

“I do not write a life.” Hamsun, Psychiatry and Life Narrative

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Abstract

Life narratives are written in many different forms. This paper discusses two such life narratives, constituting two textual explorations of the same ageing self, that of the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun.

As part of a legal process following World War II, Hamsun was submitted to a psychiatric examination in order to assess his sanity. The examination resulted in a written report by the two psychiatrists that was presented to the court of law. A few years later, Hamsun published his memoir, *On overgrown paths*, which is partly an attack on psychiatry and the psychiatric approach to the self that he experienced before the trial.

This paper offers a reading of these two documents, the psychiatric report and the literary response to the report, in light of a notion of narratives and anti-narratives. I argue that a search for a coherent self was an intrinsic element in the psychiatric way of making sense of the self. And I further argue that the response from the examinee was made in the form of a memoir that was an anti-narrative, challenging the very notion of a coherent self.

Introduction

As the second world war ended, the Norwegian author, Knut Hamsun, was arrested, as a consequence of his open support for the German occupation forces during the war. Hamsun

was 86 years old, a novelist of great repute, a Nobel laureate, and a national icon – and the only major European writer to support the Nazis in the war years.¹ In 1940, he had signed an open call for his fellow countrymen to throw down their arms. In 1945, he penned a panegyric obituary for Adolf Hitler. Upon his arrest, he was detained in a home for the elderly, then sent to a psychiatric clinic for a forensic examination before being put on trial, where he was sentenced to a considerable fine.

Hamsun's case is a *cause célèbre* in Norwegian cultural history, and it has continued to haunt an important corner of the Norwegian public imagination ever since 1945. The wide interest in the case has focused on what is often referred to as the “Hamsun enigma” - the disturbing fact that the creator of widely loved prose could also embrace what was considered a vile political ideology. This topos, Hamsun as an enigma, emerged under the influence of Hamsun's intransigence during the legal case and was stimulated by his last published work *On overgrown paths* in 1949. Many readers felt provoked by this literary meditation on the ageing self, placed in the context of the trial, because it barely mentioned the atrocities of the Nazis or any of the reasons that led to Hamsun being put on trial. In the following years, many readers reread his works, looking for traces of an authoritarian ideology there. For other readers, Hamsun's became a strong case for a strict demarcation between literature and politics: his literature was admired though his politics was despised.

The role that the psychiatrists played has also attracted a lot of attention in the aftermath of the case. Two prominent psychiatrists, Ørnulv Ødegård and Gabriel Langfeldt, were appointed by the prosecution authorities to examine the ageing author. After three months in the clinic, they concluded that Hamsun was mentally impaired, but not criminally insane. The legal implications of this conclusion were that the author was fit to stand trial. It has further been

widely assumed, though difficult to assert with certainty, that this conclusion led to the decision not to press criminal charges requiring a prison sentence, but instead to opt for a simplified trial requiring a fine. The involvement of the psychiatrists became the center of a heated exchange thirty years later, when the Danish author Thorkild Hansen published a provocative documentary novel on the Hamsun case (*Prosessen mot Hamsun*), in which he accused the psychiatrists of having played a political role in the case. As a response and a defense, the psychiatrists (Langfeldt was by then 83 years, Ødegård 77) published the original psychiatric report verbatim, an unprecedented move by a Norwegian forensic psychiatrist, in order to prove the scientific merits of the examination.

My aim here is not to rehearse the debate regarding Hamsun's mental condition at the time of the war. Instead, I want to draw attention to the two starkly different accounts of Hamsun's life that the case produced. These texts are of interest as part of a cultural history of the senescent self, due to the ways they make sense of the life of an old man, and due to the importance of narrativity in this sense making process. Firstly, in *On overgrown paths*, written as a critique of law and psychiatry, Hamsun turns his self into the object of a quiet meditation, a meditation that resonates well beyond the very specific historical situation that gave birth to the text. Remarkably, in this text he does *not* present the reader with a coherent story explaining how he came to do the things he did during the war – that is, he does not offer a coherent identity as a mitigating circumstance. His memoir should be read as an anti-narrative. Secondly, the forensic psychiatric report on Knut Hamsun is, in addition to being a report, a text that explores a life, searching for coherence. In the psychiatric context, the issues of narrativity take on a different meaning, as some of the core psychiatric concepts also have a temporal dimension: Mental illness is when no coherent life narrative can be constructed. The contrast between these two

texts, and the way they are interlaced in each other, throws light on the various conditions of possibility for a senescent self.

Narrative and anti-narrative lives

Since the 1960s, narratives have been at the heart of the metahistorical debates on the nature of history. A widely accepted premise of these debates has been the fact that a defining feature of history is that it is presented to us in the form of a narrative.² The disagreement has concerned whether this narrative can be said to correspond to something in the past itself. Hayden White and Louis O. Mink were the most prominent authors to argue that the past was not in itself a narrative, and that a narrative was a sensemaking structure imposed on a reality that was not in and by itself a story; the past, as opposed to a story, do not have a beginning, a middle and an end. In the 1980s Paul Ricœur became the most visible spokesman for the view that history is lived as a story, thereby seeking to go beyond the view that the narrative is in any sense external to reality.³ If life is lived as a story, the narrative structure can no longer be regarded as foreign to the past itself.

