

Humpál, Martin

The narrator in Knut Hamsun's *Børn av Tiden*

Brünner Beiträge zur Germanistik und Nordistik. 1998, vol. 12, iss. 1, pp. [19]-25

ISBN 80-210-2010-5

ISSN 1211-4979

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/105999>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MARTIN HUMPÁL

THE NARRATOR IN KNUT HAMSUN'S *BØRN AV TIDEN*

It is a well-known fact that the narrative style Knut Hamsun employs in his early novels differs considerably from that of his late authorship. In the novels of the 1890s, Hamsun concentrates on the main character's individual perspective of the surrounding world. Hamsun's „transitional“ works written in the first decade of the twentieth century continue to some degree in this direction, although they already anticipate the author's ensuing orientation toward a more epic form. In *Børn av Tiden* (*Children of the Age*, 1913) Hamsun adopts for the first time a way of writing which Robert Ferguson has called „Dickensian“¹ and which is typical of the remaining part of his authorship. Hamsun's late narrative involves two basic characteristic features:

— the thematic emphasis is no longer exclusively on one character. The author presents us with a broad social fresco in which many a „secondary“ character does not only function as a supportive element in the depiction of the main character (as is typical of Hamsun's early novels), but as a person whose story may be almost as important as that of the main character.

— the narrator is, in Genette's terms, *heterodiegetic*, that is, outside the fictional reality that he narrates (in other words, outside the diegetic level, or „story level“ of the narrative).² In addition, in Hamsun's texts from *Børn av Tiden* onward this narrator often manifests himself as a creator and manipulator of the narrative discourse.³

The change in approach to narrative which *Børn av Tiden* inaugurates does not necessarily result in a decrease in subtlety with which Hamsun depicts the psychology of his characters. To be sure, one usually does not find in Hamsun's

1 Robert Ferguson, *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), p. 227.

2 See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 243–252.

3 This is the major difference between the narrator in Hamsun's late works and the heterodiegetic narrator in his early works. For example the narrator of *Mysterier* (1892) rarely gives the illusion of being a storyteller-like creator of the narrative.

twentieth-century texts the techniques for extensive presentation of consciousness which characterize his early work. However, as some scholars have convincingly shown, the linguistic „directness“ of certain narrative techniques for presenting consciousness (such as „stream of consciousness“ in direct narrative discourse) does not automatically imply a more subtle rendering of the character's psychology; therefore one should not underestimate the potential of relatively traditional narrative techniques when discussing the narrative representation of the human mind.⁴ In *Børn av Tiden* Hamsun continues successfully to create a good psychological novel, although he uses narrative methods that are quite different from those used in his early work. The aim of this paper is to indicate the major lines of Hamsun's art of subtle psychological characterization in the discussed novel.

It is clear from the very first few pages that the heterodiegetic narrator wants to appear as one who is well-acquainted with the characters and the location of the story. Yet the reader soon becomes aware of two mutually opposed forces in the narrator's discourse: on the one hand, the narrator seems to be in full control of the story that he narrates, on the other hand, he indicates that his knowledge of the fictional characters and events is limited.

Apart from explicitly „omniscient“ passages, the narrator's status of storyteller in full control of his material is most obvious in those passages of the text that read as if a real person were turning to a live audience, trying to keep its attention. This vigorous rhetoric frequently involves colloquial elements and reveals the influence of oral folk narration:

Onde Tunger skumlet om at han i de senere Aar begyndte at lete efter Farns nedgravede Skat, aa men det var at misforstaa Hr. Willatz Holmsen, den ægte Stormand. Han kom avdage paa Fjældet, den gode Herre.... (p. 2)⁵

Men hvorfor dølgge Sandheten — det var nok langtfra alt som det skulde være mellem Ægtefolkene paa Segelfoss. (p. 16; this is the first sentence of chapter III)

Aajo det blev til en liten Uenighet igjen, litt munter Friktion. For en Masse av Naalstik mellem dem, altfor mange! ... Naa, nu var de alt begyndt at spille derinde. (p.21)

Aa nu var Fredrik Coldevin høi! Han aapner Frækken og tar op fra Lommerne de store Penger, de uhyre Penger. (p. 65)

4 Dorrit Cohn has argued that more indirect narrative modes for presenting the human mind can actually be better suited for representing its deeper layers than direct inside views; see her *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 41–43. Monika Fludernik extends Cohn's arguments, claiming convincingly, for example, that direct discourse and free indirect discourse provide, in principle, „equally direct evocations of consciousness“ (*The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 432).

