Blindness and Irrationalist Nature in Knut Hamsun's *Mysterier*

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"For I admit nothing but on the faith of eyes, or at least of careful and severe examination; so that nothing is exaggerated for wonder's sake, but what I state is sound and without mixture of fables or vanity." — Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration*, 1620

In addition to their psychological irrationalism, Knut Hamsun's early modernist novels from the 1890s—*Sult* [*Hunger*], *Mysterier* [*Mysteries*], and *Pan*—depict unfulfilled fantasies of pseudo-spiritual immersion in nature. *Pan* in particular is known for the intense lyrical moods of its mystical portrayal of northern Norway. A later novel, *Markens Grøde* [*The Growth of the Soil*], for which Hamsun won the Nobel Prize in 1920, condemns modern industrial civilization in the name of redeemed rural dwelling. These and other Hamsun works, with their beautiful prose evocations of Norway's forest landscapes, reveal an ecological sensibility that might make Hamsun seem like an obvious choice for an environmental critical approach to Scandinavian literature. On the other hand, Hamsun's "reactionary-radical" critique of the social and aesthetic forms of modernity led, neither inevitably nor incomprehensibly, to his support for fascism and Nazism in the thirties and forties.[1] The pressures of this context make it troublesome to locate praiseworthy political or social values of any sort in Hamsun's authorship. However, this political context is especially pertinent for an ecocritical analysis, in that seminal critical statements on Hamsun have repeatedly linked his representations of nature and the natural to his fascism, often including his earliest novels in this assessment.[2]

Hamsun's long novelistic career covered many decades of artistic and political upheaval in Europe. His trajectory leads from his iconoclastic lectures and novels of the 1890s to his support for Nazism and fascism in the interwar period, when he wrote culture-

[1] The term "reactionary radical" is Hamsun's own, from an 1894 article on August Strindberg, who was an influence and object of admiration for the early Hamsun.

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pessimistic novels in a less recognizably modernist form. Finally, and traumatically for Norway, Hamsun published pro-Nazi newspaper articles during the occupation in the Second World War, which led to his notorious trial for treason, his time under clinical observation, and eventually his final literary work, published in 1948, the disturbingly poignant *Paa gjengrodde stier* [*On Overgrown Paths*]. Hamsun presents a curious and frustrating combination: he won the Nobel Prize, had admirers of many political stripes and nationalities, was indeed one of the most influential novelists of the early 20th century, but was also an unrepentant supporter of Nazism and Norwegian fascism. After being the subject of recurrent debates in postwar Norway, Hamsun remains a controversial public figure, as shown by the recent refusal of a Norwegian theater in Trøndelag to perform any of his plays as part of the 2009 celebration of the 150th anniversary of his birth. As the critic Lasse Midttun stated bluntly in an article (*Morgenbladet*, Jan. 16, 2009) responding to this controversy: "Selvsagt var Hamsun en strålende forfatter, og selvsagt var han nazist. Kan vi starte derfra?" ["Hamsun was clearly a brilliant author, and he was clearly a Nazi. Can we begin there?"].

What is the role of the natural landscape in Hamsun's early modernist, or late romantic, turn against the Modern Breakthrough period of realism in Scandinavian literature? What might its ideological significance be in relation to the author's political trajectory? To consider these questions, my analysis emphasizes how Hamsun aligns nature and the irrational psyche in opposition to the mechanistic and disenchanting materialism represented in *Mysteries* by the protagonist Nagel's intellectual adversary, Doctor Stenersen. More specifically, I identify an undercurrent of anti-ocularcentrism in Hamsun's opposition to Modern Breakthrough realism and positivism. Like his character Nagel, Hamsun extols the mystical forces of nature, as well as the unseen depths of the human psyche, both of which exceed the gaze of the doctor's positivism and the optics of literary realism or naturalism. In *Mysteries* and the lecture "Psykologisk Literatur" ["Psychological Literature"], Hamsun

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imagines enchanted nature and the depths of the psyche with figures of blindness, implicitly rebuking the rational and ocular subject of modern knowledge.

Nature in Hamsun's novel is the dream of a radical alternative to ocularcentric and rationalist modernity. Viewing Hamsun as a reactionary avant-garde figure, the Norwegian critic Arild Linneberg suggests that Hamsun's early novels perform "en profane opplysning som setter en radikal åndelig frihet opp imot fienden: bourgeoisiets fornuft" ["a profane illumination that sets a radical spiritual freedom against the enemy: bourgeois reason"] (Linneberg, 8). Hamsun's contempt for the rationalism of existing bourgeois society finds its aesthetic expression in a "mixture of vitalism and nihilism—the blending of intense vitality and self-destruction that is found in intoxication" (Linneberg, 9). The turn to this brand of intoxication is part of Hamsun's search for something radically other than Enlightenment or bourgeois rationality. Linneberg understands this counter-Enlightenment "transcendence of rationality" in terms of a revolutionary poetics whose transgression of existing bourgeois modernity also informs Hamsun's later fascism. I would add that as an aesthetic, erotic, and pseudo-spiritual topography the forest landscape is central to early Hamsun's spellbinding poetics of mystical intoxication. Hamsun's works, however, offer no acceptable model for environmental ethics or politics.

