

## KNUT HAMSUN'S EARLY YEARS IN THE NORTHWEST

IF ONE CHANCES to turn the pages of *Who's Who* to the name of Knut Hamsun one will find, curiously enough, that Hamsun's first mark of distinction is his title of farmer. If one reads farther, one discovers that his surname was originally not Hamsun but Pedersen, that he had little formal education, and that he divided his early years among farming, clerking, school teaching, and various other occupations. It is only toward the end of the brief notice that one learns that Knut Hamsun won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1920 and that he is the author of such distinguished novels as *Hunger* and *Growth of the Soil*.

Most people today know Hamsun's fame as a writer rather than his success as a farmer. But what is not common knowledge is Hamsun's four and a half years in the United States when, a callow, ignorant youth, he crossed the Atlantic to bring poetry to the lives of the Norwegian emigrants to America. Nor is it remembered that his first published book, *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*, was a violent diatribe against American materialism which the author never re-published and which he would not allow to be translated into English.<sup>1</sup> To all intents and purposes, when Hamsun left New York in the summer of 1888 he severed his American connections permanently.

Hamsun's early life on the Lofoten Islands and on farms was not only hard; it also promised little escape as the boy grew older. The portion of a laborer did not appeal to him, yet he could see no other work ahead. According to one story, a boyhood friend, Nils Frøisland, took Hamsun

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Bjorkman owned a copy of this book in which Hamsun had written the following inscription: "A youthful work. It has ceased to represent my opinion of America. May 28, 1903." See *Hunger*, vii (New York, 1924).

home during the Christmas season of 1881 and Mrs. Fröisland, impressed with the boy's earnestness, offered to lend him four hundred kroner to continue his studies. Hamsun replied that he would prefer to use the money in traveling to America, a place in which he expected to find a fresh and clean society. According to another story, Hamsun was given free passage on the North German Lloyd ship "Oder" from Germany to New York on condition that he later write an account of his trip for publication. At any rate Knut Hamsun left Bremerhaven shortly after New Year's, 1882, and carried with him letters of introduction supplied by Björnsterne Björnson.<sup>2</sup>

For some time after his arrival he worked on eastern farms, tending the scanty livestock of the Yankee husbandmen. But later in the winter he traveled westward into Wisconsin and shortly presented himself at the home of Rasmus B. Anderson in Madison. Years later Anderson wrote that the family had been at table that day when the doorbell rang. Anderson himself opened the door, to find standing before him "a tall, slender, smooth-faced young man with a large growth of hair on his head. You could not look at this youth with a forest of brown hair without thinking of Björnsterne Björnson in his palmyest days."<sup>3</sup> Hamsun presented his letters of introduction, which were directed not to Anderson but to an infantry captain with whom Hamsun had worked, and the two men talked briefly.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Walter A. Berendsohn, *Knut Hamsun: Das unbändige ich und die menschliche Gemeinschaft*, 34 (Munich, 1929); Einar Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun*, 95 (Oslo, 1929).

<sup>3</sup>Rasmus B. Anderson, *Life Story of Rasmus B. Anderson*, 305 (Madison, 1915). All Anderson's comments on Hamsun are to be taken *cum grano salis*. For specific corrections of errors in Anderson's account, see Hamsun's "Nogen faa svar" ("A Few Answers"), manuscript notes written on January 18, 1915, and now in the library of the University of Minnesota. Hamsun even declared that his hair was *cendré*, not brown!

<sup>4</sup>Hamsun remarked that, although the letters were not addressed to Anderson, he begged to be allowed to keep them, as they contained words highly favorable to him. Hamsun consented. See Hamsun, "Nogen faa svar."

