

## Between Early Literary Modernism and Contemporary Post-Postmodernism

—Jan Kjærstad Rewrites Knut Hamsun's Novel *Hunger* 100 Years Later

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**Abstract:** The article is a comparative study in Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger* (1890) and Jan Kjærstad's novel *The Brink* (1990), focusing on similar motives, topics and references from the point of view of early modernism and post-postmodernism. It sheds light on aesthetic problems concerning how to deal literary with existential and metaphysical questions viewed against the background of changing historical and philosophical experiences and new ways of poetic expression. The article points out the resemblances and differences between the novels and shows how two of the front figures of modern Scandinavian literature meet the challenges of renewing the traditional forms of writing.

**Key words:** modernism post-postmodernism literary transcoding epic networks matrice-or foil theory literature as epistemological medium

In the second half of the 19th century Norway established itself as a literary great power in Nordic and European literature. Among those who wrote themselves into the elite among authors of their generation it is today strictly speaking only Henrik Ibsen who has maintained his status as a classic in a global context, something that is inter alia evidenced by the fact that he is included in Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*. In his own home country, however, Ibsen's later production was met with considerable scepticism from conservative quarters, and when in 1890 the young Knut Hamsun launched his campaign against the great four in a number of lectures, it was first and foremost Henrik Ibsen who was made to bear the brunt of the attack. In a sharp, provocative tone Hamsun reproached Ibsen for being an utterly uncouth character psychologist who in his dramas operated with figures composed of a few stereotype qualities. In contrast to Ibsen the character psychologist, Hamsun himself argued that he stood for a kind of individual psychology that wished to present the human mind in its finest nuances and forms of expression. Subsequently Ha-

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msun's plea for a new kind of psychological fiction was almost universally viewed as a manifesto that has been taken as established in the reading and understanding of his later novels. However, it is easy to overlook the fact that in his lectures on literature, which appear to have been strongly inspired by August Strindberg's foreword to his drama *Miss Julie* (1889), Hamsum is not first and foremost out to present a programme but to engage in polemics. By attacking an already so well established authority as Ibsen, the hitherto unknown author Knut Hamsum could turn the focus on himself and his own literary production. And everything was co-ordinated in the best possible manner. Just before the lectures Hamsum had published in the Danish periodical *Ny Jord* the first part of a fictional text that was now completed and published under the title *Sult (Hunger)*. It is probably no exaggeration to claim that with the breakthrough of this book Hamsum had written the first fundamental masterpiece of early European modernism, a prose text that marks a sharp boundary between today and yesterday. Georg Brandes, the influential Danish literary critic, who introduced the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to a wider (North-) European public, was puzzled by this novel, which according to his understanding of literature was not a novel, on which point Hamsum said he was completely right. Hamsum never used the term novel of his work, but called the text inter alia a book or an article. Since Hamsum terms each of the four parts of the text a play, it would perhaps also be justifiable to speak of a play for the stage, or perhaps best of all a text at the point of intersection between several genres. If one reads *Hunger* with one's point of departure in the psychological literary view of the lectures, as people have done on the whole, and not on its own terms, one will easily overlook its modernity, for all the main directions of classical modernism — with the exception of surrealism — have in common the fact that they are fundamentally anti- or a-psychological. And Hamsum operates in his text with a first-person narrator who, when he filters the world through his ever more desolate consciousness, slips into solipsistic states of consciousness that interrupt any rational communication with the outside world. As Arnold Hauser (Hauser 378) has shown, psychology loses its meaning when the subject loses his outside world and thereby the capacity for intercommunication. Psychological differentiation turns into metaphysics and into mythical-allegorical forms of representation that let the abstract forces of the mind find expression. This transformation from a psychological to an allegorical subject was already well prepared in the young Hamsum's time, as Hans Robert Jauss has demonstrated in his Baudelaire studies. It has hitherto been believed that *Hunger* is a kind of slightly camouflaged autobiography that depicts the awful conditions Hamsum experienced when, as a young artist, he wandered about starving in Kristiania, the present Oslo. Yet right from the start the experience of hunger has semantically superimposed on it an even more fundamental experience of lacking something, namely the lack of meaning. *Hunger* is thus first and foremost a text about experiences of loss and substantial ontological emptying. No words occur so often as empty, to empty and emptiness. There is therefore reason to claim that the text is not mainly about the I-character's psycho-pathological experiences and hallucinations under the influence of malnutrition, but about the existence of being. The existential aspect is dominant, and it is expressed in forms that in many ways pre-empt the later allegorising texts of expressionism. The main character is an I-figure with no name who during his repeated wanderings through the city meets people who do not have any individual proper names either but are characterised through typical qualities or occupational designations. The dialogues often assume the character of monologues, verbal linguistic expression is at times replaced by body language, and when things go really badly for the I-figure, he stages his own self and reveals his inner wounds in a body language repertoire. But the hunger-figure does not give up so easily; he seeks consistently throughout the text to combat the experiences of loss by fictionalising the emptying process, finding words to de-

