modern society needs to be tamed and recontained to counteract degeneration. Chapters on Hamsun's imagination of American Indians and African-Americans reinforce Žagar's argument about Hamsun's “racial imaginary.” She also examines how Hamsun's complex travel narrative, *I Æventyrland*, displays an Orientalist dream of authentic experience in the East as a revitalizing antidote to the rationalist modernity of the West. In that text, Hamsun also offers a partial critique of Western imperialism (140), which is linked to his omnipresent hostility to the perceived arrogance of the British. In primitivist discourses, the non-European

was often imagined as a coherent and healthy figure, as opposed to the fragmented and degenerate Western individual (43). Žagar points out that Norway's marginal and "wild" position in Europe could also serve as a site of this sort of primitivism. Thus Norway could imagine itself as a natural or authentic periphery to the over-civilized Continental centres, where exhaustion, nervousness, and other symptoms of modern degeneration were more visible. Žagar sees a parallel between Hamsun's Scandinavian primitivism (or imaginary self-primitivization) and the Orientalist projection of natural wholeness, health, and vigour onto distant non-European places.

In an analysis that ranges over many less-frequently discussed and non-canonical Hamsun texts, Žagar allows us to see a pattern of thought on race and gender that is obviously distasteful to contemporary readers. In a typical formulation, she writes, "Hamsun created a rather consistent worldview in which white patriarchs stand alone battling women and exotic others, a regressive worldview that has much in common with the tenets of what has been called primordial fascism" (124). She ultimately shows how Hamsun's racist and primitivist worldview was part of his decision to support the Nazi occupation of Norway (122). In the chapter on the interwar period and the occupation, Žagar challenges a number of apologetic myths about Hamsun's situation, such as the claim that he lived in isolation from actual politics and did not realize the true message of Nazism or Norway's *Nasjonal Samling*. Instead, she shows that Hamsun knew very well what Quisling and his party stood for in terms of their anti-Semitism and their fantasy of a cultural revolution that would regenerate the Germanic world. Her astute and level-headed analysis of Hamsun's interwar cultural opinions and political views makes the question that still appears in the Norwegian press as a real matter of dispute—"was Hamsun a Nazi?"—seem like a willful bit of apologetic obfuscation, because the answer is a clear yes. (She also criticizes Kolloen for posing this question without a clear affirmative answer.) As she writes,

George Mosse's colorful metaphor describing how German men and women fell into the Reich's arms like ripe fruit from a tree fittingly describes Hamsun's willingness to collaborate. Was Hamsun a Nazi? Yes. It is disappointing to see the discussion reignited within the humanities every so often, as if the legal indictment and Hamsun's actions and writings need additional clarification. He is no enigma, but it might well be that certain critics and readers crave a narrative about a mysterious genius.  
(228)

It should be clear that this conclusion does *not* relegate all of Hamsun's literary corpus to the category of Nazi literature, nor is it intended to do anything so sweeping. Žagar states the case with characteristic directness: "Hamsun's fiction

is not fascist or Nazi per se, but it is not nonpolitical or nonideological, either” (231). While some readers might object that Žagar’s content analysis of Hamsun’s literature repeats a flaw of earlier ideological criticism—it gives insufficient attention to formal aspects of the fiction—she offers compelling defenses of her reading practices and useful criticisms of formalist approaches.

Kolloen, a Norwegian journalist, spent years with a team of researchers to produce two volumes of biography, *Hamsun Svermeren* (2003) [Hamsun, The Dreamer] and *Hamsun Erobreren* (2004) [Hamsun, The Conqueror], which together reach almost a thousand pages, but were abridged in Norwegian as *Drømmer og erobreren* (2005). The shortened version makes for fascinating reading for readers familiar or unfamiliar with Hamsun’s story. The translators, Deborah Dawkin and Erik Skuggevik, have chosen to use the alliterative title *Knut Hamsun: Dreamer and Dissenter*, although dissenting is rather distinct from conquering. English readers should be grateful that this biography makes such a large amount of research material available, in accordance with Kolloen’s twofold approach of presenting “as many facts as possible” and ensuring that “the storytelling urge has not disrupted the factual base” (x). Some readers may wish that the author had chosen an approach less hostile to storytelling, and some may be frustrated by Kolloen’s reluctance to provide interpretive commentary or argument about the relationship between Hamsun’s literature and his political thought. Granted, Kolloen’s objective is to keep his role as positivistic biographer separate from the role of historical literary critic, but one often wishes for more than the plot summaries and commonplace observations he offers in his treatment of Hamsun’s fiction. In “Dikter og Politiker,” an afterword found only at the end of the second unabridged Norwegian volume, Kolloen presents fifteen brief statements about Hamsun’s life and literature. Most of them are quite banal—that Hamsun’s life is actually of importance in addition to his literature, that a biography can show how his political opinions developed, that his Nazi-friendly actions were not enigmatic or the result of illness or old age, and so on. Yet, despite the depth of research he draws on, Kolloen remains equivocal about Hamsun’s status as a Nazi and anti-Semite. Kolloen’s reasoning regarding the latter is that, on the one hand, Hamsun helped Jewish friends personally, but on the other hand he “did not distance himself” from the genocide being committed by the political power he supported (457). The two hands here are not quite equivalent in importance; helping Jewish friends privately hardly makes up for “not distancing oneself” from the Holocaust while also publicly extolling Nazism. It is irresponsible of Kolloen to equivocate in this way. In the end, the Yale edition is certainly laudable for bringing a major biography to an English public that still has too few options for learning about Knut Hamsun, but readers will have to look beyond the biography itself for a satisfying argument about his literature and politics.

The problem with Hamsun is that he commands our attention as a brilliant modern writer who influenced an entire generation of European writers across

the ideological spectrum with his most canonical works, but who also produced a large body of lesser literature that displays a distasteful racist and patriarchal worldview. And of course, he made political decisions based on ideological convictions that are so clearly offensive that, even at a recent Hamsun conference, it was asked why we still read this most problematic of modern masters. Taken together, Kolloen's biography and Žagar's study offer the English reader a useful map of this uncomfortable terrain.

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