

KNUT HAMSUN BETWEEN CULTURAL GERMANY AND POLITICAL GERMANY

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Abstract:

Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) is a Norwegian writer who managed to win a place in world literature by the side of the playwright Henrik Ibsen. Hamsun was a complex figure: he was the Nobel Prize laureate in Literature of 1920 but he was also charged with treason after World War II; he wrote stories drawn from Nordland (in Northern Norway), but he also supported National Socialism. That is why, we will make a distinction between culture and politics, between Hamsun as a literary writer and Hamsun as the author of a series of articles in favour of the Nazis. Beyond the controversial side of his life, which started in the 1930s, our aim is to analyze the role Germany played on the cultural side. Germany was the first country where Hamsun became a successful writer in the 1890s due to a wide readership and the support of the publisher Albert Langen, among others. In turn, Hamsun was an admirer of German culture and of the German nation that gained power in the 20th century.

Rezumat:

Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) este un scriitor norvegian care a reușit să-și câștige un loc în literatura universală alături de dramaturgul Henrik Ibsen. Hamsun a fost o figură complexă: el a fost laureatul Premiului Nobel pentru Literatură în 1920, dar a fost, de asemenea, acuzat de trădare după al doilea război mondial; a redat întâmplări desprinse din ținutul Nordland (în nordul Norvegiei), dar a sprijinit, de asemenea, național-socialismul. De aceea, vom face o distincție între cultură și politică, între Hamsun ca scriitor de literatură și Hamsun ca autor al unor articole în favoarea naziștilor. Dincolo de latura controversată a vieții sale, care a început în anii 1930, scopul nostru este de a analiza rolul jucat de Germania din punct de vedere cultural. Germania a fost prima țară în care Hamsun a devenit un scriitor de succes, în anii 1890, fapt ce s-a datorat printre altele unui public cititor larg și sprijinului acordat de editorul Albert Langen. La rândul său, Hamsun a fost

un admirator al culturii germane și al națiunii germane, a cărei putere a crescut în secolul al XX-lea.

Keywords: Norwegian literature, Knut Hamsun, Germany, culture, politics, identity

Introduction

Knut Hamsun began to write literature at the end of the 19th century after a period dominated in Norway by the playwright Henrik Ibsen whom Hamsun in fact opposed. From the very beginning, a distinction should be made between the literary writer and the author of the series of articles in favor of the Nazis for example, since Hamsun manifested himself as an article writer and a polemicist as well. However, some researchers such as Heming Gujord in “Knut Hamsun in Germany – A Map of Misreadings” claim that this is a quite difficult task¹.

The fact that Hamsun became internationally famous after his breakthrough with the novel *Hunger* in 1890 and that he was the Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature of 1920 for the novel *Growth of the Soil* made him gain prestige and thus a certain authority which enabled him to fight for the cause of The Third Reich. Thus, the controversial side of Hamsun’s life started only in the 1930s.

The Literary Hamsun

Germany played a very important role in Hamsun’s literary life as it was the first non-Scandinavian country where he gained success in the 1890s due, first and foremost, to the wide readership enjoyed there and to the support of the publisher Albert Langen and of periodicals such as *Jugend*, *Pan* or *Simplicissimus*. On the other hand, Hamsun was an admirer of German culture and of the German nation be it the Germany of The Second Reich until 1918, of the Weimar Republic until 1933 or the Nazi Germany.

The literary Hamsun is a complex figure. “Hamsun’s texts have been interpreted in so many different ways over a wide range of ideological positions that one may ask whether it is a question of one or several Hamsuns within the sphere of German reception.”²

From the beginning of his artistic career, Hamsun became known to the German public through translations of the essays *The Cultural Life of Modern America* (1889 - fragments) and *From the Unconscious Life of the Mind* (1890), of several short stories including *Chance*, or of his first novel, *Hunger*, which was published in book form in 1891 by the publishing house Samuel Fischer in Berlin. Previously, the novel had been published in serial form in the journal *Die Freie*

1 Cf. Heming Gujord, “Knut Hamsun in Germany – A Map of Misreadings,” in *Knut Hamsun Abroad: International Reception*, ed. Peter Fjâgesund (London: Norvik Press, 2009), 38.

