

Hamsun's betrayals

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NOBEL PRIZE WINNER KNUT HAMSUN'S LATE LIFE was characterised by a series of betrayals. He was considered his country's leading literary voice of his time: the inheritor of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Henrik Ibsen. However, Hamsun's public appearance became increasingly important to him as his creative spark faded in his late years. With increasingly isolation due to reduced hearing and innate stubbornness he came out as a staunch supporter of the German military invasion of Norway in 1940, encouraging his countrymen to lay down their arms and embrace their occupiers.¹ This first in a series of betrayals, a veritable treason against his home country, was followed by two more such acts. The sense and possible inevitability of these acts is the key concern of this essay: we will consider how Hamsun mobilised these acts of treachery to mount his own, inimitable defence against his final arch-enemy, Norway's leading forensic psychiatrist Gabriel Langfeldt.

After liberation the prosecutor called on Langfeldt to assess whether Hamsun was fit to stand trial for treason, an examination Langfeldt undertook at his Vindern clinic in Oslo (see Gabriel Langfeldt & Ørnulv Ødegård, *Den rettspsykiatriske erklæring om Knut Hamsun*, Oslo: 1978). Hamsun felt deeply insulted by this encounter with psychiatry. However, we should not forget that he had had an earlier experience of psychoanalysis, which he turned into the celebrated *Wayfarer* trilogy.² The spark that was ignited through Hamsun's second encounter with psychiatry resulted in *On Overgrown Paths* ([Paa gjengrodde stier], translated by Carl L. Anderson, New York: 1967 [1949]), Hamsun's first creative production in 13 years. This novel disguised as an autobiography gave Hamsun occasion to reprint his defense speech, which he had previously held before the Magistrates' Court in Grimstad, as well as detailed, disparaging descriptions of Gabriel Langfeldt.³ This final work by Hamsun, then, was an attempt to repudiate his diagnosis by arguing that art operates in a domain beyond the reach of psychoanalysis. However, as this essay will show, the relation between art and psycho-analysis is far from simple in Hamsun's world, and the notion of betrayal plays a crucial part when we set out to distinguish them from each other.

¹ For an illustrative rendition of how Knut Hamsun was perceived during German occupation, see this clip from the official newsreel (*Filmavisen*): "Knut Hamsun 85 år," August 14, 1944, accessed May 2, 2019, from <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/filmavisen/1944/FMAA44003244/avspiller>.

² It is this earlier encounter with the nascent practice of psycho-analysis that has been the subject of much debate recently. When Hamsun went into analysis with Dr. Irgens Strømme in 1926 he felt done for as an artist. However, in the years that followed, Hamsun's creative streak returned, ushering in a prolonged act of truly inventive, fictional writing. See Bodil Børset, "Dr. Irgens Strømme, Hamsun og psykoanalysen," in *Vagant*, July 14, 2017, <http://www.vagant.no/dr-irgens-stromme-hamsun-og-psykoanalysen/>, and Sigmund Karterud, "Knut Hamsuns psykoanalyse," in *Morgenbladet*, July 14, 2017, <https://morgenbladet.no/ideer/2017/07/knut-hamsuns-psykoanalyse>.

³ He had appeared before the court in Grimstad, tried for compensation due to his party membership.

Since the publication of *On Overgrown Paths* there has been a long line of books and articles in Hamsun’s defense, particularly claiming that he was subject to unfair and inhuman treatment at the hands of Langfeldt. The most notable of these is the early *Processen mod Hamsun* by Thorkild Hansen (Copenhagen: 1978), and the more recent books and articles by Gudmund Hermundstad (e.g., “Sensurforsøket,” in *Vinduet* 66 (2012): 1, pp. 82-90). Even the more moderate Øystein Rottem would characterise Langfeldt’s view on Hamsun as negligent: “what Langfeldt regarded as symptoms of mental illness was the stuff Hamsun’s literary work was made of” (Øystein Rottem, “Hamsun og Langfeldt: instrumentell fornuft vs. guddommelig galskap,” in *Tidsskrift for Norsk Psykologforening* 37 (2000): 8, p. 707). Rottem assumed that psycho-analysis and art should be considered to reside on two distinct, formally equal realms. This essay will show that their status is quite different, and while it is possible to argue for a certain degree of autonomy to art, such a self-governance will remain subsumed within the greater legal and social domain.

