Out of the ruins: Knut Hamsun’s ‘idealism’ and the inheritance of World War I

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Abstract
In 1920, the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun won the Nobel Prize for literature for his novel Markens grøde (Growth of the Soil) (1917). This article explores some of the key contexts for this work, highlighting the author’s own ambitions, the reasons why he sided with Germany during the war, and his generally völkisch perspectives on the Germanic and Nordic. It furthermore analyses the early reception of this World War I novel, and how it was first subjected to a number of positive readings and seen as an example of idealism, before being appropriated by Nazism.

Keywords
Knut Hamsun, literary idealism, Markens grøde (Growth of the Soil), Nazism, Nobel Prize, reception, völkisch ideology

In November 1888 a literary fragment, published anonymously in the Danish journal Ny jord (New Earth), caused something of a sensation in Scandinavia. The fragment was called ‘Sult, Fortælling’ (Hunger, A Story),¹ and the author’s name, the then unknown Knut Hamsun (1859–1952), was soon on everybody’s lips. Hamsun went on to publish the complete novel Hunger two years later, a work that he admittedly refused to call a novel. It is a work characterized by traits that would later be associated with literary modernism, such as a deeply unstable first-person narrator, the frequent use of temporal shifts, free indirect discourse, and something close to a stream of consciousness. The author’s other works of the 1890s, primarily Mysterier (Mysteries, 1892) and Pan (1894), subsequently strengthened his status as a pioneer of modernism.

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From this time until 1940, Hamsun enjoyed an enormous and now largely forgotten reputation in Europe, most intensely in Germany and Russia, but also around the world. To this day, he retains his place as the most distinguished of all Norwegian novelists, with competition perhaps only from his political arch-rival Sigrid Undset (1882–1949). Hamsun makes continued appearances in studies of modernism, largely on the basis of *Hunger*. His long and illustrious career ended abruptly, however, due to his enthusiastic support for the Nazi occupants of his home country, a matter that has since troubled his own nation and cast large shadows over his entire oeuvre. Giving Joseph Goebbels his Nobel Prize medal and diploma in 1943 and writing a laudatory obituary of Hitler on 7 May 1945, must count among Hamsun’s most memorably perverse performative gestures, reminiscent of the unnamed hero of *Hunger*.

Long before he became a supporter of Fascism, however, Hamsun’s literary method had moved on from his early modernism. Just as he had rejected the methods of the Scandinavian ‘Modern Breakthrough’ in the 1880s and 1890s, with its realism, rationalism and general belief in progress, he came to reject the prominent tendencies of the *fin de siècle* – what in Norwegian literary history has been called ‘nyromantikkken’ (New Romanticism) – symbolism and decadence after the turn of the century (Andersen, 2001: 282–8). Instead he turned to the epic form and a much more traditional, if both lyrical and often humorous, realism. The paradox is clear enough: in literary history, Hamsun has generally been associated with a break with realism, which signalled both his own breakthrough and a watershed within Scandinavian literature (Dingstad, 2003: 13–14). But later he went on to excel with a form of realism not too far away from the one he himself had criticized so vehemently in the 1880s and 1890s. Those who stress this divide in Hamsun’s oeuvre often think of it as a shift from the psychological to the social. In this he was not alone, however, even within Norwegian literature. After the diverse experiments of the 1890s, a number of writers now turned to realism or began their careers as realists. My focus here will be on a Hamsun novel published in 1917 and some of its immediate historical contexts, as well as its early reception and subsequent Nazi appropriations. What primarily interests me is the role played by this literature in wartime (in this case, World War I), and in the aftermath of war. This article, then, revolves around the story of a literary work, *Markens grøde* (translated into English as *Growth of the Soil*), that was – surprisingly, given the strong appropriations to which it was subjected in the decades that followed – open to quite a range of interpretations at the moment of its first reception.

**Germany v. England**

By around 1910 Hamsun had moved from what has been described as a ‘reactionary radicalism’, a term he himself had used about August Strindberg at a time when he at least shared a number of perspectives with the political left (Hamsun, 2009b: 186), to a more unambiguously reactionary and anti-modern position. He warned against the effects of industrialism and capitalism, and against the move away from organic local communities to alienating urban centres, and he was sceptical of modern democracy. Both his old Anglophobia and his fascination with Germany seem to have been
strengthened around this time. In 1912, in the novel *Den sidste glede* (*The Last Joy*), Hamsun typically let his narrator, in connection with a portrayal of two unsympathetic British tourists, proclaim that they belonged to a nation that ‘Germany’s healthy destiny will one day punish to death’ (Hamsun, 2009d: 219).

