

THOMAS GLAHN AND JOHAN NAGEL: TOWARDS THE ABYSS OF LIFE'S TRAGIC INDETERMINACY

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Introduction: *Pan* and *Mysteries*: modernist roots?

Hamsun's early novels, *Pan* and *Mysteries*, most fully realize the basic tenets of his critical program outlined in *Paa Turné*¹. The principal aim of Hamsun's lectures was to turn the Norwegian literature from realism/naturalism into the path of a deeper psychology of an individual as seen by the writer depicting the manifold shades of its psyche. In an unprecedented way the two mentioned novels posit a human being as an incomprehensible and unpredictable mystery. Both the creation of the protagonist as an individual extremely chaotic in thinking and acting and the narration of the two stories served to discredit the traditional model of depicting man as a rational being whose acts have particular reasons and aims.

The model of a protagonist filled with ambiguities and inconsistencies, alienated from the society, torn apart between his private life and the demands of the public sphere remains virtually "modernist", if one agrees to regard literary modernism as an aesthetic and intellectual objection to the ideal of a bourgeois society built upon an enlightened, "humanistic" belief in human's rationality and benevolence and his ability to set moral order and political welfare by way of a rational interaction of individuals aptly and eagerly finding their place in the society.

¹ See: K. Hamsun, *Paa turnée. Tre foredrag om litteratur ved Knut Hamsun*, utgitt av T. Hamsun, Gyldendal, Oslo 1971.

It has rightly been argued that “modernism is not only, not even primarily, a formal movement; it is also a change in the mind”¹. At a time of the positivist belief in „pure facts” and in physical sciences’ omnipotence it was literature that responded to this new cultural reality by way of launching a project of a radical psychologization of the individual, who, all of a sudden, has ceased to reflect typical for a given social class modes of thinking and acting and came to be not so much the product of social relations, but more of a half-conscious spokesman for his own erratic and unpredictable psyche.

It is in this historical and literary context that some critics, most notably Martin Humpål², regard Hamsun’s literary program along with its subsequent realizations: *Hunger*, *Pan* and *Mysteries*. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century the idea of renouncing the notions of “type” and “character” was known to many writers; August Strindberg, for instance, attacked it directly in his preface to *Miss Julie* (1888) and Fyodor Dostoyevski was suspicious about it in his *Notes from the Underground* (1864).

It could be argued, then, that young Hamsun was not particularly original with his idea of a new psychology of the protagonist and a new mode of narration. Both of these tenets can be found among other prominent modernist writers, notably in the works of Hamsun’s own teachers: Nietzsche, Dostoyevski and Strindberg. One can have an impression that what Hamsun actually did, was only to raise the observed tendencies of the late modernism to their extreme.

¹ L. Gustaffson, *Strindberg as a Forerunner of Scandinavian Modernism* [in:] *The Hero on Scandinavian Literature. From Peer Gynt to the Present*, Ed. J. M. Weinstock and R.T. Rovitsky, University of Texas Press, Austin/London 1975, p. 131.

² M. Humpål, *The Roots of Modernist Narrative: Knut Hamsun’s Novels: Hunger, Mysteries, and Pan*, Solum Forlag, Oslo 1998. A quick survey of essential works situating Hamsun’s 90’ authorship in the context of the European modernism can be found in Ståle Dingstad’s study: *Hamsuns strategier. Realisme, humor og kynisme*, Gyldendal, Oslo 2003, p. 35-37.

Contrary to this conclusion, however, in my paper I will argue that *Pan's* and *Mysteries'* protagonists represent a new and extraordinary, albeit full of ambiguities, image of man, quite different even from the most shockingly bizarre individuals populating the literature of modernism.

1. Hamsun's modernist specificity: a new psychology of an individual

In order to better grasp the specificity of the Hamsunian image of a human being, one should look closer at the psychological dynamic of some other heroes of the modernist prose, and then try to compare them with creations of Nagel and Glahn. The protagonists of the classic works of the nineteenth century are possessive of an extremely rich and complex inner life, constantly acknowledging the transitive character of their own identity and seeking their place in the world. What can always be said about these individuals, however, is that they are always in one way or another bearers of some general or universal traits of personality encouraging the reader to identify them with one concrete idea, such and such existential situation, such and such problem, or, briefly speaking, one *particular* aspect of humanity.

