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Monika Žagar. *Knut Hamsun: The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. viii + 343 pp. $56.13 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98945-7; $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98946-4.

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Closing the Ring around Knut Hamsun

Three decades before he won the Nobel Prize in 1920, the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun first earned acclaim with *Hunger*, now recognized as a key work of modernist fiction and perhaps the first example of what Robert Ferguson has called Hamsun's "enigma."[1] As readers grapple with the ravings of its young protagonist starving on the streets of Christiania, they discover in *Hunger* an image of the artist as a young man, isolated and struggling against late nineteenth-century convention. And here is where the paradox may lie, for while Hamsun's sense of style and perspective in *Hunger* mark him as a modernist, his biography, embedded within the tale, hints at a latent antimodernism. His sweeping assault on literary convention clashes with his character's failure to master the new world into which Norway was entering. Unable to reconcile these two halves of Hamsun, many, like Ferguson, bequeath upon him an aura of mystery that only heightens the allure of the artist and his work. Recently, this fascination has led to a significant biopic film starring Max von Sydow and a new commemorative museum nestled in the rugged north that Hamsun once called home.

The problem with these remembrances is that they are tainted by the politics of Hamsun's later years and especially by his collaboration with the Germans during World War II. From writing a eulogy for Adolf Hitler to giving his Nobel Prize as a gift to Joseph Goebbels, Hamsun made no secret of his support for the Nazis. For Norwegians, the central dilemma is thus how to remember him as a beloved national literary figure while confronting his endorsements of the Nazi occupation. Over the years, his biographers have tended towards two strategies. One has been to cast him in the role of unwitting victim or as the doddering old man manipulated by the Nazi propaganda machine. The other has been to draw a line between the younger years of literary genius and the final perplexing flirtation with Nazism. Since Hamsun himself had considered his 1936 novel,*The Ring is Closed*, to be his last, many have found it easy to cherish a literary career that ostensibly ended before his fall from grace.

Monika Žagar will have none of this. In her latest book, *Knut Hamsun: The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance*, she offers an assessment of the Nobel winner that is simple but far-reaching. She writes, "Was Hamsun a Nazi? Yes" (p. 228). There is no space for obfuscation here. After years of what she sees as a growing tendency towards apologetics, Žagar offers a searing reevaluation that responds not only to academics like Ferguson and Ingar Kolloen, but also to popular mythmakers such as Jan Troell, the director of the 1996 film. For Žagar, Hamsun was no victim and certainly no fool. There remain no blind spots in which to tuck away his unsavory writings. At the heart of her analysis is the argument that Hamsun's activities during the occupation cannot be separated from either his worldview or his literary oeuvre. Ultimately, her approach succeeds because she understands so well that there is, just as in the case of the young writer in *Hunger,* no clear distinction between the author and his work.

To trace the roots of Hamsun's Nazi proclivities, Žagar weaves together his travels, contacts, and relationships with elements of selected writings, placing them into the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What emerges is a portrait of a man who is a product of his time: a modernist with deep misgivings about modernity. Žagar is not writing a biography in the traditional sense, and rather than follow a chronology of intellectual development, she organizes her book thematically to show us just how firmly the themes of nature, race, and gender stood at the foundation of Hamsun's worldview. We see, for example, how his primitivism led him to romanticize the wilderness and underscored a sense of Norwegian identity that was "whole-

some and in harmony with nature" (p. 44). The boy who had grown up in rural northern Norway was thus skeptical of materialism and urban life, and embraced what he famously called "the whisper of the blood, the pleading of the bone" (p. 236). Notions of racial difference, however, tempered such views. In several chapters, Žagar wrestles with Hamsun's complex depictions of non-Western peoples, including Native Americans in *Segelfoss Town* (1915), Africans in *The Ring is Closed*, and Sámi, his masterpiece, *Growth of the Soil* (1917). Throughout, she expresses doubt about the veracity of some of his alleged firsthand encounters with native peoples and suggests generally that Hamsun had a dim understanding of non-Western cultures. Instead, he seems to have relied on knowledge filtered through European colonial experience and scientific racism. As a result, his treatments of natives in these texts are rife with stereotypes and vacillate between condescension and admiration for their embrace of nature and intuition.

