

SULT AND THE TRANSNATIONAL LITERARY HISTORY OF HUNGER

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Abstract

This contribution discusses Knut Hamsun's *Sult* (1890) from a transnational perspective, referring to the history of hunger and the depiction of hunger in French Naturalism. It takes Timothy Wientzen's (2015) argument about the politics of hunger in *Sult* as the starting point for a critical discussion, and reflects on the relationship between hunger strikes and political collectives. Furthermore, it points to parallels between *Sult* and Zola's *Le ventre de Paris* (1873) in the problematization of political organization and, finally, compares the narrative structures of both texts.

Keywords

Hunger in literature, naturalism, modernism, Hamsun, Zola, *Sult*, *Le Ventre de Paris*, crisis of representation

Hunger in naturalism and modernism and the politics of hunger in *Sult*

In her article "The Everyday in Nordic Modernism", Riika Rossi states that hunger is a "naturalist topic *par excellence*" (Rossi, 2010, 421). Mark Anderson's article on "Anorexia and Modernism" (1988-1989), or Leslie Heywood's monograph *Dedication to Hunger* (1996) show that hunger also plays a central role in modernist literature. However, hunger in naturalism and in modernism are usually kept separate. Rossi remarks: "Although widely acknowledged [sic] that modernism emerged as a reaction against nineteenth-century realist and naturalist literature and in spite of the rich critical tradition of naturalism and modernism, few studies have attempted to bridge the gap between these two literary orientations." (2010, 418). My contribution is an attempt to bridge this gap by showing that Knut Hamsun's (1859-1952) *Sult* (1890) rethinks problems posed by Emile Zola's (1840-1902) *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873).

The starting point of my ideas was a reading of *Sult* by Timothy Wientzen which shows how *Sult* bears traces of the economic transformations that peripheral Norway underwent at the end of the nineteenth century (Wientzen, 2015, 208-216). It is symptomatic that the article overemphasises the negative impact of global capitalism on Norway's population and underestimates its positive effects on food supply (see e.g. Fuglum, 1978, 200-210), since Wientzen does not use Norwegian-language literature at all and thus overlooks central aspects of Norwegian history, as well as the discussion of *Sult* in literary scholarship conducted in Scandinavian languages.

While Wientzen's article remains thought provoking, his argument also falls short when he relates the performance of hunger in *Sult* to hunger strikes. He writes:

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What begins as the narrator's inability to find food becomes a grotesque celebration of the extreme impoverishment to which he has been reduced. Most critics have seen this performative aspect of *Hunger* as an experimental literary method without overt political significance. Yet the resonance of self-starvation could hardly be more political; in fashioning himself as a visible sign of the costs of economic development, Hamsun's protagonist exercises authority over the one domain still available to him: his body.

The performance of starvation in this context was not unique to Hamsun's narrator. In performing his own degradation in this way, he participates in an emerging politics of hunger, one dramatically on display in the contemporaneous emergence of hunger strikes. (2015, 218)

Wientzen developed this argument by referring to naturalism. As he explains:

In part, we can see Hamsun's emphasis on the interaction between bodies and their environment as an extension of Émile Zola's understanding of the naturalist novel. Like one of Zola's characters, Hamsun's narrator is highly sensitive to his material milieu. (2015, 216-217)

According to Wientzen, the contrast between Zola and Hamsun concerns the degree of agency that the main character still possesses:

While Hamsun's protagonist is [quote from *Sult*] 'acted on and distracted by everything around [him]' (19), he, by contrast, remains nevertheless 'lucid and self-possessed' (13)—an agent who can exert a degree of control over his environment. He exerts his agency not to transform the economic structures that cause his hunger but rather to dramatize the direst consequences of modernization. (2015, 217)

By focusing on the political potential of performing hunger, Wientzen overlooks two central points: 1) the narrative structure of *Sult* in terms of its relationship to Zola's concept of objectivity; 2) the structural difference between hunger strikes and other forms of self-starvation.

The absence of political collectives

I will start with the second point: Hunger strikes become hunger strikes when political goals are explicitly articulated. Other forms of self-starvation may be interpreted as political acts – but do not constitute hunger strikes as such. Wientzen, however, does not clearly distinguish between hunger strikes and self-starvation in other forms. As he argues:

Deprived of the means of either reversing the effects of modernization or mitigating its most pernicious effects, hunger strikers employed their bodies as sites of political protest, foregrounding the material consequences of global economic shifts on the lives of those at the margins. (2015, 219)

Thus, he suggests that hunger strikers were powerless and marginalised people. However, the most well-known political hunger strikers since the end of the nineteenth century – including Russian revolutionaries, British suffragettes, Irish republicans and Gandhi – were successful because they acted according to the logic of states that included elements of humanitarian, liberal and democratic ideologies and because they had their own networks of power and excellent communication skills, participating in political movements (Felcht, 2014).

