

## AVATAR OF TRANSGRESSION: HAMSUN'S MUNKEN VENDT

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Both Knut Hamsun's play of 1902 and its principal character illustrate transgressions of many kinds. We see sexual transgression from a bourgeois standpoint, we see violence, revenge, revolt against God, trespassing against religious and social rules, theft, and the play's sins of style and genre. We also see the crossing of boundaries.

Munken Vendt almost seems like a Georges Bataille *avant la lettre*. Bataille, the founder of "transgressive" literature, believed in pursuing the extremes of experience. He sought liberation from society and morality and pursued sexual adventurism. He opposed reason and considered evil "a rejection of subservience."<sup>1</sup> He advocated a vitalism which we find in Hamsun's works as well. Bataille noted that "The moralist condemns the energy which he lacks" (96). Bataille combined sensuality with intellectual acuity, as does Munken Vendt. The archivist/librarian who pondered by day and frequented brothels by night evokes the seeker Munken Vendt, who "dårer hver pike han ser på sin gang,"<sup>2</sup> What society considers "crime" had a fascination for Bataille, and Munken's disregard for society's laws seems to be inborn. He is a danger to

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<sup>1</sup> *La littérature et le mal*, quoted in this article from Alastair Hamilton's English translation, *Literature and Evil* (London: Marion Boyars, 2006) 96. All quotations from Bataille are from this edition. Future quotations will be identified by page number in parentheses after the quotation.

<sup>2</sup> Knut Hamsun, *Munken Vendt* in *Samlede verker*, vol. XIV (Oslo: Norsk Gyldendal Forlag, 1976) 207. All quotations from the play are taken from this edition. Future quotations will be identified with page number in parentheses after the quotation.

the reasonable “others,” as he indicates to Jakob Dyre: “jeg fik med min fødsel en ulv i blodet, / han ligger og murrer her under min vest” (197). Munken Vendt’s sexual appetite seems to be his principal trait, as Hamsun previously considered the character an arch seducer in the novel *Rosa*. As Even Arntzen has pointed out in his article, “*Munken Vendt – på sporet av Knut Hamsuns mytiske estetikk*,” Munken also appears as a poet and inspiration to Johannes in the novel *Viktoria*.<sup>1</sup> Munken, whom we may call Hamsun’s “erkeskjelm,” deliberately seeks depths as well as heights and sometimes appears self-destructive in the play. As the illegitimate offspring of a servant and a nobleman, he stands outside class and is regarded as an outsider by the society in which he lives. He is a blasphemer, a liar, and a thief<sup>2</sup>, and he respects nothing but nature and unrestrained life.

Vendt is a sexual transgressor. He is “en blåøiet brunhåret kvindfolkforfører” (285). The sheriff pursuing him in Act V calls him a “falskner, tyv, og kvinnebedrager” (277). Women seem drawn to the handsome Vendt, whether they are simple and lowborn, like Blis, or aristocratic, like Fru Iselin of Os. Both of these women are attracted to Vendt, who begins the play in love with Blis, the sweetheart of his childhood and youth. This does not prevent him from wooing Inger the Lapp, however, after she and her father rescue him from Jakob Dyre’s animal trap. His response comes with inappropriate speed: he immediately says to Inger, “Jeg elsker dig . . . i bund og grund” (230). When he realizes that

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<sup>1</sup> Even Arntzen, “*Munken Vendt -- på sporet av Knut Hamsuns mytiske estetikk*” in *Hamsun i Tromsø. 11 foredrag fra Hamsun-konferansen i Tromsø 1995 (Tromsø: Hamsun-Selskapet, 1996) 99*.

<sup>2</sup> The hero of *Sult* and Nagel of *Mysterier* already illustrated an affinity for crime. The hero of *Sult* plans a work on “Crimes of the Future” and begins a play about a prostitute sinning on the altar of a church. Nagel calls for the “Great Terrorist.” The narrator in “Hemmelig Ve” theorizes that the strange stalker has committed a crime and yearns to be caught. And of course, the protagonist in “En Ærkeskjelm” is a master petty criminal.

her father has hidden a treasure chest in the mountains, Vendt promises to marry her, and even buys a ring with her money – which he eventually offers not to Inger, but to Blis. When Inger asks him if he is sincere in his protestations of love, Munken answers, “Jeg kan ikke love det bedre og renere” (235). Later Munken will admit that, although he said he would marry her, he didn’t mean it. This nordlandsk Don Juan gets around: even Iselin’s servant Nille reveals that she caught fleas from him.