Tying together these themes are Hamsun's perspectives on gender, which were informed by a sense of patriarchy and sharpened by fears of change. Just as in the case of non-Western races, "Women, animals, and nature all belong to one category, and all can be tamed and molded" (p. 100). Not surprisingly, the growth of feminist sentiment at the end of the century became for Hamsun, as for many Europeans, a source of tremendous anxiety. Hamsun responded by portraying his female characters through "a prism of frustrated male fantasy" (p. 123). At times these women are sympathetic despite violating gender norms, but inevitably their development as characters is only complete once they embrace their proper roles as wives and mothers. Such an attitude extended beyond the pages of Hamsun's novels and into his marriage to the actress Marie Andersen. Indeed, Žagar often seems to shift the mantle of victimhood onto Marie, who sacrificed her career to conform to Hamsun's vision. "Although obviously captivated by this independent, talented, and beautiful woman," she writes, "Hamsun found it difficult to accept the qualities of independence, talent, and beauty in a wife" (p. 62). We might question whether she lets Marie, who also wrote in support of Nazism, off the hook too easily, but we can nevertheless see the parallels between Marie's experience and those of the character's in her husband's novels.

Hamsun's views became increasingly politicized in the 1930s, and his conservatism and antimodernism set a path that led from simple admiration of Germany to support for Vidkun Quisling to a final acceptance of the Nazi occupation in 1940. By examining his writings from those years, Žagar uncovers the ways in which the themes that had colored his literature coalesced into an adherence to Nazism that remained unshakeable, even after Hamsun's famously disastrous meeting with Hitler in 1943. Although she might have been more systematic in revealing the continuities, her analysis nevertheless affirms what historians have noted about professionals and artists who collaborated with the regime. In such cases, there was no need to seek a deep affinity for all parts of the Nazi program. Rather, the eclectic nature of Nazism meant that one needed only to find some degree of ideological compatibility. Hamsun, it seems, found that compatibility in the vague Nazi promise of a cultural restoration that would roll back the worst excesses of the modern world.

When the war ended, Hamsun was prosecuted civilly, in part because his age and deafness led to a view that he was unfit to stand trial for treason. It was a turn of events that has raised questions about his culpability. To this discussion Žagar offers as the crowning moment of her study a brilliant dissection of Hamsun's final book, *On Overgrown Paths* (*Paa gjengrodde stier*, 1949), which he had written as a defense of his actions during the occupation. Far from seeing it as a confirmation of his advanced age and infirmity, Žagar describes the book as a last glimpse of Hamsun's genius, and she carefully details how it employed the best of his writing skills to shape his legacy. His is a carefully directed appeal, aimed not only at the criminal jury that never convened, but also at present and future generations of admirers. "Indeed," Žagar concludes, "*Paa gjengrodde stier* appeals to an audience of select initiated readers who are familiar with Hamsun's earlier works, his wanderer protagonists, and his unique rhetorical style" (p. 214).

As the book ends, Žagar's depiction of the writer in his last years stands at odds with the towering celebrity who was so connected to the cultural forces at work in his country. By the last chapter, Hamsun seems strangely out of place, and we are simply left with an image of him that once again hearkens back to his protagonist in *Hunger*, alienated and alone. Žagar gives us few clues to explain how this transformation occurred. Having so effectively accounted for the roots of his ideology, she finally loses her contextual thread and leaves us wondering why Hamsun among so many others clung to his devastating choice to support Hitler. Yet her forceful reminder of what that choice meant is compelling, and it is difficult not to share her genuine sense of astonishment that generations of scholars have since ignored Hamsun's Nazi past or the long path leading to collaboration. Certainly, they can ignore it no longer, and neither can they separate the novelist from the Nazi. As Hamsun contin-

ues to be celebrated, and as a new museum opens, Žagar's challenge seems all the more timely and important. Its appearance will undoubtedly complicate the dilemma of how to treat Hamsun, and, while Žagar hints at the lacunae of Norwegian memory culture, she stops short of suggesting how to proceed. Her study is, after all, a corrective, not a palliative. In her view, there have been too many of those already.

Note

[1]. Robert Ferguson, *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988).

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