between commitment and autonomy, nor a sort of mixture of advanced formal elements with an intellectual content inspired by genuinely or supposedly progressive politics. The content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything it is the opposite. Nevertheless, an emphasis on autonomous works is itself sociopolitical in nature. The feigning of a true politics here and now, the freezing of historical relations which nowhere seem ready to melt, oblige the mind to go where it need not degrade itself. Today, every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics. Sartre himself has expressed this truth in a passage which does credit to his honesty.[10] This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead. An example is Kafka's allegory of toy guns, in which an idea of nonviolence is fused with a dawning awareness of the approaching paralysis of politics. Paul Klee too belongs to any debate about committed and autonomous art: for his work, *écriture par excellence*, has roots in literature and would not have been what it was without them—or if it had not consumed them. During the First World War or shortly after, Klee drew cartoons of Kaiser Wilhelm as an inhuman iron eater. Later, in 1920, these became—the development can be shown quite clearly—the *Angelus Novus*, the machine angel, who, though he no longer bears any emblem of caricature or commitment, flies far beyond both. The machine angel's enigmatic eyes force the onlooker to try to decide whether he is announcing the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it. But, as Walter Benjamin, who owned the drawing, said, he is the angel who does not give but takes.

Translated by Francis McDonagh.

Knut Hamsun

By Leo Lowenthal

Less concerned than Adorno with formal issues of content, Lowenthal's essay, originally published in Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung *Vol. VI (1937), is a splended example of ideology critique applied to a sphere allegedly free from ideology. While the longing for and glorification of "nature" is rooted in a correct response to the experience of alienation and domination in bourgeois society, the escape to a sphere or vision abstractly opposed to it merely reinforces what it seeks to avoid. That ideology hides precisely where it is least suspected was a favorite argument of the members of the Institute.*

Lowenthal's argument embodies a typical figure of thought: an abstract, absolute opposition does not really "contradict" its opposite at all; instead, it becomes the other side of the same coin. Rejecting a life of isolation and domination, Hamsun's characters counter it with an isolated alternative whose merely reactive meaning now equally dominates them. Like their audience, they thus remain within the very mode of experience they tried to overcome.

In the periods studied so far, literary artists expressed through their characters the conviction that the activities of the individual are rooted in universally binding values and that therefore these fictional life histories could serve as a parable or a stimulus to others. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the artist ceases to reflect this ideal of the ethical unity of men.

At his best the modern writer, like all writers, keeps alive the hopes of the individual and the ideal of his self-realization in society; even the defeats he portrays are meaningful within this context. At his worst, however, he can fall victim to an irrational escape into the arms of authoritarianism. Knut Hamsun was this kind of writer. In the twenties and thirties, his work not only enjoyed an excellent international literary reputation but also was regarded—even by liberals and socialists—as politically above reproach. However, in his act of joining Quisling's party during the Second World War, he expressed in practice the authoritarian themes and moods that had long been implicit in his novels: the pagan awe of unlimited and unintelligible forces of nature, the mystique of blood and race, hatred of the working class and of clerks, the blind submission to authority, the abrogation of individual responsibility, anti-intellectualism, and spiteful distrust of urban middle-class life in general.[1]

Nature

In Ibsen, the hymn to nature as a last gesture of hope comes at the end of his final play, *When We Dead Awaken*. Man has found, in the social realm, not true freedom but only a mirage. By contrast with its pressures and restrictions, nature appears as a realm of freedom and a source of happiness and consolation. In enjoyment of the countryside, nothing seems to remain of the perpetual toil and responsibility, competition and even hostility. Communion with nature holds out a new image of man, one that will counter the image of himself as a victim.

The meaning of nature in almost every age is inseparable from social considerations. In the Renaissance, nature meant at once a scene of man's activities, a field for conquest, and an inspiration; it formed the *mise-en-scène* of men's lives. To be sure, even then there was an element of protest—the idyls of natural life in the works of Cervantes and Shakespeare implied a rejection of the contemporary "unnatural" society. Nevertheless, the concept of nature as a counter-ideal to society strengthened the optimistic belief in progress, since it provided men with a yardstick against which shortcomings could be more clearly seen and evaluated. In the history of Western European drama from Shakespeare to Ibsen, and of poetry from Petrarch to Hölderlin, the path to nature was not a flight but a stroll toward liberation.

However, with the coming of doubt and even despair about personal fulfillment within society, the image of nature was no longer

a basis for a new perspective, but became an alternative. Nature was increasingly envisaged as the ultimate surcease of social pressure. In this context, man could submit to nature and feel at peace—at least in fantasy. His soul, inviolable in ideology yet outraged in reality, could find solace in such a submission; frustrated in his attempt to participate autonomously in the societal world, he could join the world of nature. He could become a "thing," like the tree or the brook, and find more pleasure in this surrender than in a hopeless struggle against manmade forces. This is the most significant change in man's imagery of his environment to take place in the closing decades of the nineteenth century in Europe. The novels of Knut Hamsun portray this antinomy of society and nature in an extreme form.

Sentimentalism and Brutality

The image of nature in Hamsun's novels has little in common with earlier conceptions of nature as a source of directives for human conduct. It lacks the critical element that made Rousseau's naturalism, for example, a progressive political and cultural force in the eighteenth century. Since the Renaissance, man had seen himself able, at least potentially, to conquer some of nature's forces. This attitude reflected his faith in the unlimited potential of reason and, specifically, his hope for political and social reconstruction.

In Hamsun, submission to nature functions as an escape from the burden of social responsibility. This passive attitude in part explains why Hamsun's heroes are able to profess sentimental pity for the unsheltered animal, the tree in the wind or the withering foliage. In the fate of nature's children, they see a reflection of their own helplessness. To be a victim in the world of men is a threat to dignity. There is a certain solace, on the other hand, in being a victim of majestic natural forces for which man cannot be expected to be personally accountable.

