

¶ Martin Humpál: *The Roots of Modernist Narrative. Knut Hamsun's Novels Hunger, Mysteries, and Pan*. Oslo: Novus forlag, 1998. Pp. 167. ISBN 82-560-1178-5

Many - if not all - scholars who deal with Knut Hamsun's (1859-1952) oeuvre, and especially with his early works, become puzzled by their aesthetic versatility, and the problems they evoke when one wants to assess their position within the literary historical framework of Scandinavian fin de siècle literature. Furthermore, the reception history of the novels *Sult* (1890), *Mysterier* (1892), and *Pan* (1894), is disparate and divergent, both as works of art in their own right, as well as within Hamsun's work as a whole. In *The Roots of Modernist Narrative* Martin Humpál precisely takes up the comprehensive challenge to analyse these three early Hamsun novels under one denominator, i.e. as examples of early modernism. Humpál approaches these texts, not solely as exponents of Scandinavian literature, but he places them in a broad European literary historical and cultural context, as well. Furthermore, he discusses them from the point of view of Hamsun's aesthetic programme, which ties these three novels - notwithstanding their differences - together within the context of Hamsun's early writings.

One of the initial causes that fuelled this investigation, emanates from an essay on Hamsun by the late James McFarlane who in the 1950s indicated that one of the most revolutionary innovations in Hamsun's early works were the narrative techniques he employed, and that these techniques reveal Hamsun's affinity to early modernist poetics. Humpál follows McFarlane's line of enquiry, by connecting the specific narrative forms in early Hamsun to literary history.

Humpál's theoretical frame of reference consists of contemporary narrative theory, and the first of the book's four chapters is mainly devoted to exemplifying his position within this theoretical paradigm explaining the origins of his methodological concepts and instruments. Humpál's broad theoretical approach is principally inspired by the work of Dorrit Cohn, Franz K. Stanzel, and Monika Fludernik, precisely because these theorists (in contrast to other, more French inspired narratologists) in various ways are particularly sensitive to historical aspects of narrative forms. Within this theoretical framework Humpál adopts a pragmatic - context - oriented point of departure for his readings of Hamsun's work, than a more rigid, Genette-inspired, position would offer.

Humpál's central concern is to show, that Hamsun's early novels can be understood as early exponents of modernist *écriture*, and not as exponents of Neo-Romanticism, as has widely been claimed. Humpál defines modernism as an aesthetics which disputes and challenges the dominant cultural - and literary - codes of modernity, i.e. "as an aesthetics which foregrounds the social crisis between the public and the private that the development of modernity brought about" (p. 22). Modernism as a literary historical phenomenon introduced new literary themes (e.g.: loss of traditions values, urbanisation, industrialisation, changing perceptions of time and space, alienation, etc), often implying a different hierarchy, and it innovated literature by giving prominence to certain formal narrative techniques (e.g.: the well-known stream of consciousness, direct interior monologue, and free indirect discourse).

Quite often definitions of the concept of modernism have tended to focus primarily on the thematic aspects, whereas relatively few successful attempts have been made to take formal innovation into account as well. Frequently phenomena like stream of consciousness, textual fragmentation, and the techniques of multiple points of view, are widely acknowledged as important formal characteristics of modernist writing. One of the purposes of the present study is clearly to draw more attention to the importance of a broader variety of narrative forms in the understanding of modernism. Humpál advocates not merely a more elaborate formal approach to modernism in general, but especially in the study of modernist aesthetics in Hamsun's work. Humpál's goal is, however, even more ambitious. He is not just interested in supplying a purely formal supplement to existing thematic and historical readings of these texts, he wants to show that his approach - which he calls a 'historical narrative poetics' - is capable of generating new readings, both with regard to the formal, as well as the thematic aspects of these novels. At the same time Humpál does not overrate the impact of the radical nature of modernism's break with earlier periods and styles.

A fundamental line of reasoning in *The Roots of Modernist Narrative* is the author's consequent emphasis on (written) narrative as a textual expression (simulation) of fictional reality. Humpál essentially understands the textual status of all modes of 'narrator' representation as

textual functions, and he focuses on narrative and rhetorical techniques in terms of their mimetic effects on the reader.

The section on modernism and the question of literary representation is among the most interesting in this study. Here Humpál makes a number of relevant observations about the transformation of the role of the individual as a social being, and the effects on the literary representation of the individual's private experiences in late 19th century art, and philosophy. Humpál argues that Modernism, and not in the last instance Hamsun, sets out to liberate the individual and give it a discourse of its own, instead of adopting firmly established modes of expression and aesthetic rules.