During the war, Hamsun became embroiled in a series of debates, some triggered by his strong views on Germany. After just a few months, in September 1914, he let the German satirical weekly *Simplicissimus* publish his uncensored opinions on the relationship between his favourite and least favourite world power: ‘I am convinced that Germany one day will triumph over England. It is a natural necessity.’ England was a country in swift decline, the writer noted, while Germany was full of ‘power and youth’. ‘And I am hoping for Germany’s victory now’, Hamsun added (Hamsun, 2009d: 127). His hope was motivated by his old love of Germany, but also by the fact that his own country would benefit from a German victory, as he saw it.

Seven years earlier, in 1907, Hamsun had delivered his polemical lecture ‘Ærer de unge’ (*Honour the young!*), in which he argued vehemently against the fifth commandment, urging his people to despise their elders and instead worship youth. Soon he had transferred this idolization of youth to a nation. It was not a unique belief at this time, it must be noted, but fitted nicely into a version of *völkisch* thinking in which Germany represented the future and youth, as opposed to the decrepit, aging British Empire.

In one of the debates following his statements in *Simplicissimus* in 1914, Hamsun had defended himself against criticism voiced by the professor of European literary history at the University of Oslo, Christen Collin. In effect, he went on to elaborate on the notion of Germany’s youth, claiming that the nation had a ‘mighty birth surplus’ and therefore needed colonies (Hamsun, 2009c: 130). ‘Are we not talking about a force of nature?’ Hamsun exclaimed, and even went further, prophesying that ‘one day Germany will castigate England to death, because it is a natural necessity’ (2009c: 130–1). The Norwegian novelist ended the article by referring to his ‘Germanic heart and head’ (2009c: 132). In a later response to criticism from the British theatre critic and Ibsen translator, William Archer, Hamsun referred to Germany as ‘a far larger and actually richer people in terms of potential development’ (2009c: 136). Germany was in need of colonies, he repeated.

In private letters from the beginning of the war, such as to Reinhold Geheeb at his German publisher Albert Langen on 13 October 1914, Hamsun defended his strong opinions with statements such as ‘Germany, however, burns with power and youth’ (Hamsun, 2009d: 135). He admitted that it would seem comical if he were to prophesy the outcome of the war, yet went on to do so. Again, the foundations for his views were found in his *völkisch* thinking: ‘volkspsychologisch I have the steadfast conviction that Germany one day will lord it over England’. Hamsun added that he was of course hoping that victory would come soon, and that this hope was dictated by his ‘ineradicable, old German sympathies’ and also by his ‘love of my own fatherland, which will benefit from a German victory’ (2009d: 135). He developed these views in the decades that followed, combining a defence of the Germanic, the Nordic, and his own nation, a position that in the end led him to welcome the German occupation of Norway in April 1940.
‘I am Germanic’

During World War I Hamsun had read and been impressed by anti-Semitic and völkisch works, such as the Dane Konrad Simonsen’s book *Den moderne mennesketype* (*The Modern Type of Man*, 1917). The purpose of Simonsen’s book was precisely to argue the case for the superiority of what he took to be certain leading peoples. Three years earlier Simonsen had published a fiercely anti-Semitic book on Georg Brandes. But *Den moderne mennesketype* was also a typical attack on modernity, with its ‘mechanizing of the soul’, and with the cities as ‘centres of Civilization and soullessness’ which made man rootless and homeless (Rem, 2014: 135). Simonsen hailed the ‘Germanic feeling for nature’ and ‘mysticism’ and saw connections between this previously conqueror people and *Herrenvolk* and the Nordic peoples, whom he saw as the most uncontaminated of all races. Against these pure races he put up the example of a progressively more ‘de-Germanized, international society’, run by ‘modern Jews’, the new ‘Conquerors’. In the same year that he published *Markens grøde*, Hamsun warmly recommended this man and his works, noting that Simonsen had ‘developed a few opinions that I myself for many years have tried to spread in my books’ (Hamsun, 1997: 187).