5 The quotes from *Børn av Tiden* come from vol. 9 of Hamsun's *Samlede Verker* (Kristiania: Gyldendal, 1921). Emphasis in all the quotes is mine.

Hesten var lammet, de næste Spring var en Styltedans og endte med en Snublen. *Naada, har den endda ikke gjort nok!* Hesten kaster sig op med Forkroppen og falder igjen.... (p. 75)

This type of narration very frequently includes rhetorical questions, as well as answers to such questions:

[V]ar det et Feiltrin som laa bak? Umulig. Da hadde nok Løitnanten, denne pertentlige or nøieregnende lille Willatz Holmsen, styret sin Vei derifra. *Nei* da var en bedre Forklaring like for Haanden. (p. 4)

Det daglige Liv paa Segelfoss ensomt og ensformig? Ikke nu længer, det hørte Fortiden til, Holmengraa hadde omlagt det. (p.71; this is the beginning of a new section of a chapter)

Et Par Dager senere gik Hr. Holmengraa alene op efter Elven paa sin egen Side av den. Han hadde vel sit nye Projekt i Tanker og maalte med Øiet og skridtet op og gjorde Overslag. *Det nye Projekt? Ja et nyt Projekt.* (p. 130)

Such a rhetoric foregrounds the act of narration and thus gives the illusion that the narrator is not only a neutral narrative function, but a storyteller–personality. This explicitly authorial stance is pronounced especially in passages in which the narrator seems to be organizing his thoughts and approaches to the narrated in his mind:

William Holmsen den Tredje — *kanske* var han ingen ordentlig Stormand, *kanske* var han større end nogen anden Herre paa Segelfoss. (p.3)

Dette var ikke daarlige sagt, det var Sølv og Vin og Blomster paa Bordet og det var Fisk og Fugl og mange Lækkerheter paa Bordet. *Sandelige,* for en sjældnen Gangs Skyld sat kanskje nu ved det holmsenske Bord en Fremmed som forstod sig paa Levemaate.... (p. 32)

Such narration enables subtle manipulation of the reader's perception of the narrated events, since the narrator continually makes the reader share his own perception. At times the narrator's heterodiegetic manipulation of the discourse becomes quite obvious, as when the narrator first gives an evaluating nickname to a character and later resumes it in his narration, relying on the reader's previous knowledge of the nickname. The following passage describes Holmsen's „reading hours“ during which young girls read to him, thus providing him with a visual substitute for the erotic pleasure that he lacks in his married life: „[H]an merker godt at hun læser bedre og bedre i Bok, saa hun øver sig kanskje paa Egenhaand i Mellemtiden. Han har indstiftet Læsestunden ene og alene for sin egen Fornøielse. Slik en *Pascha*, slik en *Egoist!*“ (p. 39). Later the narrator uses the expression „*Pascha*“ again: „Nu og da kaster han Blikket ut i Værelset, ... det er muligens Pikens Nakke han vil se, kanskje det fornøier *Pascha*“ (p. 39); „*Pascha* reiser sig og Marcilie lukker Boken...“ (p. 40). By using the evaluating nickname in the ensuing text, the narrator highlights his own status of the enunciator of the narrative, because the two sentences can only be addressed to a nar-

ratee who is already acquainted with the narrator's first mention of the nickname.

Despite his appearing to be an authorial creator of the narrative, the narrator frequently indicates that he is not omniscient; his knowledge of the characters and events seems to be limited:

[H]un kom tomhændt — *derfor tok hun Løitnanten? Det var en god Forklaring.* (p. 4)

Dette at han skiftet Ringen om paa forskjellig Haand *skulde tyde* paa at han tænkte meget og vilde minde sig om et eller andet av Vigtighet. Det skete altid saa stille og ubemærket, ingen visste hvorfor han gjorde det, men *han visste det kanske selv.* (p. 9)

Han hadde litt efter litt vænnet sig til at bli mistænkt, han var *vel* blit sløvet, det *syntes* ikke at forbitre ham Livet. Nu *kunde jo* det stikke under at Løitnanten tænkte mest uforstyrret naar han ridde i Skridt og at han *kanske* hadde en Tanke om at bade Hesten sin naar han tok Veien om Vadestedet. *Men det kunde ogsaa* stikke det under at Manden var en Rædhare. (p. 10)

Han kunde være noget oppe i Firtiaarene. (p. 29)