When people in Norway and international literary circles were indignant with Hamsun it wasn’t only because of the legal consequences of his treachery, but also due to what they saw as his moral failings: on 7 May, 1945, his obituary to Adolf Hitler was published by Norway’s main daily *Aftenposten*, mourning the passing of Hamsun’s “great reformer” (Eulogy over Adolf Hitler, in *Aftenposten*, May 7, 1945, p. 1). Hamsun refused, even in *On Overgrown Paths*, to show any signs of regret, instead portraying himself as victim of psychiatry and the justice system. In the words of Atle Kittang Hamsun “slips away, puts on masks, and keeps talking about irrelevant and to some extent shamefully invented matters” (“Knut Hamsun – ettermælet,” n.d., accessed May 2, 2019, from <https://hamsunsenteret.no/no/knut-hamsun/artikler-om-hamsun/103-ettermælet>). No wonder that Kittang would refer to the enduring interest in Hamsun’s artistic production as something of a “miracle:” after all, his work continues to provide us with a sense of “freedom that makes it possible to [endure] life, even in the utmost old-age, in the greatest of humiliations, in the gravest confusion about what is right and what is wrong.”

Hamsun and psycho-analysis: from Strømme to Langfeldt

If for Hamsun – a man who described himself as overstrung – Strømme’s 1926 analysis provided the author with the capacity to rekindle his creative spark we are dealing with a classic case of the “return of the repressed.”⁴ It was Hamsun’s repressed desires, dreams and wishes, those very things that constituted his gifts as a creative writer, that had become unavailable through a series of inhibitions. Strømme gave Ham-

⁴ In *Moses and Monotheism* Sigmund Freud described the symptom as a “scar of repression”: “all the phenomena of the formation of symptoms may justly be described as the ‘return of the repressed.’ Their distinguishing characteristic, however, is the far-reaching distortion to which the returning material has been subjected as compared with the original” (Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, in *Standard Edition* 23, translated by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson, London: 1964, p. 127).

sun the keys to once again unlock this vault of imagination, enabling the production of the Wayfarer trilogy.

It is certainly true that Hamsun experienced his internment at the Vinderen psychiatric clinic 20 years later as a great humiliation. When Langfeldt declared that Hamsun suffered from “permanently impaired mental faculties”,⁵ and therefore unfit to stand trial, the author would rebel against the diagnosis with all his might. He wanted to be tried for treason, since the aura of a heroic loser – an image Hamsun had specialised in creating throughout his literary career – would be far preferable to that of a pitiful madman (Robert Ferguson, *Enigma: the life of Knut Hamsun*, New York: 1987, p. 390). Nevertheless, this time Hamsun didn’t get his way. His counterattack was instead to return to his craft, and during his stay at Vinderen and in the period that followed Hamsun honed his last work of art to perfection: *On Overgrown Paths* was published against much resistance at the publisher where he had made his home, Gyldendal, in 1949.

Langfeldt held that the two strokes Hamsun had suffered in 1942 and 1944 had triggered signs of aphasia (Ferguson, *Enigma*, 1987, p. 401). During the examination Hamsun demanded to have all questions presented in writing, and would return his answers in the written format. When Langfeldt decided to call on Hamsun’s wife Marie to ask about their married life it was without Knut’s knowledge or consent. However, when they met briefly at the clinic after Marie’s interview with Langfeldt it was obvious to her that Knut perceived her cooperation with Langfeldt as a betrayal, and as a grave affront to him (Ferguson, *Enigma*, 1987, p. 397).

This second betrayal in Hamsun’s late years would have a profound impact on his and Marie’s life. He refused to see her for several years. However, this act of treason was not an accidental event in the second psycho-analysis of Hamsun. Not only was Langfeldt interested in investigating the author’s libido, as Hamsun himself presumed, but he was also curious to find out how the author would react to the confrontation. Langfeldt had sought to find out if Hamsun had become violent in his late years. He asked both Knut and Marie about it, and the confrontation between the two of them at the clinic may have been an occasion to study their interaction closely. Knut’s curt treatment of Marie nevertheless cut the investigation short.

The limiting gesture of psycho-analysis

Since 1946 it is Langfeldt’s medical opinion on Hamsun’s condition that gives expression to the official view, sanctioned by the national prosecutor and never refuted by any public office. Nevertheless, the long stream of attempts to demonstrate how Langfeldt was wrong in his assessment

⁵ In Norwegian the term in fact claims that it was Hamsun’s soul that was permanently reduced (“varig svekkede sjelsevner”), and this legal terminology would serve as a major provocation for the ailing author.

continues to this day. While Langfeldt’s detractors are certainly right in noting how humiliated Hamsun felt by the procedure, surely such emotions much be weighted against the crime he was accused of, and the importance of the medical examination. Furthermore, as with Hamsun’s first experience of psycho-analysis, also in this case the treatment ushered into another literary creation, this time his last and supposedly autobiographical *On Overgrown Paths*.

