

# Knut Hamsun's *Sult*: Psychological Deep Structures and Metapoetic Plot

Atle Kittang

It is generally agreed upon today that *Sult* belongs to those literary works from the end of the nineteenth century which mark a turning point in the history of the European novel. Knut Hamsun himself may have been well aware of this. In a letter to Georg Brandes, written shortly after the publication of *Sult*, he repeatedly insists that he has not wanted to write a conventional novel with "marriages and picnics and parties".<sup>1</sup> This antagonistic attitude towards the prevailing norms of narrative art is also a constant theme in those famous lectures from 1891, by means of which Hamsun confirmed his position as the *enfant terrible* of the Norwegian literary institution.<sup>2</sup>

But to describe *Sult* negatively as an early specimen of the "anti-novel" does not bring about any clearer understanding of the book's positive characteristics. What kind of literary work is *Sult*? What makes it such an original and astonishingly modern novel?

One answer, which has the advantage of being close to Hamsun's own general ideas of the novel during the early 1890s, is that *Sult* belongs to the tradition of psychological Naturalism. In his letter to Georg Brandes Hamsun compares his book not only with Dostojevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, but also with the *Germinie Lacerteux* of the Goncourt brothers, that is, with a kind of literature where conventional novelistic plots and characters have been replaced by documentary investigations into the peculiarities of physio-psychological cases. If we add to this all the years of starvation and misery which characterize Hamsun's own biography during the difficult years of the 1880s, we get the model from which so many interpretations of *Sult* have taken their general idea: *Sult* is a documentary study, based upon personal experience, of how starvation affects a sensible mind.

Such a reading may explain some of the links between the novel and its author, and thus shed some light upon that ambiguous space between fiction and autobiography from which so many of Hamsun's works seem to emerge. But it does not explain the structural aspects of the book, nor its deeper thematic purport. And consequently, the interpretation it offers of the main motif, of the novel's hero, and of its plot, is too narrow and even superficial.

Let me substantiate this claim by a couple of preliminary remarks touching upon some selected aspects of the novel.

First of all, there is no simple relationship between the hero's hunger and his peculiar destiny. Starvation is of course – as in "real life" – the symptom of a real physiological lack. But on the other hand, not all the strange behaviour and reactions of the hero can be explained as consequences of his hunger. Hamsun himself has emphasized this, in a letter from 1888, when the first fragment of what was to become the novel of *Sult* was published in the Danish review *Ny Jord*.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the motif of starvation goes far beyond the mere "Naturalistic" or physiological level of meaning. In Hamsun's book hunger is also a metaphor, signifying a more fundamental lack or emptiness, which is a central aspect of the psychological deep structures investigated by the writer.

Secondly, *Sult* is not only a meticulous report on the psychology and social situation of a starving young man. It is also a very complex story which takes us from early autumn to winter, from a situation of misery where (to a certain extent, at least) the starving hero nevertheless is able to write creatively, and into a deep crisis where he destroys his manuscripts and abandons his artistic vocation. But paradoxically enough, this disastrous course of events also brings our hero from a state of total isolation, living in a narrow shed of a room which is compared to a coffin (the meaning of this simile will be discussed later on), and to a kind of social integration within the grotesque family in the lodging house in Vaterland. On his way from isolation to integration, the hero has to pass through the tragi-comic love affair with Ylajali. The profound irony of the whole thing is, however, that our hero meets his Waterloo as an artist in a situation where starvation has ceased to be any problem, since food is regularly provided by the landlady. Thus, *Sult* appears as a kind of negative novel of education, or better: its plot is that of a true novel of disillusionment.

My third preliminary remark concerns the narrative form of the novel. *Sult* is in fact a first person novel of a rather peculiar kind. It starts in retrospect: "Det var i den tid jeg gik omkring og sultet i Kristiania, denne forunderlige by som ingen forlater før han har fåt mærker av den. . ." ("All of this happened while I was walking around starving in Christiania – that strange city no one escapes from until it has left its marks on him. . .").<sup>4</sup> But this narrative distance between the first person narrator and the "narrated I" is gradually abolished. Throughout the rest of the novel the narrative movement, that is, the totality of the text, is inseparable from the gradual development of a consciousness. This consciousness, without name and biographical antecedents, is nothing but a string of perceptions and fantasies, ambitions, desires and strange kinds of behaviour, kept together as a textual unity by two permanent traits only: its inner lack (symbolized by the hunger, but also specified as erotic desire) and its artistic drives.