Paradoxically, this new type of submission to nature is closely related to political submission. The yearning for surrender to nature as it appears in Hamsun's novels not only glorifies the awareness of individual weakness but at the same time exalts reverence for superior power in general. In our time we have seen in Europe's totalitarian movements the apotheosis of unshakable political authority—unshakable, in part, because one cannot fathom it. The timelessness and magnificence of nature reinforces the finality of the political power under which man lives. The yearning at once for stability and for glory

is a trait of fascist ideologies (Hitler's "thousand years of history") that appears alongside this new type of nature worship.

The home, in the Victorian period particularly, was a refuge from the harshness of business and professional life. In Ibsen, we saw the idyl of the home devoured by the monster of competition, and nature appeared on the horizon as the utopian realm of hope. In Hamsun, flight to nature as protest becomes flight to nature as idolatry, and communion with nature is transformed from sentiment into sentimentality, and then into brutality.

Implicit in this change is an element of anti-intellectualism. The use of reason, in whatever form, is indissolubly bound up with the responsibility of the thinker. Thus, the flight to nature for the sake of abdication of human responsibility soon comes to be rationalized in thought that abhors thinking. This anti-intellectualism must be distinguished from vitalist and pragmatist philosophies earlier in this century. Bergson, Dilthey and certain American philosophers rebelled against rationalist rigidity, to be sure, but their works were nonetheless responsible theoretical enterprises oriented toward the goal of higher individual development. Vitalism (*Lebensphilosophie*) as it was taken up by the ideological spokesmen of fascism looked rather to the submergence of the individual; reason was rejected in favor of overpowering mythical forces, blood and race.

This submergence of reason accompanied a glorification of the peasant, an integral part of anti-liberal undercurrents. The peasant is seen as not alienated from his work; unlike the industrial worker, he does not seem to violate nature but follows, so to speak, its true rhythm. Since his work is hard, healthy, meaningful and in harmony with natural processes, it is set forth as the model of true manliness, dignified and silent. In the analysis that follows, an effort will be made to show that the sentimental conceptions of nature and peasant in Hamsun's novels anticipate an intrinsic part of those political ideologies that forge the concepts of leader, social coercion and soil into a tool of brutality.

Flight into Nature

At first sight, Hamsun does not seem qualified to represent the emergence of a typically modern European authoritarian ethos. (It is noteworthy, however, that it was in Germany that Hamsun obtained his greatest response from the very beginning.) Coming from a small country that, unlike the larger nations, has primary economic interests in agriculture and fishing, Hamsun might be expected to portray

themes different from those of writers in highly industrialized nations. But, in fact, it is just this disparity between Norwegian conditions and the situation of the larger and industrially more advanced countries that makes Hamsun's picture of his society so reassuring at first glance and so foreboding upon closer analysis.[2]

Hamsun's first novel, *Hunger*, written in autobiographical form and published in 1890, states the themes that are almost endlessly repeated in the later novels: abandonment of any participation in public life, submission to the stream of incomprehensible and incalculable forces, distrust of the intellect, flight from the city and escape to nature.

The opening sentence of *Hunger* evokes the fate of the average city dweller:

> It was during the time I wandered about and starved in Christiania; Christiania, this singular city, from which no man departs without carrying away the traces of his sojourn there.[3]

The theme of the city is set at once. The fate of the hero is not comprehensible in terms of any conditions specific to him (he is, in this case, luckless and starving), but only in terms of the most general fact, the city. When he has finally had his fill and leaves as a newly hired sailor, the novel ends on the same note with which it began:

> Out in the fjord I dragged myself up once, wet with fever and exhaustion, and gazed landwards, and bade farewell for the present to the town—to Christiania, where the windows gleamed so brightly in all the homes.[4]

One of Hamsun's figures once replied to an apologist for the city:

> You have your home in the city, it is true, and you have decorated it with trinkets and pictures and books; but you have a wife and a maid and hundreds of expenses. In waking and sleeping you must struggle with things, and you never have peace. I have peace. Keep your spiritual goods and the books and art and newspapers, keep your coffee houses and your whiskey which always makes me sick. Here I can roam about the woods, and I feel fine. If you put intellectual problems to me and try to drive me into a corner, I merely reply that God is the source, and that men are in truth only specks and threads in the universe. Even you have gone no further.[5]

The motif of peace is rare in Hamsun's writing;[6] its use here as the key to the blessings of rustic life could perhaps be interpreted as a legitimate protest against urban conditions. When, however, a protest in the name of a seemingly higher idea becomes a wholesale condemnation of civilization, when it does not discriminate between marketplace manipulation and family life, between the newspaper and artistic creations, between anxious restlessness and emotional pleasure, between the futility of mere distraction and the earnestness of serious reading—all of which Hamsun spurns with equal rancor—then we are not dealing with alert social criticism, but with anti-intellectual resentment. Hamsun in the same breath ridicules the cheap pictures on the wall and jeers at the intellect. The final outcome of such impotent resentment is the surrender to brute power.

But first we must trace the steps of this process. What did Hamsun's heroes seek and what did they find in their flight to nature?