Is there any connections between these two events: Hamsun’s experience of humiliation, and his later publication? It is curious that even psychoanalytically oriented scholars such as Hermundstad ignores such obvious linkages. In the tradition after Sigmund Freud there is a clear sense in which the analyst and the therapeutic treatment seeks to install in the analysand a new paternal instance.⁶ What Hamsun experienced as positive with Strømme became simply a negative enforcement of the same encounter in his treatment at Vinderen psychiatric clinic, and that is the limiting gesture of psycho-analysis.

However much we seek to assert some kind of autonomy to the artistic domain, such as Øystein Rottem does in his assessment of Hamsun’s diagnosis, what we cannot escape is the legally and socially formal structure of psycho-analysis. It was this reigning in that both infuriated him and made him able to write his last book: when Hamsun started to formulate *On Overgrown Paths* it was specifically to refute and counter Langfeldt’s perspectives and treatment. In the end Hamsun’s defense speech and discussion of his time at Vinderen would take up only part of the finished work; however, there can be no doubt that it was Langfeldt and the official legal-medical treatment of the author that provided the first impetus to write.

Where Rottem is critically mistaken is therefore in presuming that psycho-analysis and art should be considered to reside on two distinct, formally equal realms. While it is possible to argue for a certain degree of autonomy to art, such a self-governance is subsumed within the greater legal and social domain.⁷ What is even more crucial is nevertheless how Rottem misses the point of Hamsun’s last novel. While he reads *On Overgrown Paths* as a refutation of Langfeldt’s diagnosis – how could someone with “permanently impaired mental faculties” write this kind of artwork⁸ – Hamsun’s concern is far larger and encompassing.

Hamsun’s argument and the experience of art

When *On Overgrown Paths* succeeds as a novel it is precisely because of its subtle showing of an argument where autobiographical reality is weaved into the novelistic structure, giving it the appearance of a documentary text.⁹ As Toril Moi notes apropos the debate concerning Karl Ove Knausgård’s and Vigdis Hjorth’s reality literature, “only actual,

⁶ The term Name-of-the-Father was first introduced by Sigmund Freud’s primary successor in France, Jacques Lacan, in the Rome Report, published in 1956: “it is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (“The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits, a selection*, edited and translated by Alan Sheridan, London: 1977 [1956], p. 67). This act of taking up the rôle of the father is indicative of a father who is fully *ex-istant*: “While all men are marked by symbolic castration, there nonetheless exists or persists one man to whom the phallic function does not apply, one man who was never put in his place by succumbing to symbolic castration. He is not subject to the law: he is his own law” (Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, Princeton, NJ: 1995, 110).

⁷ This kind of argumentation has a history that goes back to Plato’s insistence that poets and artists should not be allowed access to the *Republic*.

⁸ Already Hamsun’s publisher, Harald Grieg, had noted this effect: in a letter to Hamsun’s lawyer in July 1948 Grieg noted how the work was “a sovereign rebuttal of the description of the author as someone with ‘permanently impaired mental faculties’” (Ferguson, *Enigma*, 1987, p. 413). We should also note, however, that in Langfeldt’s view the diagnosis was merely indicative of reduced mental capacity, and that would certainly not preclude the patient from continuing to pursue a skill he had honed to perfection. To Langfeldt the publication of *On Overgrown Paths* did not in any way undermine his psychiatric assessment of the author.

⁹ In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Ludwig Wittgenstein contrasted showing with saying, stating famously that “what *can* be shown, *cannot* be said” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C.K. Ogden, 1922, accessed May 2, 2019, from <https://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/>, 4.1212).

realistic ordinary details can make up a convincing fictional universe” (Toril Moi, “Å lese med innlevelse,” in *Morgenbladet*, July 21, 2017, p. 27). And it is this function the insertion of Hamsun’s defense speech and characterisations of Langfeldt serves in *On Overgrown Paths*: to give us the impression of a credible universe that is not our own.

When Langfeldt goes to the publisher and later the police in attempts to have the statements about him struck from the printed edition it is as much an indication of a misunderstanding of the role of art in society as it is hyperbolic to claim, as Hermundstad does, that Langfeldt’s intervention constituted some sort of attempt at censorship against Hamsun. The key to understand Hamsun’s gesture lies in his insistence that anything can be made subject of artistic treatment, even defense speeches and potentially incriminating descriptions of actual, living persons.