Just as Munken’s wooing of Inger had more to do with getting something in his stomach, so in act V, on the run from the sheriff, Munken stumbles across Thora sitting in front of her cottage and promises to replace her dead lover after he ascertains that she can feed him. He will quickly abandon her to resume his flight. It is perhaps ironic that when Munken notices Fru Iselin’s interest in him, he replies, “Jeg elsker jær ikke!” (220) and repeats the phrase to make sure there’s no misunderstanding. One wonders why Munken would refuse the rich, aristocratic woman and pursue a servant girl. The reader/spectator thinks perhaps Munken really loves Blis. But to muddy the waters still further, when Blis reveals she is pregnant (by Munken’s nemesis Didrik, in whose house she is a servant), Munken annuls his offer of marriage. He tells Didrik he will not accept paternity for Didrik’s child by marrying Blis, no matter that Didrik will provide a house for them. (Munken is no Oliver in *Konerne ved vandposten*!) Even Blis does not understand Munken’s abrupt change of heart. She reminds him, “og selv er du barn av en sådan mor” (244). True, Vendt’s mother was also a servant in the home of Didrik’s father.

Hamsun’s early work seemed to revolve around the poor boy trying to win the rich, aristocratic or wealthy maiden (*Den Gaadefulde, Bjørger, Viktoria*), so it is a surprise for the reader that Munken rejects Iselin and appears devoted to Blis. However, his devotion to Blis seems to evaporate when he realizes she is pregnant by Didrik. (It must be said, however, that the reader is told about earlier assignations between Munken and Blis, so that a

doubt might arise as to the real paternity of the child; still, Munken is recently returned, and Blis has been working in Didrik's home for some time.) When in act VI Munken returns to his northern home after many years, he seems fascinated by Iselin and even passes up an opportunity to be intimate with Blis. When Iselin (Didrik's wife) asks if it was for revenge that Munken bought Os, her estate, he replies, "Ak ja, hævn, hva andet!" (318). He tells her, "I ska stå, I skal kneise!" (318).<sup>1</sup> And of course, Iselin's strong feelings are apparent in the torture she applies to Munken – for what the reader is not even sure. Munken seems to have already served his time for the crime of filing the weights in Didrik's storeroom, cheating Spanish herring customers. The play makes clear that Munken did not do this, and strangely enough, Blis lies and says she saw him file the weights. The torture Iselin inflicts on Munken – having him bound to a tall pine in the forest, with dirt and seeds in his two hands, until the seeds sprout – seems to be gratuitously cruel. She appears to be punishing him for his rejection of her, and for no other reason. The reasons for this punishment are not made clear. Critics often cite the torture as cause of death;<sup>2</sup> however it is clear in the play that some time after the torture Munken falls "i bakken" and breaks his neck (366).

Even Arntzen has interpreted the play as myth, and certainly there is a dream-like, eventyr-like quality to it. However, Iselin in

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<sup>1</sup> The word "kneise" reminds us of the young woman in the story "Dronningen av Saba," who sits in the carriage with a whip. Many Hamsun heroes seem to have a masochistic streak.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Arntzen, p. 103, who quotes Trygve Braatøy claiming "det er fru Iselin som dreper ham." Arntzen himself says "det er Iselin som til slutt tar livet av ham" (107). However, much time seems to elapse between the torture, carried out when the sun was so hot that Vendt could be burned by it, and later in the act when it is "Senhøstes med frost" and Munken fell on the hill and "knuste nakken." So he breaks his neck and his death is not related to the wounded hands that resulted from the torture. If Munken had clearly not survived the torture, perhaps the play would have been more powerful.

*Munken Vendt* is ice cold, despite the fact that many men desire her (Svend Herlufsen, Dundas, Didrik). She bears no resemblance to the mythical Iselin in *Pan*, who is the embodiment of eros. Arntzen sees Iselin as a mother figure, symbol of fertility and destruction. She certainly is destructive, but she has no children despite years of marriage, and she is not even affectionate toward her husband. She is drawn to Munken, who spurns her. If there is a symbol of erotic femininity in the play, must it not be Blis? Munken tells her, “Men ofte nok, Blis, må jeg stanse og grue / for al denne ild i dit pikeblik” (223). She excited Munken’s passion, is impregnated by Didrik and later married to Dundas. When Munken visits her home in act VII she is open to intimacy, but Munken does not respond. She is more similar to the Iselin in *Pan* than is Iselin of Os. She does not consider her conduct shameful, and is surprised at Munken’s reaction when she openly reveals that they need to get married quickly because she is pregnant.

