

Humpál, Martin

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MARTIN HUMPÁL
(CHARLES UNIVERSITY, PRAGUE)

**LITERARY CHARACTERS
AS ARCHETYPES AND STEREOTYPES:
GUSTAV PALLAS AND HAMSUN RECEPTION
IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA**

Abstract

**Literary Characters as Archetypes and Stereotypes:
Gustav Pallas and Hamsun Reception in Czechoslovakia**

Knut Hamsun was a very popular writer between the two world wars in many countries. It was also during this period that the first and only monograph in the Czech language on Hamsun's life and works was written. The book is called *Knut Hamsun a soudobá beletrie norská* (1933, *Knut Hamsun and Contemporary Norwegian Fiction*) and was published by the translator, essayist and literary historian Gustav Pallas (1882–1964). The author of this article focuses on two books by Pallas in which he deals with Hamsun. The article argues that Pallas's studies of Hamsun's life and works, despite being quite nuanced, perpetuate some of the common stereotypes in the Czechoslovak reception of Hamsun. Among others, Pallas sees Hamsun's characters as archetypes of Scandinavian people, describing them as an extension of Scandinavian nature.

Keywords

Knut Hamsun, Gustav Pallas, Norwegian literature, reception, archetypes, stereotypes

Knut Hamsun was an extremely popular writer between the two world wars in many countries, including Czechoslovakia. By then almost all of his works had been translated there and were widely read and commented upon. It was also during the interwar period that the first and only monograph in the Czech language on Hamsun's life and works was written. The book is called *Knut Hamsun a soudobá beletrie norská* (*Knut Hamsun and Contemporary Norwegian Fiction*) and was published in 1933 by the Czech translator, critic and literary historian Gustav Pallas (1882–1964). It was republished in a slightly reworked and updated edition in 1944.¹

¹ The word order in the title is slightly different, too: *Knut Hamsun a soudobá norská beletrie*. Throughout the article I quote from this second edition of the book.

Pallas was one of the greatest mediators of Scandinavian literature in the Czech language. He made his living as a high school teacher of Czech and German, and beside this daily job he was very active throughout most of his life, publishing a great amount of texts about literature, mostly Czech and Scandinavian. He also translated several literary works from Scandinavian languages, for example an almost complete edition of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales and stories in three volumes (1914–1916; this edition contains 148 texts altogether), the first two volumes of Johannes V. Jensen's *Eksotiske noveller* (1914), Henrik Ibsen's *Kejser og Galilæer* (1917), as well as Knut Hamsun's *Pan* (1912) and *Siste kapitel* (1918). In terms of sheer quantity, there have been other, more important Czech translators of Scandinavian literature. Pallas contributed much more as an author of articles, essays, reviews and monographs, and as an editor. He wrote many articles and reviews for various newspapers and magazines, notably for *Lidové noviny*, a prestigious daily with significant cultural impact. He edited two anthologies of Scandinavian literature (*Mistři novelistiky severské*, 1920–1921, and *Severské literatury nové doby*, 1939) and Henrik Ibsen's selected works (1928–30). He also wrote several monographs. Apart from the one on Hamsun, which I have already mentioned, he authored books on Henrik Ibsen in 1922 (new edition 1927), on Selma Lagerlöf (1933) and August Strindberg (1933). His last monograph, called *Hvězdy severu* (*The Northern Stars*) from 1948 is a collection of studies of various Scandinavian cultural personalities (mainly writers), and it also includes a study of Czech-Scandinavian cultural relations. Given the overall scope of Pallas's enthusiastic efforts, there can be no doubt that his work is one of the important factors in the great success that Scandinavian literature enjoyed among Czech readers in the first half of the twentieth century.

In this article I will mainly focus on Pallas's Hamsun monograph, but first I would like to mention some passages from *The Northern Stars*. This book seems to be a good point of departure, because it was published after the Second World War: unlike the author's Hamsun monograph, *The Northern Stars* touches upon the problem of Hamsun's support of Nazi Germany. Pallas describes the writer's misdeed quite directly:

[Hamsun] tarnished himself with a crime against his own nation. Hamsun was able to ally himself with the enemy or, more precisely, the murderer of his own people at the time when his country – which he used to celebrate so much – was in imminent danger of extinction and thralldom. It is a deed for which not even the greatest sons of a nation can be forgiven. By such a deed the traitor excludes himself from the national community and condemns himself to a moral execution.²