The next definite information about Hamsun's life concerns a period spent in Elroy, Wisconsin, where he went to visit an older brother, Per Pedersen, who had preceded him to the United States. "I travelled to my brother who lived at Elroy," Hamsun later wrote. The young emigrant was having some trouble about this time deciding the orthography of his name, as he advised his family in Norway to address him as Knut Hamsund but put in parentheses, Knut Pedersen. He also recorded later that he had fallen in love three times in two months, but did not establish the identity of his inamoratas. For a time, probably, Hamsun worked on farms near Elroy. Later he was employed by local merchants as a clerk. "I worked first in the shop of E. Hart, later in that of J. G. Wighman, from neither of which was I discharged," he declared long afterward.<sup>5</sup> During his residence of a year and a half at Elroy, Hamsun tried to learn English, a village schoolmaster by the name of Johnston giving him instructions in the evenings. Even as a village clerk he hungered for the intellectual life and hoped to give lectures. Rasmus Anderson alleged that Hamsun studied so much late at night that he found it impossible to arise in the morning and that his employer was obliged to discharge him for unpunctuality; but Hamsun, as we have already seen, specifically denied this charge. More plausible is the story that Hamsun made himself ill by overwork and that Johnston lent him forty dollars in order to go to Colorado for his health. This journey he never made, but years later he repaid the money.<sup>6</sup>

Some time afterward Johnston began to operate a wood-yard at Madelia, Minnesota, and urged Hamsun to run the business while he and his wife traveled east. Hamsun accepted the offer and soon established himself in the little prairie town. The great loneliness of the open spaces

<sup>5</sup> Hamsun, "Nogen faa svar"; Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun*, 96.

<sup>6</sup> "I was never in Colorado," Hamsun declared in a personal letter to the writer, November 9, 1938.

began to prey upon him, but he had ample time for composition and with deliberate care he experimented with writing. It was at Madelia, too, that Hamsun met Kristofer Janson.<sup>7</sup>

Janson was a Norwegian intellectual who had espoused Unitarianism and as a result of various inducements had emigrated to America to establish a liberal church for his countrymen. In Minneapolis he organized the Nazareth Unitarian Church, located at Twelfth Avenue and Ninth Street, and he also served two outlying parishes, one at Hudson, Wisconsin, and one at Madelia. Janson was immediately attracted by the tall young Norwegian with the aristocratic figure who wore gold-rimmed glasses while working in the woodyard. After some acquaintance Janson offered Hamsun a position as his secretary. Hamsun admitted no predilections toward religion and particularly none toward Unitarianism, but he quickly grasped the opportunity to do work other than manual.<sup>8</sup> Thus in the spring of 1884 Hamsun was installed in Minneapolis as the rather inefficient secretary of Kristofer Janson.

At first Hamsun fitted well into his new sphere. Living in Janson's home he was modest and retiring, proved a good friend to the children, and exerted a peculiar charm over Mrs. Drude Janson. He reveled in the library of his new friend and was said to stand constantly before the book-filled shelves, reaching down volume after volume and rapidly paging through them. He seldom sat down or read a book through. Instead he had a certain intuitive faculty

<sup>7</sup> Martin B. Ruud, "Knut Hamsun," in Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, *Publications*, 3: 241 (1916); Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun*, 98.

<sup>8</sup> In 1888 Hamsun declared: "Janson's Christianity is perplexing to me, a delicate mixture of reason and Turkish superstition (*Tyrkerstro*), with a touch of mysticism"; and in the next year he referred scathingly to "that incomprehensible assemblage of ignorant culture and half radicalism which some people call Unitarianism." See Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun*, 100, which quotes from *Ny jord* (Copenhagen); and Hamsun, *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*, 87 (Copenhagen, 1889).

for getting the gist from a volume even while reading it superficially. Moreover, he was valuable to the pastor in various ways, although his obsession with reading and writing and his occasional fits of abstraction must have proved difficult. In small gatherings he spoke effectively, was successful at a *lutefiskfest* in the basement of the church, and even filled in at the pulpit when Janson was absent addressing his missionary congregations. But when he preached he usually eschewed theology entirely and was not above injecting a satirical note into his discourse. Rasmus Anderson, always hostile to Hamsun, remarked that he had heard Hamsun preach, "but I must confess that I did not have the slightest idea of what he talked about. It seemed to me like nonsensical and incoherent twaddle. There was a superabundance of words that gushed from him like peas poured from a bag."<sup>9</sup>