Let us recall a few examples from the psychological literature so that we can grasp the general tendency which seems to govern it. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Leo Tolstói's *Anna Karenina* represent mainly the solitude of an artistic, erotically unfulfilled nature in an alien world of social convenances. In Joseph Conrad's novels we deal with individuals who pay a price of exasperating guilt for their impulsive decisions, the feeling being lifted only through a confrontation with the past and their own consciousness. Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*, as well as Mabel from Virginia Woolf's short story *The New Dress* and Clyde from Theodore Dreiser's *The American Tragedy* all represent a phenomenon of social and economic pressures that shape people's life and the decried loss of sovereignty in the

necessity of conforming to the artificial demands of the leading group, its fashion and behavior. In David Herbert Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* the protagonist Paul stands for the idea of impossibility of the relationship between man and woman because of the former's emotional fixation on his own mother. This theme is often used also by Guy de Maupassant. Kafka's prose shows the lack of orientation and the feeling of life's absurdity (*Transformation, The Trial*) revealed to humans especially in the moments when they are trying to find in it any goal whatsoever (*The Castle*). Proust – and let it be our last example – embarks on a nostalgic journey of memory to „regain the time lost” by way of scrupulous tracing of tiniest sensations, which all of a sudden may recapture the images of a distant past.

The protagonists of these works are way out of the league of mundane “types” and “characters” so ironically ridiculed by Hamsun in his attacks on the popular patterns of realism. And yet, albeit their refinement as psychological creations, one cannot escape the impression that these personas always represent some clearly *determined* dimensions of human existence more than they represent the others.

Now, what can we say *for sure* about Hamsun's heroes: Glahn and Nagel? Here we meet a dilemma, since no aspect of their personalities comes to the fore. If they undertake an action, the only rule that governs it is a sudden, impulsive, half-conscious decision made generally in the most extraordinary circumstances. Of course, critics have come up with a great deal of interpretations, trying to indicate some dominant features in these two characters. Hanna Larsen, for instance, regards Nagel as a philanthropist¹, while Johan Borgen reads *Mysteries* – the first four chapters of the novel being most important to him – as a story

¹ H. A. Larsen, *Knut Hamsun*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1922, p. 49.

about artist's creative life and his eventual doom¹. In Rolf N. Nettum's highly influential study Nagel appears as the advocate of a mystical doctrine, the teacher of a pantheistic belief in the great unity of the universe, which he desperately tries to communicate². All such readings are valid, by they bring forth but one aspect of Nagel's personality. I think Øystein Rottem and James McFarlane are much closer to the truth when they stress the chronic inconsistency in Nagels' thinking and acting. McFarlane writes that Nagel – being himself a thorough observer of other people's ways – does not allow them to enter his inner world by way of constant buffooneries and mystifications³. In this sense Nagel has certainly a core, a personality, if you will, but we do not know it, simply because he does not want us to know. According to Rottem: "Nagel is a master of disguise, a man who feigns (*forstiller seg*), and plays roles. There is no 'real' Nagel and it would be a pointless task for a reader to try to (re)construct a figure thought in this way"⁴. Insightful as McFarlane's and Rottem's thesis may be, I personally do not believe Nagel to be reflexive enough to be able to consciously trick other people. For my

¹ "Allerede disse første 40 sidene sier oss med all tydelighet at *Mysterier* er en roman om en kunstner. Noe mer: om en kunstner i unngangens stund, eller i undergangens stund" – J. Borgen, *Nagel* [in:] Ø. Rottem (ed.) *Søkelys på Knut Hamsun's 90-års diktning*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 1979, p. 111.

² R. N. Nettum, *Konflikt og visjon. Hovedtemaer i Knut Hamsuns forfatterskap 1890-1912*, Gyldendal, Oslo 1970, p. 121-128. Nettum regards Nagel's sojourn in the forest and the mystical dream about "sailing in the skies' ocean, fishing with the silver rod" as his "central experience" (*sentrale opplevelse*) and a key to explain his strange behaviors – *ibidem*, p. 122, 127.

³ J. W. McFarlane, *The Whisper of Blood. The Study of Knut Hamsun's Early Novels*, "PMLA" 1956, vol. 71, nr 4, p. 572 n.

⁴ „Nagel er en maskeringskunstner, en mann som forstiller seg og spiller roller. Det fins ingen 'egentlig' Nagel, og for en fortolker ville det være nytteløs gjerning å forsøke å (re)konstruere en slik tenkt figur" – Ø. Rottem, *Hamsun og fantasiens triumph*, Gyldendal, Oslo 2002, p. 85.

understanding of this protagonist it is in Humpàl's and Kittang's discussion with Nettum that the most vital observations have been made. According to Kittang, Nagel's "naturerotiske ekstase" does not determine his "true identity" but shows "a tension between identity and estrangement, fullness and lack, the harmonic part of his Ego and the aggressive, self-destructive one, between Eros and Death"¹. I finally agree with Humpàl's view of Nagel as a figure presented in such a contradictory way, that it is not clear what kind of message he wants to carry across².

The specificity of Nagel's and Glahn's personas seems to lie in the fact they themselves do not know who they really are (Kittang: "a tension between identity and estrangement"). They can spend hours following strange thoughts that wander their minds, trying hopelessly to figure out why exactly they acted this way rather than another. Of course in vain would they wait for an answer to these questions. In certain moments, however, Glahn's thoughts betray that he is at the same time far and close from deciphering the riddle of his inconsistent deeds: "Why? Ask the twelve months and ships in the sea, ask the mysterious god of your heart..."³. My next task will be to shed some light on these puzzling words.