² “[P]oskvřnil se zločinem na svém národu. Hamsun dokázal spojit se s nepřitelem, ba vrahem svého lidu právě v dobách, kdy jeho zemi – jím tak opěvané – hrozilo nebezpečí zániku a otroctví. Je to čin, který se neodpouští ani největším synům národa. Jím se zrádce sám vylučuje

Pallas also tries to connect the early Hamsun with Nazi ideology, but he does so in somewhat unclear formulations: “In the first stage of his authorship, Hamsun was a proud, energetic and consistent advocate of individual human rights against the collective demands of the times. This is where one can find the core of his strange democratism, one which is also close to the opposite pole – the Nazi superman.”³ The author does not really clarify what he means by the writer’s “strange democratism” and how it might be related to the Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche’s idea of a superman. Instead, he concludes that both Hamsun’s view of life and his relationship to his nation are paradoxical (51).

Nevertheless, Pallas also makes clear that he still admires Hamsun’s literary works, and he does not hide his conviction that his *oeuvre* is a lasting contribution to world literature (48). Toward the end of the Hamsun chapter in *The Northern Stars* the author also summarizes Hamsun’s influence on Czech literature. But in the last two sentences of the paragraph, which also conclude the entire chapter, Pallas seems to make one more connection to Hamsun’s support of Germany’s idea of creating a Third Empire at the expense of other, non-Germanic nations:

Our literature, too, [...] has much to thank him for. We came to know Hamsun’s work early, and we welcomed it as a refreshing source of new, healthy inspiration both in art and life. The stuffy and sickly atmosphere of Decadent poetry became, thanks to him, refreshed by a healthy breeze from the majestic, strong-as-a-root climate of the North. Our Impressionism grew under his influence, and many of our writers [...] admitted that he had had an enriching influence on their work. We were even able to forgive him that we remained foreign to him and that he was always indifferent toward the fate of our nation. Our discriminating minds have always been able to separate the great artist from the hard-hearted man.⁴

The rest of the Hamsun chapter in *The Northern Stars* is basically a short presentation of the author’s views of the writer’s *oeuvre* as we know them from his book *Knut Hamsun and Contemporary Norwegian Fiction*. Therefore I will now turn my attention to this monograph.

ze společenství národního a odsuzuje se k mravní popravě.” (48) All English translations of quotes from Pallas’s texts in this article are mine.

3 “Hamsun byl v prvním stadiu své tvorby hrdým, energickým a důsledným obhájcem individuálních práv lidských proti kolektivním požadavkům doby. V tom tkví jádro jeho podivného demokratismu, který jest i blízký opačnému pólu – nacistickému nadčlověku.” (51)

4 “Také naše písemnictví [...] mu vděčí za mnoho. Poznávali jsme Hamsunovo dílo záhy a vítali je jako osvěžující zdroj nových, zdravých podnětů uměleckých a životních. Dusná a churavá atmosféra dekadentní poesie byla jeho prostřednictvím osvěžena zdravým vánkem ze sféry kořeně silného, majestátního ovzduší severského. Náš impresionismus vyrůstal pod jeho vlivem a řada našich umělců [...] mu přiznala zárodňující vliv na své dílo. Dovedli jsme mu při tom odpustit i to, že jsme mu zůstali cizí a náš národní osud že mu byl vždy lhostejný. Kritický náš duch vždycky odděloval od sebe velkého umělce a tvrdého člověka.” (52)

In general, *Knut Hamsun and Contemporary Norwegian Fiction* is quite a successful text. Pallas knows all of Hamsun's works in detail, his analyses of the individual works are convincing and he is also well-informed about the wider cultural context of the writer's authorship. Despite his obvious enthusiasm for Hamsun's literature, Pallas is not uncritical of the subject matter of his study; he does make critical remarks concerning several aspects of Hamsun's production, be it the tendentiousness of several of his works, or the "long-windedness" ("rozvláčnost", 74) of some of his later novels. However, I see at least three major problems in Pallas's book that are worth pointing out.