Solitude

When Hamsun speaks of man's solitude in nature, he seems at first glance merely to advocate liberation from the pressures of society:

> And there is another thing with which I am never finished, namely, retreating and sitting in the solitude of the woods, surrounded by beauty and darkness. That is the final joy.[7]

Nature appears to hold forth the promise of fulfilling the desire for relationships in which gratitude, joy and rest can come to fruition:

> Thanks for the lonely night, for the hills, the rush of the darkness and the sea through my heart! Thanks for my life, for my breath, for the boon of being alive tonight; thanks from my heart for these! . . . By my immortal soul, I am full of thanks that it is I who am sitting here![8]

But on closer inspection, it becomes clear that a new approach is in the making, according to which nature is more than a soothing balm:

> You must not believe that nothing happens here . . . I could send significant tales from here, but I don't do it. I have sought the woods for solitude and for the sake of my great irons. I have a few great irons within me, and they are getting red hot.[9]

These passages do not conjure up an idyllic and peaceful image of nature, but introduce a note of boastful resentment. A few pages later in the novel, the hero, thinking of the reindeer, ponders the secrets of his existence:

> I think all these things.
>
> And you? Have you compared your two newspapers, and do you know now what is the public opinion in Norway today about old-age insurance?[10]

Hamsun anticipates his imagined antagonist's retort, and with considerable resentment:

> Here you will certainly help yourself and make sport of me; you can say many droll things about the tree stump and me. But deep down you know that I am superior to you in this as in everything else, once I admit that I do not have as much city knowledge and that I was no student, ha ha. You can teach me nothing about wood and fields, for there I feel what no man has felt.[11]

The idea of a private kingdom to which man stubbornly clings (we have only to think of the dreams of fulfillment with which Ibsen endows his women) is transferred by Hamsun to the solitude of nature. This nature, however, is not merely an extrahuman place where one can go and from which one can return; it is a substitute for human society. Nature is the seat of magical qualities of a new kind. In the old fairy tales, men learn to speak the language of animals; in order to be lords of all creation, they seek to overcome the barriers of nature by bringing the animal world into the human through the medium of speech. Hamsun's hero, however, seeks to draw from nature the meaning which he can no longer deduce from history. What he "overhears" (the tales he could tell but does not) is not meant to increase man's knowledge of his world and himself; if the tales were told, they would report only his own resentment and contempt.

Identity

The philosophy of liberalism did not encompass the idea that the whole world had come within man's power. Subject and object were opposed in the forms of active man and conquerable nature. Nature was raw material and man the unrealized potential; man realized himself in its conquest. Social relationships were implicit in this interaction; the knowledge of nature was won through communication of man with man, and nature was transformed by organized societal

enterprise. The relationship toward which Hamsun's ideas tend is of a totally different kind. Nature is no longer looked upon as an object for scientific and practical control; instead, Hamsun's hero consecrates his life in rapt surrender to nature and even in mystical identification:

> We are in the midst of an omnipresence. That is truly God. That is truly we ourselves as parts of the whole.[12]

To Hamsun, nature means peace, but a peace which has lost its spontaneity and its will to know and to control. It is a peace based on submission to every arbitrary power, a pantheism which offers an escape from the gloomy framework of history. Nature comes to mean the solace of the unchangeable and the all-pervasive:

> . . . he lost himself, was carried away and wrapt in the frenzy of sunshine . . . He was in a mysterious state, filled with psychic pleasure; every nerve in him was awake; he had music in his blood, felt akin to all nature, to the sun and the mountains and everything else, felt surrounded by a whisper of his own ego-sense from trees and tufts and blades of grass.[13]

The hero avoids asking any embarrassing questions about the rest of mankind. He shows concern only for his own fate. There is even a hint that nature is his private property and that his enjoyment of it is a kind of personal possession. Paragraph after paragraph of exalted description communicates neither observation nor knowledge, but only a desire for personal omnipotence and for pantheistic possession of the world by emotional immersion:

> The sky all open and clean; I stared into that clear sea, and it seemed as if I were lying face to face with the uttermost depth of the world; my heart beating tensely against it, and at home there.[14]

The timelessness of such pantheism gives the illusion of an immediate, complete possession of the entire world, a possession that at the same time cuts off historical progress. Gone is the optimistic dualism of liberalistic philosophy which always maintained close contact with history, considered the transitoriness of the human situation, and often gave birth to a conception of the future, utopian to be sure, in which a final stasis of perfection might be reached.

Hamsun's identification with the whole of nature can be consummated with no exertion and with no fear of disillusionment. What the utopians had envisioned as a potential unity of man and nature comes to be proclaimed as already realized: the meaning of man's life is to be found in natural factors such as blood and soil. When such a myth is consciously used in the interests of a power apparatus, as it was under fascism, men are told that their inevitable and irrevocable share of nature is their "race" and their nation.

Fury

The shift to an authoritarian concept of nature is apparent also in the changed imagery of the fury of the elements. Compare Hamsun's descriptions with similar ones in earlier literature. Hamsun writes:

> . . . lightning flashes, and soon thereafter the thunder rolls like an immense avalanche far beyond, between the mountains . . . Lightning again, and the thunder is closer at hand; it also begins to rain, a driving rain, the echo is very powerful, all nature is in an uproar, a chaos. I want to enfeeble the night by yelling at it, otherwise it will deprive me mysteriously of all my strength and will power. . . . More lightning and thunder and more driving rain, it is as if I were whipped by the echo nearby . . .[15]

Kant, too, once wrote about the power of nature:

> Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunder-clouds piled up to the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river . . .[16]

At first sight, there appears to be no essential difference between the two passages. For Kant, however, the sublimity of nature and the experience of man's helplessness before it are counterbalanced by the concept of nature as subordinate in the face of humanity. It is man's own knowledge and imagination which creates the conception of the grandiosity in nature that dwarfs him. In the end, the rational faculties of man are of a higher order than the elemental force of nature, and they allow him to see it as sublime, instead of simply terrifying:

> . . . we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and

> discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.[17]

Thus, for Kant, nature is not to console man for frustrations, but to stimulate his moral and intellectual development.

In Hamsun, the relation of man to nature takes on an entirely different cast.

