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Reception of the National Trauma "Knut Hamsun" in Norway. Notes on Gabriel Langfeldt's and Leo Eitinger's Psychiatric Discourse

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Key words:
Knut Hamsun – 20th century Norwegian literature – reception – psychiatrist Leo Eitinger

Abstract:
Knut Hamsun, one of the most famous Scandinavian novelists of the first half of the 20th century, represents with his pro-Nazi opinions and sympathies a long-term challenge to Norwegian literature, culture and society. My paper reflects the ambiguity of Hamsun's personality and texts during the most significant reception phases from 1945 until today. Against the backdrop of the controversial medical report written by psychiatrist Gabriel Langfeldt, Knut Hamsun published a literary diary, his last book ever, *On Overgrown Paths* (*På gjengrodde Stier*, 1949) where he criticizes the psychiatrists and the judges. By contrast, psychiatrist Leo Eitinger, born in former Czechoslovakia and Holocaust survivor, extended and enriched the professional perspective with the dimension of personal experience.

1.

"[…] Hitler was a warrior, a warrior for humankind and a preacher of the gospel of justice for all nations. He was a reforming character of the highest order, and his historical fate was that he functioned in a time of unequalled brutality, which in the end felled him. […] And we, his close followers, bow our heads at his death.” [1]

This is a quotation from an obituary published in Norway’s largest daily *Aftenposten*. It was written by Knut Hamsun (1859–1952), the 1920 Nobel Prize for Literature laureate. The subject of this paper is not the life and oeuvre of this writer, whose metanovel *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890) is considered as the first “invasion” of modernism into European literature and whose other works are regarded as masterpieces of neo-Romanticism or Vitalism (KIRKEGAARD 1975). The aim of this paper is to describe several symptoms of trauma representation in relation to the concept of national literature and culture.

The scope and ambivalence of the reception of Hamsun’s oeuvre is exceptional within Scandinavian literature. Two psychiatrists, Gabriel Langfeldt and Leo Eitinger, influenced the shaping of this reception in a unique way. It has been said that Hamsun acted not only as a traitor to the country but also as a traitor to literature (DINGSTAD 2003). In what sense do events connected to this interfere with the present reception of Hamsun’s work? Miloš Havelka (HAVELKA 2002) claims that national self-reflection works with historical centres of memory rather than with a balanced chronology. For this reason, I will not place the case of Knut Hamsun in a diachronic dimension of the story, but rather as an image that in its emblematic reduction is a distinct sign and symbol.

What has been proved is Hamsun’s formal, not active membership in the Norwegian fascist party National Unity (Nasjonal Samling, NS): the application form did exist, and gradually it became clear that the membership fees had been paid for him by his wife, Marie Hamsun.[2] However, there were other incriminating written documents from the 1930s and 1940s; the one with the worst consequences was the above-quoted obituary. During a police interrogation on 23 June 1945, Hamsun admitted to all these performances as well as to the authorship of the obituary. The eighty-six-year-old writer was placed under house arrest, which was changed into imprisonment a few weeks later and even later into a stay at the psychiatric institute Vinderen in Oslo, where he spent four months. On 5 February 1946 psychiatrist Gabriel Langfeldt, together with

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1) Han var en Kriger, en Kriger for Menneskeheden og en Forkynder av Evangeliet om Ret for alle Nasjoner. Han var en reformatorisk Skikkelse av høieste Rang, og hans historiske skjebne var den, at han virket i en Tid av eksempelløseste Raahet, som tilslut fældte ham.Slik tør den almindelige Vesteuropæer se på Adolf Hitler. Og vi, hans nære tilhengere, bøier nu vaare hoder ved hans død.

2) Marie Hamsun (1881–1969), Norwegian actress and writer of books for young adults, 1908 married Knut Hamsun, 1940 became a NS member and official, 1947 was sentenced to three years of imprisonment, 1948 was pardoned and released.

K. Ødegårdem, stated that Hamsun had "permanently impaired mental abilities" (LANGFELDT 1979). Clearly, Langfeldt based his claim on the fact that Hamsun had had cerebral haemorrhage twice during the war years; yet his formulation was met with distrust on the part of the public because of a suspicion that this was an attempt to protect the old man from the trial. It is true that as an effect of this report and some other things, the criminal proceedings of Hamsun's treason trial were in fact stopped. Afterwards, Hamsun stayed in an old people's home, which he perceived as a very humiliating period; as a result of his insistent pleading a civil lawsuit for compensation for damages was started. On 19 December 1947, a sentence was pronounced, which was based on the writer's alleged or real membership in Quisling's party National Unity and on a classification of the consequences of his other activities during the war. Hamsun was sentenced to a fine which meant forfeiture of all of his property; he was allowed to return to Nørholm, the farm where his family lived.