Other characters behave in a “transgressive” way as well. Both Didrik father and son “tuktet folk med pisk” (195). When Jakob Dyre deliberately kills a tame fawn (tantamount to theft, since he knows it is Omoinsa Lapp’s fawn), Munken tells him God will punish him with “ild og blod” (203). In act II, Didrik orders Munken beaten and the reader thinks he is, until we later find out that Munken had bought off Dyre and the others who were supposed to beat him, laughing at the “fake” beating. Running from an irate Omoinsa Lapp, Munken exchanges clothes with Dyre, well aware that Dyre will now be the target. Dyre is shot by Omoinsa Lapp – a poetic justice of sorts. And Iselin’s later punishment of Munken, binding him to the pine tree with soil in his hands and “frø” in the dirt illustrates an intensity of feeling that causes boundaries to be crossed. Although Munken improbably survived five days on the tree, his hands never recovered (they are still bandaged in act VIII).

Theft is also present in the play. In act I, Elias Dyre, Jakob's son, steals money from the church,<sup>1</sup> and Jakob Dyre admits stealing money from his own son. In act III Munken comes to Didrik's storehouse hoping to meet Blis, and catches Jakob Dyre filing the weights in the scales. Whether this cheating was done on the orders of Didrik or not remains unknown. But later Munken Vendt will be blamed for the filing and consequent cheating of Spanish customers. Duly convicted, he steals a horse and runs away.

The theme of treasure and its ill effects is closely related to theft. After a Spanish boat sank, chests of gold came ashore. Jakob Dyre helped Didrik hide them. Omoinsa Lapp observed the entire action. He then stole some of the gold and hid it for himself. Munken Vendt then stole the gold from Omoinsa Lapp. Significantly, in act V, years later, Munken, disguised as a klokker, hires a man to take a chest north to a lapp gamme. We are to understand that he regretted his theft and plans to make restitution.

Hypocrisy and lack of empathy also transgress against the rules of society. Didrik's father sailed by a sinking boat, not stopping to help, and thus dooming people to death. God or Fate punished him with a loss of hair. His crime was hardheartedness, and the punishment was passed on to his son, Didrik, who is also bald. In act I, Jakob Dyre is making moonshine in the woods, and his fundamentalist son Elias, who will later become a noted preacher, criticizes him for it, only to imbibe generously himself. Elias steals money from the church and enjoys alcohol, all the while quoting Bible verses and admonishing others. Later in the play, he seems to have become more sincere in his religious beliefs, actually using the money Munken gives him to rebuild the

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<sup>1</sup> Elias relates how he hears organ music, though no one is in the church. One is reminded of Nagel's story about the Lyktemand; he hears organ music and sees blind angels, though no one knows the origin of the music.

church, which was struck by lightning. He kept none for himself, which he would have done were he still the Elias of act I.

Crossing religious lines seems to be the major transgression in Hamsun's play. The religious defiance of Munken Vendt was Hamsun's subject. In a letter to the composer Sverre Jordan, who had discussed a libretto for an opera of *Munken Vendt* with Hamsun in 1913, Hamsun expressed his lack of enthusiasm for the project:<sup>1</sup>

Jeg har ikke lagt noget utkast til Scenebruk av 'Munken Vendt,' jeg har ikke tænkt paa Scene med den og den kan vel ikke opføres . . . Ugudeligheten maatte bort, Theologien; men det var den som interesserte mig.

Indeed, as Even Arntzen points out, Hamsun had originally considered *Munken Vendt* as the first part of a trilogy depicting three attitudes toward God: Revolt, Resignation, and "Living Faith."<sup>2</sup>

It appears that God is Munken's "fikse idé." Other characters in acts I and II refer to the fact that Munken was "præstelært," but no first name is given to the character (who studied for the priesthood and could therefore be called "monk"). When Munken criticizes God, Blis replies in act VI, "Hans søn har I tidlig i dåpen annammet" (314). Hamsun himself wrote to his translator Peter Emmanuel Hansen on Nov. 13, 1908, "Jo Munken er Døbenavn."<sup>3</sup> Although Munken originally planned to be a priest, he soon gave up and left the seminary, becoming a critic of the Almighty. (This

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<sup>1</sup> The letter is found in manuscript collection 130 at the National Library of Norway, Oslo. It is dated January 7, 1916. Kjell Marcussen also composed a song cycle for tenor and piano based on *Munken Vendt*. This work was premiered on April 26, 1990 in Asker with the tenor Kjell Sørensen, tenor and Øyvind Aase, piano.