Reinhart Koselleck has offered an original approach to this question. Less concerned with narratives than with temporality, Koselleck proposes to replace the simple chronological time with an understanding of multiple temporalities. Crucial to this idea, also for Koselleck, is an emphasis on experience: humans experience through temporal categories. But in order to account for this temporality, Koselleck maintains that we need to develop more complex temporal categories than natural chronological time.⁴

The relationship between narrative and past has also been discussed by moral philosophers, in terms of as a debate on the narrative nature of the self. In this context too, some authors regard

narration as a structure that is imposed on an experiencing self. An early example is Jean-Paul Sartre who saw narrativisation as a means of adding a metaphysical meaning to a life that is more correctly viewed as meaningless.⁵ In the 1980s, this view was opposed by, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, who considers the self to be already narrative, or “storied.” As the latter position seems to have become hegemonic towards the turn of the century, a broad corpus of empirical studies (psychological or ethnographic) has emerged that focuses on how people narrate a self.⁶ These studies seem, in most cases, to embrace “the narrative view of life,” the view that holds for a fact that we tend to think of our lives in terms of narratives and that it is a good thing that we do so.⁷ A narrative, according to MacIntyre, helps us maintain a unitary concept of the self. For him the very concept of a unified self “resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.”⁸ Hence, creating narratives of ourselves help us uphold a coherent self.

Noteworthy in MacIntyre’s thinking on narratives is the fact that he sees *intelligibility* as a basic characteristic of action as a concept: “Unintelligible actions are failed candidates for the status of intelligible action.”⁹ It means that an action is *sui generis* something that is intelligible, or something that makes sense only when we discover (or think we discover) an intention in it. This intentionality is exclusive to humans, and therefore humans are held accountable for their actions, while other beings are not. When it is not possible to identify a link between something that happens and an intention (or a motive, passion, purpose), the conclusion may be that the person in question is not a rational actor but perhaps. *neurotic or psychotic*. It is the unintelligibility of the actions of such a person, according to MacIntyre, that leads to their being “treated as patients,” because “actions unintelligible to the agent are understood as suffering.”¹⁰

Helen Small is one of the few authors who has engaged in this debate with particular concern for what it means to age, and she considers the narrative view “especially problematic as a framework for thinking about old age.”¹¹ She argues that the narrative view inevitably positions the old age as the culmination of a life, and that lived experience rarely meets the expectation. Hence, the narrative view of life falls short of providing a guide for a *good* life in old age. Concepts such as “progress” and “utility” may be useful for earlier life, but they no longer offer a useful standard to live by in later years. On these grounds, Small has reservations regarding the “prescriptiveness” of the narrative view of lives. A narrative may be a *misrepresentation* of a life. On the other hand, she also claims that parts of the scholarly literature rely on a simplistic view of narrative. Fictional literature reveals that a narrative structure can be much more complex than it may otherwise seem. Small maintains that one way of constructing a more complex narrative structure is the “anti-narrative approach.”

For Small, “anti-narrative” is first and foremost a literary strategy, a way of constructing more complex narratives.¹² For others, it is also a view of life. As such, it rejects an analogy to life and narrative, and with it, the conceptions of unity of personhood and of life. Louis O. Mink emphatically claims that lives, as opposed to narratives, have no beginnings, middles or ends.¹³ This seems to be in accordance with Small’s view, and also with that of George S. Rousseau. In Rousseau’s “nostalgia memoir,” *Rachmaninoff’s cape*, the narrator describes how he comes to embrace an anti-narrative view of life. This is presented as a *discovery*, or an opening up to the possibility that the life and the self may unfold “incoherently, in bits and bobs, as isolated moments without connections. Or (...) so intrinsically connected to the lives of *others* that it would be a further fiction to construe individual lives as if *discrete* or *disconnected*.”¹⁴ Thinking of old age, the anti-narrative view has the advantage that it creates a space for the ageing self where it does not achieve its value from its relation to earlier stages of life.

Rousseau suggests that life and self 1) do not form a coherent narrative unfolding in linear time and 2) they do not constitute a discreet unit, but are intrinsically connected to others.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Rousseau maintains, the human sciences has historically played a part in convincing us that the opposite is the case. He further claims that the narrative stance is more “tragic” than its opposite, and because of that, holds less appeal to most people. Hence he seems to inscribe himself in the lineage stretching back to Sartre and the existentialists, who saw it as more heroic to embrace a vision of existence that is devoid of a higher meaning. In this tradition, human growth is associated with embracing the meaninglessness of life.¹⁶

The distinction between the narrative and the anti-narrative view of life is a matter of poetics and, as such, is of particular relevance for “life writing.”

Psychiatric life writing

“Life writing” is a term that covers much more than traditional biography and autobiography. Indeed, many forms of life writing are explicitly opposed to various conventions of biography. The term is here understood as referring to all forms of writing related to one’s own or other people’s lives. Even though the term is more often than not used to designate creative genres, there are also more formal, institutional, kinds of writing that can fruitfully be considered life writings.¹⁷ Among these are the case histories found in psychiatric clinical notes and in forensic psychiatric reports. These texts represent very specific genres of writing, ways of writing lives that are embedded in historically specific institutional practices.