When Wientzen states, as I have already quoted, that Hamsun's protagonist "exercises authority over the one domain still available to him: his body", he neglects the fact that the protagonist is a writer and journalist, somebody who is at least in principle able to express himself in words, and that the protagonist prefers – for example – writing "en liten karakteristikk av Correggio" (Hamsun, 2007, 100) ("a little character scetch of Corregio [a renaissance painter, F. F.]") instead of popular or easily accessible texts that his editor would have liked to publish (ibid., 101). Furthermore, the fact that the protagonist does not admit that he is hungry and refuses any help is related to his pride rather than to the inability to articulate himself; in other words, his isolation is, at least partly, his own decision.

I point to these facts because against the backdrop of a rising workers' and women's movement – Det norske Arbeiderparti (The Norwegian Labour Party) was founded in 1887, and the Norsk Kvinnesaksforening (Norwegian Association for Women's Rights) in 1884 – the absence of political collectives in *Sult* is stunning. Wientzen attributes this absence to an incapability on the part of the narrator:

Rather than map the systems that produce hunger, Hamsun filters the experience of starvation through a single, first-person narrator whose experience takes place within a social context that hunger renders him incapable of interpreting. The experience of hunger becomes a total one, swamping his cognitive faculties in favor of bodily extremity. (2015, 214-215)

However, the text contains hints about political contexts, especially when the protagonist misdates a letter to the year 1848 (Hamsun, 2007, 30, 46-48), the year of the European revolutions and the Communist Manifesto. Although the text represents the act of writing "1848" as unintended, it seems rather unlikely that somebody who, at least at the beginning of *Sult*, still works for a newspaper, is completely unable to interpret his social context.

Reading Hamsun's attack on Zola, "Samfundsdigtningen" ("societal poetry") and "engelsk Madmoral og lidt europæisk Realisme" ("English food morality and a bit of European realism") (Hamsun, 1960a, 20) in his lecture on "Norsk Litteratur" ("Norwegian literature") that he gave in 1891, one could easily interpret the astounding absence of political collectives as an opposition to a naturalist influence on Norwegian literature. Against the background of Hamsun's lectures on "Norsk Litteratur" and "Psykologisk Litteratur" ("Psychological literature") (Hamsun, 1960b), one can also understand the complicated character of the protagonist of *Sult* as an attempt to reject the "societal types of French naturalism" (Rossi, 2010, 423). However, I would say that *Sult* is not only a rejection of naturalism, but also an answer to problems dealt with by Zola in *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873).

The problem of political organisation: *Le Ventre de Paris* and *Sult*

Like the narrator of *Sult*, the main character of *Le Ventre de Paris*, Florent, is introduced as a nameless stranger and – lying on the floor due to hunger and exhaustion – suspected of being a drunkard (Zola, 1873, 2-3). Another parallel to the protagonist of *Sult* is that Florent often refuses the help that is offered to him. The description of Florent's first walk through Les Halles includes numerous elements that recur in *Sult*: Florent's fear of the police who might forbid him from sleeping on the streets, his self-hatred, his despair and disgust, his fear that his life could disappear through a hole in his body (Zola, 1873, 33-36). These parallels between *Le Ventre de Paris* and *Sult* invite a comparative reading.

In contrast to *Sult*, we learn about Florent's past quite quickly. He had been wrongly accused of violence while resisting Louis-Napoléon's *coup d'état* in 1851, and was deported to Cayenne, from which he was able to escape after some years. Many figures in the novel attempt to find out the truth of his story, but their information differs strongly – and Florent becomes an object of projection; people invent different stories about his past. In *Sult*, it is not the characters but the readers who are in the position of those who desire to know more about the protagonist and attempt to fill the gaps in the story.

Florent appears to have lost his appetite and perceives the abundance of food in Les Halles as disgusting (the famous market halls of Paris were built between 1852 and 1870 and are the dominant setting of the novel), while at the same time his hunger is insatiable. In his article, "Nutrition, Hunger and Fasting: Spiritual and Material Naturalism in Zola and Huysman", Francesco Manzini states: "The story of ... [Florent's] transportation to, imprisonment in, and escape from Cayenne is the story of his hunger." (2013, 24). From the beginning of his deportation, Florent suffered from hunger, and it had never left him since ("la faim ne l'avait plus quitté", Zola, 1873, 12, 13). Manzini explains: "This hunger, at first physical, almost immediately becomes psychological: an instinctive response to political injustice." (2013, 26). Thus, hunger is not only a physiological phenomenon in *Le Ventre de Paris*. It also has a symbolic dimension that negatively reflects the political situation: "Florent's stomach has shrunk just as Paris's belly has expanded. For Napoleon III has bought off the bourgeoisie by satisfying its appetite for money (as we see in *La Curée*) and its hunger for food (in *Le Ventre*)." (Manzini, 2013, 26).