As Lawrence Buell suggests, it was paradigmatic of ecocriticism in its first wave to select literary texts that most clearly display a celebration of nature worthy of the critic's ethical endorsement (Buell, 23). Contemporary environmental literary criticism, whose objects of analysis are more diverse, can certainly do more than applaud the ecological values of texts it finds worthy of approval. In a recent guide to ecocriticism, Greg Garrard questions the idea that there is a "seemingly secure ecological yardstick" with which to evaluate, in the words of the critic he quotes, "texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as

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responses to environmental crisis."[3] With an author like Hamsun, environmental criticism should also draw on the conceptual resources of other political modes of criticism to remain aware of the shifting historical and ideological contexts of natural values. Hamsun is an instructive case for this type of critical endeavor given the serious limitations of his ecological imagination and the related political baggage of his fascism. In this way, Hamsun is important to ecocriticism in the same way Garrard has suggested that the later Heidegger is: as a writer whose idealization of rural rootedness and authentic relations to nature has political implications that are complicated and debatable, but not to be overlooked (Garrad, 110–113).

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Anti-Ocularcentrism

By claiming that a covert hostility to the "hegemony of vision" in modernity plays a role in early Hamsun's aesthetic and ideological turn against novelistic realism, I am suggesting that we read these texts in the light of a theoretical concern with vision that has already inspired many re-readings of canonical literary and philosophical texts.[4] Although an emphasis on the visual can be found in philosophical texts throughout history, the hegemony or dominance of vision has been ascribed in particular to the modern period.[5] The modern dominance of the visual is closely related to the empirical techniques of the scientific method, as encapsulated in Francis Bacon's claim to "admit nothing but on the faith of the eyes" (Bacon). Such an emphasis on "actively seeking eyes" also rejects "blind obedience" to the past, thus allowing the potentially emancipating practice of seeing sacred texts or nature autonomously (Jay, 64). As Martin Jay writes, "whether or not one gives greater weight to technical advances or social

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[3] Here, Garrard quotes Richard Kerridge's definition of ecocritism from *Writing the Environment* (London: Zed Books, 1998).
[4] See, for example, the articles anthologized in David Michael Levin (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
[5] For more on this issue, see Levin's discussion of the linkage of the dominance of the visual to the modern period, 2-4.

changes . . . the dawn of the modern era was accompanied by the vigorous privileging of vision" (Jay, 69).

A comprehensive account of thinkers or discourses that in some way oppose the modern dominance of the visual (ocularcentrism) cannot be given here, but I will provide some brief indications of the issue as Jay presents it. With its emphasis on distancing and objectifying visual observation, the scientific method has been held accountable for the mechanistic picture of the world that so easily inspires dissatisfaction among modern intellectual or cultural movements, beginning with Romanticism. The modern dominance of vision is actually the result of a larger transformation in intellectual history: the shift "from reading the world as an intelligible text (the 'book of nature') to looking at it as an observable but meaningless object, which. . . was the emblem of the modern epistemological order" (Jay, 51). As Jay's book demonstrates, twentieth-century thought presented many avenues for a critique of ocularcentrism in Western philosophical and intellectual tradition. These anti-visual discourses may or may not include the notion—highly relevant here—that the scientific privileging of vision forms a background condition for contemporary environmental crises and for the modern loss of attunement with nature.

One anti-visual discourse that does lend itself to an ecological critique of ocularcentrism is Heidegger's phenomenology. In the introduction to *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, David Michael Levin emphasizes the anti-visuality of Heidegger's analysis of modern (post-Cartesian) metaphysics. For Heidegger, the modern ocular subject equates the being of the world with its picture or representation; this entails, in Levin's words, "reducing everything to the ocularcentric ontology of subject-relative images or representations" (Levin, 5). In Heidegger's translated language: "Only that which becomes object in this way *is*—is considered to be in being . . . The objectifying of whatever is, is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing, that aims at bringing each particular being

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before it in such a way that man who calculates can be sure, and that means be certain, of that being" (Heidegger, 127).[6] In other words, the "Age of the World Picture" structures being and nature as objects of scientific certainty, objects to be calculated, manipulated, and technologically transformed. And, naturally, such an analysis of modern metaphysics has become part of the ecological critique of modern objectifying and dominating attitudes towards nature.

Hamsun's fin-de-siècle revolt against the doctor's gaze is part of the larger cultural context of anti-positivism in the late-nineteenth century. In this period on the cusp of the twentieth century, Jay locates a proliferation of anti-ocularcentric attitudes, claiming that "the waning years of the nineteenth century [saw] an accelerated interrogation of the privileged scopic regime of the modern era" (Jay, 150). Hamsun's complaint against the doctor's positivism belongs not to philosophical discourse, but rather to an irrationalist and neoromantic literary imagination. As it comes through in novels and lectures, Hamsun's irrationalism elevates the blind forces of instinct and subjectivity—the "natural"—above any "Apollonian" or Enlightenment commitment to disinterested observation or individual human autonomy. In the following readings of Hamsun's lecture on "Psychological Literature" and his novel *Mysteries*, I emphasize the theme of blindness to argue that Hamsun's negation of the doctor's social and scientific modernity is anti-ocularcentric. This hostility to superficial or normal vision has both a psychological and an ecological aspect. Further, it is also part of Hamsun's anarchic, contrarian, and "reactionary-radical" worldview and politics.