From as early as the 1820s, European psychiatrists have provided evaluations of the soundness of a defendant’s mind in courts of law. These evaluations came to take the form of a written

report, presented as an increasingly technical account of the findings of an examination that has taken place previous to the compilation of the text. The examination, as it had come to be practiced in Norway by the mid-20th century, consisted of two steps: first, the collection of existent information about the patient (including interviews with informants), and then extracting information from the body and mind of the examinee present in the clinic.

Despite its technical appearance, the report can be argued to operate in a literary domain as well. This literary aspect was in Hamsun's case emphasised when the report was posthumously published as a book, making it more conspicuous that the report is actually a piece of life writing. The report is *also* creative writing, in that it offers an interpretation of a specific life. The writers, the forensic psychiatrists, do their best to be persuasive in their account of the life, although their rhetorical devices are often different from those employed by fiction writers.

Psychiatry's relationship with narratives is therefore something of a historical paradox. Often invisible in the training of psychiatrists, the whole issue of narrativity, the act of seeking and presenting knowledge through narration, seems to have been found to be opposed to the commitment to "science" that has been fundamental in psychiatry since the early 19th century.

Foucault has indicated how the new institutional ways of writing that emerged in the 19th century relate to a larger cultural history of individuation, as what he refers to as discipline constituted an important condition of possibility for the modern individual.¹⁸ Both the criminal law and psychiatry was crucial for this development. From the early 19th century, criminal law started to be more concerned with the individual who was put on trial. The main concern of earlier criminal reform movements had been that the law should treat different individuals *equally* (cf the reform program of Cesare Beccaria). But the prime concern of 19th century

reformers was that criminal law should be more sensitive to the individuality of the criminal, that they should be treated *individually*. The new field of forensic psychiatry, dating from the 1820s, fit into this program, as it had the capacity to render visible the individuality of the defendant standing before the court of law. Forensic psychiatry, according to Foucault, had the power to equip the crime with a personality, a personality that was both an object for knowledge and an object for correction (in a correctional institution). Psychiatry became a veritable discursive machinery, producing more life writing than most other institutions in our society. The criminal anthropology of Cesare Lombroso and others, developed from the 1860s onwards, with their infamous idea of a “born criminal,” was only the logical perpetration of this medico-legal project: to make the personality behind the crime visible and corrigible. With increasing frequency, forensic psychiatric experts sought to elucidate whether the criminal had a likeness to the crime before it had even been committed.

This project required a life perspective on the criminal; the issue could not be solved solely by examining his physique, but also demanded textual strategies. When these doctors turned up in court, when they were to write their reports, attention was drawn to the life perspective, narrating the offender’s life in order to discover what kind of person he or she was. Psychiatric reports written from early 19th century up until at least the 1970s/80s (when the hegemony of the DSM/ICD encouraged psychiatrists to restrict themselves to classification) give testimony to this *desire to write a life*.¹⁹ Hence there is an inherent discursive tension in the very genre, between the scientific ideal of cutting exactitude, and the lure of composing a holistic life narrative.

The texts of forensic psychiatry should be considered not just as reports but as a method for investigating medical questions *through* writing.

In at least some cases, these psychiatric life writings can be read as engagements with an implicit hypothesis of psychological coherence in a life: a normal life is a life that can be narrated in a coherent way. A life that does *not* lend itself to being narrativised in a coherent way may invite a hypothesis of pathology. Hence, there seems to be a tension between (healthy) coherence and pathological incoherence in these lives.

The psychiatric report on the senescent self

The text published in 1978 as *The forensic psychiatric report on Knut Hamsun*, follows the conventions of forensic psychiatric texts; it is a text that includes fragments of other texts, collected from various official documents concerning the object of investigation.²⁰ It is a bureaucratic text, meticulously concerned with documenting the circulation of “the case” between psychiatric institutions, physicians, courts of law and prosecuting authorities. It is also a text that contains the rudiments of a narrative about the life of an author, told by a multitude of informants, albeit that the tendency to synthesise this information is rather weak, at least until the concluding section.

The report documents an observation, by putting on paper what is *seen* – by the psychiatrists, by the nurses, by every member of the faceless apparatus of the clinic. The information in the text is loosely organised along a timeline defined by the stay in the clinic. It opens with the appointment of the two named experts, and with the admission of the examinee to the clinic. And it goes on to record the examination or observation that stretched over the following months, before it ends in a formulaic conclusion, constructed to meet the demands of the law court. The reader knows that what follows is the patient’s discharge from the clinic, but this climatic event is not explicitly written into the text.

Within this loose temporal structure, from entrance to exit, are located the fragments of a life of Hamsun.