> I stood in the shelter of an overhanging rock, thinking many things; my soul was tense. Heaven knows, I thought to myself, what it is I am watching here, and why the sea should open before my eyes. Maybe I am seeing now the inner brain of earth, how things are at work there, boiling and foaming.[18]

The locus of knowledge has become nature itself, mysterious and beyond man's capacities to know. Hamsun's questions are framed so they cannot be answered; his tired individuals seek to silence themselves as quickly as possible. They really have nothing to say, and they welcome the storm that can roar loudly enough to drown out their own silence. The relationship of man to nature as seen by Kant is reversed; for Hamsun, the storm serves as an occasion for increasing the individual's awareness of his own insignificance.

> When a moment of sadness and realization of my own nothingness in the face of all the surrounding powers comes over me, I lament and think: Which man am I now, or am I perhaps lost, am I perhaps no longer existent! And I speak aloud and call my name, in order to hear whether he is still present.[19]

Anxiety enters as a component of Hamsun's pantheism. Kant's pride in human autonomy is replaced by a sentimental uneasiness that is announced in every thunderstorm and that is subsequently ramified as a jumble of mawkish sympathies for both natural objects and spiritual difficulties.[20] Hamsun's nature world foreshadows the affinity of brutality and sentimentality, a well-known phenomenon in Nazi Germany.

Rhythm

When Hamsun speaks of nature, it is generally the forest and the sea. In the world of the forest, the law of rhythm, another significant element in Hamsun's imagery of nature, emerges:

> There is nothing more glorious than the soughing of the woods. It is like swinging, rocking—a madness: Uganda, Antananarivo, Honolulu, Atacama, Venezuela.[21]

The countries and cities have no concrete significance: what is essential is the sound of their names, which serves only to evoke and echo the order of natural motion. The rhythmic cycle of the seasons is also incessantly noted in the novels, where hypnotic prose again seems to imitate the phenomenon itself:

> Then came the autumn, then came the winter.[22]

> But the road leads on, summer follows spring in the world . . .[23]

> The days passed, time passed.[24]

Innumerable sentences of this kind sometimes take the form of a linguistic leitmotif, such as the ruthlessness of life, the procession of the seasons, the march of time, the men who go over the field or walk along the road, the measured steps of life and so forth.[25] Elsewhere, we find the seasonal and the daily rhythms unified:

> It is the autumn season now, a silence in the woods all round; the hills are there, the sun is there, and at evening the moon and the stars will come; all regular and certain, full of kindliness, an embrace.[26]

The rhythmic principle can also take on a normative character. What is wrong with certain people is that

> they won't keep pace with life . . . but there's none should rage against life.[27]

Even man's sexual relationships are oriented to the regularity of nature. The shepherdess will walk past the hunter's cabin in the autumn just as infallibly as she comes to him in the spring:

> The autumn, the winter, had laid hold of her too; her senses drowsed.[28]

Uniformity of rhythm and tempo is sought in both the natural and human spheres; the passage of time brings recurrence, and not

change. Nature's timetable replaces the timetable of history. This tendency displays the same simplification that is found in Hamsun's selection of landscapes. Whoever senses and accepts these rhythmic patterns as fundamental has full knowledge immediately and without rational effort. At the same time, the endless reproduction of natural phenomena, the cyclic order of nature, as opposed to the apparent disorder and happenstance of all individual and historical facts, testifies to the powerlessness of man. It is the extreme opposite of human self-assurance before nature. In this new ideology, which seeks to transfigure helplessness and subjection, the individual in seemingly free volition lays down his arms before a mythical power. Once, nature was held to be "autonomous" only insofar as it was not yet recreated as the product of human activity. Now, however, man must expect a life without meaning unless he obediently accepts as his own what may be called the law of nature. And the social counterpart to the law of natural rhythm is blind discipline.

Hero Worship

When Hamsun speaks of the forces of nature to which man should subject himself, it is, as we have noted, mostly of the woods and the sea. But when he speaks of man himself, as he should be, he leaves these unspoiled provinces behind and speaks foremost of farming. Hamsun's emphasis is not upon the social conditions of the farm; rather, he is again involved in constructing the myth which demands the necessity of man's submission to nature. The peasant tunes himself to forces stronger than himself, and that is supposed to be the lesson he can teach us. In addition, vigorous youth and women are portrayed as truly obedient to nature's forces. Hamsun gives us, in fact, a gallery of unheroic heroes, whose qualities are primarily those of subjection and discipline.

The Peasant

Hamsun's peasants are not individuals; they are aspects of nature, and his apparent admiration of them is not a love of man, but a reverence for the domination of nature over its inhabitants.

> His [the peasant's] life was spent in this work and that, according to the season; from the fields to the woods, and back to the fields again.[29]

This sentence is typical. The peasant himself is not characterized; he is presented only as a natural phenomenon that comes and goes like the

blossoming and withering of the leaves in the forest. That is precisely the identity which Hamsun seeks, an identity established by nature, not by man:

> . . . looking up at blue peaks every day of your lives; no new-fangled inventions about that, but fjeld and rocky peaks, rooted deep in the past—but you've them for companionship. There you are, living in touch with heaven and earth, one with them, one with all these wide, deep-rooted things.[30]

The course of history is reversed: "Man and nature don't bombard each other."[31] In Hamsun, nature has no place for the individual as such; his irrelevancy is not only described but glorified in the person of the peasant who is reduced to a biological speck in the rhythm of life.

> 'Tis you that maintain life. Generation to generation, breeding ever anew; and when you die, the new stock goes on. That's the meaning of eternal life.[32]

Daniel is the name of this peasant, but any other peasant could serve as well. "Daniel was the same today as yesterday . . ."[33] And the elements in nature with which the peasant deals are always the same, too.

