

Knut Hamsun as a Travel Writer: *In Wonderland*

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ABSTRACT: Knut Hamsun's book *In Wonderland* (1903) is a travelogue from his journey through Russia and Caucasia to Constantinople in 1899. Though this book was recently translated into English by Sverre Lyngstad (2004), it remains one of Hamsun's less studied works. The article will trace Hamsun's attitude to travel literature and discuss the journey into the Orient as a journey backwards in his own life, to places of the mind. After returning home, Wonderland becomes the label for Nordland in Hamsun's writing, the county in northern part of Norway where he grew up, and not for the Orient.

RÉSUMÉ: Le livre *In Wonderland* (1903) de Knut Hamsun est un journal de bord tiré de son voyage à travers la Russie et le Caucase jusqu'à Constantinople en 1899. Bien qu'ayant été récemment traduit en anglais par Sverre Lyngstad (2004), il demeure l'un des ouvrages de Hamsun les moins étudiés. Cet article retracera l'attitude de Hamsun envers la littérature du voyage et abordera son périple vers l'Orient comme un voyage à rebours au cœur de sa propre vie, aux lieux de l'esprit. À son retour, Wonderland deviendra l'appellation qu'utilisera Hamsun pour désigner le Nordland, le comté de la Norvège où il a grandi, et non l'Orient.

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In 1927, in a survey for Gyldendal's Christmas catalogue, Knut Hamsun was asked what book he liked best. "Jeg er ikke glad i Bøger" [I don't like books], Hamsun replied, in customarily provocative manner. "Men" [But], he continued, "jeg sætter høit en sandfærdig Flugthistorie fra Sibirien av Klatszko" [I think very highly of a true story by Klatszko about an escape from Siberia]¹. Whenever Hamsun expressed his views on reading, novels consistently came out badly compared with travelogues, hunting tales, memoirs, correspondence and history books. To his friends Bolette and Ole Johan Larsen, Hamsun wrote from Paris in 1895: "Tænk om du kunde sende mig en Historiebog, Bolette. Det skulde være en med Historie i, ikke romaner, for Guds Skyld. Men en historisk Bog altsaa om fjærne Ting og Tider. Eller en Rejsebeskrivelse fra fjærne Lande" [If only you could send me a history book, Bolette. It should be a book of history, not novels, for God's sake. But a history book, you know, about far-off things and times. Or a travel book about distant countries] (Letter 359)². And in a letter to his friend Albert Engström, Hamsun wrote: "Snart begynder jeg med Hedins Tibetbok, slikt noget er herlig Læsning; men Romaner og Dette Land dernord Skuespil brækker jeg mig over" [Soon I'll make a start on Hedin's Tibetan book, such things make wonderful reading; but novels and plays nauseate me] (Letter 980).

Hamsun collected Julius Clausen and P. Frederik Rist's *Memoirer og Breve* [*Memoirs and Letters*], running to 40 volumes, and exclaimed contentedly in 1911 that: "Nu er hele min række fuld, og det er absolut det interessanteste i min Boghylde" [Now my whole series is complete, and it is absolutely the most interesting thing on my bookshelf].³ Nonetheless, for Hamsun, travel books seem to have occupied pride of place among documentary literature. In a letter to Marie, he tells her how he has cut hundreds of pages of a travel series out of the newspaper (Letter 915), and in reply to a query from the German translator, Heinrich Goebel, Hamsun says that: "Reisebeskrivelser og de Opdagelsesreisendes Bøger [er] min kjæreste Læsning" [Travelogues and books by explorers (are) my most precious reading] (Letter 886). In a thank-you note to the author Eilert Bjerke for his travel book *Judæa drømmer* [Judæan Dreams], Hamsun praises him precisely for his choice of genre: "Det er dem som har Hode som gjør slikt, jeg vet ikke en eneste stor Dikter som ikke har gjort det, Goethe, Hugo, Bjørnson ... Heine" [It's people with good heads that do such things. I don't know of a single great writer who has not—Goethe, Hugo, Bjørnson ... Heine] (Letter 1228). And he once more gets in a kick at Ibsen; the fact that the man had not written a travelogue is, for Hamsun, further proof that Ibsen was not to be counted among the great writers!