After about a year of this association Hamsun and Janson began to drift apart. Hamsun was much more interested in literature than in theology and had no stomach for the pastor's attempt to make a clergyman of him. The rift would no doubt have widened immeasurably had not Hamsun at this time fallen sick. An observer who saw him act as auctioneer at a charity bazaar reported that he suddenly began to spit blood and shortly afterward collapsed. He was examined by Dr. Tonnes Thams, who pronounced his condition serious and apparently convinced the patient that he was a victim of consumption. Rasmus Anderson, who visited Minneapolis at this time, remarked that Hamsun was pale, emaciated, and quite despondent, and that Professor August Weenaas of Red Wing had even administered the last sacrament to him. According to this account Hamsun repented his treason to the Lutheran faith and wished only to return to Norway so that he might die in his

<sup>9</sup> Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun*, 99; Anderson, *Life Story*, 308. Hamsun declared flatly in 1915 that Anderson had never heard him preach! "Nogen faa svar."

homeland. But Hamsun himself later declared that he did not call Professor Weenaas, and that Weenaas came to visit him chiefly because the two men had known each other in Norway. Hamsun denied that he either confessed or received the last sacrament. At any rate, a group of Hamsun's friends raised a small purse, and not long afterward the sick man was on a train bound for New York. The change of climate and the smell of sea air worked wonders on him, and by the time he saw the shores of Norway once more he was quite restored to health.<sup>10</sup>

Soon after his arrival in Christiania in the autumn of 1885 he met Lars Holst, editor of the *Dagbladet*, for whom he did some journalistic work. He remained in Norway about a year, serving as postmaster at Valders, doing some editorial chores, and lecturing occasionally on such literary figures as Strindberg and Kielland. The exact reason for his return to the United States is obscure. Perhaps his reception at home had not been quite what he desired, perhaps the wanderlust still seized him. Probably his commission as correspondent for a Norwegian newspaper emboldened him to face a strange country and a strange language a second time. But if this conjecture is true, his disappointment must have been bitter. Einar Skavlan has chosen a peculiarly suitable title for his chapter dealing with Hamsun's life at this time: "Years of Distress in America and at Home."

In August, 1886, Hamsun was once more on the high seas headed for New York, this time in the Danish emigrant ship "Geiser." He was determined to be a success in literature, and he declared to himself: "I am a literary artist. People shall yet come to celebrate me in Norway!"<sup>11</sup> But his position as correspondent paid him little, and once more he was forced to resort to manual labor for a living. There is an apocryphal story about his having spent several months

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Life Story*, 309; Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun*, 101-103.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun*, 112.

aboard a Russian fishing schooner on the Newfoundland banks in the company of ignorant and brutalized companions, an experience which reputedly is the basis of the sketch "Paa Bankerne." It is more likely that Hamsun simply utilized memories of his Lofoten days and transferred the locale from the Norwegian to the American coast.<sup>12</sup> Christmas of 1886 found him a conductor on a Chicago horsecar, where his difficulties were many. Nearsighted and lacking completely a sense of location, Hamsun conscientiously learned the sequence of streets forward and backward, but after nightfall he would simply begin to call out the names somewhere in the middle of the sequence and continue to the end. People who remembered him on the Halstead Street line affirmed that he was distinguished by a perpetual stare into the horizon and that he usually wore clothes with the elbows out. One passenger, perhaps stimulated by early proximity to a famous man, wrote in 1920:

I still remember Knut's chapped, red wrists, where his coat-sleeves forgot to meet his mittens. And he carried books in his pockets. Always books, Euripides, Aristotle, Thackeray. Such a dreamer! The passengers used to get mad. He would forget to pull the rope. They missed their corners.<sup>13</sup>

At any rate the passengers, infuriated at missing their stops, complained to the company, and Hamsun lost his job.

From Chicago he apparently drifted to Minneapolis, where he re-entered the Norwegian society that he had known earlier. He had rather a conspicuous part in the Seventeenth of May celebration which the Scandinavians of the Twin Cities organized in 1887. A grand parade with delegations from surrounding communities began the day, and Mayor Albert A. Ames of Minneapolis addressed the

<sup>12</sup> "I never compose after living or dead models. *Zachaeus* and *Paa Bankerne* are merely localized in the United States, but are not created therefrom." Hamsun to the writer, November 9, 1938.