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[6] This quotation is taken from a longer passage of relevance in "The Age of the World Picture": "Nature and history become the objects of a representing that explains . . . . Only that which becomes object in this way *is*—is considered to be in being . . . . The objectifying of whatever is, is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing, that aims at bringing each particular being before it in such a way that man who calculates can be sure, and that means be certain, of that being. We first arrive at science as research when and only when truth has been transformed into the certainty of representation." This occurs for the first time, Heidegger says, in the metaphysics of Descartes.

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In the thirteenth chapter of *Mysteries*, the charlatan-hero Johan Nagel hosts a drinking party for the men of the small Norwegian town where he has just arrived unexpectedly, only to amuse and baffle the townspeople with his inscrutable behavior, stories, and opinions. Before the carousing starts, Doctor Stenersen, who is by now familiar with Nagel's shenanigans, says to him, "I won't be astounded by anything coming from you." Nagel replies with comical understatement, "occasionally I have an inclination to contradict, and this evening I'm particularly bent on doing so" (Hamsum, *Mysteries* 154). By the end of the evening, Nagel has denounced Leo Tolstoy, altruism, Henrik Ibsen, and reigning conceptions of scientific and social progress. Carousing and drunkenness ensue, the doctor's pince-nez is crushed, and only the logic of intoxicated disintegration prevails, as it is with the novel as a whole.

Mysteries belittles the rationalism of Doctor Stenersen and underwrites the theatrical apologies for the irrational given by Nagel. In Hamsun scholarship, *Mysteries* has been a key reference point in discussions of Hamsun's literary modernism.[7] Commentators have understood the irrationalism of *Mysteries* in terms of early Hamsun's erratic infatuation with the unknowable murk of the individual human psyche. Both *Mysteries* and *Sult* are often compared to later novels of consciousness in the Anglo-American modernist canon, or to the works of Dostoevsky.[8] In Martin Humpál's discerning reading, the often noted narrative incoherence of the novel is not a flaw, but rather an "aesthetic realization" of the novel's main psychological theme: "the human being as an incomprehensible mystery" (Humpál, 74). Humpál reads *Mysteries* as "modernist parody of realist narratives" that resists interpretation in terms of a realist or naturalist expectation of causal determination and coherence (Humpál, 75).

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[7] See especially Martin Humpál, *The Roots of Modernist Narrative: Knut Hamsun's Novels Hunger, Mysteries, and Pan* (Oslo: Solum, 1998), Atle Kittang, *Luft, Vind, Ingenting: Hamsuns Desillusjonsromaner frå Sult til Ringen Sluttet* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1984), and Øystein Rottem, *Hamsun og fantasiens triumf* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2002).

[8] J. W. McFarlane, "The Whisper of the Blood: A Study of Knut Hamsun's Early Novels." *PMLA* 71, no. 4 (1956). See also the English-language biography of Hamsun: Robert Ferguson, *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987).

Although Nagel is not the narrator, his point of view is dominant in that he is the only character whose thought processes and internal dialogues are portrayed. In fact, I find little difference between Nagel's ideas and those of the implied authorial perspective or the real Hamsun's own contemporary statements.[9] Nagel has become known in Hamsun criticism as an eccentric outsider who disrupts the bourgeois life of a small town. Part dandy, part nature-mystic,[10] he possesses the flair of counter-normative subversion, but also the torment of role-consciousness and self-contempt. In the course of the novel, Nagel enters several unusual and unstable relationships with the townspeople, such as his pathologically humble alter ego, Minutten, and his beloved femme fatale, Dagny.

Most relevant to this analysis is the relationship between Nagel and Doctor Stenersen, a freethinking liberal rationalist. Doctor Stenersen functions in the character thematics of *Mysteries* as the primary representative of what Nagel and Hamsun consider the nihilistic humbug of bourgeois and scientific rationality. Most of Nagel's speech and actions can be understood as part of an occasionally brutal defense of the mysteriousness of nature and the human psyche, what he calls "livets blinde kræfter" ["the blind forces of life"] (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 132), against the doctor's rationalizing and disenchanting outlook. In fact, in the lecture "Psychological Literature" from 1891, published first in 1960, Hamsun states explicitly that he likes to put a doctor in his fiction as the representative of the contemporary science that he finds so limited. Here, he associates doctors not only with positivism, but also with social power and dogma:

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[9] This does not mean, of course, that Nagel is simply a self-portrait, although Hamsun's son Tore did suggest so. (Ferguson, 126.) While they are certainly not identical in all respects, this analysis will treat Hamsun and Nagel somewhat interchangeably *as regards their opposition to the positivist figure of the doctor*.

[10] Some critics have seen Nagel as a pantheistic mystic seeking a true self in harmony with nature, outside of an alienating modern civilization and social life. There are mystical moments of "kinship with all of nature, with the sun and the mountains and all the rest" when Nagel "curl[s] up with pleasure, hugging his knees and shivering with well-being." (Hamsun 2001, 51). At these times, nature is the site of mystical disintegration of the normal boundaries of the self, of the 'oceanic feeling' Freud located in religious experience or other kinds of de-individualizing moments. Nagel's nature mysticism should be seen as psychological rather than authentically religious.