Hamsun himself wrote a travelogue, *In Wonderland* [*I Æventyrland*], which bears the sub-title *Oplevet og drømt i Kaukasien* [*Experienced and dreamt in the Caucasus*].⁴ (The sub-title has been dropped in the *Samlede verker* [*Collected Works*] as also in the translation.) The book was published in 1903, but the journey was

undertaken in 1899. Hamsun was a newly-wed at the time—having married Bergljot Goepfert in 1898—the novel *Victoria* had just been published, and he had received a stipend of Kr. 1500 from Kirke: og Undervisningsdepartementet [the Norwegian Department of the Church and Education]. In November 1898, the newly-weds moved to Finland, where, according to letters home, they froze through a long, unhappy winter, before setting off on their great journey east to St. Petersburg, Moscow, Vladikavkas, Tblisi, Baku on the Caspian Sea, Batumi on the Black Sea, and then home via Constantinople. Hamsun's interest in Russia dated from his years of reading the great Russian writers. After publication of the programmatic article “Fra det ubevidste Sjæleliv” [From the unconscious life of the soul] in the journal *Samtiden* in 1890, Hamsun wrote to Bolette Pavels Larsen in Bergen:

Rigtig fornuftige folk synes, jeg er gal for min sidste Samtidsartikels Skyld,—synes De ogsaa det? Jeg har gaaet Tingen hensynsløst paa Klingen, gaaet det længste, en fornuftig Mand kan gaa (minus Russerne, som kan gaa engang til saa langt).

[Thoroughly rational people think I must be mad because of my latest article in *Samtiden*—do you think so too? I have pressed the issue ruthlessly, gone as far as any rational man can go (apart from the Russians, who can go twice as far).]
(Letter 146)

And Dostoevsky could go further than anyone else. He is for Hamsun the judge of the human mind par excellence: “Dostojevskij er den eneste Dikter jeg har lært noget av, han er den vældigste av de russiske Giganter” [Dostoevsky is the only writer from whom I have learned anything, he is the greatest of the Russian giants].

In 1899, Hamsun would finally enter the Russian Empire. He was by no means unaccustomed to travel: in two periods, 1882-1884 and 1886-1888, he had travelled around North America, in the the areas settled by Scandinavians in the Mid-West. And in the years 1893-1895 he lived for lengthy periods in Paris. In America he was a vagabond and itinerant worker, and in Paris he was an artist—it was not travel for the sake of it that had taken him to these places. So, to that extent Hamsun was telling the truth when he told his German publisher, Albert Langen, in 1902: “Jeg skriver nu blandt andet paa en liden Bog om min Rejse gennem Kaukasien,—den eneste Rejse jeg har gjort i mit Liv” [Among other things, I am now writing a little book about my journey through the Caucasus—the only journey I have undertaken in my life] (Letter 600).

Hamsun had long dreamt of precisely this kind of travel for the sake of the journey itself. As early as 1890, he had had plans for a trip to Constantinople, but his financial situation did not allow it. Two years later, he made another attempt. In May 1892, he wrote to his friend Caroline Neeraas: “Herregud, hvor jeg glæder mig til at komme til Tyrken! ... at komme ind i dette ukendte, sære, det hidser

meg” [God, how I look forward to getting to Turkey! ... to entering this unknown, strange place, it excites me] (Letter 198). But money was once again the problem; he was not to enter that “unknown, strange place”—it was only in his writing that he could go there (consider how the last part of *Pan* takes place in the Orient, or more precisely India).