> Wherever there was a tiny patch of fertile ground, there hay or potatoes or barley grew; in summer the cattle were out in the pasture, in winter they stood in their stalls—it was all so eternal and so changeless.[34]

In the course of the flight to nature, Hamsun's individual is stripped of his singular human qualities and subjected to "eternal" naturalness. " 'Tis the land I'm here for."[35] Service to nature is the real law of peasant life, and happiness means only that he has fulfilled his naturalistic destiny. Only submission to the laws of nature that dictate, for example, the cultivation of grain makes man an admirable figure:

> Growth of the soil was something different, a thing to be procured at any cost; the only source, the origin of all.[36]

> For generations back, into forgotten time, his fathers before him

had sowed corn; solemnly on a still, calm evening . . . Corn was nothing less than bread; corn or no corn meant life or death.[37]

The products of cities are devaluated or totally ignored, in a kind of travesty of the theories of the physiocrats:

"There isn't a human being anywhere in the world who can live on banks and industries. Not a single human being in the world."

"Ho! What do they live on, then?"

"On three things and nothing else," replies Ezra. "On the grain of the fields, the fish of the sea and the birds and beasts of the forest. On those three things. I've thought it all out."

"There's quite a few that live on their money—"

"No," said Ezra. "Not a single soul!"[38]

As contrasted with the emptiness of urban existence, the concreteness of the peasant's world seems to comprise the meaning of life itself:

He did not feel poor and forlorn, as he really was; why, all the stones he had cleared looked just like a crowd of people around him, he was personally related to every stone, they were acquaintances every one, he had conquered them and got them out of the ground.[39]

The authoritarian state did not have to invent the idea of man's roots as being in blood and soil, nor devise the manipulation of this slogan as a solace for want. "We will not be any happier if we eat more bacon," says Hamsun's peasant in defending life on Norwegian soil against a life outside that might mean greater material success; the worst fate is

. . . to be torn up by the roots from our own barren soil and transplanted into richer . . .[40]

If we accept this belief, we do not scorn the hardest labor,[41] for we know "where we really do belong."[42]

It is a good thing to belong to one's class, otherwise one becomes an upstart and gets one's originality frittered away.[43]

A good thing if you are a peasant, that is. Hamsun's eulogy of the peasant, apparently undertaken in the spirit of social critique, ends up

as a sermon on temperance, humility, privation. The message is to keep one's roots where they are, even though the soil may be very poor indeed.

As we might expect, Hamsun combines his cult of the hero and that of natural forces with praise for the vigor of youth *per se*. In comparison with this vigor, the restrained wisdom of maturity counts for little; the demand of youth for power is natural obedience to the "law of life."

Old age should not be revered for its own sake, for it merely restricts and hinders the progress of mankind. Even primitive people despise old age,[44] and they emancipate themselves from it and its hindrances without further ado.[45]

He applies to human beings the lessons of biology—more precisely, of botany—thus:

And what have you learned from the woods? But what did I learn in the woods? That there are young trees there.

Now the young stand behind me, ridiculed shamelessly and barbarously by every fool, simply because they are young.[46]

This resentful yet sentimental sermon is tied to an attack on leaders who are old enough to have learned from experience.

One should not rely too much on the leaders; the country's youth should be our hope. No; a leader is apt to prove a broken reed. It is an old law that whenever a leader reaches a certain age he pauses—yes, he even turns right about face and pushes the other way. Then it is up to the young to march on, to drive him ahead or trample him down.[47]

Hamsun's heroes do not often speak with such harsh frankness. He lends exultation to the rough tone of the young male in order to glorify manliness in general. He is happy that the peasant, reverent and serene as he is, knows how to bring his wife to her senses: "To think that a man's hard grip could work such wonders!"[48] The myth of manliness is created out of "natural" qualities of superior force.

The Vagabond

Along with the peasant, the vagabond receives affectionate treatment in every period of Hamsun's career. August, his favorite, longs "to

shoot the knife out of the hand of a man who was trying to make off with his wallet" because that would be a thrill for the "children of the age" in their dreary existence.[49] As a matter of fact, Hamsun seems fascinated by such brutal mischief:

> And steal a bag of gold and silver plate from the market, and hide it in the mountains, so that a blue flame can float over the spot on autumn evenings. But don't come to me with three pairs of mittens and a side of bacon.[50]

In this pseudo-romantic flirting with a nuisance crime, he ridicules the "unheroic" spirit of urban efficiency ("no thunderbolt ever falls");[51] he cries for "gigantic demi-gods" and blunders into a political program of violence:

> The great terrorist is greatest, the dimension, the immense lever which can raise worlds.[52]

The peasant with his roots in the soil and the bohemian vagabond with no ties to anything may seem mutually exclusive idols. Still, Hamsun's ability to sympathize with such apparently opposite types has a certain logic; their common denominator is the rejection of organized urban culture, in favor of the application of raw, unmediated "natural" force. Incidentally, it was the socially uprooted literati (the "armed bohemians," as they have been called) who performed the spadework of German fascism, playing up the cult of the hero and the maintenance of one's roots in the soil.

In Hamsun, the function of such marginal figures as the vagabond is emphatically different from that in the literature thus far discussed. From Cervantes through Ibsen, marginal characters have stood outside society and criticized it in the name of freedom and self-determination. In Hamsun, however, such figures serve as coquettish expression of his veneration of brutality and power.