This peculiar and productive connection between the textual movement of the novel and its all-dominating consciousness is seen very clearly in the opening sequence of the book, where the hero is presented in a state of awakening:

Jeg ligger våken på min kvist og hører en klokke nedenunder mig slå seks slag; det var allerede ganske lyst og folk begyndte å færdes op og ned i trapperne. Nede ved døren hvor mit rum var tapetseret med gamle numre av "Morgenbladet" kunde jeg så tydelig se en bekjendtgjørelse fra fyrdirektøren, og litt tilvenstre derfra et fett, bugnende avertissement fra baker Fabian Olsen om nybakt brød. [ . . . ]

Det lysnet mere og mere og jeg gav mig til å læse på avertissementerne nede ved døren; jeg kunde endog skjælné de magre, grinende bokstaver om "Liksvóp hos jomfru Andersen, tilhøre i porten". Det sysselsatte mig en lang stund [ . . . ]. (p.7)

I was lying awake in my attic room; a clock struck six somewhere below; it was fairly light already and people were beginning to move up and down the stairs. Over near the door, where my wall was papered with old issues of the *Morning Times*, I could make out a message from the Chief of Lighthouses, and just to the left of that an advertisement for fresh bread, showing a big, fat loaf: Fabian Olsen's bakery. [ . . . ]

It was getting lighter, and I concentrated on the advertisements by the door; I could even read the slim, mocking typeface declaring: "Shrouds available, Miss Andersen, Main Entrance, to the right". That satisfied me for a long time [ . . . ]. (p.3f)

The sequence describes a transitional situation where light gradually replaces darkness. Out of this transition the text's own consciousness is born, a psychological being is created, so to speak, from the nothingness of the night, from the nothingness which marks the limits of the text's own life. Gradually we learn about his social situation as an unemployed writer with no money and with nothing to eat. But here, at the starting point, what is worth noticing is that when this mind comes to life, it is as a consciousness of symbols, and more precisely of linguistic symbols, of texts. What is grasped as the light gets clearer, are fragments of the *Morning Times*: letters, messages, information.

These textual fragments papering the walls of his coffin-like attic are certainly not chosen at random. They refer in fact to central themes and motifs in the novel. The baker's advertisement prefigures the dialectics of starvation and nourishment; later, when the hero wishes to mark his difference from the rest of humanity, he will envisage himself as a shining lighthouse, standing erect in the middle of an ocean of human misery. And the grim, mocking letters announcing "Shrouds available" are in fact the first signals of the death motif, pointing to one of the secret thematic centres of the novel. But what strikes us most strongly here in this opening sequence, is not so much the motifs as the textual character of their introduction. Let me put it this way: just as the reader's mind constitutes itself as a consciousness of the text called *Sult*, so the text's own consciousness is born as a consciousness-of-text. The passage from nothingness to being, symbolically expressed through the awakening of the hero, is in both cases mediated through the mode of textuality.

This interpretation may appear like pure sophistry, like a splitting of the hairs of Hamsun's text. However, my reason for insisting upon the initial scene of awakening the way I have done, is not only to exemplify how narration and story are closely interrelated right from the beginning of the novel. The awakening scene also offers the first indication of the basic psychological structures which form the main field of investigation in Hamsun's text. The story of a starving writer and his tribulations in the city of Christiania is, on a more profound level, a novelistic analysis of what a philosopher would have described as a phenomenology of consciousness. Instead of presenting us with a fully-fledged character, the text shows how a human subjectivity is beginning to take shape, in a dialectic interplay between the nothingness of pure consciousness and some exterior fragments of symbols, that is, of meaning. It is not a process where the outer world is firmly grasped by a mind already formed as an identity, nor is it a process where the mind seeks to identify with the outer world. It is rather a process where the mind's access to the world is mediated through an order of symbols which makes recognition possible and, simultaneously, separates consciousness from reality itself. Rephrased in the terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis (which has contributed essentially to my subsequent interpretation), what is at stake in the opening sequence of *Sult* is the constitution of the subject through the mediation of The Other – locus and carrier of the Symbolic Order.

Let us leave for a while the philosophical subtleties and take a brief look at some of the episodes following immediately after the awakening scene, describing the first of those

aimless walks through the streets of Christiania which form the main substance of the book.

This first walk is characterized by a series of meetings which all make a strong impression on the hero. He meets an old woman in front of a butcher's shop; then he begins to follow an old cripple; the third meeting is with two women, one of whom will reappear later as Ylajali; and finally, on a bench in a park, he experiences a rather strange "meeting with himself".

There are considerable differences between these four meetings. The early glimpse of Ylajali introduces the thematics of desire in *Sult*, and triggers off what eventually will develop into a veritable "novel within the novel". The hero's meeting with himself is the first indication of a particular existential experience – a state of harmonious narcissism, sometimes with pantheistic shades – which never ceases to appear in Hamsun's work. Against the apparently positive characteristics of these episodes (– apparently, because all states of harmony in Hamsun are more or less brutally undercut by some hidden conflict), the two other meetings strike us as unambiguously negative.

However, the four meetings have at least two important traits in common. In some way or other, they all express what I would call "mirror experiences", and they all involve a curious tension between identification and aggression. It is as if the recognition implied in every specular experience is hampered by an irresistible impulse to split and separate.