Simonsen was only one particularly strong manifestation of the völkisch ideas that Hamsun had been exposed to for a long time. But they came at a particularly poignant time and with a particular stress on the role of the Germanic peoples. Already in his youth, Hamsun had picked up similar ideas, not least through Christopher Bruun’s *Folkelige grundtanker* (*The Central Ideas of the People*, 1878), a work clearly influenced by Herderian notions of folk psychology and one that made a case for the intimate connection between literature and a people’s spiritual development. With the outbreak of war, Hamsun’s strong investment in Germany, as much fuelled by a hatred of all things English as a love of Germany, meant that such ideas came to appeal even more strongly to him. For Hamsun, the First World War did not mean a general loss of faith in humanity, but rather in Britain and in what he perceived to be British values. His views of the special role of Germany and of the Germanic sphere became cemented.

But not all was ideology. There was also a financial dimension to Hamsun’s strong support of Germany, connected with his own position in the German book market. Just three months after the end of the war, he wrote to his publisher Albert Langen, noting that ‘The Germans have fabulous strength: in the middle of the most unprecedented destruction they still continue to print books and read them’ (Hamsun, 1997: 285). Later the same year, Hamsun expressed views that showed that his support of Germany was not all about income, however. ‘If I lose this money in Germany I really won’t let it annoy me’, he remarked to his publisher at home, Christian König, on 15 November 1919 (1997: 307). Germany, as Hamsun saw it, had fought the good fight against the rest of the world. But it had at the same time really struggled on behalf of the world, against ‘the bottomless English ignominy’ (1997: 307). On 10 December, the novelist would tell Langen that he, with reference to a sense of racial fellowship and belonging, had been friendly to Germany for as long as he could remember, ‘because I am Germanic’ (1997: 545).

In 1916, Georg Brandes had in fact accused Hamsun of being friendly to Germany for petty economic reasons. In mid-July of that same year, the Norwegian writer had defended himself in a letter to the Danish-Jewish intellectual. When he had spoken of Germany’s cause, Hamsun began, he had at the same time spoken of Norway’s (1997:
He went through his sources of income from various countries, claiming that he had at this time earned greater rewards from Russia than from Germany, without thus supporting Russia. This was to change in the succeeding decades, however, with vast incomes pouring in from Germany. Hamsun concluded his letter by noting that Brandes’ claims honoured neither his ‘race nor his personal character’ (1997: 124).

It is striking that Hamsun in his pro-Germanness seems to be stressing Volk and race more than Kultur and Goethe, even if the latter can be put in the service of the former. This prioritizing seems to be related to the author’s particular form of Norwegian nationalism, in which he comes to see his own country as playing a special part within a larger Germanic community. In a double process, it seems that Hamsun’s own mystifications of a German and Germanic past led to new mystifications in later Nazi appropriations of Hamsun.

Markens grøde

Hamsun had followed the developments of the First World War at a safe distance, but with a keen eye on the fate of Germany. If nothing else, he was consistent in his views. In 1916, he had written to the editor of the socialist newspaper Klassekampen (The Class Struggle), explaining the mechanisms of the war (Hamsun, 2009b: 179). England and France, he noted, had ‘little or no population growth’ but vast colonies. Germany, however, had a massive population growth and ‘not enough colonies’ and England had resisted any German attempt at expansion. To wage war in order to survive was only natural, Hamsun concluded.

When he finished his new manuscript for a novel, Markens grøde, he at first told his publisher that he wanted to give it the subtitle: ‘A novel for my Norwegian contemporaries’ (Hamsun, undated). He had written a hymn to the farmer, and more specifically the settler, and he wanted it to have a mission, he noted. In brief the novel tells the story of its protagonist, Isak, who finds himself a plot of land in northern Norway and gradually develops a farm there with his wife Inger. Isak’s simple life and dedication to the soil are contrasted with industrialization, urbanization and the supposedly shallow values of modern society. The novel, which creates the feel of an epic and preaches certain timeless values, follows Isak through a number of difficulties into reconciled old age.

Before Markens grøde was published on 1 December 1917, the author had added that the novel was ‘a wake-up call to its generation’ (quoted in Anon., 1942). At the beginning of that same year, Hamsun had responded to three questions about the future of the nation’s youth under the current uncertain conditions of the world war. The novelist – with the authority of a prophet, or, in the terminology of his own literary tradition, a ‘Digterhøvding’, literally a ‘poet chief’ – responded to them all with a single answer: ‘Norwegian agriculture, agriculture and, again, agriculture. Everything else besides or later’ (Hamsun, 1997: 156).