The Relation of the Sexes

The endorsement of violence and mischief seems to be a far cry from the theme of passive surrender to nature. But the connection between violence and passivity becomes unequivocal in Hamsun's treatment of the relation between the sexes. In his novels, there is a conspicuous absence of genuine yearning for love. When one of his characters is seized by a strong passion, it is quickly transformed into sado-masochistic torment of himself or of the partner. This is as true of the desperate ecstasy of the hero in *Hunger*, or of the literally speechless and unexpressed affair between the main characters in *Victoria*, as of the mutual hatred of the partners in *Pan*. The hero of *Mysteries* enjoys telling his beloved the most frightening and brutal stories;[53] the hero of *Pan* shoots his dog and sends the corpse as a farewell gift to the beloved from whom he has become estranged.[54]

What passes for love is closer to hostility:

> Does she then love a dead man to the point of hatred and cruelty and is she still trying to hurt him? Or is Glahn still alive and does she want to continue her torture?[55]

In general, however, sadism is much less developed than masochism. People seem to find happiness only when subjected to strength, power, and authority. On occasion, one can readily observe the shift from sadism to masochism:

> Eva answers: "It was cruel of her to laugh at you."
>
> "No, it was not cruel of her," I cry . . . "it was only right that she should laugh at me. Be quiet, devil take you, and leave me in peace—do you hear?"
>
> And Eva, terrified, leaves me in peace. I look at her, and repent my harsh words at once; I fall down before her; wringing my hands. "Go home, Eva. It is you I love most. . . . It was only a jest; it is you I love."[56]

In one of his earliest novels as well as in one of his last, a lover asks for harsh treatment:

> Only you torture me too much with your forbearance; how can you put up with my having more than one eye? You ought to take the other, you ought to take both; you shouldn't allow me to walk along the street in peace and have a roof over my head.[57]
>
> Hurt me in return! Do you hear! Otherwise you'll go off and believe I've been ruined by some one, but that isn't true.[58]

Satisfaction in love seems possible only in the sexual sphere, and even then it is not because sensual pleasure signifies any feelings of affection and identification, but on the contrary springs from malice and disdain, particularly for women:

> "Come and show where there's cloudberries," said Gustaf . . . And how could a woman say no? Inger ran into her little room and was both earnest and religious for several minutes; but there was Gustaf standing waiting outside, the world was at her heels, and all she did was to tidy her hair, look at herself carefully in the glass, and out again. And what if she did? Who would not have done the same? Oh, woman cannot tell one man from another; not always—not often.[59]

This spiteful eulogy of lust brings Hamsun back to his point of departure: the definition of man as mere nature. In an early novel, promiscuity seems to thrive in gaiety and freedom:

> "Iselin, I saw what you did," he says again; "I saw you."
>
> And then her rich, glad laughter rings through the wood, and she goes off with him, full of rejoicing from top to toe. And whither does she go? To the next mortal man; to a huntsman in the woods.[60]

But even this cavalier concession to pleasure and satisfaction describes only another form of isolation, for there is complete lack of interest in the happiness of one's partner. Sexual relations are ruled by the laws of nature which men and women instinctively obey.

> There she goes, a human being like the rest of us, a wanderer in the earth, a little girl, ah me! a life gone astray, a flying seed. She was fairly undejected in her walk . . . She had the packet of papers under her arm, she knew what awaited her at the barn, and there she went. Some call it free will.[61]
>
> . . . he broke through all rules of propriety and was very friendly, picked the hay from her bosom, brushed it from her knees, stroked, patted, threw his arms around her. Some call it free will . . .[62]

Whatever is distinctly human and spiritual is forgotten. Love, which for Cervantes and Shakespeare appeared as the key phenomenon in the autonomous development of modern man, becomes reduced in Hamsun to a bawdy jeer at free will.

Women

Hamsun belittles Ibsen's women, and thumbs his nose at Ibsen himself for his description of Nora (in *A Doll's House*):

> I know a sage, and he wrote of woman. Wrote of woman, in thirty volumes of uniform theatre poetry: I counted the volumes once in a big bookcase. And at last he wrote of the woman who left her own children to go in search of—the wonderful! But what, then, were the children? Oh, it was comical: a wanderer laughs at anything so comical.[63]

Woman attains fulfillment of her destiny when she limits her functions to those of a housewife and a mother. This enshrinement of biological function leads Hamsun to bitter hatred for any emancipation, intellectuality, or political reforms that women might desire[64] and finally, in an attack on actresses, to utter comtempt for the "modern woman":

> You ladies pretend to look down on domestic life, pretend to be indifferent to the scanty personal respect you enjoy; you are either not mothers at all, or very bad ones, either incapable of bringing up children or pitifully imcompetent at it—every day of your lives you sink into deeper shame on account of this impotence. That is the truth.[65]

The ideal peasant woman, wife of the ideal peasant in *Growth of the Soil*, unpleasant in appearance and not always faithful, has a meaningful existence as a housewife and mother: A "good nature, a clever nature,"[66]

> . . . the Margravine . . . is indoors preparing the meal. Tall and stately, as she moves about her house, a Vestal tending the fire of a kitchen stove. Inger has made her stormy voyage, 'tis true, has lived in a city a while, but now she is home.[67]

This theme is constantly reiterated: woman receives her true consecration as a mother. Of the tragic ruin of a woman who sought to run away from an unsatisfying marriage, only this is said:

> She had no occupation, but had three maidservants to her house; she had no children, but she had a piano. But she had no children.[68]

It is another woman, a paragon of mediocrity, who receives the accolade:

> A mother many times, realizing life—it was worthy of a great reward.[69]

In such idealization of fertility, biology takes precedence over the conventions of middle-class morality; as in the case of Inger, sexual vicissitudes are blinked—indeed are condoned—provided the end or denouement is that of producing children. This was also a stock in trade of the Nazi ideology, which reduced womanhood to a biological function. Hamsun's language becomes almost epic when he speaks of woman as the bearer of progeny: she becomes a fertility-heroine:

> A real girl shall marry, shall become the wife of a man, shall become a mother, shall become a blessing to herself.[70]