2. Beyond Dostoyevski and Strindberg

I shall now contrast Hamsun's creations with those of his two prominent masters: Dostoyevski and Strindberg. Dostoyevski congenially portrayed the antinomies that tear apart a human

¹ "spenninga mellom identitet og framandgjeri, fylde og mangel, harmonisk Eg-kjensle og aggressiv Eg-oppløysing, Eros og Død" – A. Kittang, *Luft, vind, ingenting. Hamsuns desillusjonsromanar frå Sult til Ringen Sluttet*, Gyldendal, Oslo 1984, p. 91.

² M. Humpàl, op. cit., p. 78.

³ K. Hamsun, *Pan* [in:] K. Hamsun, *Samlede Verker*, vol. 2, Gyldendal, Oslo 1992, p. 404. English translation: K. Hamsun, *Pan*, trans. Sverre Lyngstad, Penguin Books, New York 1998, p. 100.

being. Even his Alosha Karamazov, the embodiment of Russian orthodox purity, can abandon his deep faith in a second and go to a brothel with Rakitin. However, in each of such cases, be it Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov or Stavrogin, one can observe one tendency: after performing a gesture unacceptable within a society and sinful from the point of view of Christian religion, the protagonists of Dostoyevski undergo an inner struggle, feel remorse, reconsider their action prospectively or retrospectively. It thus might be said that they always feel some kind of a fundamental responsibility for the world or the society, against which they tried to raise in a gesture of blasphemy, negation or transgression.

Now, turning back to Nagel and Glahn, one is led to conclude they never feel the afore-mentioned responsibility, nor do they have any kind of remorse as a result of their reckless, or sometimes ruthless, ways. Naturally, after a series of bizarre *faux-pas* in his encounters with other people from Sirilund, Glahn feels the need to escape back to the woods, where he notices that his “befriended” stone placed in front of his cottage “stands with an expression of pain and despair”. Such an emotion of shame is not meant to last long, however, maybe a few seconds. It is soon replaced by a different emotion which might suddenly guide Glahn’s thoughts and actions toward a completely different, if not opposite, direction. When it comes to more serious offences, such as humiliating people close to him, as it happens in his relation with the doctor, he performs his erratic deeds as if in a dream. Spitting in the baron’s ear or shooting his beloved dog, Ezop does not provoke in him any kind of repentance or grief. What is perhaps most shocking, is Glahn’s behavior after he unintentionally kills his lover, Eva, in a stone avalanche he himself triggered. Thinking of Eva over her grave, Glahn bids his lover farewell with

a shockingly egoistic confession about another woman, who is now “possessing all his thoughts”¹.

It seems then that Glahn and Nagel respond to the surrounding world non-reflexively and automatically, letting themselves be momentarily driven by their senses’ desires, imagination, or by vague fantasies generated by their psyche. Characteristic of them are sudden and hardly understandable changes of mood. Nagel, for instance, experiences a suicidal grief after his last conversation with Minute, only to let himself be lifted by a joyful exaltation one moment later, making him cry of happiness and give money to the children in the street. The moral sphere of the two protagonists seems in this regard largely reduced. Governed by no rule, respecting no value, no ideal, not even the most basic code of behavior, their morality amounts literally to nothing more than flights of fancy, vibrant sensuality or irrational impulses what makes of it a *perverted* morality, morality *à rebours* immanent to a person completely egocentric, irresponsible – virtually anti-social.

But is it not Dostoyevski who first discovered the “man from the underground” – an absolute egoist who utters famous words that “the world can go to hell, as long as I can always have my tea”? Was it not Dostoyevski who portrayed in *The Devils* the suicidal character of Kirylov – an individual whose abnegation breaks even with the responsibility for himself and with an inherently human instinct of self-preservation? Indeed, “the man from the underground” renounces responsibility for the world. This negation however – as is also the case with other notorious protagonists of late modernism, duke Des Esseintes’a in Huysmans’s *À rebours* being one of the finest examples – is followed by an apotheosis of an egoistic “I” which becomes the proper subject of the individual’s concern. Therefore it can be argued that all in all “the man from the underground” does abide by a rule (his sole commandment being: “care only for thyself”),

¹ Ibidem.

does find in his life an Archimedean point he believes in. And speaking of Kirylov, let us not forget that his suicide would have been sublime as a glorious act of self-annihilation, had it not been for the fact that he decides to take his own life only to prove the non-existence of God. What dictates his deeds is in fact resentment. It is easy to notice the dialectic dependence of the hero on the world which he is trying to negate.