<sup>13</sup> "The Horse-car Conductor Who Wins the Nobel Prize," in the *Literary Digest*, 67:35 (November 20, 1920), quotes the reminiscences of Dr. Anders Doe of Chicago.

people. Later at Dania Hall the Norwegian Total Abstinence Society held its festivities. According to the *Minneapolis Tribune* of May 18,

The most notable event of the evening was a lecture on the origin and history of Norway's day of independence by Knud Hamsun [*sic*]. The lecture throughout was full of interest to the audience and full of bright and happy sayings which took the Scandinavian heart by storm.

In the early summer of 1887 Hamsun went to the Red River Valley in search of work in the grain fields. In an interesting letter written to Kristofer Janson from Casselton, Dakota Territory, July 16, 1887, he recounted his attempts to find employment and pictured the great prairie wheat country.<sup>14</sup> Hamsun went first to Fargo, where for a few days he probably lived the life of any migrant farm laborer. He told Janson of shaving himself and making his toilet under a convenient bridge. He and two other field workers celebrated the Fourth of July with a flask of beer and some rye bread. The next day they walked six miles to a "storfarm," or bonanza farm, seeking work, but soon went on to Casselton and there walked from one huge grain farm to another until they found employment.

During the era of bonanza farms—roughly from the panic of 1873, when land could be purchased cheaply, until about 1890—Casselton was the headquarters of the Oliver Dalrymple farm and was also a kind of supply center for the entire Red River Valley. Dalrymple himself had begun wheat farming as a kind of resident manager on a small scale, but by 1878 he had thirteen thousand acres under cultivation, and in 1895 he is said to have farmed sixty-five thousand acres.<sup>15</sup> It is impossible to ascertain today exactly where Knut Hamsun was employed. If it was not on

<sup>14</sup> Kristofer Janson, *Hvad jeg har oplevet*, 222-224 (Christiania, 1913).

<sup>15</sup> Lewis F. Crawford, *History of North Dakota*, 470-472 (Chicago and New York, 1931). See also *North Dakota: A Guide to the Northern Prairie State*, 278 (Fargo, 1938).

the Dalrymple farm, it could have been either on the farm of the Amenia and Sharon Land Company, which operated thirty thousand acres north of Casselton, or on the Watson farm, a bonanza project of twenty thousand acres which lay south of the town. At any rate, Dakota filled him with wonder. "Fy for et land dette Dakota!" ("Fie, what a country, this Dakota!") he exclaimed, half in bewilderment, half in admiration.

To Janson he wrote his impressions of the isolation of the prairies and the endless sea of wheat; he remarked the cloudless sky, the long day without shade, the vistas in every direction unbroken save by an occasional thicket or "tree claim"; and he particularly observed the unequalled sunset, blood-red in hue and of an intensity almost defying description. To judge by his reminiscences of his Dakota life, these were happy days.<sup>16</sup> He was liked by his fellow workers and he wrote Sunday letters for them. Together with them he sat on plows as on a stool, with wheels replacing legs, and talked and sang as the machines crawled along the furrows. But Hamsun was never a great success as a manual laborer. As one critic expressed it,

For general farm labor and work on the street-cars he had no ability at all. He had earned anything but praise this summer in Dakota. He had strength enough, he was as powerful as a lion, and he was not altogether an idiot, either, but if a certain kind of work could not completely engage his attention, his thoughts ran off with him.<sup>17</sup>

His overpowering ambition was, of course, to write, and only intellectual work could ever satisfy him. His work on a Chicago streetcar and a Dakota plow was only a stopgap, something to tide him over temporarily. His real interest lay in literature, in reading the sentences of other people and in polishing and shaping his own.

<sup>16</sup> Two semi-autobiographical sketches by Hamsun, "Zachaeus" and "Paa praerien," both of which reflect his North Dakota experiences, are included in *Kratskog: Historier og skitser*, 51-78, 117-131 (Copenhagen, 1903). They are as yet untranslated.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Wiehr, "Knut Hamsun," in *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, 3: 5 (1921-22).