Derfor har jeg gærne med en Doktor i min Digtning, som skal repræsentere Videnskaben, og Doktorerne, disse Folk, der som Stand betragtet er næst Teologerne de mest dogmatiske Menneske i Samfundet, Doktorerne staar der Respekt af. Doktorerne i vor Literatur er kloge Hjærner og humane Hjærter, de har Viden om alt muligt, de er liberale om en Hals og er aldeles fortræffelige Fritænkere. Bedre Repræsentanter for Videnskaben end slige Doktorer, kan en Literatur aldrig faa.

[I like to include a doctor in my fiction, who is supposed to represent science, and doctors, these people who are as a profession the most dogmatic members of society other than theologians, there's respect for doctors. The doctors in our literature are wise minds and humane hearts, they have knowledge about everything; they're liberal to a fault and wholly excellent freethinkers. A literature could hardly have better representatives for science] (Hamsun, Paa Turné 53).

Here Hamsun blames Scandinavian realist and naturalist literature for portraying doctors too respectfully. In this lecture, as in "Fra det Ubevidste Sjæleliv," Hamsun rebels against doctor-respecting literature in favor of a more psychologically sophisticated and purportedly deeper subjectivist alternative. Such a figure of the doctor combines progressive political and social opinions with the literary and scientific positions that both Hamsun and Nagel regard as demoralizing and narrowly unable to acknowledge the irrational. Clearly played by Doctor Stenersen in *Mysteries*, this figure represents everything targeted by Hamsun's revolt against the Modern Breakthrough's literary and ideological status quo.

As a contemporary statement of Hamsun's aesthetic aims, "Psychological Literature" continues to cast light on *Mysteries*. The lecture's main negative gesture is to reject the tendentious and "useful" literature of the Modern Breakthrough era in Scandinavia, along with its program of debating social problems and advocating radical or progressive politics. In a pre-Freudian psychological move, Hamsun rejects realist characterization in favor of a view

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into the inner "electricity" and "nervousness" of the modern individual (Hamsun, Paa Turné 48–49). The tempo of our modern nervous life, he claims, has made us more complicated than people in Shakespeare's time; yet the typological and shallow character psychology of our literature has not kept pace. Here, Hamsun shows his similarity to Strindberg, echoing the latter's attack of nineteenth-century dramatic characterization in his "Preface to *Miss Julie*."

Hamsun's bombastic and scandalous criticism of Shakespeare's shallow character psychology is an attention-grabbing and iconoclastic gesture reminiscent of Nagel. His repeated point is that "det modne, nervøse, forfinede Menneske er bleven et overmaade indviklet Væv af Sammensætninger . . . et Væsen, som ikke paa nogen Maade kan gaa op i en Sum eller udtrykkes i en eller to særskilte Egenskabsbetegnelser" ["the mature, nervous, refined person has become an extremely intricate web of contradictions . . . a being who can in no way be summed up or expressed in one or two distinct character descriptions"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 51). As a response to the complex electricity of the modern soul, Hamsun famously calls for a literature that focuses primarily on hidden interiority. This anti-typological psychology emerges in a confrontational differentiation from realism that is also a touch defensive: "Jeg vil udstyre mine Mennesker som jeg føler Dem, og ikke som Positivismen byder og befaler" ["I will make up my characters as I feel them, not as positivism commands and orders"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 52). Rejecting the alliance of literature with the shallow positivistic science that he calls "Tidens eneste totale Magt" ["the only total power of our time"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 53), Hamsun claims that this science cannot explain the singular and unpredictable psychological phenomena that are most worthy of attention.

The theme of blindness enters the lecture when Hamsun chooses to exemplify the need for a less superficial literary optic with a story about a blind man. Last winter, he begins, he was living with a family near St. Hanshaugen in Kristiania. The poor couple had a child, and

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the wife's old and blind father lived with them as well—Hamsun signals in advance that the whole story revolves around this figure (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 57). One day, while going for a walk toward the center of what is now Oslo, Hamsun meets a friend, an author, walking in the opposite direction. The author friend says he has something to show Hamsun, leading him back, coincidentally, to the very house where Hamsun resides. In the backyard they see the boy and the old blind man playing; the old man is pretending to be a horse for the child to ride. Although they can tell that it is physically difficult for the old man, he still amuses the child by whinnying and performing horse-like gestures. Hamsun and his friend notice that the old man is shaking visibly from the effort, "men for ikke at forstyrre Barnets Illusjon, klaged han slet ikke, han vrinsked blot, fordi han var Hest" ["but to avoid disturbing the child's illusion, he didn't complain at all, he merely neighed, because he was a horse"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 57). Even when the child begins to go too far, hitting his old blind grandfather with a pretend whip, the old man withstands the discomfort, presumably for the sake of the child, and the playing continues.

The crux of this story becomes apparent when Hamsun explains how his friend's interpretation of the scene differed from his own. Visibly moved, his friend says that this is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen, scribbling some notes about the old man in his notebook. Hamsun asks how his friend might represent this man in a piece of fiction. The maudlin reply: "Jeg kunde ikke fremstille ham paa en bedre Maade end som et levende Eksempel paa Barnet i vor Sjæl som den menneskelig Godhed" ["I couldn't portray him better than as a living example of the child in our soul as human goodness"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 59). This sort of fictional use of the old man would be one of his friend's "Types," thinks Hamsun to himself. Thus, the friend is aligned with the typological character psychology that Hamsun's lecture aims to transcend with a more incisive literary optic.