Hamsun depicted this whole period in his last text, his literary diary *On Overgrown Paths (På gjengrodde Stier)*, for which he could not find a publisher, as his life-long publisher and friend Harald Grieg had been held prisoner during the war and refused to publish a text in which Hamsun did not even come close to any sense of regret for his pro-Nazi position. The book was published on 28 September 1949 simultaneously in Norwegian and in Swedish in 5,000 copies and sold out immediately. The Czech version was only published in 2002, translated by Veronika Dudková and complemented by a critical analytical afterword by Martin Humpál. In a passage evoking the relationship of the author and his characters, Humpál writes: "[…] The benevolence that [Hamsun] shows to his fictional characters in his novels he shows here to himself as a literary character in his book. *On Overgrown Paths* thus remains a text that, despite its inner 'innocence,' provokes by a certain moral relativism – to a great extent, the writer depicts himself as a human being beyond good and evil… […]" (HUMPÁL 2002: 171).

Den rettspsykiatriske erklæringen om Knut Hamsun ("The Forensic Psychiatric Statement of Knut Hamsun," 1979) was released at a time when prevailing political views and historical perspective were completely different from those at the time of the text's inception. The next stage of the Hamsunian discourse had been triggered by the publication of Hamsun's biography by the Danish writer Thorkild Hanssen (HANSSEN 1978). The psychological portrait of a deaf old man isolated from the world and left at the mercy of his wife's ideological manipulation as well as humiliation from psychiatrists has been provoking conflicting reactions from the day of its release until the present day. Scandinavia of the 1970s, however, preferred the possibility of an unambiguous interpretation; implicit compassion was unacceptable in this case. Hanssen's work, often referred to as documentary novel – nowadays one would place it rather in the genre of literary biography – was taken up by Per Olov Enquist in his film script from 1996.[3] In response to Hanssen's pardoning interpretation, Gabriel Langfeldt decided to release a portrait whose objectivity was guaranteed by its genre and specialization – namely the aforementioned psychiatric report.

In this report, the specialist interviews Hamsun about his family, friends and acquaintances, his childhood, youth, literary work, political views and positions, personal taste and physical condition. The diagnosis Langfeldt arrived at immediately after the war obviously cannot have been based on the semantics and structure of Hamsun's replies, since these are matter-of-fact, often witty or coldly ironic. Langfeldt cannot have drawn from the extensive neurological and psychological tests either, as these tests had not proved any memory lapses or tendencies toward senility. According to the post-war convention, the report was not supposed to be longer than ten pages, yet the text is 83 pages long and contains a large number of non-medical statements. The suspicion that Langfeldt's report was a reaction to contemporary political imperative was not refuted but supported by this act.

Not taking into account the role of subjectivity and subject-creator of the depiction, it is probably appropriate to work with analogies, if possible. For this reason I add in parentheses that in the years 1945–1947 Norway saw a rare wave of processes with traitors and Nazi collaborators (ANDENÆSS 1979). As part of this action, 93,000 people were detained and subjected to investigation; almost half of them were sentenced: 17,000 persons to imprisonment and thirty persons to death.[4] Nowadays it seems that coming to terms with what happened seventy years ago has always been and remains an unfinished business for Norway – as it does for other European countries. 40,000 Norwegians were involved in the anti-Nazi resistance movement; there were up to four times as many active collaborators. Many more Norwegians were fighting for the German army than for the British. Hamsun's sons Tore and Arild, too, were active on the Eastern Front.[5] Even in this sense Knut Hamsun is not a unique case but a potential initiator of national self-reflection.

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[3] The director and co-author of the script for the film *Hamsun* was Jan Troell.

[4] In Norway, death sentence in peace times had been cancelled as early as 1902 but these cases were assessed in relation to the state of war, which the country was in in the years in question. Membership in NS after 9 April 1940 was classified as treason; the party leader Vidkun Quisling was executed on 24 October 1945.

[5] Tore Hamsun (1912–1995), painter and writer, joined the army as a volunteer, was sentenced to four months of

To conclude this part of the paper, let me mention one of the significant records published by Langfeldt twenty-six years after Hamsun's death. The therapist's question "How do you see yourself?" was answered by Hamsun in the following way: "From the time I began I do not think that in my entire output you will find a character with a single dominant characteristic. They are all without so-called 'character.' They are split and fragmented, not good and not bad, but both at once, subtle, and changeable in their attitudes and in their deeds. No doubt I am like this myself. It is very likely that I am aggressive. I may have some of the characteristics mentioned by the professor: vulnerable, suspicious, egotistical, generous, jealous, stubborn, logical and cold in my judgements, oversensitive. All these qualities would be human. But I do not know that I could give any of them supremacy in my nature" (LANGFELDT 1979: 41).