Beside discarding the world of others, Hamsun's protagonists do not seem to acknowledge even the value of their own lives. Glahn can for no particular reason shoot himself in the leg or, after definitely leaving Edvarda, go for sure death with a smile, which even at that moment was, as Hamsun puts it, "beautiful". Let us also recall the protagonist of *Hunger*, who despite his extreme poverty, risking massive sufferings or life, can give his last money to strangers met in the street. And finally Nagel who carries a bottle with poison to use it at any moment. It has rightly been observed that in Nagel there is "a great lassitude, an indifference, to his own advancement in life (...). He seems to have no purpose of any kind"¹. This remark fits Glahn as well. Glahn and Nagel are like leaves floating freely in the air, swept from place to place without any purpose. The specificity of their existence could also be expressed by a comparison to a dreamscape, in which one vainly looks for sense and rational connections between sequences of events.

We would not do justice to Dostoyevski, however, if we did not consider here the figure of Smierdiakow, the fourth of the Karamazov brothers (although unaccepted by the family), one of the most terrifying characters ever created by the Russian writer. In his total irresponsibility for the world, the others and for himself he overbids even the most ruthless Hamsunian creations. I would risk a statement that it is Smierdiakov who remains the authentic literary ancestor of Glahn and Nagel, although contrary

¹ H.A. Larsen, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

to Hamsunian heroes he induces in readers an immediate feeling of dislike.

Similarly to these two characters, Smierdiakov plays out a bewildering character about whom no-one knows anything for sure. It is someone for whom it is virtually neutral whether he helps or kills somebody, whether he takes his own life or not. Why did Smierdiakov kill? Because he wanted to. Because he took a sudden liking in Ivan's quasi-Nietzschean philosophy. Ivan was only making a philosophical and psychological experiment, being far from actual perpetrating it. For Smierdiakov thinking and doing is the same thing. Now, why did he commit a suicide? Because he felt like. Certainly not because of bad consciousness and remorse – that was Ivan's domain. This is why the police will have found by his body a short, sinister note which read: "I, myself. Do not blame anyone".

One is led to conclude that Smierdiakov's deeds do not originate from his moral evil or corruption, he is not merely a negative hero of the novel. He killed, but we can as well imagine him not having killed. And this, exactly, is the most terrifying feature of this character. He impersonates the pure chaos of being, the madness of the world and something that I call "life's tragic indeterminacy" and by this concept I mean all the events, decisions and dictations of fate that horrify us because we cannot justify them and find in them any sense whatsoever. Now, I want to remind that although Dostoyevski created Smierdiakov – a predecessor of Glahn and Nagel – it was Hamsun who developed and thematized the phenomenon of an absolute inconsistency, read: total irresponsibility as a protagonist's response to life's immanent accidentality and indeterminacy. We shall return to this problem in a minute.

But before we do, we should shortly examine Strindberg's case. There exists a substantial difference between the Hamsunian and Strindbergian approach to creating protagonists devoid of "character". Already in his earliest novels Strindberg thought

about a “character” as a synonym for roles that an individual takes in social life¹. It seems, then, that in Strindberg, who, being also a playwright, was extremely sensitive to the difference between authenticity and simulation, the concept of “character” served first of all the critique of the hypocritical society, which petrifies the individual by forcing it to identify with an externally imposed social role. According to Strindberg’s famous statement from *The Son of the Servant*: “character and automaton seem roughly to coincide”².

Strindberg believed there is no such thing as a permanent “character”; there are only “characters” – always complex and contradictory. Still, if he were to choose either to become a fixed, unified character, or be torn apart between many versions of oneself, Strindberg would sympathize with the latter model. I believe he proves it in *The Son of the Servant* – the autobiographical work which introduces Johan, the capricious and always undecided outsider, unhappy because of his constant hesitations. On the last pages of the novel, however, Strindberg makes his protagonist feel satisfaction from this tormenting lack of consistency. As Johannesson comments: “Not having found a role for himself, Johan remains fully sincere. The lack of character, ‘characterlessness’, as Strindberg calls it, is thus actually a virtue, and a distinct mark of superiority”³.

In Strindberg the combat with the notion of character was based on sociological observations. From the discovery that a constant character enslaves man, whereas its lack opens him to an infinite self-creation emerges some kind of philosophical

¹ See: E.O. Johannesson, *The Novels of August Strindberg. A Study in Theme and Structure*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1968, p. 17.

² “Karakter och automat tyckas något så när sammanfalla” – A. Strindberg, *Tjänstekvinnans son* [in:] A. Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter*, ed. John Landquist, Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm 1913, vol. 18, p. 212.

³ E. O. Johannesson, op. cit., p. 66.

optimism. The Strindbergian individualist seems so advanced in self-awareness that he can actually *justify* himself in his chaotic irresponsibility and see in it a constructive and positive value. Let us stress this important observation: similarly to other great modernist individualists, he abides by *some* central value, even if it were the idea of being different from everybody else at any cost.