First, Pallas exaggerates when he claims that almost all of Hamsun's works are autobiographical. His monograph is interspersed with many statements in this regard: "Hamsun's works are [...] predominantly autobiographical"; in most of his works he "paints his own portrait in various stages of his life"; the series of novels from *Segelfoss Town* all the way to *The Road Leads On* is "an autobiographical confession".⁵ Incidentally, one finds similar formulations in the Hamsun chapter in *The Northern Stars* (48). Of course, it is very likely that Hamsun uses his own experience for aesthetic purposes in most of his works, but then again, which novelist does not do so? It is incorrect and somewhat unfair to overemphasize the role the autobiographical elements play in Hamsun's *oeuvre* as a whole. This approach indirectly diminishes Hamsun's actual artistic accomplishment: the writer's imagination was *also* capable of creating many splendid fictional characters, events and scenes which are pure fiction, completely unrelated to what the author had experienced. In other words, Hamsun's talent was not as one-sided as Pallas's insistence on the autobiographical sources of everything in the writer's works might indicate. Thus, in this regard, a reader who reads Pallas's book and is not yet familiar with Hamsun's works themselves may get a somewhat distorted impression of the writer's production.

The described problem may very well be related to the fact that Pallas, like many literary historians and critics of his time, often considered the expressions and opinions of literary characters to be the same as those of the author's, which was especially tempting in the case of first-person fiction.⁶ One could give several

⁵ "Díla Hamsunova [...] jsou převahou autobiografická" (23); "tak vystupuje básník sám ve všech skoro dílech se svou konfesí a kreslí tu vlastní svůj portrét v různých údobích životních" (79); "celý cyklus, jehož úvodem bylo *Město Segelfoss*, jest autobiografickou zповědí." (75)

⁶ This phenomenon is relatively well known among narrative theorists. See, e. g., Stanzel: "For a long time older views of first-person narration stood in the way of an accurate understanding of the peculiarity of this type of narration in contrast to third-person narration. One of these views, for example, asserted that the 'I' of a first-person narrator was largely identical with the author. This view evolved especially in conjunction with the interpretation of the great *Bildungsromane* in the first person, such as *David Copperfield* and Gottfried Keller's *Green Henry*, which actually suggested an identification of this kind." (80)

examples of this from Pallas's book, but it will suffice to quote a very obvious one. Pallas writes: "[Hamsun] himself says ironically of his knowledge of people: I think I can read a little in the minds of the people that I meet; maybe I cannot."⁷ Those who know Hamsun's works well will immediately recognize in this quote the beginning of a passage from Hamsun's novel *Pan*. Indeed, what follows is a whole paragraph taken directly from Chapter VII of *Pan*, and the thoughts of Lieutenant's Glahn's are thus being presented as Hamsun's own thoughts.⁸

The two other problems I want to mention are even more related to certain hidden assumptions and habitual thought patterns that were common in writing about literature in earlier days. One such assumption was that the entire *oeuvre* of such a famous modern classic as Hamsun must be an organic whole. Pallas clearly thinks so, because he defines several features that are, in his opinion, characteristic of the writer's entire authorship, but in order to be able to keep such assertions tenable, he is forced to make some rather inconsistent or self-contradictory statements. For example, he insists so much on the idea that the same type of character recurs throughout all of Hamsun's novels that he disregards some major differences between the individual characters and, consequently, makes a statement that borders on the absurd: "The main hero [of *Growth of the Soil*] Isak [...] is a continuation of both Nagel and Lieutenant Glahn" (69).⁹ Similarly, when Pallas claims in *The Northern Stars* that "the main elemental objective of Hamsun's *oeuvre* from the beginning to the end is a hymn-like apotheosis of nature"¹⁰, one wonders how a novel such as *Hunger* might fit into this pattern.

7 "Sám ironicky praví o své znalosti lidí: Myslím, že umím trochu číst v duši lidí, se kterými se stýkám; možná, že neumím." (84)

8 "Myslím, že umím trochu číst v duši lidí, se kterými se stýkám; možná, že neumím. Ó, když nastanou mé šťastné chvíle, tu se mi zdá, že nahlížím hluboko do duše jiných, ačkoli nejsem zvláště vtipná hlava. Sedíme ve světnici, několik mužů, několik žen a já, a mně se zdá, že vidím, co se děje v nitru těch lidí a co oni myslí o mně. Vkládám něco do každého mžiknutí jejich očí; občas vběhne jim do tváře krev a oni zčervenají, jindy se tváří, jako by se dívali jiným směrem, a přece na mne pohlížejí se strany. Sedím tu a dívám se na to všecko a nikdo netuší, že prohlédám každou duši. Po mnoho let jsem se domníval, že umím číst v duši všech lidí. Možná, že neumím ..." (84-85). In Hamsun's novel *Pan*, the first-person narrator Glahn largely uses the same words: "Jeg tror at jeg kan læse i de menneskers sjæle som omgir mig; kanske er det ikke så. Å når jeg har mine gode dager da forekommer det mig at jeg skimter langt ind i andres sjæle, skjønt jeg ikke er noget videre godt hode. Vi sitter i en stue nogen mænd, nogen kvinder og jeg, og jeg synes å se hvad som foregår i disse menneskers indre og hvad de tænker om mig. Jeg lægger noget i hvert vink som iler gjennom deres øine; stundom skyter blodet op i deres kinder og gjør dem røde, til andre tider later de som om de ser til en anden kant og holder dog litt øie med mig fra siden. Der sitter jeg og ser på alt dette og ingen aner at jeg gjennemskuer hver sjæl. I flere år har jeg ment å kunne læse i alle menneskers sjæle. Kanske er det ikke så" (343)