Already in this textual structure there is an ambivalence to the text's own character as life writing. This ambivalence is directly touched upon in the authors' preface, where the two psychiatrists (Ødegård and Langfeldt) claim that it is *not* their ambition to write a life. "A forensic psychiatrist," they write, "is restricted to the task of answering a set of questions posed by the court of law."²¹ They further claim that they have only sought to carry out "an exact evaluation of his attitude during the occupation," even though they seem to admit to have felt a temptation to carry out what they call a "completely new study on a characterological basis."²² The thought of a "new" characterological study of Hamsun may refer to the fact that a colleague of the two psychiatrists, Trygve Braatøy, already in 1929 published a psychological study of Hamsun's work.²³ But it also seems to refer to a general temptation to "write a life," as if biography was to psychiatry what the monster was to doctor Frankenstein.

And yet, the psychiatrists *do* write a life, even though they place it within the safe borders of the institutional life. They collect and present information about a life, and structure it according to the stages of life: childhood, adulthood and old age. The life starts with Hamsun's birth, and continues with his upbringing and personality, before it closes in on the years of the occupation, and finally focuses on the state of the old man in the clinic.²⁴ In this representation of a life, there is an outspoken concern for fixed character traits in the examinee (his care for animals, his sensitivity, his aggressiveness, his contempt for actors, his inferiority complexes, his generosity), that are not situation specific, but perceived as stable personality traits.

Occasionally, the text draws information or clues from Hamsun's literary *œuvre*. For example, when the psychiatrists discuss the apparent generosity of Hamsun, they present a quote from the novel *Mysterier* from 1892: "They do not offer gifts by kindness, but by urges [*drift*], for their personal wellbeing."²⁵ In the novel, these words are put in the mouth of the protagonist, Nagel. But in the psychiatric report, they are taken as a description of a character trait in the author himself. In this manner, Hamsun's literature is seen as (involuntarily) providing clues about the mental state of the author. Similarly, the novel *Pan* is considered to give "good insight in Hamsun's sense of communion with nature and in his sensitivity."²⁶ These psychiatric readings of the literature are always symptomatic; the literature is never considered to contain psychological ideas worthy of consideration in their own right. This stands in contrast to fellow psychiatrist Trygve Braatøy's readings of Hamsun from before the war, when he stated programmatically: "It might very well be the case that we might learn some psychology from Hamsun."²⁷ This difference of views between the psychiatrists surely has something to do with their orientation as psychiatrists; Braatøy was receptive to psychoanalytical thinking, whereas Langfeldt was more attuned to the dynamic psychiatry of Adolf Meyer. As such they marked stricter borders between literature and psychology than the psychoanalytical tradition; the author could be no subject of knowledge, only its object.

Among the informants that the psychiatrists consulted was Hamsun's son. In the summary of these interviews, matters pertaining to age come up for the first time in the report. The son reports how Hamsun has become forgetful, absentminded, hard of hearing. He also reports a stroke, possibly followed by others, in 1942 or 43 (also confirmed by a physician). Another informant, a friend of Hamsun's, explicitly points to the stroke as an explanation for the treason.²⁸ Taken together, these pieces of information read as a description of increasing mental isolation: the ageing author does not hear, does not communicate, and does not understand the

world around him. His public utterances are those of a misinformed old man.²⁹ His age serves as exoneration.

As a concession to his hearing impediment, part of the examination was conducted in writing. This permits Hamsun to shine through in the report as the author he still was, writing answers characteristically full of double *entendres* and ironies. The written replies constitute the first germs of Hamsun's own later book, *On overgrown paths*. But as interesting as the answers are the questions, as they reveal a great deal of the psychiatric way of thinking about a life. The first question is: "Would you briefly describe your current views on your childhood and upbringing. Pay particular attention to experiences that you think have left lasting traces."³⁰ And then: "In the report I am obliged to give the authorities, I also have to include a characterisation of your character traits. It would be of great interest to learn to know your own opinions on this matter – as I presume that you in the course of your life have analysed yourself thoroughly."³¹ Through these and similar questions, the psychiatrists invite the examinee to cooperate, building on the premises that the self is coherent and that his personal history explains his present self.

The author's written answers reveal an increasing impatience with the examination: "I tire of messing with my own poor self to no avail."³² This poor self is not conceived as a unified self, or as a storied self. It is the anti-self of an anti-narrative. Increasingly, the question and answer session becomes a duel over the significance of the life of the author. The examiner asks, mixing flattery and excuses, about the dominant character traits of the examinee, inviting him into his psychological discourse. But the examinee declines the invitation:

The so-called 'naturalist' period, Zola and his time, wrote about men with main qualities. They had no use for a nuanced psychology; men had dominant traits that dictated their actions. Dostoevsky and several others taught us differently. From the

start, I don't think you can find in my entire production a character with such a whole, rectilinear dominant quality. They are without so-called character, they are disunited and fragmented, neither good nor evil, but both, nuanced, shifting in temper and in actions. And so am undoubtedly I. It is quite possible that I am aggressive, with all the characteristics that the professor refers to – vulnerable, suspicious, egotistical, generous, envious, righteous, logical, sensitive, of a cold nature. But I don't know how to say that one of these is dominant in me.³³

It is astonishing how Hamsun seems to take over the psychiatric text at this point. And he does so by invoking his personal intellectual past and his position as a pioneer of a modernist, perhaps anti-narrative, novel that questioned notions of coherent narratives and characters in the literary tradition. More than half a century before the encounter with the psychiatrists, Hamsun had launched his literary program in a much-publicised attack on the psychology of the realist writers, most notably Henrik Ibsen.³⁴ Hamsun had claimed to be the better, more profound psychologist. By invoking this polemic half a century later, he placed the psychiatrists in the role of the realists. Now it was the psychiatrists who were the shallow psychologist.