Now, can the same be said about Glahn and Nagel? I don't think so. As we shall soon see, in their individuality there lurks something dark and frenetic, which does not lend itself to thematization on the part of their psyche. Their lives do not revolve around any idea or predominant value whatsoever. It is rather on the contrary: it is from life's effervescence, its pure accidentality on the one hand, and its fateful necessity on the other, that the Hamsunian individualists derive their points of view, their values and incitements for action.

3. „Man with no qualities”: Hamsun's ambivalent invention

In his lectures on Norwegian literature Hamsun promised to create “human types whose inconsistency is literally a fundamental trait of their character; this trait being not the only one dominant, but central and definitive”¹. It should come as no surprise that if „inconsistency” is regarded as a „fundamental trait of character”, then the whole notion of “character” loses its sense. In *Pan* and *Mysteries* Hamsun intended to achieve this goal and indeed, there exists no other literary work in which a gesture of depriving the protagonist of a specified character would be performed with more consequence and severity.

Now, let us consider *philosophically* what it means to completely rid a human being of dominant features? Has this Hamsunian gesture been properly understood in all its con-

¹ „...menesker hos hvem inkonsekvensen bogstavelig er grundcharaktertræk, men det eneste, ikke det hærskende grundcharaktertræk, men det meget fremtrædende og meget bestemmende” – K. Hamsun, *Paa turnée*, op. cit., p. 63.

sequences for the philosophy of a human being and for social practice?

Let us begin with a question: what is left of a human, when one eliminates from him/her everything that literature has along the centuries learned so finely to depict: one's "character" and "personality" expressed in certain "typical" ways of thinking, in acknowledged rules, values and ideals? Most probably, what is left is bare life of instincts having nothing to do with rationality. What is left is a "man without qualities"¹. In my view Hamsun was the first writer who long before Robert Musil's novel bearing this very title (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930), and long before Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), whose main protagonist, Mersault, commits a murder just "because of the sun", created characters which not only cannot be explained through a reference to a particular psychological or social theory, but are impossible to understand at all! Their behavior simply transgresses our modes of conceiving the world in which we can function rationally only as long as we are able to find reasons for given phenomena, including our own actions.

Still further I claim that the nature of Hamsun's invention is far more ambivalent, not to say dangerous, than the Norwegian writer could have ever assumed. Let us remind that the idea guiding Hamsun in the creation of his protagonists was "that human characters in literature should resemble as much as possible, the characters of living people"². Admittedly, this idea is nothing special in literature. It has probably accompanied every good writer in the history and even Hamsun, always ready to look down on other writers, must have known that. What Hamsun was

¹ Sverre Lyngstad has already compared Nagel to "the man without qualities" but he did not elaborate on this idea – See: S. Lyngstad, *Knut Hamsun, Novelist. A Critical Assessment*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, p. 33.

² „at litteraturens mennesker skal ligne livets saa meget som muligt” – K. Hamsun, *Paa turnée*, op. cit., p. 63.

not aware of, however, was something that his *Pan* and *Mysteries* have brought to light: that Glahn and Nagel, conceived of as “men with no qualities”, do not at any rate resemble ordinary people, contrary to the opinion quite commonly shared by Hamsun’s critics¹. According to my knowledge, there was only one critic, a very early one, who really thought throughout this fact: Hans Aanrud. However negative his opinion about *Pan* and *Mysteries* might have been, he came up with a very relevant idea about their protagonists: “Like Nagel in *Mysteries*, lieutenant Glahn is not a human being, but a cluster of spiritual and physical movements (...), which are not governed by any will, any aim, any measure – as in a madman; only with this difference, that the madman has his *idées fixes*. Lieutenant Glahn is neither normal, nor mad, shortly speaking – he is not a man”².

This feature of Hamsun’s protagonists which Aanrud got so irritated with is the one most interesting for me. Let us follow this newly observed trace. Shortly after publishing *Hunger* Hamsun would claim that in his psychological inquiries he went “as far as

¹ For example French expert and translator of Hamsun – Régis Boyer – claims: “We are all Augusts or Thomas Glahns. (...) The Hamsunian hero well fits the man of our time, with his doubts, his search for happiness, or more precisely, identity” – R. Boyer, *Introduction* [in:] K. Hamsun, *Littérature à la mode et autres textes*, traduit du norvégien, présenté et annoté par R. Boyer, Joseph K., Lonrai 1996, p. 23. In relation to Hamsun’s vision of the new psychological literature voiced in *Paa turné*, Nils M. Knutsen writes: “for literature to be realistic, it should deal with life as people factually live it” („at litteraturen skal være realistisk, den skal handle om livet slik menneskere faktisk lever det”) – N. M. Knutsen, *Knut Hamsun*, Aschehoug, Oslo 1975, p. 12.