² *Ibid*, 37.

*Bühne*³ (The Free Stage), at the end of 1890, at a short period after its publication in Copenhagen by Philipsen publishing house. The journal *Die Freie Bühne* states on 5th November 1890 that “one of the youngest in the Norwegian writer’s generation offers here descriptions with the most penetrating knowledge of the mind and the finest artistic form.”⁴ [our translation]

Nevertheless, Hamsun did not spend much time in Germany although he was connected to the writer circle from Friedrichshagen, to which other Scandinavian authors such as Ola Hansson, Dagny Juel, August Strindberg also belonged. Ingar Sletten Kolloen wrote for example in *Hamsun. Erobreren* about a visit paid by Knut Hamsun and his wife in Berlin in January 1931: “Hardly had they entered Germany when they discovered that the journey had been known. Several newspapers reported that now Knut Hamsun visited Germany for the first time since the Munich stay in 1896. Some thought they knew that the visit was related to the Norwegian author’s intention to thank the German people for their exceptional celebration of his 70th birthday.”⁵ [our translation] Since Hamsun had become even more famous after being awarded The Nobel Prize for Literature, on his 70th anniversary in 1929 he enjoyed not only national but also international celebrations. In *The Festschrift* issued on this occasion, the German writer Thomas Mann wrote from Munich on 24 June 1929: “His work, the previous one, which rose up at the turn of the century belonged to the most inner literary experiences in my youth, the wonderful climax of his life work in the *Growth of the Soil* twelve years ago was also for me the shocking event this delightful book meant at that time for so many war-afflicted German hearts.”⁶ [our translation] Mann also praised Hamsun for his unforgettable support of Germany during World War I.

Already the first novel had been regarded as “a product of the genuine Nordic and Germanic affinity to the dark and misty landscape of nature and the human

³ *Die Freie Bühne* was also the name of the independent theatre run by Otto Brahm, which was founded in Berlin in 1889 and got involved in promoting naturalism and Scandinavian plays such as Ibsen’s *Ghosts* or Strindberg’s *The Father*.

⁴ Quoted in Lars Frode Larsen, *Tilværelsens udlænding. Hamsun ved gjennombrudet. 1891-1893* (Oslo: Schibsted, 2002), 117. “en av de yngste i den norske diktergenerasjonen skildrer her med den mest inntrengende sjelekunnskap og den fineste kunstneriske form.”

⁵ Ingar Sletten Kolloen, *Hamsun. Erobreren* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2004), 15. “De var knapt kommet inn i Tyskland før de oppdaget at reisen var blitt kjent. Flere aviser kunne fortelle at Knut Hamsun nå besøkte Tyskland for første gang siden München-oppholdet i 1896. Noen mente å vite at besøket hadde sammenheng med at den norske dikteren ville takke det tyske folk for dets enestående markering av hans 70-årsjubileum.”

⁶ Thomas Mann, “Til Hamsuns syttiende fødselsdag.” *Vor verden* 6 (1929): 326. “Hans diktning, den tidligere, som steg frem ved århundreskiftet, hørte til de innerligste litterære opplevelser i min ungdom, hans vidunderlige livsverks kulminasjon i «Markens Grøde» for tolv år siden var også for mig den rystende begivenhet, som denne herlige bok dengang betød for så mange krigsplagede tyske hjertes.”