What Hamsun seems to aim at is the fact that the psychiatric report is based on a *presumption* of psychological unity and stability. His character is basically innate. What he does not seem to notice, on the other hand, is the fact that the psychiatrists also perceive these character traits as “reactive products,” i.e. they are the results of the subject's interactions with the surroundings. This notion of reaction, taken from Adolf Meyer's psychiatry, introduces a dynamic element in the portrait of the artist: he is a subject who reacts to the environment, and hence his psychological make-up has a temporal component, or his self belongs in a story. This makes it possible to understand the character by means of a narrative. Therefore, the story of the life is not only a place where the (innate) character traits become visible, but also the way the reactive products are formed.

It is in the report's conclusion that the text comes closest to formulating an explicit narrative about a life. It synthesises much of the information provided by various informants into a meaningful account of a life. According to the psychiatrists, this account/narrative reveals a consistent *neurotic* personality. And this neurosis provides the life with sufficient coherence for the psychiatrists to conclude that the ageing man's action is in accordance with the younger man. Ultimately, this continuity, the relative coherence of the life and the character, is what decides the crucial question in the forensic psychiatric examination, the question of mental sanity. His life can be represented as a whole, therefore he is not insane.

But it is equally important in the conclusion that Hamsun's age is evoked as some sort of mitigating circumstance: yes, his neurotic personality makes sense of the acts he is accused of. And yet, he is weakened by age, by reduced hearing, by his strokes. As if the narrative of his life, the coherent part of it, has already come to an end. Therefore, if not insane, he is suffering from an "impairment of the mental capacities" (*varig svekkede sjelsevner*), as the technical expression from Norwegian forensic psychiatry expresses it.

In this psychiatric account of a life, everything is expected to *mean* something, every gesture is a potential sign. The object of study, Hamsun, is expected to demonstrate a coherent self, with fixed personality traits that are formed and revealed along his life course. This portrait is, nevertheless, presented in a fragmentary text, with multiple authors, suggesting, more than narrating, a *storied* self.

Ageing in *On overgrown paths*

Hamsun sensed the importance of psychological and narrative coherence in the psychiatric approach, and recognized in it something that was opposed to his long-standing project as a

writer. He read the psychiatrists' report when it was finished, and he wrote *On overgrown paths* at least partly as a response to the report, as an anti-report.³⁵ In this text, there is an often quoted critical description of psychiatry as “Domination over a living being [*regjereri over det levende liv*], regulations lacking mercy and tact, a psychology of blank spaces and labels, a whole science bristling defiance.”³⁶ The encounter with this system, hostile to living life, allegedly turned the author from a man in good health into “jelly.” It is significant that this criticism of the psychiatric way of knowing takes the form of an anti-narrative and conveys an anti-narrative view of the self.

Hamsun's final work *is* a critique of psychiatry, and is an integral part of the author's defence in the legal process against him. But it is also a work of fiction in which Hamsun appears as a character. And it is a meditation on the phenomenon of ageing. It is an anti-narrative placed within the frames of the legal process, as well as those of a rigorously non-anthropocentric universe.

The legal process bookends the text. It starts with the very first sentence of the book (“On May 26 the chief of police in Arendal came to Nørholm and served notice that my wife and I were under house arrest for thirty days”) and ends with the very last (“Today the Supreme Court has given its verdict, and I end my writing.”). What is at stake in *this* story is the ageing Hamsun's agency, i.e. his right to take responsibility for his actions. The story really has only two events: the psychiatric examination, in which Hamsun is silenced by the psychiatrists, and the legal hearing, in which Hamsun is finally allowed a voice. In between, there is no progress, no dramatic development. Prior to the first event, there is waiting, and following the second there is more waiting, until the case is closed by the Supreme Court. This story is about something

that is apparently significant in the life of the author, but it remains puzzlingly undramatic, uneventful.

The legal case, that one might expect to be at the very heart of the text, is in reality relegated to the background. In the foreground is Hamsun, waiting for something to happen. But the case emerges in the text twice: first, when Hamsun is admitted to the clinic and second, when his case is heard. Both times the literary discourse withdraws, vacating space, first for a discursive silence (in the absence of a psychiatric text), and secondly for the insertion of a non-fiction text. This technique seems to assimilate literature with life on the one hand and to oppose law and psychiatry with life, on the other.