<sup>2</sup> Arntzen cites Hamsun from *Verdens Gang* in 1910. Hamsun claimed to be finished with revolt, and not weak enough for resignation or toothless enough for faith. See Arntzen, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Brevsamling 130, National Library of Norway, Oslo.

transition from piety to revolt is also mirrored in the life of Georges Bataille, who studied for the priesthood but later lost his faith.) When lightning strikes the church, Munken says, “En lynslagen kirke er . . . et mærke på misbrukt guddommelig magt” (326). Munken is incensed by God’s unresponsiveness: God ”nikket fra skyen og trak sig bort” (305). Munken wants to ”neve Vorherre hans glemte pligter” (305). As in *Sult*, God is not observing his office hours. Munken sets his will against God’s: “Min bøn er å høres, mit skrik å bli hørt, mit håp er å smælde hans øre mort” (302). His blasphemy reaches its peak in his observation that ”Det skapte var bedre end han som har skapt” (307). When Munken recalls various commandments, he cries out, ”ak sådanne bud! En kan hylde og nyte dem helt til den dag en blir sterk nok å bryte dem!” (247). In an undated telegram Hamsun wrote to a teacher in Haldal: ”Det er mit inderligste Ønske at du som vordende lærer ikke må undervise i det 4de bud. Du vet naturligvis, at vi er kommet ind i det 20de Århundrede.”<sup>1</sup> Hamsun considered at least some of the ten commandments to be outdated. In the eighth and last act of the play, Munken wonders how Elias, who now seems to be genuinely religious, can keep putting up with God: “Og jammeren, nøden, I ser ham forvolde til den vil I tie igjen og igjen?” (358). When Munken returns to Os, he is asked if he is “en hedning fra fremmed land” (305). The “heathen” encounters Dundas, who is impoverished and starving. When he offers to feed Dundas if he comes to his home, Dundas points to the church and says he should go there instead. In answer to the question why? he says: “For å takke min skaper og herre / at prøvelsen ikke blev større og værre” (363). Munken is amazed at the human being’s capacity for suffering, and for embracing his suffering.

Nevertheless, Munken seems to believe in God, all the while accusing him. In act III he calls Dyre “en hedning” and when he is

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<sup>1</sup> Brevsamling 130, National Library of Norway, Oslo.



starving he cries out, "Hvor du tukter mig, Gud, hvor du tukter!" (227). When he realizes his beloved Blis is pregnant by Didrik, he again declares: "Å nei hvor du tukter mig, Gud, hvor du tukter!" (245). In fact, after Jakob Dyre is killed by Omoinsa Lapp while Dyre was wearing Munken's clothes, Munken kneels down and thanks God, vowing to give the stolen treasure back to Inger. Since Munken knew Omoinsa was pursuing him with a gun, one wonders how he could not be aware of the consequences when he exchanged clothing with Dyre.

In act V, Munken has fled south after being accused of filing the weights of Didrik's scales, and after abandoning Inter, whom he has promised to marry. We see Munken as a klokker at a church and we find out he has given several parishioners money, and continues to lend money, extending deadlines for repayment, and winning the affection of his congregation. He has in general behaved as a good Christian. However, when the lensmand comes to the district looking for the con man Munken Vendt, the klokker leaps into the saddle of a horse and rides off, saying to himself, "Et tåpelig påfund at jeg blev klokker" (279). He reverts to his former amorality: "Jeg er ikke længer en guddoms nar, jeg narrer fra nu av for egen regning" (279). Munken comes to Thora's hut in the woods and when two men stop by looking for a priest to minister to their dying mother, Munken sees the work of fate: "En præst! Jeg gad vite hvad dette mener? / om skjæbnen her gir mig et fingerpek / å vandre den vei jeg alt halvveis vek . . .?" (283). But when he meets another priest who is actually giving the last rites, Munken shocks him by claiming to preach before a horseshoe. Yelling through the window, "hei gamle derinde, din synd er forlatt" (287), Munken may actually have caused the death of the old lady. In the last act, Munken is just as critical of God as at the beginning of the play. But he seems to have turned over a new leaf as far as his actions are concerned. He gives Dundas his very last dollar; after he buys Iselin's estate, he gives it away, and becomes a simple shoemaker to earn his living. (Presumably, this new

livelihood does not serve him after Iselin's torture – his hands remain bandaged from being bound to the pine tree for five days). At the end of act VIII, Munken falls on the hill and is carried to his workroom, where he orders “fedrenes hestesko” to be hung up; the new church tower is visible through the window as he lies dying.