Sult also contrasts the protagonist's hunger with the abundance of a modern urban consumer culture. However, this consumer culture is not, as in *Le Ventre de Paris*, obviously connected to the State or groups that form political entities. In *Le Ventre de Paris*, those who accept the rules of consumer culture are politically conservative. The narrator in *Sult* has an ambivalent relationship to consumer culture, oscillating between disgust and desire. As Stefanie von Schnurbein has shown, consumer culture in *Sult* reflects the problems of modern authorship in which texts become commodities. The protagonist's struggle with consumer culture is, at least partly, a struggle against the heteronomy of art (von Schnurbein, 2008).

Florent finds his half-brother Quenu, a butcher, and Quenu's wife Lisa, and is invited to stay at their place. However, Lisa is astonished and even disgusted when she hears of the periods in which Florent did not have any food; and she perceives a person who is able to starve for three days as dangerous and monstrous. As Manzini states: "His story – a religious story of fasting and sacrifice – is a story that can no longer be told with propriety." (2013, 25; see also 24-25).

Sult also deals with the secularisation of fasting. However, in *Le Ventre de Paris*, hunger results from revolutionary events and Florent becomes part of a group of would-be revolutionaries. In *Sult*, collective political action is absent.

In summary, *Le Ventre de Paris* – as well as Zola's famous novel *Germinal* (1885) – tells the story of failing collective political action and portrays the political leaders of the potential or real upheavals as naïve, egocentric and unable to develop a common, long-term strategy. Zola's novels assume that revolutions are doomed to fail within capitalistic systems and that those who think that they are able to represent other people's interests are not able to do this. *Sult* seems to respond to these pessimistic truths, with a text that has few references to political discourse. While hunger strikes resulted in the re-sacralisation of hunger, *Sult* secularises hunger and individualises its experience.

Conclusion: crises of representation

Several studies have pointed to the fact that *Sult* deals with a crisis of representation that is typical of modernist literature (see e.g. von Schnurbein, 2008; Oftedal Andersen, 2000). *Sult* reflects on the problematic relationship between signifier and the signified. Hunger and language crisis converge and the narrator is unable to eat or to express himself; the interaction between self and world is disturbed.

The narrative structure of *Sult* is extremely focused on the protagonist, who is an unreliable narrator – thus, the text becomes highly ambivalent. In *Kroppens betydning i norsk litteratur*, Unni Langås explains that the form of the first-person narrative establishes a subject-object relationship in which the body of the narrator simultaneously produces, perceives and interprets sensations – cause and effect thus become indistinguishable (Langås, 2004, 161-187). This narrative structure differs strongly from Zola's novels, which include changing focal points and perspectives. In his essay *Le roman expérimental* (Zola, 1880) Zola demands an approximation of science and literature. He considers observation and experimentation to be the most important methods of naturalist literature, which presupposes the determination of human phenomena by laws that still have to be detected.

One aspect of Zola's scientific approach to literature is the attempt to keep observation and experimentation separate. The narrative structure of *Sult* demonstrates the impossibility of this separation when the object and subject of the study are identical. Thus, the narrative structure of *Sult* deals with epistemic problems related to the scientific concept of objectivity. *Le roman expérimental* also quotes Claude Bernard's thesis which claims that while we can judge our own actions because we know our own thoughts and feelings, we have to interpret the actions of others (Zola, 1880, 9-10). The starting point of Zola's Rougon-Macquart novels (1871-1893) is this interest in the interpretation of the actions of others. However, the protagonist Florent illustrates that thoughts and feelings can be contradictory and that even the judgement of one's own actions may be problematic – Florent develops plans for a revolution but cannot bear the sight of blood. *Sult* radicalises the uncertainty in understanding human behaviour by using a narrator who lies, has rapidly changing moods and presents contradictory judgements of his own actions. Thus, readers must constantly attempt to interpret his actions without ever being certain whether they are right or wrong.

Zola's novels illustrate the difficulties of the organisation of social protest and the representation of other people's will. *Sult* radicalises the problem of representation by pointing to the uncertainties of language and to the complexity and inconsistency of human nature already present in Zola's work. Thus, the problem of representation becomes less a political issue and more of an epistemic question.

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