When, in 1899, Hamsun finally set out on his journey, however, Turkey had become less important to him. Constantinople was only a stop on the return leg, and even his account of the journey ends already in Batumi. This is not because he has nothing to relate from Turkey; in fact Hamsun published a seven-part travelogue from Constantinople in *Aftenposten* in the spring of 1903, just before *In Wonderland* appeared. However, this part of the journey was not included in the final book; Turkey is in a sense pushed out of Wonderland. Nor does the Constantinople travelogue possess the same literary quality that is a feature of the diary of his Russian journey.⁶

While Constantinople was among the places that fascinated in the early 1890s, a zone of exoticism for young poets, it was towards Russia that Hamsun would later gravitate. Here are his great models, and here was to be his great market. Indeed, in 1909 Hamsun went so far as to suggest to his Russian translator that his books henceforth need *only* come out in Russian, rather than Norwegian, German, English and other languages (Letter 977).

Orientalism

Italy was the classic destination of the *Grand Tour*, which originated in the Renaissance and was common throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which young men from England and Northern Europe were expected to undertake. The young men were expected to acquaint themselves with the art and the important places of the Western tradition; the journey was the affirmation of a universal inherited civilisation. While the Grand Tour was for the traveller a step up the scale of civilisation, Knut Hamsun’s journey to the East expresses a desire to take a step down; it is a journey back in time in search of more archaic forms of consciousness, in line with the late-nineteenth-century cult of anti-intellectualism and primitivism (e.g., Gauguin’s voyages to Tahiti).

The writer of *In Wonderland* is not interested in gaining entry to elevated social circles, or in meeting artists and intellectuals, but in experiencing everyday life. The Caucasus is orientalised, made strange; it is not infected by the stress and fuss and materialism of the West. The East-West dichotomy is highlighted again and again, and to the people of the East are attributed positive qualities: peace, dignity, time: “det var ikke spor av hast i hans bevægelser” (183) [there wasn’t a trace of haste in his movements] (42), he observes of a Persian boarding the train. The food is also better in the East: “Druerne er de herligste jeg endnu

har smakt i mit liv og jeg skammer mig litt over at jeg før i tiden hadde spist slikt noget som europæiske druer med velbehag” (p.187) [The grapes are the most delicious I’ve ever tasted, and I feel a bit ashamed that I have previously eaten such things as European grapes with pleasure] (48). America comes to represent the West and all that the traveller wants to get away from.

However, there is a glaring mismatch between the pace attributed to the orientals and the speed maintained by the travellers. We know from letters and journals that they left Helsinki on 8 September 1899, and arrived in Istanbul only three weeks later. In terms of nineteenth-century means of transport, this must surely be called an “American” pace. However, the first-person narrator presents the journey as a lengthy one, probably to present it as a state. From Constantinople he writes to his friend Wentzel Hagelstam: “Det er i min fortumlede Hjerne mindst et Aar, siden vi forlod Finland. Jeg paastaar iblandt, at det er tre Aar siden” [In my bewildered brain it is at least a year since we left Finland. I sometimes claim it was three years ago] (Letter 526). In fact, it had been only three weeks earlier. But time stands still in Wonderland.

For Hamsun, the Orient was the expression of a kind of eccentricity. The Orient was seen as the image of an irrationality and an anti-intellectualism that Hamsun had lauded in all of his writing of the 1890s—note how Ylajali in the novel *Hunger* (1890) is imagined as a Persian princess. In the introduction to the travelogue, he writes: “Jeg skal med statsstipendium gjøre en reise til Kaukasien, til Orienten, *Persien*, Tyrkiet” (165, my emphasis) [I’ll be traveling to Caucasia, the Orient, *Persia*, and Turkey on a government grant] (20). When we leave the travellers in Batumi at the end of the account, he writes again: “Imorgen drager vi igjen til Baku og siden videre mot Østen” (290) [Tomorrow we again go to Baku and then onward to the Orient] (184). In fact, Hamsun was not travelling east at all at this point, but west by ship across the Black Sea to Constantinople. *Persia* is never reached, but lies ahead of them like a promise or a prophecy. It lends the journey a unique aura that we as readers cannot accompany him into his final adventure. That the travellers themselves never got there either is another matter.