² “Ligesom Nagel i *Mysterier* er Løitnant Glahn intet Menneske, men en Ophoben af sjælelige og fysiske bevægelser (...), hvor ingen vilje, ingen hensigt, intet maal styrer dem, altså hos en gal – dog med den forskjel, at en gal har fikse ideer. Løitnant Glahn er altsaa hverken normal eller gal, kort sagt intet menneske” – H. Aanrud, [no title], “Norske Intelligenssedler” 1894, nr 10, [no page], quoted by: Ø. Rottem, *Hamsun og fantasiens triumf*, op. cit., p. 92.

only a sane person may go”¹. I think he did not know to what extent he was right! The existence of a “man without qualities” has nothing to do with an existence of an ordinary man, since it opens itself for dangerous forces gripping it from beyond, it entrusts itself to fate and accident only, which brings about both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, such an existence must break with all the relations with the organized world of a human community, but on the other, it is capable of responding in the authentic way to the offer of the ever-evolving, effervescent life in all its tragic groundlessness.

I think that literature of modernism, however transgressive and innovative it might seem, has not been able to realize a vision of a human being as posited by Hamsun. To put it even more radically, I should state the following: not only has modernist literature been unable to fulfill the task set forth by Hamsun, it simply couldn't have done so. It couldn't, because it vaguely realized that to disconnect man from the ideals, values and socio-cultural measures that organize and govern his behavior would mean to break up with the traditional social ethics conceived of as an elementary care for a single life and, more generally, for the well-being of the human community.

4. Nietzsche/Hamsun: Culturogenic Perspective of „The Will to Power” and „The Eternal Return” vs. The Irrational Unity of Life

Modernism has often emphasized the rampant individualism at odds with the social life, but still, underlying this special interest was the aim of grounding new values e.g. the idea of limitless auto-creation, elevation of a remarkable individual above the mediocre world, or ultimately – instauration of some counter-

¹ *Letter to Bolette Oavels Larsen* (no date), Oslo Universitets Bibliotek, quoted by: R. Ferguson, *Enigma. The Life of Knut Hamsun*, Hutchison, London 1987, p. 118.

values. Contrary to this tendency, early Hamsun's positing of accidentality, contradiction and disunion as the sole determinants of human behavior *surpasses the horizon of modernity*, transgresses the cultural and embraces the inhuman dimension of life's playful, innocent becoming "beyond good and evil". In their indifference to their own fate Glahn and Nagel impersonate in a way life itself inasmuch as life cannot be endowed with responsibility for its acts and expected to turn with reactionary force against what time and fate have brought about.

Quite reasonably one is led to associate Hamsunian thought, as interpreted here, with the philosophy of Nietzsche, notably with his concepts of the "will to power" and "the eternal return". In *Gay Science*, where the notion of the eternal return appears for the first time, Nietzsche asks the reader:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness, and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh (...) will have to return to you gain to you, all in the same succession and sequence. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again be turned and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "you are a god and never have I heard anything more divine"?¹

The eternal return signifies the coming back of every moment *ad infinitum*, which constitutes a vision both joyful and abysmal at the same time. To pass with dignity the ordeal of the eternal return

¹ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [in:] *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. by K.A. Pearson and D. Large, Blackwell Publishing, New York 2006, p. 236.

is possible only for the ones who can say “yes” both to the moments of happiness and fulfillment in life and to those that bring suffering, shame or even self-destruction. To speak of Glahn and Nagel as incarnations of the Nietzschean Overman is only legitimate when we assume that what links these two characters is a desperate “courage to live their own moments to the limit”, as Stanislaw Brzozowski – a prominent Polish literary critic of the late nineteenth century and an admirer of Hamsun – once put it¹. Such a courage does not refrain even from the perspective of one’s own collapse and unexpected death. To have a “courage to live one’s own moments to the limit” means not to want to change *anything* in one’s life, to feel in every particular moment of becoming its inconditionality and necessity, that is, its highest value. It means living in a real unity with the world and giving one’s actions an absolute sanction. Whereas the ordinary man’s will remains always in a way imprisoned in the past – it regrets what happened and, realizing the impossibility of turning back the time, demands compensation or vengeance, Hamsun’s protagonists might be said to fulfill the Nietzschean commandment: *amor fati*, which, according to the philosopher, expresses “the eternal joy of becoming – that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction*”².

There exists, however, a large difference between Hamsun’s heroes and the Nietzschean Overman, which points to a far-reaching discrepancy between Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return and the vision of a human being developed in Hamsun’s early novels. In the light of this difference Hamsun appears to be much less “Nietzschean”, and *ipso facto* still more original than it is commonly believed.

¹ S. Brzozowski, *Legenda Młodej Polski. Studya o strukturze duszy kulturalnej*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1983, p. 315.

² F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin Books, New York 1968, p. 110.

In the clearly modernist spirit and in accordance with Nietzsche's thought, early Hamsun links the human ego with unconscious psycho-biological forces which form its real ground. It is through an active reference to this ground that the human "I" is being constituted, and it is this ground that attributes man with the authenticity unmediated neither by work of reason, nor by patterns of social co-existence.