Munken's philosophy of right and wrong also seem to prefigure Bataille and “transgressive literature.” Bataille quotes the Marquis de Sade approvingly: “O man! . . . Is it for you to say what is good or what is evil?”<sup>1</sup> Munken reveals his philosophy in comforting Blis, who has now also become “vakt,” under the influence of Elias Dyre. “Du kan ikke synde ved egen magt,” he tells her: “Hvad galt du har gjort og hvad godt du vil gjøre / blev hvisket, skal hviskes dig ind i dit øre / Og snubler – ja falder du plat på din gang, / du bare tar plass i din skjæbnes fang” (329). Munken praises life and frees himself of judgments; perhaps that is Life's purpose:

Vort mål er å lære at frihet og tvang,  
at ungdom og ælde, at væte og tørke,  
at godhet og ondskap, at lys og mørke –  
at alt er værdier av l i k e rang. (329)

We must experience life in all its facets. We must not deny ourselves experience because of God's rules or society's rules. All values are equal. Hamsun's play has not illustrated this philosophy, however. Far from accepting all values, Munken has been consumed by hatred of Didrik (who seduced Blis and whose father seduced Munken's mother, making Munken Didrik's half brother!); one of Munken's complaints about God was that he had not punished Didrik:

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<sup>1</sup> Bataille, *op.cit.*, p. 110.

Hvi nøler hans svidende hævn over drotten?  
Jeg bier og bier, men hører ham le,  
og hævnen han lovet er aldrig å se –  
men jeg står tilbake med skammen og spotten. (248)

For Munken every experience is not of equal value.

There is a whiff of the demonic about Munken Vendt. There are Faustian echoes in the play. Some of the local people in act II note that Munken studied at “Wittenbergsolen” (221) like the “historical” Faust. Munken tells them, “jeg løser og binder de kræfter jeg vil” (221). Then he points upward, it thunders, and the boys run away in fear. When the men come to attack him, “solen overskyes.” (221). Jakob Dyre says of Munken in act III, “Han har kræfter og hode til både å øve det onde og gode” (227). When Omoinsa notices that the bag (containing food) he has lowered to help Munken out of a trap is noticeably lighter, he says, “Men litt får en gi til . . .” and Inger finishes the sentence “fanten” (233). In act IV people are afraid that Munken has learned to “gane” from the lapps (272) and will not help the sheriff pursue him. In act III, Munken declares, “Jeg står og beslutter en bindende pagt imellem mig selv og en høiere magt” (245) and later, after being falsely declared guilty of filing the weights, he repeats, “Jeg . . . fornyer en bindende pagt imellem mig selv og en høiere magt” (269). In court, Munken says to those present, “Hvis jeg bare vilde da skulde det gå eder alle ilde. . . Det skulde være min minste kunst” (269). Although he refers to a “higher” power, given his resentment of God, the inference is that he may be in league with darker sources.

In act VII Munken brags, “hvor jeg blev lærd på Wittenbergsolen” (329), to which Blis replies, “Der lærte I mer end Jærs Fadervor” (329). One wonders whether Hamsun was aiming for comparison with Goethe by including these intimations of Munken’s powers, by writing the play in verse, and by including an innocent young girl, impregnated and abandoned (though Blis

is no Gretchen, being saved through marriage to Dundas and money from Didrik). Hamsun even puts German words into the mouth of a masked reveler at the end of act V: “Nei wissen Sie was . . . “ (291).

Certainly Munken’s exuberance and energy reveal the vitalism inherent in transgressive literature. Munken, like Glahn, wants to live in the woods and support himself as a hunter.<sup>1</sup> Munken’s love of nature and feeling of kinship with plants and animals recalls that of Glahn. Munken says he “pratet” with the fawn (199) and asked it to go a different direction, but it would not move. (It would then be shot.) In the woods, Munken enthuses: “jeg vil juble mig hæs / og elske alt levende midt i dets fjæs.” (201). Glahn’s “loddent hi” becomes Munken’s “hule der oppe i heiene” (206). He blends in with the animals and plants, as does Glahn. Iselin says of him, “Han har slikt et brusende blik den mand” (223), recalling Glahn’s “dyreblik.” His masculinity seems to equal Glahn’s. Iselin notices “Hans røst er av malm, han har malm i sit øie” (224).

The personification of objects in nature is present in the play. Munken exclaims,

Slik nat! Se hvor stille den ligger leden.  
Og krattet har likesom slått en ring,  
det lytter til dyrs og menneskers ting. (327)

Munken tells how he survives in nature, occasionally hunting, fishing, finding berries. He is happy in his cave: “Og utenfor suset og suset et væld, / det var som om skoger på stjernene suset” (228). Inside, he sleeps on enerbær and twigs, with his fist as a pillow: “Min hule var slot og min ur var park, / min stenrøis var

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<sup>1</sup> Arntzen points out that both Glahn and Vendt have abandoned their “sivilisasjonskarrierer” as soldier and priest and have gone to the woods in search of a transcendental world behind the “real” world; they are in search of an original, “natural” condition that has been lost.