soul"⁷, and since Germany was a model culturally speaking, Hamsun's recognition in Germany was very important to him. However, a difficult moment came in 1892 when the German critic Felix Holländer accused him of plagiarism for the short story *Chance*, which he considered a rewritten version of the novel *The Gambler* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The journal *Die Freie Bühne*, which had previously published *Hunger*, also published this accusation, which was then quoted in other newspapers in Norway. In 1890, one of Hamsun's German translators, Marie Herzfeld, had rejected "the idea of any direct influence from the Russian. She considers that such a thing would have appeared in the author's style of writing and choice of subject. She accepts however that there may be a 'distant affinity' [...] when it comes to the area of interest - that is the abnormal psyche"⁸ [our translation]

After Holländer's accusation to which Hamsun gave no answer, the publishing house Samuel Fischer refused the publication of his next book *Mysteries* (1892), and Hamsun had to find a new editor. Moreover, at that very time Hamsun had become unpopular in Norway after his lectures on Norwegian literature in which he attacked Ibsen and realism in general. Under these circumstances the encounter with Albert Langen in Paris in 1893 became quite fruitful as in 1894 the Langen publishing house supported the publication of *Mysteries* as its first printed book and *Shallow Soil* from the previous year. The Langen publishing house played afterwards an important role in promoting Scandinavian literature in Germany (namely authors like Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Georg Brandes and the above mentioned Knut Hamsun). Moreover, Albert Langen had a direct contact with Norway by his marriage with Dagny Bjørnson, the Norwegian writer's daughter. Unfortunately, Langen died in 1909, at the age of 40.

By his works Hamsun proved a representative of the avant-garde literature, and the periodicals *Simplicissimus*, *Jugend*, and *Pan* were among those which promoted them in Germany. *Simplicissimus* was a publication founded in 1896 by the same Albert Langen, while the competing journal *Jugend* was an art magazine created in the same year to promote artists in the direction of Jugendstil. In 1895 Langen published the novel *Pan* (written in 1894) at a time when the journal bearing the same name and later becoming highly influential in the field of Art Nouveau, was also founded in Berlin.

In the frame of Norway's independence in 1905 the reputation of Norwegian figures such as the composer Edvard Grieg, the explorer Fridtjof Nansen, the writers Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson played a role in the easier

⁷ Gujord, "Misreadings," 44-45.

⁸ Larsen, *Hamsun*, 114. "avviser tanken om noen direkte innflytelse fra russeren. En slik mener hun ville ha vist seg i forfatterens skrivemåte og stoffvalg. Hun åpner imidlertid for at det kan finnes et 'fjernt slektskap' [...] når det gjelder interesseområdet - dvs. den anormale psyken."

acceptance of Norway as a free nation by other European states. And Hamsun's path in Germany was most probably facilitated by the presence and achievements of former Scandinavian writers, Ibsen included. "On the basis of the information in Hamsun's letters one can infer that the first request for a possible translation of *Hunger* must have already come around the 20th of June 1890. Given the fact that the book was published on 2nd June, it must be said that it was a remarkably quick response from a foreign publisher, and it is a clear evidence of the Germans' interest in everything Norwegian and Nordic at this time."⁹ [our translation]

The German personalities Albert Langen, Thomas Mann and Frank Wedekind helped Hamsun with a fund-raising which should correspond to a scholarship thanks to the publication *Simplicissimus*, and that was another reason why Hamsun felt an attraction towards Germany. During World War I Hamsun expressed himself on the side of the German nation and this sympathy showed, first of all, a cultural identification with Germany. At that time this sympathy did not manifest itself in Norway as a shame as it proved in the case of World War II because of the Nazi occupation of the Nordic country.

After Hamsun was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1920, the German stages became more interested in his plays. To give some examples, *At the Gate of the Kingdom* from 1895 was staged by the theaters in Heidelberg and Bremen, and was met with a big success in Berlin in 1936. *The Game of Life* from 1896 was staged in Dresden, Munich, Leipzig, Berlin and Hamburg or Luzern (in the German-speaking part of Switzerland), *Evening Glow* from 1898 in Frankfurt and Lübeck, *Queen Tamara* from 1903 was staged in Essen in 1937, *Vendt the Monk* from 1902 had its first performance in 1926 in Heidelberg and another premiere in 1937 in Göttingen. 1937 seemed a very good year for Hamsun's reception in Germany, and tens of thousands of copies of *Growth of the Soil*, *Victoria* and *Pan* were printed. Besides, Hamsun also proved popular with the young generation in Germany.