The importance of the hospitalisation is emphasised by the fact that it is displaced in relation to the natural order of things. Where it naturally belongs, in the text, there is a discursive void. There is a description of Hamsun's *admission* to the clinic, with particular emphasis on the abundance of closed doors and the multitude of faceless staff, as well as on how the examinee is stripped of his belongings – keys, watch, notebook, knife, pencil, glasses – and thereby of his very humanity, as the text seems to suggest. But with regard to the months spent in the clinic, the narrative is at first silent, deliberately leaving an empty space, blaming the professor of psychiatry for this discursive void: “since the professor has refused to lend me the originals [i.e. the notes of his replies to the written questions from the psychiatrists], I have nothing to insert here in this void.”³⁷ The remark is filled with resentment, revealing differences in power between examinee and examiner. The narrative picks up as Hamsun is released from the clinic, four months after his admission: “The year is 1946, February 11. I am out of the institution again.”³⁸

Forty pages later, the author reintroduces this central event, describing it over the course of ten pages in a passage that has become famous for its tenacious attack on psychiatry in general, and professor Gabriel Langfeldt in particular.

The months at the clinic mark a period of resistance, and a phase that must be passed through in order for the narrative to approach closure. While the examinee was in the clinic, discussing psychology and his dominant qualities, the legal trial was put on hold. When the author left the clinic, the slow wheels of justice could be set in motion again. But the action that followed seemingly happened elsewhere. The prosecutor decided not to put Hamsun through a common trial. He was not to be tried in a criminal court with the punishment being imprisonment. Instead, like a large number of people investigated for similar crimes, his trial was simplified, technically a civil lawsuit, with the punishment being a fine. As far as the text is concerned, these administrative deliberations happen elsewhere, and Hamsun's narrative turns to his physical ailments. The examination has not only made a difference for the case, but also for the examinee: "I come from a health institution and am very low. I was well when I entered it."³⁹

The quiet drama of the psychiatric clinic, which confronted the author with the psychiatric power, corresponds to the more verbal drama of the legal hearing. Hamsun gave a speech before the court, and this speech is quoted verbatim in the book "taken from the stenographic report."⁴⁰

Hamsun was accused of ideological support of Nazi Germany. But he denied that his actions had any such ideological or transcendental overtones. Facing the court, he paints a portrait of an old man, struck by aphasia and deafness, isolated from the world, a man who takes no part in daily events. If his sympathy lies with Germany, it is a Germany that has always been accommodating to the greats from the north, and the fact that this Germany was recently overtaken by the Nazis seems insignificant in this broader time scale. Hamsun paints a portrait

of a man whose experiences belong to a different time – not the time of political events but the time of ageing and the time of the universe. In this framework, the individual life seems to lose significance: “I have time on my side. Living or dead, it’s all the same, and above all, it’s the same to the world what happens to one single person, in this case me.”⁴¹

A single life is insignificant, because it is embedded in a larger cosmos, conveying the circular time of the turning seasons and the slow time of the dwindling senses: ”Oh, the infinitely small in the midst of the infinitely great in this incomparable world.”⁴² The great things as well as the small things are events that are devoid of meaning, insofar as meaning is conceived as relative to a human-centric narrative, as for example, MacIntyre maintains.

The reference to nature and the cosmos evokes a specific philosophy of life, a kind of epicureanism.⁴³ It is perhaps given its most succinct expression in this reflection on the self:

One, two three, four – thus I sit and make notes and write down little odds and ends for myself. Nothing will come out of it, it is only habit. Cautious words dribble out of me. I am a faucet that goes on dripping, one, two, three, four –

Isn’t there a star named Mira? I might have looked it up, but I have nothing to look it up in. Never mind. Mira is a star that comes, shines a little and is gone. That is the entire course of life [*Det er hele levnetsløpet*]. Mankind, I think here of you. Of all living creatures in the world, you are born to be almost a mere nothing. You are neither good nor evil; you have come into being without any purpose. You emerge out of the mist and return to the mist, so utterly nebulous you are. And mankind, should you mount a noble steed, that steed is noble no longer. Ever so, whatever the day and the way, slowly – ⁴⁴

This characteristically modest vision of writing, here described as taking notes and writing “odds and ends,” out of which “nothing will come,” contrasts with any vision of the great transformative powers of poetry and narratives. For Hamsun, there is nothing transcendental in

these acts. And this very mundane poetics is associated with a vision of a universe in which man is far from being the centre. The de-centring of man in the universe, the metamorphosis of man into a thing (a tap) and of life into a liquid, as well as the emphasis on the volatility of all things and the invalidation of the distinction between good and evil, serve as the philosophical underpinning of this anti-narrative. The lack of a transcendental meaning in life runs through the text: “We are all of us on a journey to a land where we will arrive in good time. We have no reason to hasten, we take events [*tilfældigheterne*] as they occur along the way. It is only fools who grumble at heaven and hit upon big words for those events [*tilfældigheter*], which are more lasting than we and cannot be avoided.”⁴⁵ Life is not a universe ordered by causally determined events, it is the result of a number of contingencies, or coincidents (*tilfældigheter*), that are not only outside our control, but also much larger than us.

Hence, the Hamsun character experiences his life in relation to multiple temporalities, to borrow an expression from Reinhard Koselleck: the temporality of the case, the temporality of the ageing body and the temporality of nature.⁴⁶ In none of these time series is Hamsun a significant actor; the deaf man is a passive object, the victim of the psychiatrists, the ageing process, the legal system, and nature. Only as the creator of the book is he an active agent, and in this capacity, he is very active indeed. Throughout the memoirs he invents, he distorts, he picks up other people’s stories and elaborates on them, as he picks up his own fragmented memories and elaborates on them, so that the reader is left uncertain as to what is fact and what is fiction.