2.

All the events connected to Hamsun's case are linked to representation in the sense of a speech act, which, as Wolfgang Iser contends, is connected with a performative aspect. To be more specific, it is verbal construction of certain images that are relevant to perception – then and today. I place the extensive reception of Knut Hamsun's work in this category.

The following laconic diagnosis by the poet Nordahl Grieg was very well-known among Norwegian readers for a long time. After Hamsun's harsh criticism of the German pacifist Carl von Ossietzky, Grieg wrote: "As a writer, Hamsun is undeniably a genius; in the political context he behaves like an idiot" (Aftenposten 16 November 1935). This witticism, apt though it may have been at the time, has become an impediment to holistic research; an actual change in the reception paradigm only took place after the year 2000.

Let me add as a side note that in the years 1896–1920, i.e. from the first Czech translation to the Nobel Prize award, Czech culture got acquainted with virtually all Hamsun's works, then encompassing more than twenty titles. In the late 1930s, during the war and the post-war years, his works were not translated into Czech. On the occasion of the writer's hundredth birthday anni-

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imprisonment; Arild Hamsun (1914–1988), war correspondent and member of Waffen-SS, sentenced to sixteen months of imprisonment. Upon return he took charge of managing the family manor house Nørholm.

versary, the novel *Hunger* (*Hlad*, 1959) was published, with Břetislav Mencák’s afterword, which includes the fateful Hitler’s obituary. Focusing on facts and formally sophisticated, Mencák’s text was a marked exception to the standard rhetoric of the 1950s: for many years, it remained the most succinct analysis written in Czech.

After the war, the starting point of the reception of Hamsun in Norway and elsewhere was studying specific works, especially in the light of Hamsun’s modernism, which may seem as a rather evasive move. Nowadays the literary historians of that period are regarded as “apologists” who were not able to unlock the interconnectedness of Knut Hamsun’s artistic representation and his ill-fated self-representation. A completely new phase in the reception began after the year 2000, when researchers started to provide not only critical assessment of the whole of the author’s oeuvre created throughout seven decades, but also of the interference of the narrative and stylistic dimension of the work, in particular in conflict or in harmony with the personality of the empirical author. The new reception paradigm reflects the possibility that the trauma of Norwegian cultural identity might not be connected only with the writer’s opinions and deeds, but also with the nature of his texts. Ståle Dingstad replaces the earlier expression “artistic irony” with the term “cynicism.” While earlier scholars discussed impulsive vitalism, Dingstad talks about a textual strategy which can from a certain perspective be seen as an obstinate pose as well as a conscious manipulation of the reader (DINGSTAD 2003). Unlike earlier studies, the most recent reception refuses to condemn the person and free the writer; it aims at a holistic approach. For this reason, Jørgen Haugan analyses the continuity of fascist ideology in Hamsun’s work as a whole (HAUGAN 2004).

The degree to which it is desirable to identify controversial political opinions with a mental illness has been a matter of discussion at least since the end of World War II. The tragedy of Breivik’s terrorist attack on 22 July 2011 has affected all dimensions of Norwegian discourse; it has also had consequences for the reflection of Hamsunian parallels, primarily with regard to the interconnectedness of psychiatry and law. Does neurosis, or psychosis, mean insanity and thus guarantee exemption from punishment? In other words: Is politically motivated violence, e.g. terrorism, a mental deviation or a manifestation of evil? The first psychiatric report on the Norwegian murderer underscored the diagnosis and reduced criminal liability, and Norway fell into apathy. The second expert opinion and mainly the verdict pronounced on 26 August 2012 brought relief. The need for self-reflection, however, remains – and increases.

In 2009, Norwegian culture commemorated the 150th anniversary of the writer’s birth – it was the so-called Hamsun year. It brought a few moments that can illustrate attempts at processing the Hamsun trauma. After many years of protests, the first street, or actually square, was named after Hamsun, namely one in Grimstad in southern Norway. For the first time, the writer’s statue was unveiled in public space[6]; what had the greatest impact on the state level was opening the most modern museum in Norway: a modernist tower was constructed on the island of Hamarøy, which should, according to the American architect Steven Holl, enter into a dialogue with the surrounding world. The friction areas are obvious: the construction, which certainly does not strive to blend in with the natural scenery of northern Norway, also hosts a research centre, which organizes Hamsun days every year. In August 2012, one of the invited speakers was the Norwegian activist Sara Azmeh Rasmussen, yet she refused the invitation with the explanation that her political opinions prevent her from celebrating Hamsun. The reply of the director of the literary festival, who explained that the event was not supposed to be a celebration but remembrance (*ikke hyllest, men markering*), did not convince her. Once again, the Norwegian media and blogs were directly hit by the destructive resonance of Hamsun’s legacy.[7]

3.

