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CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Norway's Black Sheep

Reviewed by Michael McDonald

KNUT HAMSUN MAY LACK NAME RECOGNITION in the English-speaking world, but the admiration of his contemporaries suggests the stature he once enjoyed. "The whole modern school of fiction in the 20th century stems from Hamsun, just as Russian literature in the 19th century 'came out of Gogol's greatcoat,'" declared Isaac Bashevis Singer. To Henry Miller, Hamsun was "the Dickens of my generation." Hamsun received the world's greatest literary honor in 1920. Summing up the modernist literary consensus, Thomas Mann issued a characteristically lapidary pronouncement: "Never has the Nobel Prize been awarded to one worthier of it."

Twenty-three years after receiving the Nobel, Hamsun made a gift of his medal to Joseph Goebbels, explaining, "Nobel established his prize for the previous year's most 'idealistic' writing. I know of nobody, Herr Reichsminister, who has unstintingly, year after year, written and spoken on Europe's and humanity's behalf as idealistically as yourself."

Small wonder that Hamsun has been the subject of numerous studies, notably Robert Ferguson's impressive 1987 book *Enigma*:

The Life of Knut Hamsun, the first full-length biography to appear in English, and the 1996 Danish biopic *Hamsun*, featuring Max von Sydow's memorable portrayal of the writer in his final years.

Only in 2001, however, did scholars usher the final volume of Hamsun's complete correspondence into print. Other important sources recently made available include the notes of the psychiatrist who treated Hamsun for depression in the 1920s and Hamsun's private archive, now deposited in the National Library of Norway. The diligent Norwegian journalist Ingar Sletten Kolloen spent five years poring over this new material, and produced a monumental two-volume biography in Norwegian that runs to nearly 1,000 pages.

That original work has been reduced by two-thirds in an English abridged version. Kolloen writes in his preface that he wished "to investigate the interaction between [Hamsun's] writing, his life, and the wider society." Whether or not he achieved his aim

KNUT HAMSUN:
Dreamer and
Dissenter.

By Ingar Sletten Kolloen.
Translated by
Deborah Dawkin and
Erik Skuggevik.
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378 pp. \$40

in the unabridged volumes, all but the most cursory discussions of Hamsun's cultural milieu—in Scandinavia and in Europe as a whole—are absent in the Yale edition. Though leery of “reducing the work and the creative process” of his subject to biographical events, Kolloen mechanically juxtaposes Hamsun's activities with potted plot summaries of his novels. Kolloen himself writes in a matter-of-fact way punctuated by occasional and regrettable rhetorical flourishes for which the fluent translation by Erik Skuggevik and Deborah Dawkin does not compensate.

Ferguson's superior biography remains in print, so the main justification for picking up this one is that Kolloen carried his research further

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than Ferguson was able to do. The wealth of detail he supplies underscores Hamsun's relentless drive to succeed as a writer and, otherwise, his rottenness as a human being.

Hamsun was born

Knud Pedersen in 1859 in central Norway. The son of an impoverished tailor, he traveled with his family to Hamarøy, above the Arctic Circle, when he was not quite three. There, his father worked a farm owned by his brother-in-law, and Hamsun, when he was old enough, went to work for his uncle more or less as an indentured servant. By Kolloen's reckoning, Hamsun received a mere 252 days of schooling in his life. But once he learned to read and discovered the libraries of local men who encouraged his interest in literature, he determined to become a great writer.

There were no takers for Hamsun's first literary efforts, socially realistic tales of peasant life imitative of the great Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (whose pioneering efforts in the 19th century to create a national Norwegian literature would earn him the Nobel Prize in 1903). And so, in the 1880s, like many Norwegians—only Ireland donated a greater proportion of its population to America—Hamsun tried his luck in the New

World. He made two forays to the United States, from 1882 to 1884 and from 1886 to 1888; he worked, mostly as a laborer, in areas where there were sizable Scandinavian communities: principally Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

It was during these uncertain years that he began to use the pen name Knut Hamsun. He eventually returned permanently to Norway, where he hung out in literary circles in Oslo, virtually destitute. Reacting against the literary school of naturalism and its depiction of people with a single characteristic that controlled their behavior, Hamsun became captivated by the vogue sweeping Europe to capture subconscious and pathological states of mind: “I will make my hero laugh, where sensible people think he ought to cry,” he proclaimed, “and why? Because my hero is no character, no ‘type’ . . . but a complex, modern being.”