9 "Hrdina románu [...] Isak [...] je pokračováním Nagla i poručíka Glahna [...]" (69)

10 "Hymnická apotheosa přírody je vedoucím živelným cílem Hamsunova díla od prvních počát-

The third and, in my opinion, biggest problem of Pallas's book is the way the author often equates everything Hamsunian with things that are allegedly typically Norwegian, or even Nordic. Again, it seems that what is behind this approach is a certain hidden assumption. It is the assumption that a great writer who has achieved such a status that he almost exclusively represents a literature of a particular country in the eyes of foreign readers (and Hamsun, for Pallas and many other Czech readers of his time certainly did, since Pallas writes that Hamsun "reigned over Scandinavian literature for two generations"¹¹, and he repeatedly calls him one of the "leading figures") must by default express the spirit of his or her nation. Pallas is not alone at assuming so. Seeing Hamsun in this fashion was a widespread stereotype among the broad Czech readership in the period between the two world wars, and Pallas fell for it as well. The main aspect of this stereotype is the tendency toward regarding Hamsun's characters as archetypes of Scandinavian people and, at the same time, the tendency toward describing these people as an extension of Scandinavian nature.

To illustrate this, the first chapter of Pallas's Hamsun book is the best point of departure. This chapter, called "Pohádka Severu" ("The Fairy Tale of the North"), actually does not yet speak much about Hamsun, or at least not directly. It is, in reality, a poetic preface which is supposed to introduce the reader to what the North is like in terms of atmosphere and spirit. As the title of this introductory chapter indicates, it describes the North as a fairy tale world, in other words, as something which seems very exotic to a Central-European. The chapter opens as follows:

The wanderer who has decided to become acquainted with the regions of which he has read a great deal in the books of Scandinavian authors, will encounter a fairy-tale scenery which evokes many memories in the spheres of sacred silence, in the very heart of mountains and glaciers. The outskirts of town, as well as the last human abodes [...] have been left far, far behind. A virgin countryside, pure and stark. The last train station is far away from here [...]. Silence, silence. Nature is holding its breath before its own immensity. In this grandeur one perceives the presence of God himself.¹²

This image of the North in general, as a beautiful, exotic, almost uninhabited landscape is decisive for everything else that comes afterwards in Pallas's

ků až do konce." (51)

11 "[V]ěvodil po dvě generace písemnictví severskému." (12)

12 "Poutníkovi, který zatoužil poznat kraje, o nichž mnoho četl v knihách severských autorů, naskytá se pohádková scenerie, vyvolávající mnoho vzpomínek ve sférách posvátného mlčení, v samém klínu hor a ledovců. Daleko, velmi daleko zůstala periferie města i poslední lidská sídla [...]. Kraj panenský, čistý a přísný. Daleko odtud je poslední stanice dráhy [...]. Ticho, ticho. Příroda zatajila dech před vlastní mohutností. Cítíte v tom majestátní přítomnost samého Boha." (5)

monograph.¹³ The image of the North never really becomes more nuanced as the book progresses, and both Scandinavians as people in general and Scandinavians as artists and writers are portrayed as being determined by this landscape.

Pallas's fairy tale continues as follows: "This is where the priest Brand once walked in the chilly fog over the snow-covered mountain plateaus. [...] Also Alfred Almers [sic], father of Little Eyolf, came here, into the tranquility of the sacred silence of the Nordic mountains [...]"¹⁴ After some more literary allusions of this type Pallas eventually arrives at Hamsun: "The Nordic Pan, Lieutenant Glahn, also dwelled in these melancholy, dreamy regions, so quiet and calming."¹⁵ After elaborating a little more on how Glahn allegedly felt, Pallas concludes the introductory chapter by the following sentences: "This is how a Scandinavian sees his country, these are the thoughts that occur to a wanderer who comes to these regions. The words of a poet who once said that he who wants to understand the art and the spirit of a nation, must become acquainted with its country, are, in its own special way, valid for Scandinavia as well."¹⁶