In another connection Hamsun noted that he, with his new book, wanted to accomplish something ‘a bit more than literature’, as he put it (Hamsun, 2009a [1917]: 356). He wanted a reaction against what he saw as a failed modernity. He wanted agriculture to take the place of class struggle, he wished for new settlements at home rather than emigration to America, depth rather than surface, Germanic ‘Kultur’ rather than French and
British ‘Civilization’. *Markens grøde*, as he intended it, was to tie together his literature and his political engagements in new ways. It was, furthermore, in this way that it would be received and appropriated, albeit in strikingly different ideological ways, in the foreign country to which he had grown closer than any other: Germany.  

In the decades that followed, *Markens grøde*, in German even more meaningfully translated into *Segen der Erde* (*The Blessing of the Earth*), would be exposed to radical appropriations by a growing Nazi movement, without, it should be noted, the author ever protesting. Hamsun never seems to have commented on the uses of his literature, and of this work in particular, while at the same time, at least after 1933, voicing his consistent and strong support of the new regime. The Norwegian novelist’s success in Germany was enormous, in terms of both book sales and critical reputation. In the 1920s and ‘30s, he was considered something of a new Goethe, even being awarded the great Goethe Prize, and his popularity crossed political divides. Stefan Zweig claimed that ‘we do not have anyone like him’ (Zweig, 1929: 177). Egon Friedell dedicated his *Kulturgeschichte Ägyptens und des alten Orients* (*A Cultural History of Egypt and the Ancient Orient*) to him and claimed that the Norwegian could only be compared to one author in the entire world canon: Homer. In 1929, Carl von Ossietzky praised the 70-year old Hamsun by joyously noting that he is ‘of the Earth!’ (Ossietzky, 1994: 868). Only to be able to direct one’s gaze towards the north, and think that ‘there live Knut Hamsun’, represented great comfort and stimulation, the later Nobel Peace Prize winner and victim of the Nazi regime concluded. When Ossietzky did win the Peace Prize, Hamsun would vehemently attack him for opposing Hitler, thus strongly polarizing the Norwegian literary field with his opinions. A great number of his colleagues condemned him and his views. On the occasion of Hamsun’s seventieth birthday, the official Nazi organ *Völkischer Beobachter* had been among those printing celebratory articles. ‘Who is Knut Hamsun, the fine – the most rare human being of our times?’, the paper asked (Anon., 1929). Hamsun was a nobleman loved by the Germans because he was ‘blood of our blood’, the newspaper claimed. Already by this time Hamsun had become a Nazi ideal, one who, as the *Völkischer Beobachter* noted, renewed culture by bringing forth ‘the grace of Germanic force’, by preaching ‘German faith and will to power’ (Anon., 1929).  

Hamsun’s popularity was not limited to Germany, however. By 1940 he had been translated into 34 languages, but had enjoyed particularly phenomenal success in Germany and Russia. In 1927 Maksim Gor’kii had written to him to say that he was ‘the greatest artist in all of Europe’, and he continued to sell books in the millions in the Soviet Union (Hamsun, 1999: 101). But Hamsun’s own relationship with Russia would never resemble his relationship with Germany. This was partly due to the fact that Germany had become his most important source of income, as he struggled with copyright issues in the Soviet Union, and partly because of the special role he came to give Germany, and later, no doubt, due to the political developments in what was to become the Soviet Union.  

**The Nobel Prize**  
First awarded in 1901, the Nobel Prize for Literature was supposed to go to ‘what is most excellent in an ideal direction’ (Svensén, 2001: ix). Hamsun’s earlier production had
hardly made him qualified in this respect. He was seen as too decadent, cynical, even destructive, beyond good and evil. It was only in 1918, therefore, after the publication of *Markens grøde*, that he received a nomination. The Swedish Academy had strong doubts, however, with a dissenting member expressing the view that Hamsun lacked ‘the culture, the considered world-view and humanity’ that ought to suit a worthy recipient of the prize (2001: 430–2). The Norwegian had mostly represented an ‘anarchic force’, it was claimed. The dissenting member instead supported Georg Brandes.

When the Nobel committee in 1920 announced that it had, after a second nomination, nevertheless found Hamsun worthy of the prize, it became clear that it had struggled to come to a decision. Among the other nominees, in addition to Hamsun and Brandes, were Thomas Hardy, Arne Garborg and John Galsworthy. But most of these writers were not constructive or idealistic enough, and the committee expressed its regret as to how difficult it was to find personalities about which one could, ‘without serious doubts’, agree. The solution was to award the prize to Hamsun for only one work, rather than for his entire oeuvre. The book that was singled out from the rest of his production, for the first time in the history of the Nobel Prize, was ‘his monumental work’ *Markens grøde* (2001: 432). Hamsun had been made into an idealist – albeit with reference to a single work.