Actually, both the old woman and the cripple embody in a rather grotesque way the hero's own existential condition. In the eyes of the old woman, "still full of sausage" (p.7), he finds a reflection of his own hunger. And the cripple, who by the way is compared with a "huge limping insect" (p.9), is not only as penniless and hungry and miserable as the hero himself. He also appears as a curious prefiguration of the hero's physical defect during the tragi-comic love game with Ylajali towards the end of the novel. Suffering from an injury in his leg after an accident in the street, the hero will in turn appear like a limping insect in his erotic pursuit of Ylajali around the family table in her apartment. Hamsun critics like Aasmund Brynildsen have recognized in such episodes the motif of the Double, so important in several of Hamsun's early novels.<sup>5</sup> (Another example would be the couple Nagel/Minutten in *Mysterier*). However, an adequate interpretation of this motif will have to consider its other face also, that is, the role played by aggression. The meeting with the old woman and her look "still full of sausage" fill the hero with disgust and nausea; and his reaction towards the cripple is aggressiveness pure and simple. In fact, if the two figures can be interpreted as grotesque mirror images of the hero's own condition, it is as if he needs to maintain a distance towards these exterior images of himself: as if the irresistible fascination has to be controlled by an act of mental separation.

This is even more striking in the park episode, where the hero "meets himself":

Idet jeg ligger i denne stilling og later øinene løpe nedover mit bryst og mine ben lægger jeg mærke til den sprættende bevægelse min fot gjør hver gang pulsen slår. Jeg reiser mig halvt op og ser ned på mine føtter og jeg gjennomgår i denne stund en fantastisk og fremmed stemning som jeg aldrig tidligere hadde følt; det gav et fint, vidunderlig sæt gjennom mine nerver som om det gik ilinger av lys gjennom dem. Ved å kaste øinene på mine sko var det som jeg hadde truffet en god bekjent eller fåt en løsreven part av mig selv tilbake; en gjenkjendelsesfølelse sitrer gjennom mine sanser, tårerne kommer mig i øinene, og jeg fornemmer mine

sko som en sagte susende tone imot mig. Svakhet! sa jeg hårdt til mig selv og jeg knyttet hænderne og sa svakhet. Jeg gjorde nar av mig selv for disse latterlige følelser, hadde mig tilbedste med fuld bevissthet; jeg talte meget strængt og forstandig og jeg knep øinene hæftig sammen for å få tårerne bort.

(p.19)

Lying in this position, letting my eyes float down over my chest and legs, I noticed the tiny leaping movement my feet made every time my heart beat. I sat up partway and gazed down at my feet. At that moment a strange and fantastic mood came over me which I had never felt before – a delicate and wonderful shock ran through all of my nerves as though a stream of light had flowed through them. As I stared at my shoes, I felt as if I had met an old friend, or got back some part of me that had been torn off: a feeling of recognition went through me, tears came to my eyes, and I experienced my shoes as a soft whispering sound coming up towards me. "Getting weak!" I said fiercely to myself and I closed my fists and said, "Getting weak." I was furious with myself for these ridiculous sensations which had overpowered me even though I was fully conscious of them. I spoke harsh and sensible phrases, and I closed my eyes tightly to get rid of the tears.

(pp.23–24)

What is described here is a profound experience of existential integrity: a unification in the Ego of something that hitherto only existed as "some part of me that had been torn off", a harmonious identity between mind and body which enables the hero to mirror himself in the separate parts of his body. But the feeling of integrity is triggered by an experience of alienation (the feet lead so to speak their own "leaping" life), and this initial splitting or separation is repeated at the peak of ecstasy, when the "I" turns aggressively against his own existential harmony, scolding himself as a father would scold an irresponsible child, driving as it were a wedge of language into the whispering and speechless communication between mind and body.

The meeting with the unknown ladies follows the same pattern. The moment of physical contact with Ylajali's arm, comparable to the hero's awareness of his own feet in the park, creates immediately a kind of erotic communication which is repeated as a specular communication between the two of them, across St Olaf's Place, when Ylajali has reached her apartment and looks down at her pursuer in the street: "Vi står og ser hverandre ind i øinene uten å røre os; det varer et minut; det skyter tanker mellem vinduet og gaten og ikke et ord sies" (p.15). ("We stood looking into each other's eyes without moving; this lasted a minute; thoughts shot between the window and the street, and not a word was said" (p.16)). But between those moments of erotic contact and specular identification a moment of aggression has already interfered: the hero's strange "lyst til å gjøre denne dame rædd, følge efter hende og fortrædige hende på en eller anden måte" (p.13) ("desire to frighten this woman, to follow her and hurt her in some way" (pp.13–14)), and to address her by means of meaningless phrases which strengthen her anxiety and unease.

In all these meetings, then, identification and separation, contact and aggressiveness, are woven into a complicated psychological pattern. The feeling of identity and wholeness which is created in the hero's mind, nevertheless originates outside him, in

some other figure (be it his own feet) functioning as a mirror image. Into this specular experience some kind of separation is then invariably introduced, mostly in the shape of an aggressive impulse, splitting as it were the I away from a self-absorbing communication with his mirror image.

In this process, language and discourse act as a force of separation and aggression, as in the park episode and during the meeting with Ylajali. But language can also be a vehicle of the desire for harmonious wholeness and unity. This aspect is also most clearly seen in the meeting with Ylajali. In fact, the hero's fantasy name "Ylajali", with its "glidende, nervøse lyd" (p.13) ("smooth, nervous sound" (p.14)), emerges in order to fill and sustain the distance created between them by the hero's mocking aggression. The name is not only a symbolic substitute for the desired woman. It is also a symbol of desire itself – considered in the Lacanian sense of a drive sustained by lack, sliding from element to element in the chain of symbolic substitutes, and which can never be fulfilled without losing its character of being desire: Y-la-ja-li. . .