Hamsun's breakthrough came with *Hunger* (1890), in which he describes the inner psychological state of a starving writer wandering the streets of Kristiania (as Oslo was then known). *Hunger* was enthusiastically received throughout Scandinavia, and Hamsun followed it up with two short, stylistically innovative novels, *Mysteries* (1892) and *Pan* (1894). The plots of both books are slim. In *Mysteries*, a stranger named Nagel appears one day in a Norwegian coastal village. Among other people he behaves irrationally; alone, he dialogues with his various personalities. Then one day he vanishes as suddenly as he arrived. *Pan* similarly presents an oddball, Thomas Glahn, who describes how his progressive entanglement with the daughter of a rich local merchant affects his mind.

This was stream-of-consciousness writing well before James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and with a Nordic twist. The major Norwegian writers have created characters who define themselves in relationship to nature, and Hamsun was no exception. He alternates descriptions of the workings of the human mind with rapturous depictions of the Norwegian woodlands and

coastline. In less than five years, Hamsun created the prototypes for a certain kind of modern fiction based on alienation, existentialism (the absurdist outcast), surrealism, and the instability of character.

Once you've simultaneously created and deconstructed the modern novel, where do you go? Hamsun spent a good deal of time on the lecture circuit, attacking his literary predecessors—most notably Henrik Ibsen—for their brutal simplifications of human behavior and emotions. But progressive *embourgeoisement*—and the need to cultivate a stable readership—set in. Hamsun married an actress, Marie Andersen, who was 22 years his junior, purchased a country estate, and retreated to writing traditional novels, usually set in rural towns, perhaps the most acclaimed of which is *Growth of the Soil* (1917).

Growth of the Soil—something of a cross between Laura Ingalls Wilder and Ingmar Bergman—celebrates rural virtues embodied by a pioneering Norwegian farmer named Isak and his wife and children, with infanticide, infidelity, and insanity thrown into the mix. Though it may strike present-day readers as a distinctly odd tale, it touched a nerve. Within a month of publication, the book sold 18,000 copies, a startling figure given Norway's meager population of three million. It was quickly translated and sold well



Controversial Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun sits on the steps of his country estate, Nørholm, with his wife, Marie, and dog Dux, ca. 1925, several years before his outspoken support of Hitler began to tarnish his reputation.

abroad, particularly in Germany. The novel made Hamsun rich; it also marked him as a leading candidate for the Nobel Prize.

Hamsun's stylistic retreat did nothing to diminish his Promethean drive. (During his long life, he produced some 20 novels, six plays, two volumes of poetry, and three collections of short stories.) Kolloen is good at describing Hamsun's bouts of *furor scribendi*, and offers an amusing glimpse of his creative method: "Using any scraps of paper he could find . . . he would scribble down ideas as soon as they seized hold of him. He

would arrange these notes in little piles of paper slips spread out over his table, like a game of patience. It was Hamsun's task to see which slips would slot together, making a greater whole or blending with each other, to come to life."

Hamsun had the full complement of bad artistic qualities. He lied about his age, tried "wonder cures" such as electric belts to cure hair loss, and underwent an operation to close his spermatic duct, in the hope that it would slow the aging process. He was a journalistic brawler who, as Kolloen notes, "seemed to draw energy from the discord" he created. Perpetually debt ridden, he had a taste for American automobiles: Cadillacs and Buicks. He was a skirt chaser, a prodigious drinker, and an egomaniac who demanded utter subservience from friends and family.

But so what? Personal flaws such as these—and worse—are common to many literary figures whose genius we easily acknowledge. Hamsun's failings, however, strayed beyond the personal. Had he died before Adolf Hitler's assumption of power in 1933, he long ago would have been widely accepted as an important part of the patrimony of world literary culture. Instead, he lived to applaud Hitler and to welcome the Nazi invasion of Norway in 1940, and his literary reputation consequently suffered a worldwide eclipse. But now the signs are unmistakable that Hamsun's literary standing is on the verge of full rehabilitation.

His defenders—there are more than a few—offer any number of excuses to explain away his disgraceful actions. The three most popular: an irrational hatred of Great Britain (where his books never sold) inculcated by his parents; an irrational love of Germany (where he was feted) inculcated by his wife; and his advanced age (by the time World War II broke out, Hamsun was 80). In the words of the otherwise usually astute literary critic James Wood, a staunch Hamsun advocate, "His personal strangeness was the real engine of his politics; there was almost no theoretical fuel."

As Kolloen's biography makes abundantly clear, however, Hamsun's political motor ran almost exclusively on hatred, which he powered from a number of fascist filling stations at home and abroad. To be sure, it would be wrong to view him as an ideological Nazi. Rather, his ideas fit with what scholars such as Stanley Payne call "generic fascism." He was a racist, an ultranationalist, and a social Darwinist who believed that war was a natural part of the battle for survival.