Urban Society

The idolatry of nature is set up against "a world where cheating goes on in the dark."[71] The composition of this rejected world is quite apparent. It is, in brief, an inventory of modern urban society that Hamsun condemns—industry,[72] public officials,[73] the natural sciences,[74] the teaching profession,[75] the coffee house,[76] the corporation,[77] and countries under liberal governments—as well as the city, the intellectuals, the workers and platforms of social reform; these are all surveyed in the novels and dismissed as hateful. Significant, for example, are his contemptuous remarks on Gladstone,[78] and his rejection of "the modern type, a man of our time," who believes "all the Jew and the Yankee have taught him."[79] He has warm words of praise for Sweden because she is oriented toward Germany, not toward Switzerland,[80] and he tells the English that they "will someday be whipped to death by the healthy destiny of Germany."[81]

Numerous are his attacks on Switzerland—not just coincidentally the model of democratic experimentation. In one of his novels, a man plans to build a comfortable home for his family in the "Swiss fashion." He is taken to task by Hamsun for believing he can learn something

> . . . from a miserable little people up in the Alps, a people that throughout its history has never been or done anything worth speaking of.[82]

These attacks are typical of a romanticizing primitivism anticipating in literature the sneering propaganda of the middle-European authoritarian parties against "effeminacy" and the "morass" of the big cities. When Hamsun assumes the posture of social critic, he

focuses his attention only on superficial, secondary aspects of industrial society. Everything the inquiring mind finds of interest and of crucial importance—including consideration for mutual help—is flattened out, or swept away with an imperious gesture. Not accidentally, a chief butt of his ridicule are the manufacturers of consumer goods, whom he epitomizes in those who seem most readily to lend themselves to caricature, such as producers of canned goods, candies and herring meal.[83] "Butter?" he asks:

> One did not churn butter any more—one went to the store and bought margarine. Storehouse and shed full of meat, pork and fish? One would have died of laughter at anybody who kept salt meat . . . wasn't there food to be had in tins—tinned food? It was ready cooked, it was chewed too, it was ready to put into a cloth to make a child's sucker of for all mankind . . . What did mouths want with teeth anymore? Weren't there false teeth hanging on a string in the toothmaker's shop? And as for the tinned foods . . . it dealt gently with people who had already got stomach trouble from eating it.[84]

Middle Class

For Hamsun, intellectuals and public officials exemplify middle-class triviality. The work of the journalist, the teacher and the historian find no favor in his eyes.[85] Scientists are represented as having wrought a permanent injury against man; science is an empty mechanism, an incomprehensible hodge-podge of data.[86]

The brunt of the attack is on civil servants[87] and clerks in general:

> . . . officials—believe me, they are a miserable tribe . . . Nothing but mediocre abilities and stunted energies; the triumph of the commonplace.[88]

In the midst of a hymn to nature ("I am never done with grass and stones"), Hamsun plunges into an attack on the "sons of clerks," the "official residence," and the "garden of the commonplace" where everything is decided "on account of age, length of service, and school learning."[89]

> . . . with such useless hands as theirs, which they could turn to no manual labor, they could only sit in an office writing . . . such servile work as writing the letters of the alphabet . . . The most that can befall them is to fail in an examination . . . I pity them

> . . . bent over a table so long that they are round-shouldered; they are helpless with their hands; they generally wear glasses—a sign that as learning poured into their brains, it sucked the sight from their eyes . . .[90]

Now—as we see the clerk, the bureaucrat, the intellectual portrayed as sickly, decadent, impotent—there emerges by implication the counter-image of the self-assured, vigorous, tough Nordic hero. Those who do not display these virtues are summarily disqualified.

Working Class

Contempt for factory workers and for workers' movements permeates Hamsun's novels. It first appears in the disguise of his romanticizing naturalism:

> What was more, I liked to be among field and forest, not with lumbermen and proletariat.[91]

But soon in the same novel, the disguise falls away and resentment comes to the fore:

> These gentlemen of the proletariat think a good deal of themselves; they look down on farm workers, and will have nothing to do with them . . . Then, too, they are more popular among the girls. It is the same with men working on roads or railways, with all factory hands . . .[92]

This contemptuous sarcasm remains a key motif. In one of his last novels we read:

> The moment that Alex had found himself with a job and with money in his pocket, food in his belly and clothes on his back, he had crawled to his feet and begun stalking around like a man, had even applied for membership in the trade union, to which he pointed with considerable pride.[93]

The competitive interwovenness of urban lower strata appears as a threat to the "heroic" *status quo*—life on the soil.

> The others, the workingmen, businessmen, the day-laborers, go about showing their teeth at one another and fighting. That is life. They are really fighting over the old landowner, they are fighting over his possessions.[94]

For Hamsun, the struggle for an increase in material welfare is merely vulgar. Whatever rational justifications such claims may have is no concern of his. He engages in a variety of attacks on "the proletariat's strong and blind craving for food,"[95] on "the roar of the masses," who unfortunately have learned from "mechanical reading and writing" how beautiful it is to "live by others' labor."[96] But worst of all are the destructive tendencies that are bound up with the workingman's "worldly greed."

> They [the masses] want to roar and turn things upside down, and when it comes to a pinch even their own leaders can't hold them in. The whole thing's crashing, let it crash![97]

Here indeed we are face to face with the nihilistic furor of the authoritarian mentality.

Nihilism

Anti-Intellectualism

At the peak of liberalist optimism, popular manifestations of confidence in scientific progress made the coffee houses and beer halls the layman's university, with natural science, medicine, and politics the favorite subjects in the curriculum. True, these flourishing ideas were without influence, not only in the groves of Academe, but in society at large; still, the constant critical concern with the affairs of science and public life served to perpetuate a confidence in the efficacy of each member of society.