Hamsun's reading of the scene ascribes a very different motivation to the blind man for his willingness to tolerate the painful playing with the child. The more complicated reason, available to an enhanced authorial sensitivity, has nothing to do with the generality of human kindness, but rather with the particular, invisible guilt that the old blind man is experiencing. This guilt constitutes what Hamsun calls "et Stykke Særliv, som ikke kunde læses udenpaa hans milde Ansigt" ["a bit of singular life, which could not be read from the outward appearance of his mild face"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 61). Here, as frequently in early Hamsun, interiority holds a secret pain or transgression (as in the story "Hemmelig Ve"). In this case, the old man has stolen cheese from his daughter's kitchen, an act that Hamsun claims to have witnessed repeatedly in his daily observation of the family. Once, says Hamsun, he saw the old man crying while eating the stolen food. Hamsun conjectures that the old man knows that his daughter can see him playing with the child; yet it is not merely to appear kind to her that the old man endures the painful play with a lighthearted smile. Rather, in a characteristically Hamsunian twist, the old man takes secret satisfaction in the pain inflicted by the playing child: "han nyder denne fortræffelige Smærte, uden at fortrække en Mine, netop fordi den gør meget ondt. Han gør det ikke af Bitterhed, men af en sentimental Grusomhed mod sig selv" ["he enjoys this splendid pain while keeping a straight face, precisely because it hurts so much. He doesn't do it with bitterness, but with a sentimental cruelty to himself"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 64). In this reading of the scene, the old blind man's secret transgression and guilt are accompanied by a secret pleasure in pain experienced as punishment, all masked by an apparently kind and grandfatherly indulgence.

As the center of Hamsun's story-in-a-lecture, the blind man functions not as a type who signifies a bland conception of human kindness, but rather as an individual in a peculiarly painful situation. Only his face, the false appearance registered by the blunt optics of realism, signifies anything like goodness; the inner truth that Hamsun's psychological

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method perceives is one of crime and guilt, obsessive awareness of being observed, of hidden and irrational self-punishment. Shortly after the story of the old blind man, the lecture continues in its condemnation of authors like Ibsen and Alexander Kielland, who supposedly scope out only externals, missing the richly disturbing contradictions of the human interior.

In contrast, Hamsun's desired literature would feature, as he puts it in an often-quoted line, "Mennesker, hos hvem Inkonsekvensen bogstavelig er Grundkaraktertræk" ["persons for whom inconsistency is literally a fundamental feature"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 66). His proposed idea relies on novelistic observation beyond the visual: his literary psychology would entail a diligent attempt to seek out and register the smallest vibrations and seeds of thought and feeling (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 70–71). For this goal, says Hamsun, it is not sufficient to "study a soul in its conscious and reasonable condition"; the literary psychologist must approach the soul when it is sleeping, when it is led astray in fantasy, or taken to illogical extremities of sorrow or gladness (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 71). Modern literature, breaking with "Mill and Comte and Zola," must be willing to follow the movements of a soul "lige ind i Mysteriet" ["right into the mystical"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 67). The figure of blindness in this story challenges the limited outer vision of realism, which Hamsun rejects for an internal view that is mystical, bodily nervous, and electrical.

Hamsun's plea for a superior "moderne Sjælemaleri" ["modern soul-painting"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 67) is psychological in that it depreciates literary realism for its inability to capture the unseen life of the mind. The ultra-subjectivism of Hamsun's "Psychological Literature" relegates mere facts to merchants and capitalists, or as he suggests at one point, the mercantile aspect of our being ("*Et faktum* rammer saa at sige mit merchantile Væsen"). As a self-styled aristocrat of the spirit, Hamsun rebels against the doctrinaire superficiality of the entire positivist era, whose bourgeois rationalism is condensed in the observing eye of the doctor. When Hamsun defends the "Omraader i vort Væsen, som levnes uberørte af et

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Faktum" ["areas of our being that are left untouched by a fact"] (Hamsun, *Paa Turné* 54), he reveals his artistic fixation on what Robert Musil later called "the non-ratioid"—"the area of the dominance of the exceptions over the rule" and the region where "facts do not submit, laws are sieves, events do not repeat themselves but are infinitely variable and individual" (Musil, 63). The very form of Hamsun's modernist novels is affected by this frantic obsession with the non-ratioid and *Erlebnis*.[11] His hostility to the doctor's rationalist version of nature and human experience disrupts his narrative structures in a thrilling departure from novelistic realism. In *Mysteries*, Hamsun's version of nature is non-ratioid like the unconscious psyche: both are positioned outside the scope of the doctor's worldview, against whose symbolic power Hamsun premises his literary and ideological revolt.

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Blind Illumination in the Forest

In *Downcast Eyes,* Jay observes "the tendency of the visionary tradition to posit a higher sight of the seer, who is able to discern a truth denied to normal vision. Here the so-called third eye of the soul is invoked to compensate for the imperfections of the two physical eyes. Often physical blindness is given sacred significance" (Jay, 12). Hamsun's romanticization of blindness can be seen as a secular continuation of this tendency among visionaries. In one of the many eerily beautiful incidents of fantasy, dream, or hallucination in *Mysteries*, Nagel recounts a luminous and violent fairytale to his love interest, Dagny, as they walk through the forest on a long Norwegian summer night. This is set apart as the only chapter in the novel with a title, "Lyse Nætter" ["White Nights"]. The story contains unusual alternations of light and dark, as well as many motifs associated with vision and blindness. Reiterating the novel's contrast between a natural and cultural topography, the story is told and takes place in a forest

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[11] David S. Luft suggests in his introduction to Musil's essays in *Precision and Soul* that Musil's distinction between "ratioid" and "non-ratioid" corresponds to Wilhelm Dilthey's classic distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. (Musil, xxvi). For more on literature and the non-ratioid, see also Musil's "Sketch of What a Writer Knows" in the same volume.

landscape that is markedly different from the town. Additionally, the entire scene is loaded with erotic significance, which makes sense given that Nagel is telling the story to the woman he desires.