In his critique of post-Cartesian conception of the rational subject realized by way of vindicating irrational impulses that constitute an individual, Nietzsche, however, was occupied with yet another problem of crucial importance for his cultural thought, namely: how to ground ethics and induce universal values out of this newly glorified sphere of the irrational? Although it is possible to find in Nietzsche's work fragments showing his fascination with pure frenzy of life and his urge to let go and perish in it ecstatically, it seems to me that the stakes of his work were set much higher: he wanted to synthesize the phenomena of rationalism and irrationalism, to connect that which is vital, biological, with that which is fully conscious, reflexive, and what would enable human's cultural activity.

Nietzsche was perfectly aware of the hazardous temptation introduced by the perspective of the eternal return. If the world is to be seen as a giant pot, indifferently producing and dissipating forms of life, and if we are advised to say tragic "Yes" in the face of every single event it has arranged for us, then maybe the only thing worth doing is to embrace moments of ecstasy and sensual intoxication. As early as in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche was being lured by a perspective of the experience of the limits, which he referred to as the "tragic" or "dionysian" experience, wherein the individual casts a challenge against the neurosis of death and, by way of glorious self-annihilation, willingly throws himself into the primordial chaos of becoming.

Now, it is essential to understand that it was not this hectic frenzy that Nietzsche had on his mind when he spoke of the

consequences of the “dionysian” insight. On the contrary, he meant to say that acknowledging life’s tragic indeterminacy should serve as a stimulus to create new values in the ever transient world of flux. That is why Nietzsche insisted that to gaze into the world’s abyss takes much courage, if not heroism. What is at issue here is particularly Nietzschean heroism of the Overman, who recognizes the tragic groundlessness and aimlessness of life, yet does not allow this tragic knowledge to devour him. On the contrary: the Overman uses it to reinforce his affirmation of every moment of his short yet intensive life: “Who sees the abyss but with the eyes of an eagle, who grasps the abyss with the talons of an eagle – that man has courage”¹ – wrote Nietzsche in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche’s intention was to make of the knowledge of the eternal return the complement of the will to power (understood as the will to life and creation) and not its contradiction as a motivation for an irresponsible flight towards auto-destruction.

Strong subjectivity, the one that the late Nietzsche was trying to reanimate, lies in an individual who consciously lives through his/her life, not letting himself be carried away towards an all too easy irresponsibility. It is an active and creative subjectivity which, naturally, is constituted by irrational drives and instincts, yet he is able to “keep them on the leash” and harness them to work for the sake of culturogenic goals, for building in this world new islands of sense.

That would be Nietzsche’s position the way I see it. Now, coming back to Glahn and Nagel, one is led to conclude that their peculiar submission to perilous forces of their psyche rids them of any concern with the fate of the world and with their own plight. What is more, it does not allow them to set for their existence any

¹ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [in:] *The Portable Nietzsche*, selected and translated by W. Kaufmann, The Viking Press, New York 1954, p. 400.

constructive aim, letting it be swept towards an imminent catastrophe.

Hamsun sees his protagonists as standing in the monstrous flux of unconscious, blind forces, but instead of equipping them with any form of stability or self-assuredness in the face of this monstrous influence – be it some rule by which they could abide in the moments of hesitation, be it the most basic instinct of self-preservation, etc. – he only says: “do not refrain from anything” , “you are not accountable for anything you do”. This is a path to be followed only by those, who are not limited by any ethical ideas, be it “pity” for human beings, “human fraternity”, or even the ideals that Nietzsche was calling for: man as a “will to power” that wants to create new values and by the act of creation overcome nihilism and lay the normative fundamentals for a new culture to come.

It could be argued, then, that contrary to Nietzsche’s thought, which, as it can be rightly argued, “does not avoid the eschatologic and perhaps even quasi-teleological dimension, and betrays a constructive bias clearly based on the moral ideal in its concern for the condition of the world and the establishment of a harmonic community”¹, Hamsun’s thinking in *Pan* and *Mysteries* situates itself truly “beyond good and evil”, on the side of pure life, which in all its profound irrationality revokes faithfulness to any intellectually or culturally imposed ideals of itself and perpetually invents itself anew – ever becoming, accepting everything it comes across.

¹ B. Banasiak, *Integralna potworność. Filozofia libertynizmu, czyli konsekwencje “śmierci Boga”*, Wyd. Thesaurus, Poznań 2006, p. 429.

5. Glahn and Nagel: Tragic Dignity in the Face of Life's Indeterminacy or an Inhuman Will of Nothingness?

According to Anne G. Sabo Glahn and Nagel bear certain Nietzschean features, such as the rejection of Christianity, search for Dionizyan intoxication in the experience of a unity with the totality of being, saying „Yes” to every moment of life.

Sabo goes on to say that ultimately these protagonists suffer defeat. In Nagel the will to affirm the existing world turns out to be “incomplete”; in the end he takes his own life after realizing that he cannot get with his mystical message across to the people. Likewise, Glahn’s feeling of unity with nature does not protect him from an urge to finish with himself: “He remains at the level of shattered individuation – disintegration – and thus he goes under without actually crossing over”¹.