folk og jeg selv monark . . .” (228). The stones are people for him, just as the boulder outside of Glahn’s cabin was his confidant. At the beginning of act IV the advent of spring brings the usual intoxication in nature:

Kjend vinden – den streifet en skog på sin flugt,  
den dufter av løv og av fet furuluft.  
Det vakner og vokser og gror allevegne  
fra myrenes mose til urenes bregne –  
slik skyter den ildgule blomst i mit sind  
og damper i hete og duver i vind . . . (247)

Munken cast off civilization when he left the seminary, and he is an instinctive animal in nature. When he feels constrained by social rules (for example, when he lives with Omoinsa Lapp and Inger) he longs for the freedom of forest creatures. Having to admit to Omoinsa that he is leaving, Munken sees an eagle and exclaims: “Se ørnen tilveirs! Som et skib den glider, / .og gjør som den lyster til alle sider. / Å slik vil jeg glide -- !” (250).

Naturally, Munken is considered “strange” or worse by the community and even by the women who seem to love him. Iselin says of him, “Han synes å være en underlig skrue” (206) and after he says the plants are listening to people and animals, Blis says, ”I snakker så rart” (327). When Munken tries to explain his philosophy of equal values Blis replies, “Alt skjønner jeg ikke av hvad I har sagt” (329). Later she will exclaim, “Jeg tror du er galen!” (241). Nille tells her mistress, Iselin, that Munken is disreputable: “Han er både Gud og alverden til skam” (206). He is ”et ilde født barn” (207) banished from polite company. Although Munken’s “crimes” seem mild, they nevertheless contradict the norms of society and Christianity’s rules. His vitality scares the members of the community. As Bataille says of Sade’s atheism: it substitutes “Nature in a state of perpetual motion for God” (110). It is nature in all its perpetual motion and fertility that speaks to

Munken Vendt; he is a part of it. He is imbued with the “original energy” of Nature.<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille says in his discussion of *Wuthering Heights* that the lesson of that novel and “of Greek tragedy and, ultimately, of all religions, is that there is an instinctive tendency towards divine intoxication which the rational world of calculation cannot bear.” (22) Munken is intoxicated in nature and free of restraint in his erotic endeavors; he lives in the present and does not worry about the future. No wonder his community finds him strange (as their communities found *Sulthelten*, Nagel, Glahn, and Johannes strange).

“Transgression” has been considered in the sense of sin, taboo, or crime. But transgression is also a crossing of boundaries. In *Munken Vendt* Omoinsa Lapp and his daughter Inger live outside the community and continue the traditions of their race/culture. Hamsun the playwright says of his character Omoinsa, “Han taler bumandssprog mangelfuldt.” The Lapps are dressed differently: “rund toplue, renskinds mudd, bælte, båndsnørte bukselægger, komager. Dragten er hos begge rikt utsydd med blå, røde og gule tresser.” (228). Omoinsa lapp and his daughter save Munken from starvation. They are naive and trusting, in contrast to the lying Vendt, who sees a good opportunity and tells Inger he loves her. (Despite his enthusiastic, intoxicated nature, he does calculate when he is hungry and needs to figure out how to stay alive.) Hearing about the treasure, his plan is to steal it away from the Lapps. When Omoinsa orders him to be blindfolded before leading him to the treasure, Munken says “Mærkværdig til ufine skikke I lappfolk har” (234), as if the lapps are the only people who would blindfold someone to lead him to a secret place. When he sees the treasure, Munken takes a few coins, and says only he

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<sup>1</sup> Bataille wrote of William Blake that he “managed to restore life to original energy.” *Op. cit.*, 96. He might have had the same opinion of Munken had he read Hamsun’s play.

and Inger should be in charge of the money. Inger replies that others beside herself make those decisions. Munken's reply shows the lack of respect he has for Inger:

. . . Det vil si, når du veier  
dit forhold til skatten og derpå til mig;  
at du eier skatten og jeg eier dig,  
så er det jo egentlig jeg som er eier. (236)

She is obviously only a means to an end. He is willing to lie to her in order to stay long enough to make his plans. But even the trusting Inger becomes suspicious after a time.