The Landscape of the Mind

What is Hamsun looking for in Wonderland? It is perhaps easier to say what he finds. He finds his way home—home to Nordland. In 1899, it was twenty years since he had left Hamarøy, with money from the merchant Zahl, to become an author in Copenhagen. And he had not been home since. Now things begin to remind him of home. Even in the opening chapter, on the way to Moscow, the first-person narrator begins making comparisons with things experienced back home. He hears the starling, which has now left Norway for the winter; he sees men standing in doorways in their shirtsleeves, “likesom hjemme” (167) [like at

home] (23); he sees a man following a path into the forest: “Det er noget så hjemlig ved dette billede, jeg har været hjemmefra så længe og ser det nu med glæde” (168) [There is such a feeling of home about this picture; I’ve been away from home for so long that the sight gives me joy] (24). What he has been away from for a long time is not really Norway, but Nordland. The journey into new territory also becomes a journey backwards in his own life, to places of the mind. From the train he sees people threshing grain, which leads his thoughts back to his father’s mill, which ground corn from Arkangel.

Indeed, the further away he gets, the more present the past becomes. “Jeg husker fra min barndom i Nordland en sælsom nat” (203) [I remember a mysterious night from my childhood in Nordland] (69), begins one passage of reminiscence, before being checked by an ellipsis. Later comes another memory of a night in Nordland, which once again is interrupted by ellipsis (213; 83). This graphic effect gives the event an unfinished character—it is both intangible and important at one and the same time. The ellipses indicate states rather than chains of effect. We are glimpsing fragments of something the writer does not really want to explore. But he gradually reveals more and more, and in chapter 9 we get a longer retrospective look at his childhood on Hamarøy.

“Denne verden er ikke som nogen anden verden jeg kjenner og det kommer atter dertil at jeg kunde ville være her for livet” (235) [This world is like no other world I know, and again I come to think I could wish to remain here for life] (110), writes the traveller. How does this insistence on strangeness fit in with the feeling of being at home? “Jeg sitter og er hjemme her, det vil borte, altså i mit æs” (174) [I feel at home here, being away from home and accordingly in my element] (32). Roland Barthes reflects on a similar phenomenon in a passage in his book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*. When he sees a beautiful landscape, he always has the feeling of having been there before, or that he was supposed to come to precisely this place, writes Barthes. He describes a yearning for places that are “fantasmatic, deriving from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself.” Barthes is referring here to Freud, who has said of the mother’s body that there is no other place of which one can say with quite as much certainty that one has been there before. “Such then would be the essence of the landscape (chosen by desire),” says Barthes; “heimlich, awakening in me the Mother (and never the disturbing Mother)” (40).

The passage in Freud to which Barthes is alluding is a passage in the essay “Das Unheimliche,” from 1919, where Freud says that “‘Love is home-sickness’; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: ‘this place is familiar to me, I’ve been here before,’ we may interpret the place as being his mother’s genitals or her body” (Vol. 17 245). It is suppressed feelings towards the mother that here come to the surface. The analogy should not be stretched too far in this case. But one might speculate as to why

Hamsun had not been home in twenty years. Lack of money cannot be the only reason, since he had managed to finance passages to America, Paris, Munich, Sweden and Denmark. Had Hamsun perhaps, in the years when he had been struggling to become an author, put a lid on his childhood memories and landscapes? Some support for such a view may be found in Lars Frode Larsen's account of the Hamarøy years and Hamsun's relationship with his parents in *Den unge Hamsun* [The Young Hamsun]. Larsen shows how Hamsun's relationship with his mother, who suffered frequent nervous breakdowns, must have been particularly traumatic, but this was something Knut Hamsun himself never mentioned (Larsen, Chapter 2).