scribe the emptiness in himself and filling the meaning vacuum with reflections and texts that can communicate his existential situation in a universe which in a Heideggerian sense is *unheimlich*, which in other words is no longer able to offer its inhabitants a feeling of belonging and feeling secure. Hamsun's text has a circular structure, which sharpens the main character's feeling of being enclosed in a circle from which he cannot escape. This also conditions the plot of the text, which does not unfold in a linear fashion from a beginning to an end, as is the case in the classical *Bildungsroman*, but circles around itself in a monomaniac repetition of the same thing. In a way one may say that approximately the same story is told four times, and its development, as in expressionist literature, takes place in the form of increasing intensification of the original situation. Thus a de-finalising of the epic structure takes place, which causes the temporal dimension to be weakened and the spatial factor to stand out more clearly. The city of Kristiania appears as an allegorical setting where existence occurs and the conditions of existence are displayed in all their frightening dimensions.

The urban space is further minimised in the main character's changing lodgings which in all their spartanness envelop him as if he were in a coffin and make it comprehensible to him that in the midst of life he is already surrounded by death and destruction. The dearest room he spends a night in is an unlit prison cell, in which the fear of existence grips him, and in a state of hovering between madness and rationality he seeks to express his situation in a newly created vocabulary that may liberate him from the established straitjacket of language logic. He invents an artificial word which does not exist in the known vocabulary and to which he ascribes the alluring property that it can have any meaning whatsoever all according to his fancy or according to what his immediate need might require. It can in other words mean everything and nothing at the same time as it suggests that he is again master of the world by being master of the language through which it is expressed. In the main character's confused consciousness this narrative sequence marks the utmost loss of language, but also at the same time a notion that this liberation and the regaining of a larger angst-free world is only possible through language, i.e. through a creative verbal transformation of the existential space in which he finds himself. But with his verbalisations — be they written or oral — the hunger-figure never reaches beyond a beginning that can constitute the prelude to any continuations whatsoever (Hamsun 30), as he puts it, and thus everything he undertakes simply remains as fragments that never fall into place as a conclusion or whole, but come to a standstill in an eternal repetition of the same original optimism. This repeated act of writing forms the counterpart to his aimless and fruitless wanderings through the streets of Kristiania. It is on the one hand an expression of the nihilist awareness of meaning devaluation and loss of values, and on the other a heroic expression of the creative combat against this vacuum. The metaphysical light that streams out from the inventor Hapollati's electrically illuminated hymnbook has however long since been extinguished for the hunger-figure, who is left to writing out a possible meaning in the light of the candles he procures with his last coins and with the little stub of a pencil he still owns.

There is nothing wrong with describing Hamsun's *Hunger* with its serial and repetitive composition as a first example of an expressionist station drama that pre-empted August Strindberg's dream play and establishes a literary text in connection with the freeze of life pictures that Edvard Munch created at the same time under the inspiration of existential philosophy. In the research literature the ending of Hamsun's text has been discussed in great detail. Since the main character is locked in a circular structure, it has been problematic to explain why in the end he escapes his circular prison. If one looks at the ending of the text in the light of Hamsun's other literary production, one will however easily realise that he does not escape, but comes into a circular world

with a greater radius, in an orbit that links him to the surrealist August, who has sailed round the world and is the main character in a subsequent novel trilogy from the second half of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s