The fourth act begins with Munken outside the Lapp gamme; his situation between the two cultures is evidenced by his clothing: "Han er klædt i bumandsdragt, men med en stærkt utbroderet lappemudd av gråt vadmål istedetfor trøie og med lappelue på hodet" (247). Of course Munken does not feel at home in the gamme, or with Omoinsa and Inger. His awareness of being outside of his ethnic boundary is obvious:

Her går jeg til nar i en laps mundering  
og driver al dagen en laps håndtering,  
nu slutter jeg op med den dårlige flid,  
jeg spilte mit spil og tjente min tid. (247)

He has played a game simply to have access to the treasure, and he feels no guilt over his behavior toward Inger. When she protests, he insults her: "Å Gud – jeg er mæt av dit vås, det er tingen." (248)

He plots his escape and is remarkably frank about his plans with his "fiancée," Inger. When she says "Vi skal giftes i vår," he replies candidly, "Nei hverken i år eller senere år" (248). A shocked Inger shows her ring and reminds him, "Vi klædte dig op og vi fødte dig fet," expecting some minimal gratitude from

Munken. He, however, makes the arrogant reply, "Jeg lærte jær op til alt hvad I vet" (248). Omoinsa and his daughter live, as they did before meeting Munken, from hunting, from their reindeer, and from fishing. What did Munken add to their knowledge? Nothing. When Inger asks, "Og skatten - ?" Munken replies, "Til den er det ingen eier. / Nu er den hos mig. Den har skiftet leier" (249). Inger says she will call her father, whose aim is very accurate. After she leaves, Munken goes into the gamme and takes the bullet out of the rifle. When Omoinsa shoots at him, nothing happens. When he changes clothing with Jakob Dyre, he knows it will be Dyre who will be shot, as we have seen. Munken's behavior toward Omoinsa and his daughter is exploiting and condescending – but then he has not behaved much better toward Blis, whom he claimed to love. When he is bound to the tree, it is Inger Lapp who comes by and offers to free him. He declines to be freed. Why he declines to be untied is a mystery.

Hamsun's dislike of the theater (and lack of talent for it) are well known.<sup>1</sup> To his translator P. E. Hansen, Hamsun wrote, "Sagen er, jeg interesserer mig ikke for Skuespil og udsætter og udsætter med at gaa til Værks med det."<sup>2</sup> Another letter to Hansen denies Hamsun is nervous about the reception of his play; he tells Hansen he is mistaken for thinking this and goes on to say, "Det var mine *Romaner* jeg for mange, mange Aar siden gik i litt Spænding for; mine Skuespil aldrig. Jeg bryr mig ikke om Skuespil og Teater."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this lack of respect for the theater explains the chaos of *Munken Vendt*. Perhaps he wrote the play to show that, like Goethe and Ibsen, he also could produce a

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<sup>1</sup> Even Arntzen, *op. cit.* cites an article Hamsun wrote in *Verdens Gang* Dec. 29, 1890, claiming that the playwright can not be a penetrating psychologist. See Arntzen, 95.

<sup>2</sup> Brevsamling 130, National Library of Norway, Oslo. The letter was written on Nov. 15, but no year is given.

<sup>3</sup> Brevsamling 130, National Library of Norway, Oslo. The letter is dated May 29, no year is given.



panoramic play, and that he could also write a play in verse if he wanted to. Arntzen quotes Trygve Braatøy in *Livets Cirkel* concerning Hamsun's wish to beat Ibsen at his own game: "Gud vet om det ikke delvis var av forfengelighet: *so etwas kann ich auch!* og da var det like godt å slå mesteren ut av hans egen taktart" (103). But Hamsun's monster play was less successful than Goethe's or Ibsen's.

So now let us turn our attention not to Munken Vendt, the character, but to the play itself. Edgar Allen Poe said that "there is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness of proportion."<sup>1</sup> *Munken Vendt*, by that measuring stick, is a beautiful play. Transgressing against aesthetic and generic norms, Hamsun wrote his play in eight acts and in verse, and interspersed songs of sailors, of Svend Herlufsen, and of Thora with the dialogue. There are also hymns sung by the *vakte* followers of Elias Dyre. There are comic elements thrown into the play – drunks at the *tingmøtet*, Vendt's conversation (partially in Latin) with the priest in act V, and in act VII, when Munken deliberately leaves his *rutede bukser* in Blis' cabin so that her Scottish husband Dundas, so proud of his aristocratic background, will think a lover has been in his home. The drunken Dundas wants a duel with the unknown miscreant, and says, "en ædelmands fødsel forpligter . . . vi skyter os gjerne ved slike konflikter" (VII, 340 ff). We have already noticed how the sun is clouded over when Munken mentions his pact with mysterious powers; in act VIII, when young girls sing a hymn with the kapellan about human beings being worms, specks of dust in God's eyes, the author tells us again "Under sangen skyes solen over" (355). Although Hamsun is subtle in his novels, especially those that read like prose poems, all subtlety vanishes in his plays.

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, "Ligeia," in *The Complete Illustrated Stories and Poems of Edgar Allen Poe* (London: Chancellor Press, 1988) 168. Actually Poe says in the story that he is quoting Francis Bacon.