And this is where we find Hamsun’s final betrayal: as a treacherous act against his own craft, against the foundation on which his artistic work is established. While posing as an autobiographical work, the sense of this last text lies in quite a different domain. Here, Hamsun did everything in his power to make it seem as if the book was a correct rendition of actual events, to the extent that he would include verbatim speeches and documents.

On Overgrown Paths is a novel, and as such it is a work of fiction. The critical innovation in his last work isn’t the way he would incorporate biographical, and even documentary, detail onto the text, but the way it more radically broke with his earlier stance of vitalism, the idea that we find in everything a particular force of life independent of its material composition. Rather, in *On Overgrown Paths* Hamsun would admit that the pathways and rocks he encountered were “his own invention.”¹⁰ The nature he sees through his window is beautiful, even though it is merely a cropped hill, with biting weather and strong winds. He is struck by “how rich the colors are here in the very rocks and the heather, how incomparable the forms in the [flora]! And the taste of a piece of wall fern that [he found and picked] is still good on the tongue.” (Hamsun, *On Overgrown Paths*, 1967, p. 17). The sensibility of the early wanderer is still here; however, it is no longer characterised by extatic suggestibility, but by a careful attention to the seemingly insignificant elements in his environment:

A branch moves with a bird on it. I stop right there. On another branch of another tree a new bird sits; they seem to belong together, a pair of sparrows who flew towards each other and met and separated five times right before my eyes. ... Oh, the infinitely small in the midst of the infinitely great in this incomparable world. I am glad to be alive again. (Hamsun, *On Overgrown Paths*, 1967, p. 80-81)¹¹

Hamsun listened to the world around him in a way that captured his contemporary audiences, and that continues to arouse our aesthetic re-

¹⁰ “Det var meg som hadde oppfunnet [invented] dem, og det var trær og stener jeg kjente igjen” (quoted in Henning Wærp, “Hamsun og naturen,” n.d., accessed May 2, 2019, from <https://hamsunsenteret.no/no/knut-hamsun/artikler-om-hamsun/100-hamsun-og-naturen>).

¹¹ Henning Wærp notes how Hamsun in *On Overgrown Paths* recycles the term “inntrykksømhhet,” which he had first used in his lectures on literature in 1890, to describe a kindly, affectionate, devoted, loving care with respect to external impressions, observations, and events (Wærp, “Hamsun og naturen,” n.d.).

ceptors to this day; however, to get a feeling for Hamsun’s sensibility it is necessary to first read beyond the immediacy of the measurable, the documentary, and taken-for-granted realism. Can we guess that Hamsun allowed himself a brief laughter when Gabriel Langfeldt tried to have the passages about himself deleted from the print version of *On Overgrown Paths*, and that this would be Hamsun’s last laugh?

Kierkegaard and the meaning of treason

In any case, Hamsun’s last betrayal also led to reconciliation. Having shown that being present in one’s environment trumps any scientific measure, all that was left for him was to surrender to the redemptive capacity of love. And when Knut reunited with Marie, enabling them to spend his last years together, we get a sense of what it means to be betrayed.

It was Søren Kierkegaard who had described so eloquently Abraham’s double bind: how could Abraham not commit treason when he was forced to choose between the ethical demand of his community and the religious call of his Father. While Abraham was called by his God to murder his son Isac, he was forbidden by the laws to do so. If he obeyed the laws and spared Isac, he would betray his Father; while if he obeyed his God and murdered his son, he would betray his laws.¹²

This is the reason why the truly heroic attitude can be discerned in the gaze of he who is betrayed: when at the moment of denunciation the traitor and he who is betrayed look each other in the eye and the traitor recognizes himself, seeing that the act of treachery was unavoidable the betrayed can shoulder his role as a true hero. This is how the literary community is catching up with Hamsun’s insight with the advent of “reality literature;” it certainly was the recognition Marie would find in her reconciliation with Knut; and is it not the kind of acceptance that would lay the ground for a reconciliation with Hamsun’s acts of treason?

To act in accordance with the religious injunction is therefore to resist the ethical temptation. Hamsun committed his final betrayal precisely as an act of resistance: disobeying the laws of autobiography and proper conduct, he demonstrated by the same token his commitment to his artistic calling. It was this passion that led to his final acts of heroism and reconciliation on a limited domain: that of art and love.

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¹² In *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling) Kierkegaard wrote: “Det ethiske Udtryk for hvad Abraham gjorde er, at han vilde myrde Isaak, det religiøse er, at han vilde ofre Isaak; men i denne Modsigelse ligger netop Angesten, der vel kan gjøre et Menneske søvnløst, og dog er Abraham ikke den, han er, uden denne Angst” (Copenhagen: 1843, p. 126).

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