The eminent Norwegian psychiatrist Leo Eitinger[8] took over Professor Langfeldt’s clinic in 1966. By that time it had become obvious that Hamsun’s *On Overgrown Paths*, ambiguous from the point of view of both art and psychology, had turned into a nightmare even for Langfeldt himself. One of the reasons for that was the recurring question as to whether the psychiatrist had managed to maintain objective distance toward the scornful Hamsun and his snide remarks.

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6) The statue was unveiled in Hamsun‘s birthplace Vågå near the small town of Lom in Gudbrandsdalen.

7) More than eight thousand comments were published within the following two months in *Vårt Land* only.

8) Leo Eitinger (1912–1996), born in Lomnice near Tišnov, studied medicine at Masaryk University (graduated in 1937). He came to Norway as a refugee with the so-called Nansen passport, but he was dragged to the Auschwitz concentration camp. In May 1945 he returned to Norway, where he worked as a psychiatrist. In his research, he focused on long-term psychological consequences of imprisonment, especially the posttraumatic stress syndrome in the first and second generation Holocaust survivors. In 1986, he and his wife founded a foundation sponsoring the annually awarded “Lisl and Leo Eitinger Prize – The University of Oslo’s Human Rights Award.”

Unlike his predecessor, Leo Eitinger did not avoid appearances in the media; on the contrary, he viewed them as part of his mission, as an irreplaceable form of communication with those who wanted to follow his call for human dignity and against dogmatism and intolerance. He did not approach the "Hamsun puzzle" on the personal level but as a problematic expression of national identity. Eitinger, who had come to Norway as a political refugee, was strongly aware of the fact that there were other people in Norway besides humanitarians such as Fridtjof Nansen (EITINGER 1981). He rejected the idea that Langfeldt's diagnosis had been driven by political purposes, yet he admitted that his predecessor belonged to a generation which accentuated authoritative approaches and methods in psychiatry as well as in the society and which was not able to accept the dichotomy of the empirical author and his work. Eitinger paid great attention to literature and literary studies, their function and power in the society. The education he had obtained in Masaryk's Czechoslovakia, often mentioned by himself, was of great importance in this respect. He regarded literature and art in general as an integral part of his own life and a source of inspiration for his work in psychiatry. He often used poems and extracts from literary works in his popular science books – as if his message was to engage the whole personality of the reader, i.e. both cognitively and emotionally.

On the whole, Eitinger's scholarly and popular science texts always focused on victims of violence.[9] Looking for solutions to problems of worldview or of racial minorities, especially against the backdrop of modern migration waves, represented an intellectual challenge of the highest priority to him. He dealt, among other things, with questions of the relation of migration to mental health; as a therapist, he worked with refugee families, but he was also interested in new models of co-existence. As an eye witness of the horrors of the Holocaust, Eitinger rejected questions of the need for private or collective revenge; he saw vengeance as a manifestation of a person's or society's immaturity. He stressed the self-destructive component of every revenge and repeatedly said that in order for him to be able to help his patients (former prisoners), they have to learn to forgive: they have to "break the cycle of evil" (IBID).

What Eitinger valued most highly was tolerance, painfully brought by inner self-reflection; he regarded tolerance as the opposite of indifference, and indifference as the caricature of humanitarianism. For this reason, he often discussed the Hamsunian question in interviews and newspaper articles. While the afore-

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9) Leo Eitinger is considered to be a co-founder of the field of victimology (therapy for victims of crime, imprisonment and domestic violence).

mentioned civil lawsuit against Hamsun was taking place, Leo Eitinger was summoned as a witness in the criminal procedure against Vidkun Quisling, who gave the order to drag Norwegian Jews to concentration camps. Only twenty-five out of the total eight hundred deported persons survived and Eitinger was one of them. He decided to devote his life to active therapeutic help to victims of imprisonment with long-term consequences. “Those who were held in a concentration camp are never fully freed. The survivor stays in the hell of memories like in a bomb crater” (SKJÆRAASEN 1986: 193).

The personal, incommunicable trauma of the Holocaust, the collective trauma of voluntarily or involuntarily migrating minorities, national trauma resulting from insufficient naming (and thus treatment) of historical events – those were the central themes in the life and work of Leo Eitinger, a man embodying the landmarks of Czech and Norwegian 20th century history. To conclude my attempt to portray representation as a communication space with many participants within and without the literary process, I quote Czech literary scholar Petr A. Bílek: “Representation interrupts the continuous thread of communication from the author to the recipient and leaves room for misinterpretation, mistake or deception. Therefore representation is both a means of communication and a communication barrier” (BÍLEK: 14).

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