It may have been during this latter period of Hamsun's stay in the United States that he experienced the close contact with the Indians that he speaks of in *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*. Twice, he declared, he lived in the wigwams of the red men for short periods, probably to gather material for literary purposes, but in both cases the result was unsatisfactory. The Indians were shabby, dirty, unheroic people; they were not even a fit source for a short article. Hamsun, of course, was temperamentally a realist and he had only contempt for the doctrine of the noble savage. For him the romantic pictures supplied by "holy Longfellow" and other apologists were only a stultification of the truth. Intimate contact with the domestic life of the Indians naturally failed to stimulate his interest.<sup>18</sup>

In the autumn of 1887 he collected what money he had saved and set out for Minneapolis to rejoin Kristofer Janson. Janson opened his parish house to the young Norwegian and Hamsun gave several lectures there for a nominal fee, his audience seldom including more than thirty or forty listeners. Hamsun discussed in rather iconoclastic fashion the work of the chief Scandinavian writers, as well as that of Zola and Maupassant. He also ventured to comment on American literature, but he held such antagonistic views about Longfellow and Emerson (he found it possible, he said, to read parts of Poe, Whitman, and Hawthorne!) that he alienated his hearers, who were quick to resent any slurs on their adopted country.<sup>19</sup> In later years Hamsun rather regretted the arbitrary judgments passed in these lectures. As he remarked in a letter to the present writer, "These lectures were very imperfect, I was myself ignorant."

Some time after Hamsun's return to Minneapolis the

<sup>18</sup> "I have been among the Indians, on two occasions have stayed for a considerable period in their wigwams," writes Hamsun in *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Hanna Astrup Larsen, *Knut Hamsun*, 23 (New York, 1922).

journalist Kröger Johansen met him and interviewed him, remarking on Hamsun's "refined and well-chiseled features, his tall, strong figure, his lively manners and animated conversation, his whole unique personality," all of which contrasted strongly with his surroundings. It was Hamsun's wish, the journalist asserted, to charge only ten cents admission to his literary talks; he hoped to get advertising for these meetings from the less bigoted Scandinavian papers and from Kristofer Janson's pulpit.<sup>20</sup>

Hamsun's activities from the fall of 1887 to his departure for Denmark in 1888 are not altogether clear. Apparently he spent a large portion of that time in Minneapolis. The *Minneapolis City Directory* for 1888-89 lists "Knut Hamsun" as a clerk with rooms at 904 North Fourth, whereas the directory for the previous year contains no such name. It was probably during the winter of 1887-88 that Andreas Ueland encountered Hamsun. Ueland related that Kristofer and Mrs. Janson were in the habit of holding Thursday evening sessions at their home, when literature and art were discussed and there was often singing and instrumental music.

On those occasions my wife and I often met a young Norwegian with hair *à la* Björnson in somewhat threadbare clothes, who was intensely interested in what Janson had to say about literature. We understood he was working for the street-car company, but of that I have no personal knowledge. He was, at all events, earning his livelihood by some common labor, and was meanwhile absorbing everything he got hold of in literature. Janson would say that like a girl practicing the scales on a piano, the young man was practicing on sentences in Norwegian, writing and rewriting to find a satisfactory form; and according to the late Dr. Thams, his most intimate friend, he would say: "Some day I shall *pinedød* show them how to write." And he did. It was Knut Hamsun.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Dagbladet* (Christiania), January 18, 1905, quoted by Wiehr, in *Smith College Studies*, 3:5. Johansen used the pseudonym of Cecil Kröger.

<sup>21</sup> Andreas Ueland, *Recollections of an Immigrant*, 63 (New York, 1929).