The Political Hamsun

When the Nazis took over in Germany in the 1930s, Hamsun supported the cause. In 1934 when he was awarded the Goethe Medal in Frankfurt, he handed back the prize of 10,000 Reichsmark as a sign of support regarding German social reconstruction. It was a time when some of the writers who had previously

⁹ Larsen, *Hamsun*, 109. "På bakgrunn av Hamsuns brevopplysninger kan man regne seg frem til at den første forespørsel om en eventuell oversettelse av *Sult* må ha kommet allerede rundt den 20. juni 1890. I og med at boken utkom den 2. juni, må det sies å ha vært en bemerkelsesverdig rask reaksjon fra et utenlandsk forlag, og er et tydelig vitnemål om tyskernes interesse for alt norsk og nordisk på dette tidspunkt."

appreciated him, such as Thomas Mann, left the country for political reasons, preferring the exile to witnessing the Nazi takeover. Mann wrote about Hamsun in 1935 that “he undoubtedly damages his reputation for the present as well as for the future. His sympathy for the regime may of course be based on confusion with Germany in general, to which he – like all the great Scandinavians – owes a great debt of gratitude. As for the rest, we know of course his political disposition, which also revealed itself through his apostatic attitude towards Liberalism.”¹⁰

In the 1930s, accompanied by his wife, Hamsun went several times to Germany, and these visits impressed him. Marie Hamsun used to represent him on other occasions in Germany as well, when he could not participate. In Norway he promoted the Pan-Germanic ideal also by contact with *Nordische Gesellschaft* (the Nordic Society), an organization based in Lübeck, which intended to strengthen the cultural and political cooperation between Germany and the Nordic region. Hamsun was a keen reader of Norwegian newspapers and was eager to learn about German politics. Moreover, he made comparisons between the political situations in Germany and in Norway. But soon he was exploited by the Nazis for their ideological purposes. Besides the German Nazis, Hamsun also showed sympathy for the Norwegian Nazi party, Nasjonal Samling, led by Vidkun Quisling. “A man to Knut Hamsun’s taste. In just a few months he would point to him as Norway’s savior.”¹¹ [our translation]

At this time Hamsun was already a political person who wrote articles in Norway, which were then quoted in German publications. These articles were mainly pro-German and anti-British. “Hatet England, elsket Tyskland” (“Hated England, loved Germany”) is the name of an article signed by Ingar Sletten Kolloen and published on 20 October 2005 by NRK, where the hate is shown to have occurred because of the previous contact with the English people in Hamsun’s youth and of the imperial character of England willing to control the rest of the world.

The Nazi leaders Alfred Rosenberg, the primary German ideologist of Nazism, and Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda, both admired Hamsun and were acquainted with his work. When Hamsun turned 80 in 1939, they sent him birthday greetings, and the same did Hitler himself. Rosenberg for instance wrote to him: “When you created your characters for the world out of an indestructible will, you have been able to provoke many similar feelings to the German people

¹⁰ Thomas Mann, *Briefe 1889-1936* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1961), 406, letter dated 16 July 1935, quoted in Gujord, “Misreadings,” 52.

¹¹ Sletten Kolloen, *Hamsun*, 21. “En mann etter Knut Hamsuns smak. Om bare noen måneder skulle han peke på ham som Norges redningmann.”

and have given German writing life-giving impulses.”¹² [our translation] Nevertheless, the situation was very different from his anniversary 10 years before when names like Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Gerhart Hupfmann, John Galsworthy, Olav Duun, Nordahl Grieg, André Gide, Maxim Gorky, Gabriel Scott, H. G. Wells had contributed to *The Festschrift* issued in his honor.