Such passages reveal that the narrator is not as familiar with the events he narrates as a classical omniscient narrator would be. At the same time these passages create the illusion that the narrator is or was close to the events and characters in a way a character in the story-world might be. In this way the narrator's perception approximates the perception of a homodiegetic narrator, that is, in Genette's terms once more, a narrator inside the fictional reality that he narrates. For example, the effect of the last-quoted sentence is such that the narrator seems to perceive Holmengraa as any character in the story might, as if he saw him in town for the first time and were guessing his age by his appearance. Such limitation of the narrator's visual and auditory perception recurs frequently in the text and indicates that the narrator has to rely on conjectures based on observation or hearsay. Thus the narrator's inferences concerning the minds of the characters may be just as accurate as those of any character in the fictional world: „*Det lydde litt uægte* i den Fremmedes Mund og *syntes* at være sagt for at tækkes Eieren. Kong Tobias *lot ikke til* at være nogen Kjender av Utsigter“ (p. 31). The passages indicating that the narrator's knowledge is limited are important for the whole narrative structure of the novel. By pointing out hidden facts in the characters' lives they build up narrative suspense.

The remaining part of this paper will show how Hamsun makes use of the above-mentioned narrative devices in *Børn av Tiden* to display the psychological subtleties of his characters.

The two main protagonists of the novel represent two poles of the major thematic conflict. Lieutenant Willatz Holmsen stands for a certain type of aristocratic individualism in decline, a social force which is no longer productive. Tobias Holmengraa represents a progressive entrepreneurial force, introducing new ways of accumulating wealth, as well as a higher standard of living for the people of Segelfoss. It is apparent that Hamsun sympathizes with Holmsen. At

the same time, however, Hamsun's narrator ironizes over Holmsen's out-of-date aristocratic manners⁶ and his view of Holmengraa is conciliatory. The narrator devotes most attention to Holmsen's psychology, followed by Holmsen's wife Adelheid and Holmengraa. I will concentrate on the psychological conflict between Holmsen and Adelheid because it is executed with subtlety that does not apply to the other characters in the novel.

Holmsen's character has several things in common with the main characters of Hamsun's early novels. His individualism and abnormal pride make him somewhat alienated from other people. Like Hamsun's early heroes, Holmsen is to a great extent a mystery to the other characters, as well as to the reader. Hamsun's effort to keep the reader in the dark concerning important psychological motivations of characters such as Holmsen seems to go hand in hand with his admiring view of exceptional individuals: the exceptional quality of an individual finds its expression in the narrative as the inexplicability of the character's psyche.

As Harald Næss has noted, Holmsen's views „are mostly expressed in action and brief statements, where we find him engaged in discussion.“⁷ This is true as far as, for example, his views of the social order are concerned. However, the more intimate the information about his personality, the more concealed it is. This is nowhere more evident than in the erotic conflict between Holmsen and his wife. There is hardly any other subject in the novel that is revealed in a more indirect way. The depiction of this conflict is a matter of subtle understatement. Although it becomes clear very soon that the two spouses do not share a sexual life, it takes many pages before the reader can actually infer the probable nature of the marital strife. It is a typical Hamsunian battle of the sexes in which two people love each other, but do not get each other because they are both excessively proud.⁸ They are too aware of their own unique identities which they struggle to keep intact.

The principal factor affecting the reader's perception of the conflict is the fact that the narrator seems to pay relatively little attention to the conflict. The dialogues between the husband and wife occur quite sporadically, which in itself indicates that there is a substantial problem in their relationship. Whenever the

6 The narrator's ironic detachment is sometimes quite obvious, as in the following example: „Løitnanten optraadte som det anstod sig ham, han var den overlegne, han hadde det i sin Magt at øve Selvtægt og han gjorde det ikke. Aa en ualmkelig Herre! Det hadde den største Betydning for ham at han hverken var blit bedt om eller tvunget til dette — for saa skulde han nok ha reageret, ho. Han hadde selv bestemt i hvilken Utstrækning han vilde være overlegen: han vilde være det i videste Utstrækning, Konen kunde faa gaa i Fred. Det var noget i Retning av Humanisterne.

Tiden gik, Løitnanten graanet mere og mere, han muntret sig med sine velsignede Bøker og med at lægge Kabbal om Kvældene. En rigtig uværdig Adspredelse for en Willatz Holmsen!“ (p. 92).