A conclusive answer to the question of why Hamsun had not been home in twenty years is probably impossible to find, but it is striking how memories of Nordland keep surfacing in the travelogue. He has even apparently had a block about writing about his childhood: "Jeg har siden forsøkt å skrive noget om dette; men det har mislyktes for mig. Jeg har villet prøve å sette det litt i stil for å bli forstått, men da har det kommet bort for mig" (233) [I have since attempted to write about it, but without success. I wanted to try shaping it up a bit in order to be understood, but then I lost it] (108). But on his journey, or rather in the travelogue, he does succeed in doing so. In the Caucasus, the first-person narrator has a feeling of having returned to an original state; and one of the places visited is tellingly named Kilden, the Source (215; 85).

Interestingly, on his return Hamsun decides to visit his parents; in spring 1900, he is back home on Hamarøy again. We might also note that Hamsun later chooses no longer to use the name *Wonderland* of the Orient or Russia, but of Nordland.⁷

Experienced and Dreamt

The Orient appears in Hamsun's travelogue as a spectacle, a *tableau vivant*. The traveller also locates himself within this tableau, by taking us back through his own life, to America in particular via comparisons between working practices and processes, and to the Nordland of his childhood, the latter with more emphasis on fairytale landscapes. The Orient becomes a stage in capturing the attention of the reader, as the Orient had been in so much other writing before. And here we arrive at the real purpose of the journey: the journey is undertaken for the sake of the writing. The writing situation is thematised again and again, in both the diary entries in the past tense and the editing in the present.

The sub-title, *Experienced and Dreamt*, alludes to two different modes of experience, to what, following Irish poet Seamus Heaney, we might call the "geographical country" and the "country of the mind" (132). Geographical experience has a processual character, while stativity is more characteristic of

the geography of the mind. The encounter with landscapes becomes an interaction between the place in which the journey takes place and the place of the mind that emerges, between new sights and old memories. Place triggers memory. The Orient appears in this perspective as a pendant to the (fairytale) landscape of his childhood. The peace and authenticity of the Orient touch upon the child's experience of nature.

For the literary scholar, a travelogue is first and foremost a good or bad story, any value it may have as a literary source takes second place. Any travelogue is a fictional account, and Hamsun goes a long way to distance himself from his (ostensible) documentary models. On the other hand, *In Wonderland* measures up to Hamsun's other fictional writings. It is the poetic function of the story rather than its referentiality that provides the necessary power to convince the reader and that links it with the rest of his production. All the same, the book should be acknowledged as a travelogue, rather than counted among Hamsun's novels.

NOTES

1. Letter 1930. Klaczko was the French translator and author whom Poles know as Rufin Piotrowski. The book in question was translated into Norwegian at Hamsun's behest and published by Gyldendal with Hamsun's own foreword, where he writes: "Jeg tror Læseren vil tiltales av denne usædvanlige 'Reiseskildring' med den stilfærdige Tone. Jeg læste den første Gang i 1888 og har siden læst den mange Ganger" [I believe that readers will be drawn to this unusual 'travelogue' with its self-effacing manner. I first read it in 1888 and have since read it many times] (Piotrowski 8).
2. All letter citations refer to *Knut Hamsuns brev I-IV*. The translations are my own.
3. Letter 1033 (to Lars Swanström).
4. Though this book was recently translated into English by Sverre Lynstad, it remains one of Hamsun's less studied works. The only scholar to attempt a close analysis is Atle Kittang, who reads the book from an "illusion/disillusion" perspective and discusses it to a lesser degree within the genre of travelogue. However Elisabeth Oxfeldt discusses the link between *In Wonderland* and Hamsun's travel essay from Constantinople ("Under halvmånen") in a recent article, "Orientaliske rejseskildringer."
5. Letter 1051 (to Marie Hamsun, 1910).
6. Nevertheless this material is taken up in Hamsun's third short story collection, *Stridende liv* [Struggling Life] under the title "Under halvmånen" [Under the Crescent Moon].
7. Kirsti Thorheim's and Ottar Grepstad's book *Hamsun i Æventyrland* is then not about his Caucasian journey, but about the Nordland, in the northern part of Norway.

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