Before I continue my interpretative investigations into the text of *Sult*, I will present some more theoretical remarks on the psychological structure that I have analysed so far. My starting point will be the psychoanalytical theory of narcissism, and my aim is to establish a set of thematic categories which are sufficiently general to convert Hamsun's literary discourse into cognitive terms, and sufficiently flexible to secure this hermeneutical transformation without betraying the real complexities of Hamsun's text.

In the Freudian tradition, the theory of narcissism refers originally to the phenomenon of self-love or auto-eroticism, interpreted both as the first decisive step in the psychosexual development of the child, and as a structure of the Unconscious. Primal narcissism precedes any awareness of sexual difference; it is a kind of infantile (that means also prelinguistic) mirror experience where the child is able to organize the chaos of scattered sensual feelings into a unifying perception of its own body. Thus primary narcissism is the main condition of the foundation of an Ego. But as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has argued in his theory of the mirror stage, this crucial process presupposes an external image which the child may interiorize, and on which it can organize its growing self-awareness. Following Lacan, who builds his theory on clinical observations made by specialists like H. Wallon and M. Klein, the infans, still without language and bodily co-ordination, enters the mirror stage between the sixth and the eighteenth month of its life. By means of identifying with an equally formed body (in "pure" form its own mirror image), the child grasps the image of a total, unified form upon which the future Ego will be organized. Central in such a theory is the role played by The Other in the development from infans to individuuum: The Other being this "place" outside of me where both my Self Image, "my" language and "my" desire originate.

This means, however, that narcissistic identification is not only the interiorization of an image. It is also the interiorization of a relation, that is, of the primary relation between Mother and Child. Since this relationship is essentially a sexualized relationship, narcissism means that an erotic structure is being implanted, originating, as Lacan puts it, in the desire of The Other (that is, of the Mother).

In *Sult*, the hero's "meeting with himself" in the park and the specular communication between Ylajali and himself illustrate these two basic aspects of narcissistic relationship. In the park episode, fragmentary sensual perceptions are unified into an experience of identity and wholeness, by way of which the hero is able to

grasp himself as an Ego, and even finds confirmation of this Ego-identity in his surroundings. The mirror contact with Ylajali adds to this confirmation a promise of erotic communication which prefigures the hero's desire for reunification with a Mother figure, as I will try to show later.

However, these two episodes, together with the two other meetings in the first part of the novel, also indicate the other main aspect of the psychoanalytical theory of narcissism. In fact, the process of identification upon which my Ego is founded is already undermined by some splitting or separation. Birth itself, when I am physically separated from the symbiosis with the maternal body, is the first moment of splitting out of which, eventually, something like a human individual being develops. This complex process attains its most dramatic stage during the oedipal period, where the desire of a reunification with the Mother and the corresponding dream of an invulnerable and all-powerful Ego are shattered against socio-psychological laws and interdictions. Unconsciously, this crisis of narcissism is overcome by means of a castration fantasy, which eventually puts an end to the dangerous regressive wishes and sustains my further development into psychological independence and maturity. The unconscious message of castration teaches us that separation and lack are essential aspects of our psychological make-up, and that our existence as individual beings depends upon such an inner void or split in our existence. This profound message is, however, in permanent conflict with our infantile dreams of unity and reintegration, and also with our deepest convictions of being an autonomous Ego, a self-contained psychological entity.

The role played by language and symbols in the life of human beings is explained by psychoanalytical theory as a function of this primordial splitting. As Freud argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and as Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan have repeated in various ways, the acquisition and mastery of language and of symbolization in general are closely linked with our early experiences of absence and lack. Language and symbols represent both the absence of something (in Freud's famous "Fort! Da!" example: the absence of the Mother), and the desire to substitute something for this lack. They sustain the distance that separates me from the order of reality. They prevent me from any self-destroying fusion with the world surrounding me, as when the hero in *Sult* employs language as a means not only of aggression but also of self-defence. And they fill the inner and outer void with substitute representations, as when the hero invents the name of "Ylajali".

Not only the opening sequences, but in fact the whole text of *Sult* with its various plot elements, can be interpreted as a modulation upon this tension between narcissistic desire and splitting (or castration). This does not mean, of course, that Hamsun's novel is some kind of unconscious allegory about children's desire for their Mother, or about castration anxiety, etc. It is my contention, however, that in *Sult* Hamsun is approaching the same fundamental level of consciousness and the same psychological deep structures as Freud did some years later, along the paths of clinical experience and self-analysis. Here, in this astonishing correspondence between the novelist's investigations into the deep conflicts of subjective and intersubjective existence, and the future revolutions in psychology, lies perhaps the real modernity of Hamsun's early (and even later) works.