The chapter begins during the white night of a Norwegian summer. After a quick view of the town as "et underlig, grenet kjæmpeinsekt, et fabeldyr som hadde kastet sig flat på buken og strakt armer og horn og føletråder ut i alle retninger" ["a weird, splayed giant insect, a fabulous creature that had thrown itself flat on its belly, extending arms and horns and feelers in all directions"] (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 84), the narrative turns to Nagel smoking a cigar and walking with Dagny in a mood of calm satisfaction. Nagel makes somewhat rhapsodic comments about how gorgeous the white nights are, saying that the pines and other trees resemble seated people in the white light. Soon Nagel begins to relate a fairytale he experienced, claiming that the incident occurred eight years ago, in 1883, in a little town outside of Norway. The story begins with Nagel reading by lamplight during a pitch-black night, when suddenly he feels someone's breath and hears a voice whispering for him to come. Out of nowhere appears "en liten blek mand med rødt skæg og et tørt, stivt hår som står ret tilveirs" ["a pale little man with a red beard and dry, stiff, bristly hair"] (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 90). Nagel puts on a coat and some galoshes, lights a cigar, and also grabs some extra cigars; "God knows why, but I did" he says to Dagny (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 90). Then he follows the little man out into the total darkness, but looses track of him and decides just to wander by himself into the forest, where he feels dewy branches and leaves touching his face. He becomes tired and wet from the dew, lights yet another cigar and wanders in all directions, now with the little man near him again, breathing on him constantly. A tower clock strikes midnight, and Nagel sees the little man, with two front teeth missing, staring at him and glowing brilliantly: "Han lyste av et forunderlig lys som syntes å være bak ham, å stråle ut fra hans ryg og gjøre ham gjennemsigtig" ["he shone with a strange light that seemed to be

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behind him, radiating from his back and making him transparent"] (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 91). The sight astonishes Nagel and he turns away involuntarily, only to look back and find that the man is gone.

Nagel's story continues as he moves toward an octagonal tower, still hearing the call from the little man to come. In the first vault of the tower he meets the little man again, who stares at him laughing, with eyes full of the many horrible things he has seen. Nagel turns to see a young woman enter. She has red hair and black eyes, and, taking a wildly glowing lantern from the little man, she walks toward Nagel and asks him where he is from. He answers that he is from the town, "fair maiden," and she asks him to forgive her father, who is sick and mad, as shown in his eyes. The young woman asks Nagel to take his shoes off and leads him up into a second vault; they can still hear "den vanskapte gale" ["the deformed madman"] (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 93). The second vault is utterly dark, and Nagel finds the bed, takes off his clothes as requested by the young woman, who then says goodnight and leaves, despite Nagel's protests.

At this point in Nagel's story, Dagny is blushing red, her breasts heaving, nostrils quivering; she asks if the maiden left. After a seductive pause, Nagel continues, saying that now his narrative becomes "en rosenrød erindring" ["a rose-colored reminiscence"] (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 93). The strange shifts of light and darkness continue, as Nagel tells Dagny to "Tænk Dem en lys, lys nat" ["imagine a white, white night"] but immediately follows to say "Jeg var alene, mørket omkring mig var tungt of tykt som fløiel" ["I was alone; the darkness around me was thick and heavy, like velvet"] (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 93). All of a sudden he hears the vault fill up with a rustle of noise. He waits expectantly until he experiences something that he says still intoxicates him with "a mysterious, supernatural pleasure" when he thinks of it: "en strøm av bitte små blændende væsener bryter pludselig ned til mig; de er aldeles hvite, det er engler, myriader av småengler, som strømmer ned fra oven som en skrå

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mur av lys." ["a stream of tiny little dazzling creatures suddenly descends upon me; they are perfectly white, angels, myriads of little angels streaming down from on high like an oblique wall of light"] (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 94). Waves of tiny singing angels fill the vault, all of them naked and white; some of them come to sit on Nagel's hand, and he notices that they are blind. He captures more and more handfuls of angels, noticing that all of them are blind; "the whole tower was full of blind angels singing" (Hamsun, *Mysteries* 94). When the city clock strikes one again, the angels stop singing and fly away in a stream of light, the last ones turning back to look at Nagel, even though they are blind. Darkness ensues. Nagel later finds out that the young woman with red hair is also blind. When Nagel goes back to the forest after this magical night to find the tower and the blind girl, he finds her crushed and dead outside the tower, the mad father pacing around and wailing, still with a horrifying gaze that sends Nagel running frightened back to the town.