Some more “Nietzsche-oriented” commentators of Hamsun look upon the existence of these two heroes in terms of success and failure, assuming that it is their eventual self-inflicted death that proves their failure. Nettum, for instance, sees the reason for Nagel’s fall in his “uncompromising nature” (*det kompromissløse ved Nagel*)² his incapability of conforming to the society’s requirements. According to Sabo, „If loneliness is his doom, that also indicates that his will is not as courageous as that of the *Übermensch*. Loneliness, or solitude, does not overpower Zarathustra”³. If we agree to see in Hamsun’s protagonists the characters shaped accordingly with the pattern of Nietzschean Overman, then it is indeed hard not to acknowledge their failure as individuals incapable of resisting the “will to nothingness” and directing their existence onto a path of sovereignty and pure affirmation of being.

¹ A.G. Sabo, *The Übermensch Comes to Scandinavia: Rereading Hamsun and Dinesen in the Light of Nietzsche’s Philosophy*, University of Washington Press, Washington 2000, p. 343.

² R. N. Nettum, op. cit., p. 140.

³ A. G. Sabo, op. cit., p. 342.

But I would like to advance a different interpretation. I propose to take Nettum's argument concerning the "inability to compromise", add to it the opinion of Nils M. Knutsen according to which this is Glahn's "pride" that refrains him from coming back to Edvarda and becomes a "cage" in which he is willingly locked and in which he will "eventually perish"¹, and interpret them *against* themselves, that is, to the *advantage* of the Hamsunian protagonists. Perhaps then this "uncompromising nature" (revealed most dramatically at the end of the two discussed novels when we see that Glahn prefers to die rather than go back to Edvarda who once again offers her love, that Nagel chooses to distance himself from those who carry about him and plunge in his crazy visions instead of fighting them in an attempt to save himself) would be a proof of the sublime (for Nietzsche both fascinating and terrifying) carelessness towards their life, their truly "higher morality"? Perhaps this "pride" we deal here with would mean *being able to die for one's irrational ego*, accept death where it is the consequence of an arbitrary psychological impulse which cannot be explained by reference to any lucid reasons and motivations?

I claim that in early Hamsun we stand face to face with some kind of a dark morality; a morality fundamentally tragic in its acceptance of life's chaotic maelstrom, a morality demanding that one never flees from any moment that it introduces to us. One of Nietzsche's metaphors imagines a player who throws dice and never complains about the number shown, the dice being in fact thrown by the world which is also the world of our groundless psyche. Maybe this is so, that in every moment we live the full possibility of our lives. Each moment contains in itself the fullness of life. And maybe to have a courage to live through all one's

¹ „Tidligere har vi sett at Glahn på visse måter er lukket inne i seg selv og lukket inne i øyeblikkets rus. Nå kan vi se at han også er lukket inne i sin stolthet; - og stoltheten blir til et bur som han til sist omkommer i” – N. M. Knutsen, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

moments, means solely to live freely? Acting spontaneously and impulsively, or, as I argued before, irresponsibly, Glahn and Nagel pay a great tribute to the ideal of not falsified life, the life that neither looks back at other people, nor does it care for itself, but presses ahead, ready to meet either its further development and intensification, or its disdain, derision and fall.

We cannot forget the other side of the “coin”, however. The Hamsunian man, driven only by external, unconscious forces, is virtually incapable of building anything steady and durable in his existence. Nor is he able to participate in creating a new world of values and meaningful deeds – this being the goal essential for Nietzsche. Thus it might be said that the Hamsunian vision of “man without qualities” – an individual capable of throwing himself into the dangerous effervescence of life – is marked by something wholly other to the ordinary human world, something monstrous... or maybe divine? If we agree to regard Hamsun as a great observer of the most subtle quiverings of the human psyche, if we see in his early heroes the dreamers characterized by “a poet’s responsiveness to things that more thick-skinned people do not notice”¹ or romantic visionaries, who, like their creator, are able to “delve into scenery in all its being and make it appear in images which pulsate with life, with eroticism and with mood”², then we should also acknowledge Brzozowski’s insightful remark that: “underneath these flights of fancy, absorbed in listening to the beauty of passing moments one can feel a tragic, resilient, terrifying force”³. This force makes of the Hamsunian protagonists characters in a way gruesome, inhuman. The creations of Glahn and Nagel incline one to as much of a romantic fascination, as an awe and pure horror. The greatness of the Norwegian writer, I

¹ H.A. Larsen, op. cit., p. 46.

² N.M. Knutsen, B.E. Olsen, *Hamsun’s Nordland*, Forlaget Nordlandsbilder 1991, p. 22.

³ S. Brzozowski, op. cit., p. 316.

believe, manifests itself in that he left his readers clueless in the face of this engrossing ambivalence.*

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