It can easily be shown how the tragi-comic love affair between Ylajali and the *Sult* hero reflects this pattern of conflict. The desire which eventually brings the hero into the bourgeois apartment of Ylajali is both a regressive oral desire for her breasts and lips (this is very neatly emphasized in the text), and a desire for recognition as an Ego. But

all along the various scenes of seduction the hero is in multiple ways marked by the stigma of castration. During their second meeting, the hero is suffering from a sore finger – a self-inflicted wound which saved him from the dangerous lethargy of self-pity. His sore foot makes him limp like the old cripple when he is pursuing Ylajali around the family table. And the erotic spell is brutally broken when Ylajali notices, at the moment of sexual fulfillment, that he is even losing his hair – the third mark of castration on the hero's miserable body. Consequently, the love scene ends in frustration. The hero is ruthlessly expelled just as he is enjoying the prospect of being reunified with a maternal body.

It would be a simplification though, if this expulsion from the Paradise of the maternal body (which also happens to be a Paradise of the bourgeois Family) were construed as a negative experience only. It must also be interpreted as a salvation. From such a viewpoint, the signs of castration on the hero's body correspond to his moments of aggressiveness in those other narcissistic experiences that I have already analysed. Castration is so to speak his talisman which prevents him from being absorbed and dissolved in the erotic fusion with the (M)other.

This interpretation is sustained by the rather striking parallels between the erotic plot in *Sult* and the grotesque social integration within the family in the lodging house, which forms the hero's main temptation in the last part of the novel. What is described here is the fascinating effects upon the hero of a demonic family life to which he clings desperately, although it threatens both his pride, his self-respect, and his sense of individuality. In fact he is on the point of losing himself in a terrifying "family romance", and the magic centre of this romance, the landlady in the lodging house, is definitely a Mother figure (more so than Ylajali). Not only is she the one who feeds the hero, thus partly compensating for this inner lack of which the hunger is the main symbol. She is also pregnant with a child, and consequently a true symbol of maternity – of the biological symbiosis between Mother and Child which precedes any moment of splitting. The hero's experiences in the lodging house end, as does the Ylajali plot, with an act of expulsion. But this time its positive signification is unmistakable: it rescues the hero from the dangers of total regression.

The two secondary plots of *Sult* which I have mentioned briefly here, indicate two of the central thematic fields in the total novelistic universe of Hamsun: the conflicts and psychological mechanisms of love (e.g. *Mysterier*, *Pan*, *Victoria*, and the vagabond novels from the beginning of the twentieth century), and the inner and outer conflicts of social life (e.g. *Benoni*, *Rosa*, and *Konerne ved vandposten*). But *Sult* is above all a novel about the illusions and disillusion of an artist. For that reason I shall concentrate the following part of my interpretation upon the metapoetic plot of the book, trying to give some idea of how this principal theme is related to the structures that I have analysed so far.

To begin with, it is important to notice that what Hamsun offers in *Sult* is in fact a double portrait of an artist. On the one hand, he describes his hero as a writer, who has chosen this risky profession not only in order to earn a living, but also in order to gain recognition and fulfil some socially sanctioned ambitions. However, the hero's career as a writer brings him very little success and ends in total failure. On the other hand, the hero is furthermore presented through his powerful force of imagination, appearing as a breeding place of myriads of fantasies: erotic and sensual daydreams, exotic flights from reality, hallucinations of food, love, and music, visions of colours and forms, strange adventures and identities.

The innermost dream of the writer is to gain access to the Literary Establishment – to the Holy Family of Letters where the Almighty Editor (the Chief, as he is called in the novel) reigns as some sort of quasi-divine Father figure. To reach this aim the hero is willing to sacrifice his own individual talent on the altar of conformity and taste. He tries to write about the subjects and ideas that are most popular at the time, and at the Editor's request he attempts to remove from his articles and sketches all the traces of fever and intensity which come from his restless imagination. Behind this ambition it is easy to find a dream of social recognition and a narcissistic wish for self-realisation and integration which correspond to the erotic dreams and wishes that I have commented upon already. The dream of the writer is once more a mirror dream: a desire to recognize his own genius, his artistic Ego, in those signs of public recognition which arrive from The Other. Therefore, he has to conform to the images of success that Society keeps putting before him, like a mirror.

Why is this ambition never crowned with success? The hero himself seems to have a simple and straightforward answer to this question. It is because he always lacks the necessary material resources, such as paper and pencil when inspiration comes over him, or a place to work, or most importantly: enough food to eat. But underneath this simple answer the text hints at a more complex one, which puts the emphasis on the ironic aspects of the hero's situation as an artist. This complex answer focuses on the curious separation between the hero as a writer and his capacity of imagination – between the hero's ambitions and his creativity. In fact, on one occasion only do imagination, inspiration, and writing intermingle as productive forces in a successful creative process. This privileged moment is situated in the first part of the novel, and it marks at the same time its point of bifurcation: from now on, inspiration and writing, imagination and ambition will be definitively separated and will remain so throughout the rest of the novel.

As will be noticed from the following quotation, it is difficult to distinguish between Hamsun's description of poetic inspiration and those countless descriptions which can be found everywhere in the platonic-romantic tradition of aesthetics. Metaphors and motifs are in fact strikingly conventional:

Jeg skriver som en besat og fylder den ene side efter den andre uten et øieblikks pause. Tankerne kommer så pludselig på mig og vedblir å strømme så rikelig at jeg mister en masse biting som jeg ikke hurtig nok får skrevet ned skjønt jeg arbeider av alle kræfter. Det fortsætter å trænge ind på mig, jeg er fyldt av mit stof og hvert ord jeg skriver blir lagt mig i munden.