The incomprehensibility and inexorability of the social process has increasingly given rise to pseudo-philosophies and pseudo-sociologies which claim to possess superior wisdom, keys to the mystery of human relationships, recipes for the best and quickest possible solution to man's dilemmas. The attraction, in recent decades, of innumerable panaceas for curing the ills of the world through programs which promise to discover the meaning of life in nature illustrates this trend. Nudism, astrology, dietary and breathing fads are cases in point. Man seeks to draw from nature the meaning he cannot find in society.

At the same time, the results of science and education are often

not experienced by broad strata of the population as aids to progress. What was actually to be gained from the work of the natural scientists, from the apparatus of schools and other cultural institutions?—so people asked. To the extent that these activities seemed unrelated to universal improvement in material welfare, an impression grew that learning was an empty program, busywork or pointless pastime. Anti-intellectualism is intimately linked with disillusionment in the credo of progress among broad social strata in Europe. To them, the intellect appeared either as an instrument of domination or as an abstract conglomeration of phrases and slogans having no reference to their own concerns.

This loss of faith by Europeans in their rationalistic daydreams, wherein their power had seemed to grow without bonds, was given respectability by the anti-liberal literati's devaluation of reason. Hamsun's anti-intellectualism soon became apparent in his attacks on earlier nineteenth-century writers. One of his heroes calls Maupassant "crude and soulless,"[98] Tolstoi "a fool in philosophy" who talks "twaddle,"[99] and Ibsen a "little writing oddity"[100] who has brought shame upon his country, a land which has engendered nothing but "peace conferences, the skiing spirit, and Ibsen so far."[101] In 1892, Hamsun already contributed to the authoritarian *Führer* cult—which jeers at the moral anxieties and compulsions of the intellectual, while arrogantly exalting the morally insensate body-beautiful ideal of the racial hero—when he joined his contempt for one of Ibsen's more remarkable sayings with an alleged physical weakness of the playwright:

> The great poet produces a pursed-lips expression, braces his chicken breast to the utmost, and delivers himself of the following words: "To make poetry is to summon oneself to the Day of Judgment."[102]

Philosophy of Life

Hamsun's heroes are querulous in posing the problem of their destiny. The hungry one asks:

> Was the hand of the Lord turned against me? But why just against me? Why, for that matter, not just as well against a man in South America?[103]

The journalist Lynge never finds an answer to his question:

> Why could not everything be good, and why could not men be happy in life?[104]

A lover poses the problem:

> The other he loved as a slave, as a madman and a beggar. Why? Ask the dust of the road and the leaves that fall, ask the mysterious God of life, for there is no other that knows such things.[105]

When August, the vagabond, meets with misfortune, the question is raised:

> Possibly somewhere away out in the universe there was a great eye which was watching him, a power which in some way or another had learned of his labours in the desperate service of nothing at all.[106]

In the end, the answer to all these questions of suffering humanity is invariably surrender—surrender to a sphere of power existing before and beyond all individual existence. Man is not capable of changing it in any way, nor is he entitled to do so. "What is life's? All! But what is yours?"[107] And the answer demonstrates once more the worthlessness of the individual. "Life could afford to waste her, to throw her away."[108] That is true of every floundering human being—and every human being is going under. "Life is a loan . . . I know no one who has not fared as badly as myself . . ."[109] Hamsun again and again gives expression to the passivity and obedience which such inexorability of life requires. While life itself "has thrust me away into something hostile to myself," there is no court which must answer the question, "why should life do that?"[110] There is only one law here: "Life can afford to waste."[111]

Hamsun's philosophy of life has a twofold social function. On the one hand, it offers the socially less successful the consolation that their insignificant role in the economic process can be compensated for by the acceptance of the greater, metaphysical context of the omnipotence of life:

> And so it is: the mere grace that we are given life at all is generous payment in advance for all the miseries of life—for every one of them. No, do you think we have the right to more sweetmeats than we get.[112]

The individual is to become reconciled to his condition in society by perceiving himself as a necessary sacrifice to a natural process, a sacrifice not merely mechanical but full of meaning.

On the other hand, this mythology offers no tangible expectations for alleviating deprivation and disillusionment. The consolation turns against those consoled. They must accept life as it is, and that means the existing relations of domination and subordination, of command and serve.

The Image of Man

Hamsun's mythology throws new light on his misanthropic contempt. His exalted picture of life stands side by side with the image of crawling and creeping man, in the same way that authoritarian propaganda later combined ostensibly lofty notions with expressions of vulgar misanthropy. A metaphysics of the miserableness of man is mobilized against the idea of human progress. Every desire for a more rational organization of society becomes incongruous.

It is significant that Hamsun uses the analogy of the anthill, so popular in liberal reformist literature as a model of constructive social order, as an image of planlessness:

> . . . but that made no difference to the town, the town remained the little crawling ant-hill it was, and this in itself must have been a proof that life itself went its way in spite of all theories . . .[113]

> Oh, that little anthill! All its inhabitants are occupied with their own affairs, they cross each other's paths, push each other aside, sometimes they trample each other underfoot. It cannot be otherwise, sometimes they trample each other underfoot.[114]

We have returned with the ants to the starting point, the myth of nature. Every recollection of historical existence has now been obliterated. We are left with an apotheosis of the merely natural—of force without reason. The exodus from social reality is complete.

Behind Hamsun's bitter responses to contemporary civilization lies the cold and nihilistic negation of the very image of man on the road to freedom. His characters are not truly individuals but irrelevant particles in an ahuman process forever beyond their control. Both as an artist and as a political partisan, he was unequal to the challenge of

the great heritage of libertarian thought in the West. Cervantes and Shakespeare, Racine and Molière, Goethe and Ibsen, had this in common: all embraced the struggle of the individual with his social and natural environment; all refused to place limits on human imagination and achievement; all, with fervor and tenderness, served human liberty.