Humpál's textual analyses are all careful and to the point. In the chapter on *Sult*, he does not focus on thematic issues to the same extent as in the chapters on *Mysterier* and *Pan*, because he finds that *Sult*'s thematic and compositional aspects have been discussed successfully by others. Therefore, the chapter on *Sult* is the most homogeneous formal investigation, explaining the novel as a modernist work in which the narrator's voice is eliminated in favour of figural narrative forms of discourse, which simulate the immediacy of the main characters' experiences and their concrete subjectivity.

With respect to *Mysterier*, Humpál argues that the novel essentially is:

an anti-novel that follows scrupulously one character, yet at the same time frustrates all attempts at our understanding of him. The purpose of such a puzzling narrative is to present the character as having no identity. (p. 44)

In the chapter on *Mysterier*, Humpál argues, too, that the novel's special form and narrative incoherence defies the fundamentals of realism and, in that sense, is a modernist parody of the mimetic principles of realism. Furthermore, he maintains that the novel presents the central modernist theme of the human psyche as an inexplicable riddle in the text's main character, Nagel. According to Humpál, *Mysterier* is the most radically modernist novel of the three works scrutinised here, because:

The narrative form is radically determined by the theme, rather than by well-established genre conventions. [...] Hamsun's effort to present extensively a character without identity/essence produces a narrative which prevents a coherent realist interpretation of the protagonist in terms of social causes and effects [...]. (p. 105)

Also Humpál's third analysis, of *Pan*, is convincing, showing that the text is far more in compliance with modernist aesthetics than the Neo-Romantic label it has often received suggests. In the case of *Pan*, it is precisely the text's most outspoken romantic thematic feature - the protagonist's longing for organic authenticity (the back-to-nature theme) - which is supported by the novel's most important modernist formal narrative features: the presentation of Glahn's psyche (and self-reflections). In Humpál's reading, Glahn's unsuccessful project is a double evasion; he escapes on the one hand into his private world, away from the city and, on the other hand, into textual discourse, designing his own (self-reflexive and self-propelling) fiction of nature.

Although *The Roots of Modernist Narrative* is well written - which is quite an achievement for a work of this kind - and a thought-provoking study, a critical remark must be made concerning the text's frequent repetitiveness. Some observations are repeated, rephrased, summarised and repeated once more, challenging the reader's patience. In other cases the reader is slightly provoked by the author's too overt pedagogical concerns. According to the prefatory remarks, this study began as a dissertation. It still, alas, very much contains the distinguishing features of this genre, at the expense of argumentative elegance. Fortunately, these imperfections do not spoil the overall positive results of this study.

One of the reasons why *The Roots of Modernist Narrative* is such an appealing effort, is the fact that Humpál never pushes a point further than the textual evidence can justify. Hamsun's early novels have a lot in common, for example the solitary position of their main characters, but the way in which these anti-social characters are (re)presented in the text, and in which the status of their consciousness is expressed, are

quite different in form and function.

Humpál's narrative analyses convincingly demonstrate that Hamsun's major formal innovations are rooted in a concept of literature which in many ways corresponds to the poetical stance of other (later) modernists. *Sult*, *Mysterier* and *Pan* are in Humpál's detailed textual analyses not reduced, or put in a taxonomic hierarchy in terms of one text being more 'pure' modernist than the other, but they stand as three quite different works of art which for various reasons can be denominated as modernist, for various reasons. (Incidentally: the points Humpál wants to get across in this study are in many respects related to the Danish research project on 'Significant Forms. The Rhetoric of Modernism'. I also expect that new explorations in the early works of authors such as Johannes V. Jensen, might benefit from approaches as the one Martin Humpál uses here on Hamsun.) Another appealing aspect of this study is that Humpál understands Hamsun's works on their own terms, and that he in addition to offering his own interpretations, effectively debunks a number of previous readings of Hamsun.

It is, furthermore, a pleasure for every scholar who works with, and within, a relatively small language area such as the Scandinavian that Humpál builds a very strong case when showing that important literary innovation too often has been conceived as a prerogative of canonical authors writing in major languages. In the case of modernism, artists such as Joyce, Woolf, Proust, and Kafka, of course play an important role. But modernism was a widely proliferated aesthetic phenomenon, which was not merely imported from major literatures. On the basis of local conditions, it also produced authentic varieties in their own right. Humpál's study not only widens the concept of modernism. He also makes it clear that Hamsun - as a kind of *pars pro toto* representing the often neglected literatures of less widely used languages - was one of the most versatile and vital pioneers of early European literary modernism.

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