Hamsun's *Hunger* was a source of inspiration not only for a number of the most significant authors of the time, including Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Andre Gide etc., but also for Norwegian and Nordic authors, not least from more recent times Jan Kjærstad, one of the most important living Norwegian authors. In 1990, one hundred years after Hamsun published *Hunger*, Jan Kjærstad published a novel with the title *Rand* [The brink] which for many reasons it is natural to regard as being an inter-textual response to Hamsun's classic text from 1890. While Hamsun's book is one of the most significant pre-texts of classical modernism, Kjærstad's novel is a post-postmodernist novel, i.e. a fictional text which according to the author's understanding of himself is not a carbon copy of postmodernistic ways of writing, but a furtherance of them. And it is not difficult to see that Kjærstad consciously develops his project with Hamsun's *Hunger* as sub-textual reference text. Both authors bring their main characters into what the German existential philosopher Karl Jaspers calls existential borderline situations (Jaspers). While in connection with the Baroque allegory Hamsun lets his emaciated, skeleton-like main character wander around in the borderland between life and death, Kjærstad makes his main character into a mass murderer, who with no motive whatsoever, it would seem, wanders around Oslo (formerly Kristiania) killing off random passers-by he meets on his way. In an interview Kjærstad said that he got the idea for the book one day when he was wandering along Grensen [literally: the border], one of the main streets in the centre of Oslo, and he connects this border experience with theological notions that in one's meeting with the existential brink experience one is at the same time receptive to the divine. The laconic titles of both books consist of four graphemes, which precisely designate the abyss faced by both main characters, hunger and death. In terms of genre it may seem at first sight as if Kjærstad's novel is a detective story that thematises unmotivated murder and the hunt for a dangerous killer. But the detective story constitutes only the surface structure of a text that is gradually supplied with other dimensions and assumes the character of being a text about what it is to be a human being. This is in harmony with Kjærstad's writing practice, that in his novels he always applies a recognisable genre model, the developmental novel, the love story, the detective story, so that the reader always has a feeling of recognising something well known and familiar, and then at the next step he deconstructs this surface structure, or ornamentises it, as Kjærstad calls it, and transforms the whole text into a text about the different or, as here, into the completely different. Behind this intention lies the notion of being mixed up in an extreme affair, which directs the attention at terrible and mysterious happenings that alienate the well-known urban surroundings and transform them into terra incognita, which needs to be explored as if it were an exotic place in the periphery of the Milky Way, the solar system and the planet Tellus and the country of Norway. The killer himself is a computer expert and engaged in a pioneer project with a view to developing a network for the Criminal Investigation Department. In this capacity he is assigned the task of investigating the murders he is himself alleged to have committed. It is part of the literary transcoding process that through the supply of ever more information the surface text undermines the detective story's intention in so far as the detective story is exclusively directed at revealing who the murderer is. It may even seem as if a question mark is placed against whether it is a matter of murder at all in a criminological sense. There is much to suggest that it is really rather a matter of fictitious killings that are simulated in the computer and that these killings are in reality not killings but births. An extremely subtle inversion of death and life takes place. The author exploits the graphemic proximity between the two Norwegian words

morder [murderer] and moder [mother] which semantically indicate the difference between death and life. It is in this respect symptomatic that the victim of one of the killings collapses and remains lying in an embryonic position which purely iconographically transforms the death into a prenatal phase of birth. This transformation becomes clear on two textual levels. In the first place the murders contribute to the fact that the victims are lifted out of their anonymous bourgeois existence and acquire posthumous reputations as figures of fiction and the status of heroes in the public media. Secondly, Kjærstad operates not only here, but also in his debut novel *Speil* [Mirror] from 1980, with a matrix theory that plays on the fact that matrix also has the meaning of womb. In *Speil* an attempt is made to recreate the 20th century by the telling of one and the same story in as many individual stories with various themes and motifs as will illuminate the relationship between hunger and war. Kjærstad imagines that the complex epic network that is established in the novel functions analogically to matrices or foils that are placed over one another and give the reader an insight into the intricate, simultaneously present relations that constitute the epic network. The same network technique is also adopted in *Rand*. In the collection of evidence, the main character in the novel proceeds like a criminal investigator; he carries out investigations, collects forensically interesting clues, calls witnesses in for questioning etc. and all the data are entered into and systematised in the computer, where they gradually give rise to theories and counter-theories that are to contribute to reconstructing the course of the crime, shedding light on the connections between the individual murders and reconstructing the victims' biographical and bourgeois-existential profiles. The macrotext thus builds up an archive of epic micro-segments or perhaps better narrative chips that map all the victims' activities in the private and public sectors and register all their ethical, aesthetic, political and other preferences and involvements. Each individual one of the six victims' existential and social experiences and their diverse talents and qualities is registered in detail. This makes it possible for the investigator (and the reader) to make comparisons and draw parallels in all directions between the individual life stories as they are embodied in the epic field. In this network one finds, seen as a whole, an accumulated wealth of information which, if one operates the fiction system in an intelligent manner, supplies knowledge about what a human being is and what it is capable of achieving. Thus Kjærstad approaches his object with his starting point in a metaphorical principle in which it is the intention that analogies shall open the world and provide us with an answer to the anthropological question of man's potentials. According to Kjærstad's matrix theory all the chapters form a network of cross-references that it is the reader's task to actualise. Considered as an epical-simultaneous field the text is present in the reader's consciousness as a filigree system of branching folds and wrinkles that imitate the form of the brain and testicles and through this create a relation between writing, reflection and sexuality. The very writing instrument, a Montblanc fountain pen, a technologically improved variant of the hunger-figure's pencil stub in Hamsun, is the weapon the main person uses to penetrate reality.