7 Harald Næss, *Knut Hamsun* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), p. 102.

8 Næss has already noted the pride as the source of the married couple's problems (*Knut Hamsun*, p. 100).

narrator tries to describe the conflict, he always seems to be insufficiently informed about it. His descriptions are insecure and full of guesses:

Hvor de begge spræller! Fruen spræller ogsaa, det er *vel* ikke større Følelsen i hende for den Mand som nu gik ut, ikke nogen overdreven Ømhet mere, *slik ser det ut*. Det er *uforstaelig*, han er jo hendes Mand, og skal man ikke holde av sin Mand! Det er et lite godt Sted ved Vin-duet, der staar hun og ser ut til han er ridd bort, saa *synes* hun tryg. Det er en Nøkkel i hendes Dør, den vilde hun *kanske* ikke miste for en Nøkkel av Guld, hun pleier at bruke den, at vride den om paa Indsiden av Døren.

Det er saa *uforstaelig* altsammen. Hvad hadde han gjort hende? Var det Samlivet overhodet som bydde hende imot, Vanen, Skammeligheten? *Kanske* hans lange Hænder, hans Aande? (p. 17)

The narrator's descriptions of the characters' minds then often seem to be psychological inferences made by a homodiegetic narrator, rather than typical statements of an omniscient, heterodiegetic narrator. The narrator's insecurity as to what the characters think is sometimes paradoxically reflected in words that claim certainty (a truly omniscient narrator should have no reason to use the words of assurance):

Allikevel hadde han *sikkert* ingen Fornøielse av at gjøre sig saa ubevægelig, det kostet ham *vistnok* Selvtukt, denne stivnakkede og lunefulde Adelheid fra Hannover hadde nu engang besat hans Sind og Sanser saa enevældig. (p. 91)⁹

The narrator's ignorant rhetoric occurs most frequently in the novel precisely when the narrator speaks about Holmsen and his wife Adelheid. The narrator also typically approximates the characters' perception when speaking of the married couple, may it be Holmsen's, his wife's or someone else's. In the following example the narrator simulates Holmsen's auditory and visual perception; the present tense intensifies the illusion of immediacy:

Løitnanten kommer hjem. *Det er noget som ringler, ringler, hvad er det? Klingeling! Fruen leker med sin Søn inde i Gaarden og kjører med ham. Hun har en liten Bjælde paa ham og kjører ham med Tømmer. Det var ustyrtelig morsomt, begge ler og kjører, hahaha.* Da Løitnanten kommer stanser Leken og Gutten begynder at sutre. (p.20)¹⁰

⁹ One finds many similar passages throughout the book in which the narrator points out a possibility by its very exclusion: „Og Dagene gik, Løitnanten ældedes mere og mere, men holdt sig opret. Hvad var det derimot for Tryk som graanet Haar og Skjæg paa Hr. Holmen-graa, *han som intet Tryk hadde?* Det var paafaldende. Den to Ukers Svir kunde vel ikke rede ham saa til og at Fru Adelheid døde vedkom ikke ham, hun var ikke hans Frue“ (p. 180).

¹⁰ Hamsun does not always attempt to be consistent in simulating the character's perception in such passages. Cf. the repetition of the word „ringler“ in the quoted paragraph, which adds rhythm to the narrator's discourse while diminishing the illusion of the direct representation of Holmsen's auditory impression.

To conclude, the narrator of *Børn av Tiden* is a heterodiegetic narrator whose act of narration is often foregrounded. He appears to be a storyteller–personality who takes pleasure in entertaining his audience as well as himself. He typically chooses whichever technique he perceives as best suited at a particular moment to pursue the joy of his narrative game. At times he reveals important secrets in the lives of his characters, at other times he keeps them hidden. At times he directly enters his characters' minds, at other times he portrays their psyches as impenetrable. The narrative joy permeates the whole novel. Hamsun lets his narrator manipulate the rich plot of *Børn av Tiden* in such a way that at each point of the story there always remains something yet to be revealed, which helps to maintain the narrative suspense. A case in point may be the conflict between Holmsen and his wife: its core is disclosed only by degrees, yet the narrator seems to intentionally portray Holmsen in such a way that the lieutenant's innermost nature remains mysterious until the end. *Børn av Tiden* shows how the arrival of the new times at Segelfoss makes the old aristocratic world begin to lose its identity, yet the narrator lets Holmsen, who represents this world, keep his unique identity until the very end in spite of the changes the new times have brought. The pleasure of reading *Børn av Tiden* consists to a substantial degree in searching for hidden clues concerning the characters' psychological motivations that the narrator disperses throughout the text. The readers' task is to construct psychological hypotheses out of these clues and to create their own portrayals of Hamsun's characters. In this manner, Hamsun creates a text which once more demonstrates his art of subtle psychological characterization, although he uses a type of narrative which differs considerably from the narrative of his early psychological works.

