Knut Hamsun: A Review of Peter Sjøyst-Jackson's 2010 Study through the Lens of Recent Hamsun Scholarship

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ABSTRACT: This review article goes beyond a traditional book review in that it places Peter Sjølyst-Jackson's 2010 study of the legacies of Knut Hamsun in the context of the wider scholarship on Hamsun. At the same time, it provides a thorough reading and analysis of Sjølyst-Jackson's seven chapters, highlighting instances where Sjølyst-Jackson missed important opportunities to engage in the existing scholarship as well as other moments where his analysis and insights contribute significantly to the scholarship on this remarkable writer.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article de synthèse va au-delà d'une critique de livre traditionnelle en ce qu'il transpose l'étude de 2010 de Peter Sjølyst-Jackson, concernant l'influence de Knut Hamsun, dans le contexte plus large de l'étude de Hamsun. De même, il offre une lecture et une analyse approfondie des sept chapitres de Sjølyst-Jackson, en soulignant les cas où Sjølyst-Jackson a manqué d'importantes opportunités de s'engager plus avant dans l'étude existante, ainsi qu'en soulignant d'autres cas où l'analyse et les aperçus de ce dernier contribuent de manière significative à l'étude de ce remarquable écrivain.

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Peter Sjølyst-Jackson's book has a twofold aim: he wishes "to reflect upon Hamsun's multiple, contradictory, even mutually exclusive legacies" (6) through the lenses of deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory, and he wants to point out the compelling nature of Hamsun's work and its relevance for "other fields of literature, politics and theory" (7). The book operates on a number of registers simultaneously. In it Sjølyst-Jackson presents readings of Hamsun's texts intermingled with a critique of Hamsun's reception in various contexts and eras. The readings are at times predicated upon insightful philological comparisons of different editions of Hamsun's texts, at times upon deconstructionist techniques, and at times upon historical contextualization. As a whole the book is uneven, with passages of real insight and impressive scholarship in the later chapters after what can only be described as a rough start.

In the introduction, Sjølyst-Jackson positions his work in relation to two strains within Hamsun scholarship, Marxist criticism represented primarily by Leo Löwenthal, and deconstructionist criticism represented by Atle Kittang. He is also concerned with the divide that, he argues, still keeps Hamsun scholarship outside the mainstream of Anglo-American criticism, and contrasts Hamsun's reception in the rest of Europe with that of the UK and US. Sjølyst-Jackson rightly argues that both the apologist position in regard to Hamsun's Nazi sympathies and the out-of-hand rejection of Hamsun's writing on ideological grounds are equally reductive, and he uses a brief reading of Hamsun's early publication *From the Cultural Life of Modern America* to illustrate why he finds Hamsun's shifting rhetoric and self-contradictory writing resistant to such categorical readings, and thus worthy of scholarly attention.

In the chapter on Hamsun's *Hunger*, Sjølyst-Jackson sets out to argue that "the strange city" of Kristiania that Hamsun produced in the text "proceeds not simply from the author's times of starvation in Kristiania, but more profoundly perhaps, from the way the text of *Hunger* re-inscribes, and so displaces and condenses, the author's experience of migration" (21). Sjølyst-Jackson opens with a convincing critique that explains why Walter Baumgartner and others are misguided in applying "the city/nature dichotomy" (22) to *Hunger*, and touches in passing on earlier Marxist and deconstructionist analyses of the text, before settling into an analysis of "The City as a Figure of Migration" (25). Sjølyst-Jackson ties this reading of the city directly to questions of language in the text, arguing that it demands "re-thinking the status of the 'city' and, moreover, the work of 'writing'" (25), stating "I wish to reconsider, as it were, the city *within* the writing and the *writing* of that city – after which I shall consider the hero's flighty *project*

of writing within that city" (25, italics original). Here one would expect Sjølyst-Jackson to build on the many strong readings of the writing in/of the city in *Hunger* (Cease 1992, Sandberg 1999, Selboe 1999 and 2002). None of these, however, appears in Sjølyst-Jackson's bibliography. After a brief analysis of the fictions produced by the protagonist within the text, Sjølyst-Jackson veers off into a discussion of the three English translations of *Hunger*. He claims that *Hunger* is unusual because it "seems to put the very principles of re-translation to work" (31). This claim of a special narrative quality in *Hunger* is insupportable. Even if the translations by Egerton, Bly and Lyngstad varied dramatically (they do not), the fact remains that every literary text has the potential to produce variation in translation. That the three translators happen to have chosen "tipsy," "intoxicated," and "drunk" respectively, does not in fact indicate that "The translators' innumerable choices and unaccountable decisions locate in the original a certain force of arbitrariness which, nevertheless, affirms an effect of invention and re-invention; the bottomless pit of hunger" (31). Sjølyst-Jackson returns to the theme of migration briefly at the very end of the chapter, linking his reflections over the invented word "kuboaa" to the topic through the protagonist's musing over "emigration" as one of many possible meanings for the word.