Most of these repugnant views Hamsun expressed openly in his journalism, and in a much more attenuated form, if at all, in his fiction. Yet the two sources are linked. Hamsun used his literary prestige to lend credence to his social and political harangues. More to the point, the separation between Hamsun's social and political commentary and his novelistic concern with eternal truths would have made little sense to him or his readers. He genuinely seems to have viewed himself as "Norway's soul," an appellation bestowed upon him by Norway's King Haakon, and all of his writing served to shed light on contemporary Norwegian reality in its spiritual as well as its political dimensions.

Once Hitler was in power, Hamsun defended Nazi concentration camps and Hitler's execution of political opponents, and declared, during the German occupation of Norway, "We are all Germans. . . . Any opposition will be crushed." The rotten apples did not fall far from the tree. Hamsun's son Tore applied to join the SS on a visit to Munich in 1934 (but ended up becoming something of an artist), and his son Arild joined a legion of Norwegian volunteers incorporated into the SS. His daughter Ellinor married into a family with high positions in Nazi Germany.

Then there is Hamsun's famous meeting with Hitler at the Führer's Berghof mountain lair in June 1943. Hamsun was quite happy to see fascism imposed on the Norwegian people. But Reichskommissar Josef Terboven's brutality had crossed a line. It was one thing for Ter-

boven to round up Jews and send them to die in concentration camps; they didn't belong in Norway. But under Terboven, tens of thousands of ordinary Norwegians had been arrested and many were tortured. Hamsun's dream was that after the war, Norway would occupy a high position in the "future Greater Germany," and he viewed Terboven's cruelty as a serious impediment to Norwegians' acceptance of their destiny. Accordingly, he asked the Führer to remove Terboven on the grounds that his excessive use of violence was "adulterating Hitler's true teachings." The notion that Terboven, a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi who had joined the movement in 1923, had deviated from Hitler's orders was ridiculous. Hamsun succeeded only in angering Hitler. Terboven remained de facto dictator of Norway until his suicide in May 1945.

Because of Terboven's brutality and the relatively large size and reach of the domestic resistance, after the war Norway prosecuted a greater percentage of its population for collaboration than any other nation. Unlike the politician Vidkun Quisling (whose last name has become a synonym for "traitor") and other major collaborators, Hamsun was spared. (His wife served a three-year prison term, and Arild was sentenced to 18 months' hard labor.) By this point Hamsun was in his mid-eighties, and enjoyed international status. There was also the question of his competence to stand trial. The authorities shuttled him between nursing homes and a psychiatric clinic for three years. In the end, psychiatrists judged Hamsun sane but "permanently impaired" mentally. He was fined for "economic collaboration" and stripped of his property. He died in 1952, at the age of 92, in poverty.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of Hamsun's birth. The anger that caused Norwegians to burn his books in public squares at the war's end has cooled. To mark the occasion, a bronze statue of him was erected near his birthplace, and a multimillion-dollar complex

dedicated to his life and work was unveiled in Hamarøy. In a final gesture of reconciliation, Norway's central bank is issuing a coin to commemorate his birth. One side displays a reproduction of Hamsun's notes for *Growth of the Soil*, along with his features. Given the inextricability of Hamsun's art and his politics, on the other side an image of Hitler might be appropriate, over the declaration "I believe in you!" But of course that will never happen.

One reason is the erosion of social memory, which in part is natural. Norway's "greatest generation" is dying off, and whereas just a few years ago the voices of enough angry veterans were raised to prevent a street in Oslo from being named after Hamsun, now there is silence. In part, though, the erasure of Hamsun's sins is deliberate. Great literature, we are told, refines our sensibilities, deepens our understanding of human nature, and sharpens our moral acuity. When confronted by a serious artist who is also a reprehensible figure, these lofty claims cannot be reconciled with the ignoble actions, and so we blink and present only one side of the coin.

George Orwell had it right when, in reviewing Salvador Dali's autobiography in 1944, he wrote, "One ought to be able to hold in one's head simultaneously the two facts that Dali is a good draughtsman and a disgusting human being. The one does not invalidate or, in a sense, affect the other." Adopting such a hybrid view is difficult. Yet it's important that we try. Hamsun's early novels remain strikingly undated and have influenced numerous European and American writers. As André Gide remarked, they are, in their way, "perhaps even more subtle" than Dostoyevsky's novels in their exploration of human consciousness. Let us, then, recognize Knut Hamsun for what he was and remains: a pivotal figure in the literary canon and a disgusting human being.

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