This incident is certainly one of the most evocative in the novel, and I don't want to reduce it to a clearly legible set of symbols. Its suggestiveness and resistance to decoding are part of its enthralling effect on Dagny and the reader. What I find important is the convergence of erotic and spiritual epiphany in the forest—a natural landscape that functions throughout the novel as an alternative to the town's social and cultural space of rationality, falsity, and conformist superficiality. While the doctor is strongly associated with the town and the faults of the modern era in his liberalism, rationality, and scientific approach to all phenomena, the anti-ocularcentric imagery and opacity of this story defy his worldview. Like the angels, the young woman is blind; the angels are denizens of a mysterious, non-visual realm of fantasy that is resistant to the doctor's disenchanting explanations. The intoxications of the fairytale function as part of Hamsun's poetics of the irrational, which concern not only the inconsistent psyche, but also the natural landscape. The latter is of course a subjective,

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even narcissistic,[12] dream of a landscape, containing all the torments and terrors of Nagel's mind, but also the volatile dream of an alternative to the "total power" of the doctor.

In an article that analyzes the role of the forest in Hamsun's novels, Steinar Gimnes situates Hamsun's forest as a literary topos in the cultural-historical context of forests in the European imagination. The Hamsunian forest, as Gimnes argues, is romantic rather than rationalistic, positioned against the disenchanting Enlightenment "forest ideology," encapsulated in Le Roy's article on "forest" in Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, which stripped the forest of all symbolism and meaning, reducing it to a material and utilitarian object (Gimnes, 174).[13] Gimnes refers to Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, which begins with the eloquent statement: "forests represent an outlying realm of opacity which has allowed [Western] civilization to estrange itself, enchant itself, terrify itself, ironize itself, in short to project into the forest's shadows its secret and innermost anxieties" (Harrison, xi). The terror and enchantment of Nagel's story of the blind girl in the tower are palpable enough; moreover, the story's opacity to the positivist eye is also inscribed in its very symbolic texture, with its emphasis on distortions of and alternatives to normal vision. As Harrison writes, "an obstacle to visibility, the forests also remained an obstacle to human knowledge and science" (Harrison, 10).

The nostalgia and poetic fantasy of Hamsun's forests can be seen as compensatory for modernity's loss of attunement with nature, while they also challenge modern ideologies of progress (Gimnes, 175). As Hamsun writes in "Lidt om Strindberg," a turn away from the

[12] Kittang's *Luft, Vind, Ingenting* employs psychoanalytic theories of narcissism to account for the illusions of harmony and wholeness that early Hamsun's heroes project onto the world and the people around them. Since these dreams of unity are imaginary moments in an inherent dialectic of lack, they are accompanied by a disillusioned, ironic stance of alienation and disharmony. Such a narcissistic "dialectic of self-mystification and self-revelation" (Kittang, 81) dissolves all fantasies of 'true' harmony in Hamsun, including Nagel's oft-noted mystical communion nature. Accordingly, the natural landscape is in Kittang's reading a narcissistic and auto-erotic dream that, like every other fantasy of fulfillment in Hamsun, is undercut by reflexive awareness and an ironic refusal of harmony.

[13] "'Det er ingen herlighet til som suset i skogen'—Skogen som 'stad' i nokre Hamsun-tekstar," Gimnes takes his discussion of Le Roy from Robert Pogue Harrison's chapter on "Enlightenment" in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 115-120.

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contemporary situation of *overkultur* is needed: "Mennesket selv [er] udartet ved Vold paa dets Natur, og der er intet andet, som kan redde det, end tyk, veritabel Reaktion" ["human beings have become degenerate by violence to their nature, and there is nothing that can save them other than dense, true reaction"] (Hamsun, *Artikler* 25). [14] In this respect, says Hamsun, progress can occur through regress: through a reaction as dense or thick as the forest, to highlight the sylvan adjective in this description. Here, Hamsun describes as *udartet* [degenerate] cultural man's (and especially woman's) deviation from the norms of nature and the forest.

Reactionary Radicalism and Fascism

Hamsun's reactionary-radical critique of post-Enlightenment modernity finds its home in the only major political ideology to emerge out of Europe's fin-de-siècle crisis of culture: fascism. This is not by necessity, but it is also not unfathomable. In "Lidt om Strindberg," the natural has an obviously normative function as the basis of reactionary social values. All of Hamsun's authorship is politically fraught, and its models of nature have troubled many previous critics of differing persuasions. In 1937, before Hamsun greeted the Nazi occupation of Norway, the Frankfurt School Marxist Leo Löwenthal published an article on Hamsun's work. For Löwenthal, the view of nature expressed in Hamsun's authorship is symptomatic of a "late-liberal" (*nachliberalistisch*) and proto-fascist ideology, in which the freedom and harmony lacking in modern industrial society are projected onto nature.[15] A Danish study from the 1970s—a fruitful decade for Marxist ideology criticism on Hamsun—expands such a reading of Hamsunian nature as a symptomatic disclosure of the author's reactionary politics, building a system of nature-culture oppositions with which to understand the entire authorship. At the

[14] Gimnes quotes this also in his discussion of *Mysterier* (184).

[15] In contrast to the alienating pressures of bourgeois existence, "Verkehr mit der Natur" ["interaction with nature"] appears "als Eintritt in den Bezirk menschlicher Freiheit" ["as the entrance to the domain of human freedom"] (Löwenthal, 245). Nature in Hamsun's early novels functions in this reading as the site of a reactionary and proto-fascist retreat into an irrational realm of mystical authority.