The play obeys no rules of form; but far more rebellious than the eclectic style is the lack of unified plot. In the first four acts, Munken loves Blis and tells Iselin he does not love her. However, in the later acts it seems to be Iselin he is pursuing and who tortures him – for being spurned by him? for being turned out of her home by him? The spectator/reader does not know the real reason for Iselin’s cruelty. In *Pan* the contrast between the loving, almost masochistic Eva and the proud Edvarda was made clear. It was clear to the reader that Edvarda was the woman Glahn most wanted. The love “triangle”? in *Munken Vendt* is muddled. Blis, who lies and says she saw Munken file the weights, does not behave as if she loves him, despite his feeling for her. Iselin, though beautiful and rich, does not attract Munken until he returns to Nordland as an old man. Munken has a chance to be with Blis and does not take it, simply leaving his spare pants (plaid ones, at that) behind to confound her husband. In *Pan* the goatherd Henriette illustrated Glahn’s lust, but Munken is never attracted by Inger Lapp, and is motivated solely by his hunger for food and survival; later he stays because of the possibility of stealing treasure from Inger. The romantic constellation is anything but clear. We have already noted the ambivalent attitude toward God displayed in Munken’s comments and actions. Though he mocks God throughout the play, when Dyre is shot in his place, he thanks God and resolves to give back the stolen treasure. However, when he returns to Nordland in act VI, he is again the religious rebel, being taken for a “hedning” by the local population. The reprehensible hypocrite Elias Dyre is inexplicably turned into a genuine believer who is willing to sacrifice and whose goal is to rebuild a church. At the end of the play, he has attracted many followers, including Blis. Munken still finds this phenomenon shocking, but he does not dissuade anyone from following Elias. The theological perspective is no clearer than the romantic one.

The play jumps through time with no explanation. The first four acts establish Munken as a man falsely accused of cheating,

driven out of his community, and having caused the death of Jakob Dyre and stolen Inger's money. Act V begins "down south," no longer in Nordland, and we see the scene outside the church with the klokker who is revealed to be Munken Vendt. At the end of act V, Munken takes part in a masquerade ball at a bazaar in an unidentified town, where he seems to fall in love with "Empire," a beauty in a white dress. Act V ends with Munken being led off by police. Then, in act VI he returns as a stranger, much older (he is now gray-haired), to buy the formerly grand estate of Os, which has fallen to ruin. At the end of act VI, Munken tells Iselin, "Jeg kommer fra morgenland nu iaften" (316). Nothing is ever revealed about time spent in the East. When Munken returns to Nordland as a wealthy man and buys the estate, everyone is old (except Svend Herlufsen!) – decades seem to have gone by. What Munken was doing in those decades the spectator/reader does not know. At the end of the play Esben Skomaker finds a paper attesting to the fact that Munken has paid for his crime; did he spend some of those years in prison? The spectator does not know. Did Hamsun feel obliged to provide a panorama of an entire life, *à la Peer Gynt* ?

Surely the play would have been more dramatic if Munken had died immediately following the torture to which Iselin subjected him. But he survives the five days on the tree, a season passes, and then Nille reveals that he has fallen on the hill, and he dies shortly thereafter. Certainly his death has nothing dramatic about it. In the play Blis says that her daughter Alexa "has no father," and the spectator is free to wonder if the father was Didrik or his half-brother Munken Vendt. Significantly, Munken is waiting for Alexa to come to him when he dies. She arrives too late, and puts her white kerchief over his face. Once again, a mystery (her paternity) is never solved in the play.

It is as if Hamsun threw into the play all the topics that interested him, and that he had already communicated to the reader more clearly in his early novels. Perhaps it was the problem of composing in verse that hampered him. There is much

repetition in the play, as if Hamsun couldn't think of new rhymes. Some of the lines are clearly simply attempts to find a rhyme. Hamsun's genius was free-flowing prose; even his poems seem labored; only "Skærgårdsø" is recognized as a beautiful poem.

The play, *Munken Vendt*, is a kaleidoscope of transgression – aesthetic and formal, physical, social, religious, and psychological. It is a rambling *potpourri* of transgression and desire, full of contradictions. The character of Munken Vendt shows the same attraction and repulsion to religion as did Georges Bataille, the founder of transgressive literature. There is the same split between intellect and carnality, the same erotically omnivorous behavior, the same defiance of God and society, the same rejection of morality and reason, and the same glorification of experience for its own sake. There is the same vitalism, the same search for unity. *Munken Vendt* reveals Knut Hamsun as a proponent of transgression in so many ways, not simply in the realm of politics.

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