‘The constructor’

During this terrible war, then, in which the author had so clearly taken up a political position, came the work that would raise his fame to new levels. While it was to become the most ideologically important Hamsun work for the Nazi movement and later in Nazi Germany, it would be wrong to forget, as I noted initially, that the early reception was much more open than this. *Markens grøde* was, across various dividing lines, seen as constructive, as a rare attempt at creating hope and pointing out new directions in these appalling times.

When Hamsun was awarded his Nobel Prize, Thomas Mann declared that ‘Never have I found that it has been given to anyone worthier’ (Mann, 1990: 619). At the time of the publication of *Segen der Erde*, the same Mann had claimed that the work was wonderful, and ‘completely unpolitical’ (Mann, 1979: 194). Hamsun was deeply in touch with ‘the very newest longing’, Mann argued, the glorification of the lonesome farmer. The German novelist even labelled this a ‘human-poetic anarchism’ (1979: 195). But of course we should remember that this was the Thomas Mann who, the year before writing this, had published his *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Reflections of an Unpolitical Man), a strongly German nationalist work in which he had argued that there was no use in acting politically in the face of modern civilization. Mann later referred to Hamsun’s novel as an ‘earth novel’ (*Erd-Roman*) that was a ‘symptom of the state of the world’ (*Welt-Symptom*) (1979: 295).

Many saw Hamsun as leading the way. This was no less the case outside Germany, in countries and in artistic milieux where the war was not associated with military defeat, but with a loss of faith in humanity or at least in the idea of progress and industrial or technological advance. In Britain, Katherine Mansfield wrote that ‘there never before existed a time with a greater need for its message’ (quoted in Sjølyst-Jackson,
The Norwegian writer was one who wanted to rebuild for a new future. The soil, he seemed to be saying, was the only secure value in modern society. In her greeting to him on his sixtieth birthday in 1919, another Nobel Prize winner, the Swede Selma Lagerlöf, claimed that Hamsun’s protagonist Isak, the hardy, stoical settler of the north, accomplished the ‘most glorious conquest’ that had ever been put into writing (quoted in Vassenden, 2012: 150). While others destroyed, Hamsun had written a book about ‘the constructor’.

There is, it is also worth noting, a continuity between this part of the novel’s first reception and recent ecocritical readings that tend to downplay the novel’s ideology, historical situatedness and Nazi appropriations. The literary scholar Henning Howlid Wærp, for one, has recently claimed that in Markens grøde Hamsun has ‘delivered the recipe for the “simple life”’ (Wærp, 2017: 6). In a critical response to such ecocritical reappropriations of Hamsun, Reinhard Hennig persuasively argues that the ‘non-human environment’ in Markens grøde appears as ‘infinitely customizable to human needs’ (Hennig, 2018: 25).

**Nazi appropriations**

When approached as a literary work, Markens grøde cannot be reduced to a single message. Hamsun is too subtle a writer for that: too much committed to his literary methods and his own literary ways of thinking, always creating texts that are more multifaceted and polyvocal than his stated intentions may lead us to believe. It was, it is tempting to suggest, beyond Hamsun to create a stable narrative voice with the authority to convey a simple message. Furthermore, the wanderer figure Geissler at least partly represents competing values that carry some authority within the novelistic universe. While Hamsun became the greatest writer to wholeheartedly support Hitler’s Germany and render it his services, he never ended up writing a Nazi novel. That said, he inspired numerous more purely ideological agrarian novels.

There was also plenty of material in the novel for Nazi ideologists to appropriate. Isak is called ‘a farmer in mind and body and a settler of the grace of God. One resurrected from the past, pointing to the future’ (Hamsun, 2009a: 352). He is 900 years old, the narrator notes, and ‘again the man of the day’. Even Geissler, who, as noted, on one level disturbs the image of steadfastness and belonging, at moments voices some of the seemingly highest values of the novel. He praises the settlers Inger and Isak who exist simply to reproduce themselves, who are characterized by ‘peace and authority’ (2009a: 347). And he speaks in pejorative terms of ‘the fast man of today’, of the ‘character of our times’ who has modelled himself on the ‘Jew and Yankee’ (2009a: 347). Furthermore, and even less idealistically, the novel contains clearly racist descriptions of the Sami people.