Kjærstad's text is in the true meaning of the word pregnant with a meaning that it is the reader's task to deliver. Since it is man with all his possibilities who is hidden behind the branching epic network, it is the reader's privilege during the reading process to give birth to the new man and have a share in an extended and bigger world. Part of Kjærstad's writing strategies is that he aims at opening doors out onto a reality in the periphery of known reality and thereby creating prerequisites for participating in something that lies outside and cannot yet be articulated in a rational medium. Kjærstad uses in one place the metaphors of pregnancy to suggest how his novels have the intention of extending the world towards a reality outside reality. The intended extension of reality is woven into his text matrix on the pattern of an embryo that in the period before birth senses

the existence of a larger world outside the womb

For Jan Kjærstad literature is an epistemological medium that helps one to cognise reality and make it available in a way that pleases the reader at the same time as it entertains and instructs him. In the same way that the hunger-figure in Hamsun finally succeeds in overstepping the urban circle in which he is imprisoned in order to escape to a larger reality, in the same way the reader of Kjærstad's novel has a possibility of liberating the human being who lies hidden in the digital or narrative matrices that the macrotext presents to us and thereby of incorporating in himself a larger reality than the reality of which he was in possession before he read the text

Both books have Oslo (Kristiania) as their setting, but in both Hamsun and Kjærstad the city is something more than an urban reality; it is a place that shows the conditions for and possibilities of human existence. In Hamsun the vanitas allegory dominates; the hunger-figure exists on the verge of van-vidd [madness] and as a result of hunger visibly bears the stigma of the van-skapte [deformed] on the outside of his body. To combat the emptiness in and around him, in a kind of futur creationis he fills the voids with words, texts and artistic projects that contribute to articulating his sufferings and filling the vacuum with a self-produced verbal world around him that can replace the loss of social and metaphysical security. While it is the state of deficiency that dominates in *Hunger*, it is diversity and the overabundance of information that threaten the extraction of meaning in Kjærstad's roman. All of those murdered are outstanding experts within their special occupational world. Together the six murdered persons constitute a body of encyclopaedic knowledge, which however, as long as it is not made functional within a holistic context, remains within the specialists' horizons. Kjærstad's project consists, as we have seen, in liberating this accumulated individual knowledge and offering to let the reader put these understanding potentials into a broad context, which again opens the way to a world in which all things fall towards one another instead of falling apart in fragments and individual segments. And here the reader has his great task, which during the act of reading consists in giving birth to a new and bigger human being out of the relation potentials that the novel, by means of its ingenious coding, has paved the way for

### 【Notes】

In 1917 Knut Hamsun was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his novel *Growth of the Soil*

The designation the great four is used to mean in the history of Norwegian literature the poets and authors Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (Nobel Prize 1903), Jonas Lie, Aleksander Kielland, Henrik Ibsen

Hauser states inter alia that sobald die objektive Wirklichkeit einmal restlos subjektiviert und zur Projektion des Ichs geworden ist, verliert die Psychologie ihren eigentlichen Sinn; sie wird zu einem Vehikel der Metaphysik.

Jan Kjærstad claims that Hamsun's *Hunger* is the first text in world literature in which consciousness itself is the main character, (Kjærstad *Sult, et fragment* 9). This consciousness is distributed over the hunger-figure's primary reflections and the textual consciousness in all the subtexts that arise from his numerous attempts at writing

The novel trilogy consists of the individual works *Vagabonds* (1927), *August* (1930) and *The Road Leads On* (1933). A first analysis of the August trilogy with its interpretational anchorage in surrealist theories will be found in Brynhildsvoll: Frankfurt am Main 1998

More on the relationship between writing, reflection and sexuality in Brynhildsvoll: 1990, pp. 177 - 208 and in Brynhildsvoll: Munich 1998, p. 709f

One can in a way argue that in his last 13 dramas Ibsen makes use of a *corresponding* network-based technique where the individual dramas are cyclically linked with one another and where themes and motifs are repeated and

varied so that everywhere in the collected text corpus one finds resonances and assonances that link the individual dramas to one another

Vanitas, Latin: emptiness, vanis, Latin: empty, absent

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