Since Hamsun himself admired Joseph Goebbels, he even gave him his Nobel Prize medal as a gift. Moreover, in June 1943 he had a meeting with Adolf Hitler, and this subject is thoroughly explored in Tore Rem’s new book *Knut Hamsun. Reisen til Hitler*, published in October 2014. As Ingar Sletten Kolloen shows in his Hamsun’s biography, at this meeting “The politician wanted to talk about writing. But the writer wanted to talk about politics”¹³ [our translation], namely he asked Hitler to remove Josef Terboven, the brutal Reichskommissar for Norway. Taking these into consideration, we can say that Hamsun had become quite influential in Germany.

After Hitler committed suicide, Hamsun wrote an obituary for *Aftenposten*, a leading Norwegian publication, on 7 May 1945, just before the German surrender on 8 May. There he asserted that Hitler had been a “warrior for mankind, and a prophet of the gospel of justice for all nations”¹⁴. This obituary, difficult to understand at that time and until today, has contributed to Knut Hamsun’s bad reputation. Moreover, after the war, Hamsun was charged with treason, and the trial affected the cultural honor of his entire homeland.

“Ever since, the question of Knut Hamsun’s Nazi leanings has traumatized Norwegian culture and society. Hamsun shook up the special Norwegian myth of the Great Poet, which had developed historically in parallel with the creation of the modern Norwegian nation. [...] The fact that he so clearly failed his country at the time of its greatest need may have helped to give the myth a blow that all ‘good Norwegians’ could only regard as an attack on the very cultural identity of the nation.”¹⁵

It is hard to say whether Hamsun was a Nazi or not. During World War II Hamsun published 15 manifestoes and articles in Norwegian and German publications to support the Nazi forces and Vidkun Quisling’s party, Nasjonal Samling. However, it could be said that he was neither a war profiteer nor an

¹² Quoted in Sletten Kolloen, *Hamsun*, 191. “Idet De skapte Deres skikkelser for verden ut av en uforgjengelig vilje, har De formådd å utløse mange likartede følelser i det tyske folk og gitt tysk diktning livgivende impulser.”

¹³ Sletten Kolloen, *Hamsun*, 282. “Politikeren ønsket å snakke om diktning. Men dikteren ville snakke om politikk.”

¹⁴ *Aftenposten*, 7 May 1945, quoted in Robert Ferguson, *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 386.

¹⁵ Atle Kittang, “Knut Hamsun and Nazism,” *UiB-Magasinet* 3 (1996), accessed March 30, 2014, <http://org.uib.no/uibmag/grafikk/eng-96/hamsun.htm>.

informer although he did show support for the dictatorial leader model and the will to govern with violent and undemocratic means. He even gave an interview to the German-controlled Norwegian radio although he usually did not give interviews.

Nevertheless, he claimed that he had never paid a party subscription. Finally, by being declared mentally incompetent, the charge of treason was withdrawn.

Conclusions

Nowadays, Knut Hamsun is perhaps Norway's most widely known writer beside Ibsen. He made a remarkable contribution to world literature and in Germany, his revolutionary writing found a profitable market as well as recognition immediately after his literary breakthrough in 1890. Although after World War II many of his books were destroyed because of his political beliefs in favor of National Socialism, a revival of his work occurred especially after the celebration of his 100th anniversary in 1959. "The politician Knut Hamsun is no enigma. He is a myth created in the late 1930s. The writer Knut Hamsun remains however an enigma like all great artists."¹⁶ [our translation] Taking into consideration the two directions – cultural and political – it seems that Germany was of tremendous importance in Hamsun's life since it was the country that brought both his fame and decline.

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¹⁶ Sletten Kolloen, *Hamsun*, 455. "Politikeren Knut Hamsun er ingen gåte. Han er en myte skapt i siste halvdel av 1930-årene. Dikteren Knut Hamsun forblir derimot en gåte, slik alle store kunstnere er."

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