The first chapter and its ending thus indicate that Pallas approaches literature in a certain manner that one can trace back to Romanticism or even Preromanticism, and the rest of the book confirms this suspicion. It seems that for Pallas the spirit of a national literature is automatically equal to the spirit of the nation itself, and the greatest writer is the one who captures this spirit best. Moreover, Pallas seems to assume that the spirit of the Scandinavian nations equals the spirit of nature, obviously the concrete type of nature one finds in Scandinavia, or more precisely, in Norway. Probably the best example of what I have just described is the following passage:

Together with [J.P.] *Jacobsen* Hamsun is the purest expression of the Scandinavian spirit, because he has portrayed all the subjective distinctiveness of a Scandinavian

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- 13 Interestingly enough, a similar view of Hamsun's writing was typical of the early twentieth-century reception of Hamsun in Germany. Speaking of Kurt Rotermund's book *Knut Hamsun: Ein nordischer Portrait* (1907), Gujord remarks: "A link had to be forged between the artist as an individual, the artist's origins, and his artistic expressions. In the case of Hamsun, the link was found in the artist's 'Germanic-religious sense of nature' and in his affinity to the realms of mystery. Thus Hamsun's writings were perceived as a reflection of the world of fairy tales, prior to the written word." (42)
- 14 "Tudy kráčel kdysi po horských sněžných pláních, za mlhy a chladu, kněz Brand. [...] Sem, do ticha posvátného mlčení hor severských, šel i statkář a spisovatel Alfred Almers [sic], otec malého Eyolfa [...]" (6-7)
- 15 "V těchto melancholických, zasněžených končinách, tak tichých a uklidňujících, dlel i Pan severský, poručík Glahn." (9-10)
- 16 "Tak vidí svou zemi Seveřan, takové myšlenky se probouzejí v poutníkovi, který do těchto končin přichází. Platí o Skandinávii s určitou obměnou slova básníkova, že kdo chce porozumět umění a duchu národa, musí poznat jeho zemi." (10)

in the most open way and in the boldest outlines: his taciturn, introverted character, his moral strength, his dreamy, indecisive and reflective soul. In him they have both underscored what others of their fellow compatriots did not fully manage to capture: his inborn clean-cut way of being true to himself, his proud strength.¹⁷

Similarly, in the next to last chapter which is, in reality, a summarizing afterword, the author claims that the most typical trait of Hamsun's characters is that "they are introverted, they are taciturn [...]"; and several lines later he adds that "a Scandinavian is usually taciturn, introverted. That's what these people [Hamsun's characters] are as well."¹⁸ Just like the landscape Pallas has described in the first chapter, one may add.

The author thus approaches Hamsun and Scandinavian literature in a manner which is reminiscent of the pre-romantic and romantic climate theories. In Pallas's presentation the Scandinavian landscape becomes a mental landscape – both in Scandinavian literature in general and in Hamsun's works in particular. In Pallas's eyes, the mark of quality of Hamsun's literary characters is that they seem to be the archetypes of Scandinavian people. Some of them perhaps are, but hardly all of them. The potential danger of such one-sided emphasis on the archetypal is that it might easily turn into the stereotypical. Indeed, many Czech readers in Pallas's time stereotypically perceived Hamsun's characters as the archetypes of Scandinavian people; and the core of this archetype was, as I have already mentioned, the idea that they were an extension of Scandinavian nature. For a long time, this was the Czech idea of what not only Hamsun's works, but also Scandinavian literature in general is all about. Pallas was certainly not the first Czech reader to see Hamsun and Scandinavian literature in this way, but his monograph certainly contributed to perpetuating the stereotype for many years to come.

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17 “Spolu s *Jacobsenem* je Hamsun nejčistším výrazem severského ducha, neboť zobrazil otevřeněji a nejsilnějšími rysy veškeru subjektivní výraznost Seveřanovu: jeho nemluvnou, do sebe uzavřenou povahu, jeho mravní sílu, jeho snivou, nerozhodnou a reflektující duši. Podtrhli v něm oba i to, co jini krajané jejich nedokázali vystihnout: jeho vyhraněnou, vrozenou věrnost sobě samému, jeho hrdou sílu.” (15)

18 “[J]sou obráceni do sebe, skoupí na slovo“; „Seveřan bývá málomluvný, uzavřený. Takoví jsou i tito lidé.” (77)

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