(pp.26–27)

I wrote as if possessed, and filled one page after the other without a moment's pause. Thoughts poured in so abruptly, and kept on coming in such a stream, that I lost a number of them from not being able to write them down fast enough, even though I worked with all my energy. They continued to press themselves on me; I was deep into the subject, and every word I set down came from somewhere else.

(p.36)

Of far greater importance is the setting of the scene. As in the opening sequence it is a scene of awakening, situated on the borderline between nothingness and being, in a room already presented by the text as a "gissen, uhyggelig likkiste" "hvis gulv gynget

op og ned for hvert skritt jeg tok bortover det" (pp. 7–8) ("This empty room whose floor gave a little with every step was like a badly put-together coffin" (p.4)). In this room, associated not only with death, but also with the image of the sea (the association is evident in the original, but almost imperceptible in the English translation), – in this no man's land the hero experiences poetic inspiration as an irresistible force, emerging from "somewhere else": from Otherness.

One of the consequences of this privileged moment will appear to be devastating: I am thinking of the hero's hubris, his self-deceptive arrogance which makes him leave the coffin-like attic room, although it appears later on to have been the only place where inspiration was found! Hamsun describes this arrogance with profound irony. But what is so special about such a miserable shed of a room? The answer can only be given by looking closer at its symbolic significance. As an image of death and nothingness it expresses exactly this fundamental lack or void which is the necessary condition of every act of imagination and symbolization; as an image of the sea it indicates this dynamic restlessness which characterises the forces of imagination. By treating such a symbolically loaded room with contempt, the hero is in fact alienating himself from the precondition of creativity. The rest of the novel is there to prove the disastrous nature of his decision.

This link between imagination and nothingness, enigmatic as it may seem, forms one of the central thematic points of the novel, which can be easily shown from the following two examples.

First of all, it is not accidental that the hero's most powerful fantasies are born not in the park or elsewhere in the city, but near the harbour, where the soft movements of the sea and the ships will act like a trigger on his imagination. However, the harbour is not only sea and ships and promises of exotic voyages. It is also, like the attic room, the image of a terrifying darkness inhabited by black monsters raising their bristles and waiting to pull him into the mortal void beneath the "heavy drowsiness" of its surface:

Og sjøen vugget derute i tung ro, skibe og plumpe, brednæsedede prammer rotet grave op i dens blyagtige flate, sprængte striper ut til høire og venstre og gled videre, mens røken væltet som dyner ut av skorstenene og maskinernes stempelslag trængte mat frem i den klamme luft.

(p.33)

Mørket var blitt litt tykkere, en liten bris furet i sjøens perlemor. Skibene hvis master jeg så mot himlen så ut med sine sorte skrog som lydløse uhyrer som reiste bust og lå og ventet på mig.

(p.44)

In front of me, the sea rocked in its heavy drowsiness; ships and fat, broad-nosed barges dug up graves in the lead-coloured plain, shiny waves darted out to the right and left and kept going, and all the time the smoke poured like feathery quilts out of the smokestacks and the sound of pistons penetrated faintly through the heavy moist air.

(p.46)

The darkness was thicker now, a light breeze furrowed the pearl-grey sea. The

ships whose masts I could see outlined against the sky looked, with their black bodies, like silent monsters who had raised their bristles and were lying in wait for me.

(p.68)

But paradoxically, from this feeling of dissolution and submergence imagination begins its work, developing around the name of Ylajali a glittering erotic fairy-tale:

Fremdeles var det ikke en lyd som forstyrret mig; det milde mørke hadde skjult alverden for mine øine og begravet mig der i idel ro – bare stilhetens øde lyddulm tier mig monotont i ørene. Og de dunkle uhyrer derute vilde suge mig til sig når natten kom og de vilde bringe mig langt-over hav og gjennom fremmede land hvor ikke mennesker bor. Og de vilde bringe mig til prinsesse Ylajalis slot, der en uanet herlighet venter mig, større end nogen menneskers er. Og hun selv vilde sitte i en strålende sal hvor alt er av ametyst, i en trone av gule roser, og række hånden ut mot mig når jeg stiger ind, hilse og rope velkommen når jeg nærmer mig og knæler. Velkommen, ridder, til mig og mit land!

(p.44)

Not a sound came to disturb me – the soft dark had hidden the whole world from me, and buried me in a wonderful peace – only the desolate voice of stillness sounded monotonously in my ear. And the dark monsters out there wanted to pull me to themselves as soon as night came, and they wanted to take me far over seas and through strange lands where no human being lives. And they wanted to bring me to Princess Ylajali's castle, where an undreamed-of happiness was waiting for me, greater than any person's! And she herself would be sitting in a blazing room all of whose walls were amethyst, on a throne of yellow roses, and she would reach her hands out to me when I entered, greet me, and cry "Welcome, O knight, to me and to my land!"