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"philosophical" level—one of four levels at which Hamsun raises natural values above cultural ones—the authors describe the opposition in terms of an "irrationalist naturalism" that involves subordination to an unchanging nature, construed as a mystical and spiritual force. Hamsun valorizes this irrational dream of nature as opposed to modern culture's rationalism and reductive materialism.[16] This places Hamsun in proximity to what the authors see as the idealist anti-modernism of fascist ideology.

Non-Marxist critics of Hamsun, including some with stated environmental concerns, have also understood nature as a key term in discussions of his fascism. Nina Witoszek understands Hamsun as an exception to the Norwegian pastoral tradition she calls "eco-humanist," seeing in his works an ecstatic religion of nature, whose demonic power she construes as a hypnotic and atavistic force of terror (Witoszek, 125–138). With greater nuance, the Norwegian critic Aasmund Brynildsen argued in his excellent essays from the fifties and sixties that Hamsun's entire authorship displays a reactionary-utopian, culture-pessimistic, and anti-humanist nature romanticism that makes his path to fascism comprehensible. Brynildsen pondered these issues in his 1962 essay "Den Gådefulle," in which he writes that "it was naïve [of Hamsun] to believe that German Nazism actually was to be a political instrument for this romantic reaction" (Brynildsen, 62). Brynildsen's essays on Hamsun are notable for the insight they provide into the attractions of Hamsun's romantic reaction: why it spoke so deeply to those experiencing the cultural and ecological crises of modernity. Speaking of the historical path—"progress"—toward the contemporary "abstract and artificial world," Brynildsen writes:

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[16] The authors also identify an "anthropological" level, at which nature as "biologism" informs Hamsun's cult of youth, his patriarchal values, his view of women as mother or love-object, his supposed worship of the *Übermensch*, and his nationalism. At the "sociological" level, rootedness in nature, glorification of the farmer, and individual freedom in nature are superior to alienating sociality. Lastly, the authors point to the opposition between a natural economy and an industrial market economy; Hamsun's novels praise naturalness in economic relations for stability, transparency, and a wholesome lack of unnecessary luxury, surplus, and waste. See Morten Giersing, John Thobo-Carlsen, and Mikael Westergaard-Nielsen. *Det Reaktionære Oprør: Om Fascismen i Hamsuns Forfatterskab*.

One would have to be blind and deaf not to see how inwardly impoverished people have gradually become on this path, not so see what they have lost, both in terms of spiritual wealth and inner security and dignity—not to see how loathsome the world has become, how we slowly but surely are *consuming* nature, where Hamsun's mountains and forests must soon be salvaged as a kind of *nature-museum*. Yes, one would need to be blind and deaf not to understand Hamsun's and all the great Romantics' *reaction*… I can understand it—but I cannot accept it (Brynildsen, 63).

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Brynildsen's work contains a needed combination of sympathy and soberly reflective judgment: he refuses to pretend that Hamsun's fantasy of a flight to nature and natural values was politically innocent during the age of fascism.

While it is quite misleading to label *Mysteries* "fascist literature," one can nonetheless discern the continuities between Hamsun's literary modernism and his fascism, both of them comprising reactionary-radical responses to the crises of reason, liberalism, and industrial society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[17] As the historian Roger Griffin argues, fascism offered a vision of a future escape from the "decadence" of liberal and bourgeois modernity. Griffin's work emphasizes that fascist ideology constitutes a *revolutionary reaction* against Enlightenment or liberalist modernity. Rather than being simply anti-modern, fascism is "one of the forms taken by political and cultural modernity," and it positions itself as a future alternative to the bourgeois, rationalist, capitalist, cosmopolitan, or otherwise "decadent" existing modernity (Griffin, 348). Øystein Rottem makes a similar point about Hamsun's ambivalent relationship to social modernity in his essay collection *Hamsun og fantasiens triumf* when he characterizes Hamsun as a

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[17] Most ideology critique of Hamsun proceeds with a Marxist understanding of fascist ideology as a regressive and backwards-longing form of bourgeois response to modernity. Many contemporary scholars, however, reject the idea that fascism was wholly anti-modern, or simply nostalgic or regressive; instead, they think of it as "a complex ideological synthesis of old and new, of left and right" to quote Roger Eatwell's discussion of the origins of fascist ideology. Such contemporary scholarship suggests that Hamsun's affinity to fascism should be understood in terms of a bipolar, not merely regressive, ideological dynamic.

"reactionary modernist" (Rottem, 11–12). Generally speaking, scholars no longer commit "the critical conflation of political and aesthetic 'progressiveness'" (Hewitt, 39) that produced a view of modernism and fascism as incompatible, and it is now widely acknowledged that fascism is one of modernism's ideological possibilities.

Hamsun's counter-Enlightenment and, as I have suggested here, anti-ocularcentric, revolt begins in the last decades of the nineteenth century in anarchic fits and strains against what it perceives as the soullessness of positivist modernity and the degeneracy of liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and progressive intellectuals: all the degenerate aspects of modern *overkultur*. Considering that the "norms of the forest" underlie these aspects of Hamsun's relation to fascism, one sees how problematic it would be for environmental criticism to cast an approving, de-historicizing gaze on Hamsunian nature—or worse, to turn Hamsun into a timeless nature lover whose wisdom would help us improve our ecological piety. Though a fascinating novelist, Hamsun is not a "claimable" figure for *any* contemporary political or social movement.

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