In his second chapter, Sjølyst-Jackson discusses Hamsun's intellectual relationship to Friedrich Nietzsche, as mediated through Georg Brandes and August Strindberg. He discusses Hamsun's polemics in "From the Unconscious Life of the Mind" (1890) and the 1891 lectures on literature, and offers a comparison of *Mysteries* and Strindberg's *By the Open Sea*, concluding that "Although Hamsun echoes Nietzsche, Brandes and Strindberg when he rejects the homogenizing stupors of bourgeois 'democratic' literature, the trouble is that he fails to realize how his own elaboration of fragmented psychology recognizes difference in a way that is far more democratic than his politics would ever accommodate" (56). This is an important insight. The chapter is, however, flawed by a failure to engage with previous studies that examine the question of "Aristocratic Radicalism" in Hamsun's writing. It would have been interesting to see how Sjølyst-Jackson would respond to, for example, Rolf Nyboe Nettum's book from 1970, *Konflikt og visjon: Hovedtemaer i Knut Hamsuns forfatterskap 1890-1912*, which also offers a comparative analysis of *Mysteries* and *By the Open Sea* (130–31), or Michael J. Stern's *Nietzsche's Ocean, Strindberg's Open Sea* (2008), which, in addition to presenting an extended reading of *By the Open Sea*, discusses "From the Unconscious Life of the Mind" along with Hamsun's 1889 article, "Lidt om Strindberg" (121–26), which differs in important ways from Hamsun's outspoken criticism of other writers in the 1891 lectures.

Sjølyst-Jackson's focus in chapter three is on *Mysteries* and *Pan* and the question of "how these novels might *destabilize their own investment in masculine authority* – through laughter" (58, italics original). The basic argument regarding Hamsun's use of laughter, which Sjølyst-Jackson links to Freud's theorization of

repetition, is convincing: "The involuntary and compulsive 'insight' of Hamsun's fictions do not lead to any 'understanding' in the classical sense of the word, but, rather, to what the author himself called 'an involuntary understanding', and what Freud called the compulsion to repeat', the force of repetition, *repeating*" (73, italics original). Drawing on the work of Simon Critchley, the chapter examines five ways of understanding laughter in Hamsun's oeuvre: as "Comedy and Humbug and Deceit" (58), as excess, as spite, as feminine laughter that provokes male spite, as dark irony, and, finally, as a compulsion to repeat. The textual analysis that Sjølyst-Jackson offers is, at times, problematic. His point that "Eva's name is split in Edvarda's name – E(d)v(ard)a – and in the story itself" (71) was, for example, already made by Nettum in 1970 (228). We are, of course, all capable of such oversights at times. Far more questionable, then, is the analysis of names in *Mysteries* that Sjølyst-Jackson offers. After suggesting a parallel between Dagny Kielland and the character Nagel refers to as "my little Danish Kamma" through the shared "initials" of "DK" (70), he goes on to argue

> The Hamsunian 'answer' comes in another configuration of the double: 'Miniman Grøgaard' and 'Martha Gude', who share the initials 'MG', which is very spooky indeed, as MG is also the abbreviation of 'Markens Grøde', Growth of the Soil (1917), Hamsun's 'back to the land' novel written over 20 years later. In the face of laughter, my reading is essentially this: the Danish currency (DK) is haunted by the inscription of the soil (MG).
> (70–71)

This is, I think, a stretch that will cause many readers to balk. And once again, the chapter is weakened by a missed opportunity to engage with previous scholarship, in this case Stefanie von Schnurbein's work on constructions of masculinity in *Pan* (2001a and 2001b).

Thankfully, the following chapter, which focuses on Hamsun's travel narratives *In Wonderland* and "Under the Crescent Moon," is a much more stringently constructed analysis, and it offers real insight into Hamsun's position in relation to national identity, in terms of the perennial "language question" in Norway, his transformation into a "national poet" upon the death of Bjørnson, and, not least, in his questioning of identity at the "margins" of Europe in the travel narratives. In this chapter, Sjølyst-Jackson engages closely with Kittang and with Elisabeth Oxfeldt, offering a useful and insightful critique of their work. He argues that both unwittingly perpetuate the East/West dichotomy that they claim to want to subvert, because they in his view fail to see that "The Hamsunian binary is … counterintuitive, because it posits the margins of Europe above and in opposition to the Western metropolitan centres" (85). In the context Hamsun constructs, Norway and the Caucasus hold a similar status in relation to metropolitan centres of power, and Hamsun's concern in his travelogue is at least