This pluri-temporal structure can be read as an anti-narrative structure because it relegates the world of actions and intentions, the human time, to a subordinate position. But the anti-narrativism is also expressed more explicitly in the text: “(...) I am not writing my autobiography [*levnetsløp*]” the author assures us.⁴⁷ This word, *levnetsløp* (literally, life course)

is synonymous to biography, but it has connotations to nature; for example, the ending “løp” is also found in the word “elveløp” (river course). This word, which is not very common in Norwegian, invites us to think of the life as a river, temporarily filled with water/life, flowing neatly in one direction. Hamsun’s refusal to write a life is therefore also a refusal to accept the river as the model for a life. Read in context, this anti-biographical assurance establishes a contrast between Hamsun’s text and that of the psychiatrists. It is an introduction to the description of the months he spent in the psychiatric clinic. In a short sequence of effective prose, he produces a list of qualities (“I am no malcontent. I joke a lot, laugh easily, have a happy nature”), that he ascribes to his father and mother (“In this I take after my father”), and he avows willingly: “I am a product.” This sequence includes what the psychiatrists wanted him to produce in the first place, a sketch of a coherent self, explained by causalities. But he cuts himself off abruptly to declare: “I am not writing an autobiography [*levnetsløp*].” What is provided instead of the declaration of the self is what Hamsun declares to be “a few chance occurrences, random recollections from the Men’s Ward of the Psychiatric Clinic” – a story, we might add, deprived of any transcendent meaning.

The anti-narrative position is further expressed in the account of an encounter Hamsun has with a man when he was still residing in the home for the elderly (before he is sent to the clinic for mental observation). The man is a barefooted preacher from Hamarøy, where Hamsun grew up, and he strongly resembles the kind of character that is commonly found in Hamsun’s fictional works. He approaches the author on the street and, after a brief chat, he begs the famous author to read something he himself has written. Uninvited, he hands Hamsun some notebooks, and the author thinks “It was what I had expected, the story, the course of his life [*levnetsløp*].”⁴⁸ The author tries to talk it away, but the barefooted preacher insists: “I have written everything down as true as it happened.”⁴⁹

The demonstrable disinterest of Hamsun the character in the “true” autobiography signals a weariness with regard to the belief in the analogy between narration and life, that a narrative can be true in any meaningful sense. Reluctantly, he starts reading the preacher’s story, a very “Hamsunesque” story about a man who meets a woman but never has the chance to follow his romantic inclinations.

If the character of the preacher is read as Hamsun’s alter ego, as there are good reasons to do, the entire scene turns out to be about a man confronting his own desires, as well as his aversion to the very idea of the written, true, life.

Hamsun’s *Case*, in *On Overgrown Paths*, evolves at a slow tempo, and inaction is more conspicuous than action. This is a contrast to the cosmos that is turning on a non-human scale, dwarfing the individual. But there is a third temporality that frames the experiences of Hamsun the character, and that is the temporality that seems to be specific to his ageing body. The experiences of the ageing body occur outside the time of general society. (“And we dotards light our pipes and putter about some more.”⁵⁰) This is a time of slowly dwindling senses: “Was it last year or even longer ago that I had full mastery of my faculties? I recall it as a vision.”⁵¹ And hovering above this time of ageing is the routinization of death: “Now and then there is also some one of us who dies; it cannot be avoided, but it does not make much impression on us who remains.”⁵²

How does an anti-narrative end? Obviously, there can be no question of bringing things to a closure, as this would mean adding a transcendent meaning to human affairs. Hamsun’s book ends with a date and a matter-of-fact announcement: “St. Johns day, 1848. Today the Supreme

Court has given its verdict, and I end my writing.”⁵³ The verdict of the Supreme Court marks the end of what started with his arrest, as was announced in the first sentence of the book.

Conclusion

The two texts I have discussed here, the psychiatric text and the novelist’s memoirs, are written in opposition to each other: Literature opposing psychiatry and psychiatry defending itself against literature. But they also, paradoxically, share some common traits. Both texts have a fragmented structure, incorporating fragments from other discourses, written by different authors, into a very loose narrative. They are both concerned with psychology, but they relate to (different) programs of psychological knowledge. They both testify to a desire to write a life, a will to narrate, and at the same time a reluctance to do it so..

“I do not write a life,” Hamsun states as an invocation mirroring that of the psychiatrists. But the invocation seems simultaneously to be an act of defiance against the power of the psychiatric text. Not writing a life is an act of resistance. Curiously, the psychiatrists also seem to offer a similar invocation, as they admit that they feel a certain temptation to write a life: “We considered it right to resist the temptation to take the Hamsun case as an opportunity to write a “pathography” about Hamsun the poet and his relationship to Nazism, or the legal and moral responsibility of the genius.”⁵⁴

Helen Small, when discussing narrative strategies associated with the experience of ageing, has reminded us that narrative can be much more sophisticated and complex than what is often assumed, especially by the critics of the narrative view.⁵⁵ Hamsun’s last work gives us an example of such a complex structure, as he combines different temporalities in his portrait of the senescent self. He constructed an anti-narrative about a non-coherent self. But in so doing,

he also demonstrated an ethical implication that readers may find disturbing: the old man transformed into a tap through which the life water drips calmly, is not a man who can be held accountable when he errs.