In obviously reactionary ways, Markens grøde is about the (re)birth of a new man, who happens to be ancient. At the time, the novel was indeed received by many as a positive message, but it was a message that it obviously shared with Fascism, which operated with the idea of a nationalist ‘palingenesis’ – a rebirth (Griffin, 2007: 182). In addition to this, the emphasis of rootedness versus rootlessness communicated in the novel, and the
topic of the cultivation of new land, meant that the work was quickly written into the ideology of ‘Blut und Boden’ (blood and soil).

There were also paratextual or extra-textual statements onto which the appropriators could latch. Already in 1910, Hamsun had formulated what in Germany became his most famous statement about himself: ‘Jeg er fra jorden’ (‘I am of the earth’) (Hamsun, 2009c: 103). Even before *Markens grøde* had been translated into German, Wilhelm Breves wrote that Hamsun had become the preacher of ‘Heimatboden’, that he propagated the message that each and every human being was closely connected with his ‘home soil’ (Schulte, 1986: 12). Hamsun’s message was, proclaimed Breves, ‘You are Germans!’ This message, Breves reminded his readers, came after thousands of Germans had had their homes destroyed by the Anglo-Saxons. And it contained an admonition to every member of the Germanic community: ‘Be strong!’

In the 1920s, Baldur von Schirach, leader of the Hitler-Jugend in the 1930s, would single out *Segen der Erde* as a new Bible, nothing less than a text proclaiming a new faith for Germany’s youth (König, 1998: 63). None other than ‘the great lonely one’, von Schirach claimed, could have written it. Hamsun was also the favourite of Joseph Goebbels; in fact he was the author, and not just the foreign author, most often mentioned in his diaries (Rem, 2014: 163). During the Second World War, Richard Walter Darré, Nazi ideologue and leader of the agricultural organization Reichsnährstand, used Isak Sellanraa and the farmer Hamsun (who had started his own model farm at Nørholm, in line with his own teachings) in his propaganda for his strongly racist project (Baumgartner, 1997: 30). Darré even used *Markens grøde* to defend the brutal killings on the Eastern Front. Isak’s small settler’s farm in northern Norway had become an argument for German Lebensraum.

**The Germanic sphere**

Norway remained neutral during the First World War and on the whole escaped lightly. Immense wealth was created through shipping, even if the nation also suffered significant losses at sea. While many Norwegians clearly felt that the war was not their concern, Hamsun had invested heavily in the conflict, strongly voicing his support for Germany. In terms of Hamsun’s intentions, at least as he later came to formulate his views of development and progress, it was all about the Germanic, a racial category that of course prominently included the Nordic, with eugenics and a fear of miscegenation informing his thinking in addition to notions of a mythic past.

These ideas preoccupied Hamsun from the time of the First World War, even if they found new and more urgent contexts and became strengthened during the Second World War. Through the Third Reich, as Hamsun saw it, Norway had been given the opportunity to play a more significant role in a new world order. Without rejecting the idea of the nation and its calling, Hamsun came to believe that the Germanic sphere would soon become dominant and that Norway would be given a special place within this sphere. As such, he came, perhaps at least partly due to his experiences of the First World War, to reject internationalism and cosmopolitanism, opting for an ideological investment in the nation and in the ideas of a larger Germanic domain. He therefore turned away from the internationalism of one strand of Norwegian literature.
of the previous generation, that of Henrik Ibsen. At the same time, he modified the national tradition of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, which was, it should be noted, characterized by a small-nation internationalism.

It is worth remembering the earlier and more literary-historical context for the development of Hamsun’s ideas. When Hamsun entered the Scandinavian literary field in the late 1880s and early 1890s, it was through a rejection of the ideas and values of the ‘Modern Breakthrough’, even if, or perhaps precisely because, he acknowledged the central status of writers and intellectuals like Brandes and Ibsen. The movement against which Hamsun rebelled came to be identified with a particular form of Nordic modernity. Some of the central values of this modernity, the strong belief in progress and rationality, a concern with urban life and the predicament of the working classes, a stress on the role of women, and a form of cosmopolitanism, were all, to a varying degree, rejected by Hamsun.

The war had created new conditions for a return to the values of the earth, of the nation, and of a mythic past. This was what the famous novelist hoped would come out of the First World War and what he hoped to contribute towards: a settler’s life appearing out of the ruins, a reconstructed Germanic, Nordic and Norwegian identity and life, accomplished by way of literature – and ‘a bit more’.

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Note

1 All translations from the Norwegian are mine.

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