in part the documentation of difference in the margins—which Sjølyst-Jackson associates with what Gayatri Spivak calls "other Asias" (87). He offers a sustained reading of the character referred to in the narrative as "The Jew," pointing out the inherent tension in the narrator's rhetorical position: "The comic irony of the narrator's position does not undermine or overturn in any decisive manner, the anti-Semitic stereotype as such" (89), and demonstrates that Hamsun here employs a strategy of avoidance and displacement. Sjølyst-Jackson concludes by stating that "Hamsun's position does not fall in line with the East/West dichotomy articulated in the traffic of perceptions between the metropolitan blocks and their margins; he articulates, instead, a certain alterity, at once self-assured and uneasy" (90), in which Hamsun's disdain is directed at the centres of imperial power, rather than the racialized Other.

Sjølyst-Jackson examines what he calls the "multiple aftermaths" (96) of *Growth of the Soil* "by retrieving aspects of the conceptual background of the novel alongside the international history of reception, and … by tracing the complex figure of growth in the literary text" (95–96). He explains that the appropriation of the text for the European "back to the land" response to World War I actually contradicts Hamsun's own, more pragmatic or realist conception of agrarian life: "*Growth of the Soil* entails no ideology of 'submission'; on the contrary, it re-inscribes a tradition of liberal independence in the figure of the self-sufficient peasant" (97). Sjølyst-Jackson is less convincing, however, in his analysis of the complexities of Hamsun's figurations of the Sámi in the text. Yet again, his analysis is weakened by a lack of engagement with previous scholarship, in this case the work of Kristin Jernsletten (2003, 2004, 2006) and Troy Storfjell (2003), both of whom examine Hamsun's representations of the Sámi in this text.

In what is perhaps the strongest chapter in the book, "Reading Hamsun, Reading Nazism," Sjølyst-Jackson presents a cogent and complex analysis of, on the one hand, how Nazi ideologues read and appropriated Hamsun, and, on the other hand, how Hamsun himself "read" Nazism, as evidenced primarily by his polemical writings. Without excusing Hamsun's discriminatory and anti-democratic positions, Sjølyst-Jackson articulates a clear distinction between Hamsun's views and those that predominated in Nazi ideology:

> the figure of "blood" in Hamsun's writings was much less concerned with biology and racial purity than the problem of national identity amid the conflicted legacies of nation building and the lingering traces of migration and displacement. No overt or implicit rhetoric of national rootedness, including Hamsun's own, would ever be reconciled with those traces and fragments, the foreign bodies of migration, that everywhere animate his literary works, most obviously in the ambivalent figure of the rootless wanderer.
> (134)

The chapter is particularly insightful in pointing out that it is precisely the ruptures and displacements of Hamsun's writing that ideologues as diverse as Alfred Rosenberg and Martin Heidegger exploited, and it thus serves as a welcome corrective to Kittang's postulate that the disruptions of Hamsun's texts subversively oppose Nazism (118).

The book's final chapter, "Treacherous Testimony: On Overgrown Paths and the Rhetoric of Deafness," also offers important insights, not only in relation to Hamsun's last major work, but also into a way of understanding Hamsun's entire oeuvre in terms of the "autobiographical inscription," which "concerns both the historical sense by which the author may not always coincide or agree with *him*self, and the rhetorical sense by which the narrating 'I' may not always fully coincide or agree with *it*self. These splits and schisms are not found *between* the author and the text, but *within* the 'author' – *within* the text" (153, italics original). Sjølyst-Jackson's reading of deafness and hearing (in both its physiological and legal senses) as recurring tropes and figures in *On Overgrown Paths* is inspired as a way of accessing how the legacy of Hamsun has been "heard" and "misheard" ever since.

This book is well copyedited, but rather surprisingly, many of the dates given for publication are incorrect in the body of the text, despite appearing correctly in the chronological list of Hamsun's works provided. Is this the same ambiguous fatal flaw that caused Hamsun's *Hunger* protagonist to write 1848 on his application to work for Merchant Christie by mistake?

In sum, this is a difficult work to evaluate. It offers many rewarding readings of Hamsun's texts and cultural positioning for scholars who are well oriented in Hamsun scholarship, and who are able to recognize when Sjølyst-Jackson's insights truly add something new. In this respect, the book fulfills Sjølyst-Jackson's first goal of reflecting upon Hamsun's "multiple, contradictory, even mutually exclusive legacies" (6). The book is, however, more problematic in regards to Sjølyst-Jackson's second goal of highlighting Hamsun's relevance to other fields because, in part, of the way that his work misrepresents the field of Hamsun scholarship, primarily through omission. I do not mean here to imply that Sjølyst-Jackson is derivative; rather, it seems clear that engagement with more of the existing literature would simply have spurred him to produce more of what is good in this book.

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