Halvard Askeland, the editor of *Felt raabet*, a Norwegian temperance weekly published in Minneapolis, recalls that on one occasion Hamsun accompanied him to Trinity Church and pumped the organ while Askeland played and the Reverend M. Falk Gjertsen delivered his Thursday evening sermon. During intervals in the service Hamsun crouched down behind the organ and wrote notes for a satiric sketch entitled "Flies, a Speech at a Strawberry Festival in the Nazareth Church." Hamsun occasionally wrote editorials for *Felt raabet* and, after his departure for Europe, sent several letters to John Hansen, the business manager of the weekly, which were duly published. He also played some part in the Minneapolis celebration of the Norwegian national holiday in 1888, although festivities were apparently on a smaller scale than in the previous year. The Norwegians gathered in various halls throughout the city, and the Wergeland Lodge met at Turner Hall, Washington Avenue and Fifth Avenue North, the morning of May 17. There were toasts, exhibition drills, and music, and addresses were made by Judge Lars Rand and Knut Hamsun.<sup>22</sup>

Before leaving Minneapolis Hamsun gave a kind of valedictory address at Dania Hall, a bold and violent speech in which he flayed American materialism and ridiculed American culture. Undoubtedly it epitomized the book which he was soon to publish on his experiences and observations in the United States. Once more Hamsun's friends had to assist him to return home. John Hansen aided him to reach Chicago, and there he was helped by Professor N. C. Frederiksen, then a wealthy land agent. Hamsun sailed from New York for Denmark in the steamer "Thingvalla."

One of the last anecdotes relating to Hamsun's sojourn in America is told by Rasmus Anderson. In the summer of

<sup>22</sup> Personal conversation with Halvard Askeland; *Felt raabet*, July 1, March 9, 1887, October 5, 1888; *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 17, 1888; *Minneapolis Journal*, May 16, 1888. There are probably articles by Hamsun in *Felt raabet* that have not been located, as he rarely signed his contributions and identification is therefore difficult.

1888 Anderson, then American minister to Denmark, was in the United States on vacation and by chance happened to return to Copenhagen on the very vessel that was carrying Hamsun. Anderson tells in his autobiography how one day, as he walked through the steerage, he saw four young men, all badly clad and dirty, playing cards. One of them he recognized as the young Norwegian who had rung his doorbell in Madison six years before. Anderson engaged him in conversation and Hamsun replied that he had spent some time in Chicago, North Dakota, and the Minnesota pineries, and that he was now bound for Copenhagen to find a publisher for his book. Thereupon Hamsun produced his manuscript, bulky enough according to the narrator to make a volume of a thousand pages, and urged Anderson to read it. Anderson declined. Then, noticing that Hamsun was wearing a black ribbon on his lapel, Anderson inquired whether he was in mourning for any member of his family. Hamsun said no; he was simply honoring the Chicago anarchists! "From that moment," Anderson wrote, "Knut Hamsun was in my mind an anarchist and I had no use for people of that ilk." When Hamsun later applied at the American legation at Copenhagen, he found the doors closed. Even after the publication of *Hunger* in 1890 had made the author famous, almost overnight, Anderson did not relent in his animosity. Years later when Hamsun was established as one of the outstanding European novelists, Anderson wrote: "There are passages in his books too coarse and indecent to be read aloud even where only men are present. Such writers as Hamsun are a disgrace to the country that tolerates them."<sup>23</sup>

Hamsun's reaction to his American experiences is to be found in the book which he persuaded a publisher to bring

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, *Life Story*, 314-318. Hamsun's final comment on Anderson's remarks may well be found in a sentence taken from "Nogen faa svar": "One lie more or less hurled at me by a man of Rasmus Anderson's caliber is a matter of no consequence."

out the year following his arrival in Copenhagen, *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*. For this volume is a scathing indictment of almost everything American. Here Hamsun paid his respects to American journalism, the arts, the theater, the legal system, schools and churches, morals and etiquette, and particularly patriotism, which was to him rather chauvinism, and the national antagonism toward foreigners. Everywhere he found materialism rampant. The newspapers gloried in sensationalism, although he admired the trickiness of their advertising, and printed whatever the newsboys could best yell out on the streets; the ministers kotowed to the common passion by quoting statistics in their sermons; the people constantly speculated, whether on the New York stock exchange or in Texas cattle. America, he asserted, had no cultural life at all, the only society which made the pretense of being cultured having been exterminated by the Civil War. He condemned the national prudery and the tendency of American men to submit to feminine domination, and he arraigned the popular devotion to money-getting. Worst of all, he thought, was the ubiquitous patriotism, a kind of national conceit which seemed all the more ridiculous when he realized that the United States had welcomed and naturalized the scum of Europe.<sup>24</sup>