¹ Hamsun's support for the Nazis is thoroughly and unapologetically documented in Tore Rem, *Knut Hamsun : Reisen til Hitler* (2014).

² The classical text here is Hayden White, *Metahistory : The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973). For a critical assessment of the narrative view of historiography, see Z.B. Simon and J. M. Kuukkanen (2015).

³ See Ritivoi (2005) and Ricoeur (1983/1984).

⁴ Helge Jordheim has in several papers argued that the concept of multiple temporalities is crucial for an understanding of Koselleck's writings. See e.g. Jordheim (2012), 160-161.

⁵ This reading of (the early) Sartre is proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre. See Macintyre (2015).

⁶ See McAdams (2008).

⁷ See Small (2007), 89-148.

⁸ See MacIntyre (1985), 205. See also Small (2007) for a discussion of MacIntyre's position.

⁹ See MacIntyre (1985), 209. See also Paul Veyne (1978) who proposes a similar understanding of the historical event.

¹⁰ See MacIntyre (1985), 210.

¹¹ See Small (2007), 117.

¹² This corresponds with the understanding of anti-narrative proposed in The Routledge encyclopedia of narrative theory. See Richardson (2005).

¹³ See Mink, in MacIntyre (1985), 212.

¹⁴ See Rousseau (2015), 119.

¹⁵ A similar view is expressed in Saul Bellow's novel *Ravelstein*: "we live also not merely as isolated units but caught up in, and in important ways inextricable from, other lives." Quoted in Small (2007), 106.

¹⁶ See Scholes (1980), 212.

¹⁷ This understanding is in accordance with that held in Jolly (2001).

¹⁸ See Foucault (1978) and (1999). On the emergence of forensic psychiatry, see also Goldstein (2001) [1987]. See Skålevåg (2006).

¹⁹ On the significance of the DSM/ICD for forensic psychiatry, see Skålevåg (2016), 173-76.

²⁰ The forensic psychiatric report was obviously not written to be published. Indeed, when the report on Hamsun was published in 1979, it was the only report of its kind that had ever been published in Norway. It was published by its authors, the psychiatrists Langfeldt and Ødegård, in response to Thorkild Hansen's Hamsun biography, *Prosessen mot Hamsun*, which was published in 1978 and took a very critical stance regarding the role the psychiatrists had played in the Hamsun case. See Hansen, (1996) [1978]. According to the preface, the published version is as good as identical with the written document that was produced in 1946. I rely on the published version, *Den rettspsykiatriske erklæringen om Knut Hamsun*. See Langfeldt and Ødegård (1978). (All translations from this text are my own.)

²¹ See Langfeldt and Ødegård (1978), 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

²³ See Braatøy (1929).

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- ²⁴ See Langfeldt and Ødegård (1978), 54ff.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 25.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ See Braatøy (1929), 8.
- ²⁸ See Langfeldt and Ødegård (1978), 42.
- ²⁹ This is the impression given by informants who seem to be sympathetic to Hamsun, in particular, such as his friend Gierløff and his lawyer, Sigrid Stray. Moreover, Hamsun himself embraces this view, claiming that he has “no understanding of politics” “nor any knowledge of any war other than the short war between Germany and Norway” (spring -45). See Langfeldt and Ødegård, 57.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 82.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid., 81.
- ³³ Ibid., 82-83.
- ³⁴ On the significance of psychology in this polemic and in Hamsun’s early novels, see Skålevåg, “‘At belyse en sjæl lige ind i mysteriet’. Den unge Knut Hamsun i en vitenshistorisk kontekst” (2006).
- ³⁵ The text has been characterised both as a novel and as an autobiography. In the debate following the publication of Tore Rem’s *Knut Hamsun: Reisen til Hitler* in 2014, the correct assessment of the text’s *genre* was given prime importance. See Boasson (2014) and Rem (2014).
- ³⁶ See (1968), 91. The original reads: “Et regjereri over det levende liv, reglementer uten intuisjon og hjerte, en psykologi i ruter og rubrikker, en hel vitenskap på trass.”
- ³⁷ See Hamsun (1968), 50.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 56.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 51.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 138-47.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 147.
- ⁴² Ibid., 81.
- ⁴³ See e.g. Small (2007), 89-93.
- ⁴⁴ See Hamsun (1968), 63.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 174.
- ⁴⁶ See Jordheim (2012).
- ⁴⁷ See Hamsun (1968), 92.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 35.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 35.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 130.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 116.
- ⁵² Ibid., 33 and also 53 and 130.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 176.
- ⁵⁴ See Langfeldt and Ødegård (1978), 11.
- ⁵⁵ See Small (2007), 88.

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