(p.69)

And the fantasy continues until it reaches the climax of an oral, erotic fusion: Ylajali's kiss.

My second example refers to a totally different episode, the hero's terrifying experience of darkness and anxiety at the police station. What this nightmare prefigures is the experience of individual death and dissolution: "Hvad om jeg selv var blitt opløst til mørke, gjort til ett med det?" (p.49) ("What if I myself become dissolved into the dark, turned into it?" (p.77)). To begin with, the hero tries to defend himself by an imaginary act of regression: humming lullabies to himself like a Mother to her frightened Baby. Then another kind of salvation is introduced, so to speak, in the shape of symbolism itself: the invention of a new "word", *kuboä*, saves him from a complete breakdown. But this new combination of letters is not like the words of ordinary language. It has no meaning of its own, it can only be defined as a pure difference, and is in fact so described in the text: "Jeg hadde opgjort mig en mening om hvad det ikke skulde bety, men ikke fattet nogen bestemmelse om hvad det skulde bety" (p.50) ("I had formulated my opinion on what the word did not mean, but I had not yet come to a decision on what it did mean" (pp.78–79)). Such a decision will never be reached. As a

hole – or gap – in language, the word *kuboå* signifies nothing more and nothing less than the void of emptiness which is the necessary condition for symbolism and meaning in general.

There are several connections between this nightmare episode and the hero's moments of inspiration and fantasy. On the one hand, we have some evident resemblances between the police cell and the coffin-like room of divine inspiration; these resemblances are also connected with the hero's experiences in the harbour. On the other hand, it is important to notice that the meditation upon the word *kuboå* leads directly on to a fantasy which is nothing less than a version in negative of the *Ylajali* fantasy from the harbour:

Herregud hvor det var mørkt! Og jeg bringes igjen til å tenke på havnen, på skibene, de sorte uhyrer som lå og ventet på mig. De vilde suge mig til sig og holde mig fast og seile med mig over land og hav, gjennom mørke riker som ingen mennesker har set. Jeg føler mig ombord, trukket tilvands, svævende i skyerne, dalende, dalende. . .

(p.51)

God in heaven, how black it was! And I started again to think about the harbour, the shops, the dark monsters who lay waiting for me. They wanted to pull me to themselves and hold me fast and sail with me over land and sea, through dark kingdoms no man had ever seen. I felt myself on board ship, drawn on through waters, floating in clouds, going down, down. . .

(p.80)

In this way the nightmare episode becomes a central clue to the understanding of the metapoetic theme in *Sult*. It expresses in a negative mode what the other episodes express more positively: namely, that fantasy, imagination, creativity and true writing are necessarily preconditioned by nothingness itself. Hunger, lack, emptiness and the principle of separation, by virtue of which individual consciousness, or *Ego*, is always already divided from the image of totality and fullness that constitutes the object of narcissistic desire: – those are the gaps and splits in human existence from which symbols, fictions, poetry and art emerge. This view of the nature of imagination is never absent from Hamsun's work, although it is often contradicted by more "positive", ideological conceptions of the artist and his functions. It is most clearly (and brutally) developed in the rather monstrous novel from 1920, *Konerne ved vandposten*, where the hero, Oliver Andersen, is not only an eunuch, but also a master of fiction, and thus a grotesque symbol of the Hamsunian artist: restless imagination drawing its force from a fundamental lack, and converting a self-sufficient world of fiction into an equally self-sufficient mode of existence. There can be no doubt about the sharpness of Hamsun's irony in *Konerne ved vandposten*. But irony, in Hamsun, is very seldom a rhetorical means of persuasion. On the contrary, it is the textual expression of deep insights into the existential truth of illusion: its central, and necessary, place in human life.

From this point of view, the failure of the *Sult* hero as a writer has to be interpreted as a consequence of his own arrogant blindness as to the real truth of his creative power. When he leaves his coffin-like attic room in order to seek public acceptance and social integration in the city of Christiania, he walks straight into the traps of narcissistic desire. However, he avoids being definitively trapped. Lack is so to speak his faithful

talisman, it inhabits his being in different ways: as hunger, as signs of castration and incompleteness, and as a profound force of separation and division. In the final scene of the novel, when the hero is leaving Christiania and his scattered ambitions, all these forces of nothingness and separation are concentrated into an image not of defeat, but of victory:

Ute i fjorden rettet jeg mig op engang, våt av feber og mathet, så ind mot land og sa farvel for denne gang til byen, til Kristiania hvor vinduerne lyste så blankt fra alle hjem.

(p.140)

When we were out on the fjord, I straightened up, wet from fever and exertion, looked in toward land and said goodbye for now to the city, to Christiania, where the windows of the homes all shone with such brightness.

(p.232)

Pushed by the disastrous course of events, the hero separates himself not only from the city of disillusionment and misery, but first and foremost from his own erotic and social dreams and wishes. Logically, this final act of separation is imagined as a sea voyage – as a flight into the realm of death, emptiness and movement, the field of imagination itself. What is left behind is the symbolic image of narcissistic desire: the homes, shining with brightness, idyllic but treacherous promises of integration and "family romance".