Although the book is largely objective in the sense that there are few personal references, Hamsun did allude occasionally to his residence in Minneapolis. He chose to discuss Minneapolis and Copenhagen, cities comparable in population but in other respects very different. Minneapolis expended three times as much money on schools and education as did the Danish capital, and got poorer results. Minneapolis boasted 146 churches, Copenhagen only 29, a statistical comparison which led Hamsun to remark sarcastically that there was much God in America! He then remarked about the opulence of the Minneapolis churches, the

<sup>24</sup> *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*, 2, 19, 26, 28.

monstrous organs, the deep carpets, the stained glass windows, one of which alone cost five hundred dollars; the pews, the people, and the word of God were all alike in that all were highly polished! He remarked that the preaching was American, being given over chiefly to Bostonian morals, but he expressed his own preference for American sermons since, if they were sugar-coated, they were at least entertaining. Particularly was he impressed by Minneapolis' deficiencies as a cultural center. It was an important commercial city, it could boast theaters and schools, art galleries and a university, yet it had a negligible library and only *one* bookstore. The Minneapolis Athenaeum he thought was a remarkable building, but one could hardly call it a library. It shelved the works of Scott and Dickens and Dumas and Marryat, but it contained no modern literature. Instead of French and Russian novelists one was given handsomely bound volumes of Congressional debates and patent reports. If one asked for Comte or Schopenhauer, one was handed Emerson. The books of Zola, of course, were not even available in America, since if they were sold they would have to be distributed through cigar stores. Nor was the one bookstore much better supplied. There one could purchase detective stories, calendars, copies of "Yankee Doodle" and "Home Sweet Home," lithographs of Washington, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Grant's memoirs. As an emporium of the latest and best thought it was beneath contempt.<sup>25</sup>

Many of Hamsun's strictures were undoubtedly true, and a few may even still be pertinent. Many, on the other hand, were the direct result of his own unsatisfactory achievements and the unwillingness of a strange land to accept him at his own estimate. It is not hard to understand why Hamsun never allowed the republication of *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*. There is both irony and

<sup>25</sup> *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv*, 55, 58, 205, 209.

pathos in the spectacle of the young critic parading his animadversions with a kind of wounded arrogance. But the interest of the book today is due to the very candor and forthrightness of the writer.

The years since 1890 are no part of the present story. Hamsun left America embittered and almost as poor as when he arrived; he never returned.<sup>26</sup> For over four years he had worked and suffered privations of all sorts, in the meanwhile learning the countryside and fraternizing with the workers very much as Vachel Lindsay and John Steinbeck have done since. From these experiences he gathered a knowledge and an insight which stood him in good stead as a novelist. Specifically, his use of American material in his fiction is probably not great; he has repeatedly denied his utilization of autobiographical events. But there is no doubt that the years of toil left their imprint on Hamsun. Quite possibly he has transferred to Norway characters and incidents that were indigenous to America. Certainly Miss Larsen is not alone in attributing the success of *Hunger* to Hamsun's American years.<sup>27</sup> The New World was not kind to the young Norwegian; it taught him hard lessons the hard way. But today Americans buy his books and read them with pleasure and admiration. Knut Hamsun may often have wished to forget his experiences in the United States, but Americans have no wish to forget him.

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<sup>26</sup> The visit of the Norwegian crown prince and princess to the United States in the spring of 1939 reminded the Norwegian-American press of the earlier visits of distinguished Norwegians, including Hamsun. See a brief account of his American sojourn in *Normanden* (Fargo), June 8, 1939; and two editorials in *Decorah-Posten*, June 23, August 4, 1939.

<sup>27</sup> Larsen, *Knut Hamsun*, 35.



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