However, this image of liberating separation is ambiguously permeated with nostalgia. And the goodbye is not a definitive one. Later in Hamsun's work there will always be a hero who returns from the sea, seeking the illusions of comfort and identity in some little town. We meet him again in Hamsun's next novel, where Johan Nielsen Nagel, passing by on the coastal steamer, is so fascinated by the sight of the small town that he spontaneously decides to go ashore. In *Mysterier* this proves to be a disastrous decision: trapped in the labyrinths of love and social life Nagel seeks his death by returning to the sea. But the ending of *Mysterier* is rather exceptional in Hamsun's work. As a rule, the typical Hamsun hero resists the temptations of narcissistic desire, clinging to his inner emptiness, his "hunger", as to his life. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Hamsun's last novel, the enigmatic *Ringen sluttet*, whose main character, Abel Brodersen, bears such a strong resemblance to the *Sult* hero. The novel about Abel Brodersen is, fundamentally speaking, nothing but a repeated pattern of arrivals and departures, elaborated around an inner void: a human being devoid of any "character" or "identity". The *Sult* hero has no name; the hero of *Ringen sluttet* has a name filled with mythological connotations. But its etymological core reflects precisely the existential emptiness and restless movement around which Hamsun closes his ring of fiction: "air, wind, nothingness".<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. Cf. Tore Hamsun (ed.): *Knut Hamsun som han var. Et utvalg av hans brev* (Oslo, 1956), p.75.

2. Tore Hamsun (ed.): *Paa Turné. Tre foredrag om litteratur* (Oslo, 1960).
3. *Knut Hamsun som han var*, p.53.
4. Quotations from *Sult* are taken from *Knut Hamsun: Samlede verker, vol. I* (Oslo, 1954), and from Robert Bly's American translation, *Knut Hamsun: Hunger* (New York, 1967).
5. Cf. Aasmund Brynildsen: *Svermeren og hans demon. Fire essays om Knut Hamsun* (Oslo, 1973).
6. The main ideas of this article are developments of parts of the *Sult* chapter in my book *Luft, vind, ingenting. Hamsuns desillusjonsromanar frå Sult til Ringen sluttet* (Oslo, 1984).

## Ringen sluttet: In Defence of Abel Brodersen

Harald Næss

Knut Hamsun's later work has been overshadowed by the achievement of his youth in the 1890s: though most of his twentieth century production has enjoyed widespread popular appeal, critics on the whole have concentrated their efforts on analyzing the early novels – *Sult* (1890, trans. Hunger, 1899), *Mysterier* (1892, trans. *Mysteries*, 1927), *Pan* (1894, trans. Pan, 1920) – which is natural, considering both their greater historical impact and the youthful exuberance of their style. On the other hand, one might have expected that James McFarlane's seminal essay from 1956, in which he placed these works in the forefront of European Modernism, would have led to a similar treatment of Hamsun's later work.<sup>1</sup> Until recently this has not been the case.\* The following discussion of Abel Brodersen as a twentieth century "hero", is an attempt to show how the rarely read *Ringen sluttet* (1936, trans. *The Ring is Closed*, 1937), in addition to its distinction of being Hamsun's last novel, is one of his important books, containing the author's (as opposed to the politician's) latest wisdom and carrying still the stamp of his early Modernism.

This Modernism, which in his essay McFarlane referred to as "the whisper of the blood", and which is well illustrated in the novel *Sult*, involves both a revolt against bourgeois society – its beliefs, ideals, manners, style – and a lack of interest in its improvement through social reform. It demonstrates a total subjectivity, with a hero given to painstaking self-inspection and less intrigued by the objective world than by his own way of perceiving it. Furthermore it emphasizes the primal importance of art for its own sake, and explores art's anatomy and physiology, including the shock effects of abnormal fantasizing and perversity. *Sult*, as Hamsun claimed, was played on one string,<sup>2</sup> showing the Modernist way of saying the same things over and over again, each time differently, and this theme-and-variations technique applies to all his works, which are thematically much alike (the basic love triangle), though new dimensions are gradually added – Nagel's exploration of the demon within; Glahn's, and later Geissler's, primitivism; the preoccupation with cripples (already in *Sult*), disease, and uprootedness in the novels from the 1920s, etc.

It is Modernism's goal to avoid respectability and stagnation, and Hamsun's works show the author's attempt to keep his inspiration fresh by not repeating successes (like *Markens grøde*, 1917, trans. *Growth of the Soil*, 1920) and rather search for new ways of stating the old case. But for the modern, too, there is the altered perception of old age as well as the danger of routine, and, particularly, there is the tendency – not avoided by Hamsun – to adopt prophetic stances: politics entered his work after *Sult* and can be found in all his later books. Attempts have been made – and several times by Hamsun himself – to show that the opinions in his works are exclusively those of his characters, which is an argument easily refuted.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it is remarkable to what extent the politician – who inspired much of Hamsun's journalism – is absent from

\* After submitting the first draft of this article I have seen Atle Kittang's impressive and exhaustive treatment of Hamsun's "novels of disillusionment", including *Ringen sluttet*, in his book *Luft, vind, ingenting* (1984).