

2015

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Recommended Citation

Wientzen, Timothy. "The Aesthetics of Hunger: Knut Hamsun, Modernism, and Starvation's Global Frame." *Novel* 48.2 (2015): 208-223.

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Published in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 48.2 (2015)

print version available here: <http://novel.dukejournals.org/content/48/2/208.full.pdf+html>

The Aesthetics of Hunger: Knut Hamsun, Modernism, and Starvation's Global Frame

In 1888, the Copenhagen magazine *Ny Jord* published the first, anonymous fragment of a novel quite unlike anything before seen in Scandinavian literature. Depicting the mental and emotional life of a man ravaged by hunger and wandering the streets of Kristiania (present day Oslo), the novel that would become Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890) shocked its initial readers. Where they might have expected to encounter conventions native to the novelistic tradition of the nineteenth century, readers instead found a narrative world virtually devoid of plot, narrated by a protagonist with neither name nor history. By nineteenth-century standards, *Hunger* was, as Hamsun asserted, "no novel" at all (*Letters* 118). Overtly discarding prevailing conventions of the naturalist novel, Hamsun's experimental depiction of hunger has long been recognized as an early example of modernist aesthetics and has earned the novel a central place within diverse genealogies of modernism. As James McFarlane wrote in 1956, in *Hunger* "it is as though some of the catch-phrases current in Europe some twenty-five or thirty or so years later ... were being given early rehearsal" (568). Perhaps most important of these "catch-phrases" was Hamsun's pioneering emphasis on the affective experience of the body.

For all the stress traditionally laid upon consciousness in the modernist novel, it was the turn toward the materialist aspects of embodied life that fueled some of the most important innovations of the form at the turn of the century. Three and a half decades after the publication of *Hunger*, Virginia Woolf would argue that "literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent" ("On Being Ill" 101). The modernist novel attempted to address this lacuna by integrating the affective

life of the body into its experimental forms, often in ways that grated against the novelistic traditions of the nineteenth century. Yet, hunger—that most extreme of bodily conditions—remains a difficult subject for novel theory. Though hunger and starvation have played an important role within the history of the novel—from the urban poor of the naturalist novel through works by contemporary novelists like Coetzee and Helen Oyeyemi—under the critical gaze, novelistic depictions of hunger are easily transformed into all manner of non-physical appetites. Starvation becomes for many critics a metaphor for the most varied forms of spiritual hungers, including the ascetic “hunger” for divine communion and the starving artist’s “hunger” for expression.¹ What is the hunger that animates Hamsun’s novel if not a hunger for the *emotional sustenance* lacking in the modern metropolis? This focus on hunger’s metaphorical resonances has tended to limit access to questions about the politics of hunger within the history of the modernist novel.

Modernist emphases on the materialist underpinnings of embodied life were, in their earliest manifestations, grounded in a political understanding of the body’s role within an emerging global economy. Far from serving as a metaphor for the degradations of modern life, hunger became a politically freighted concept at the dawn of the modernist era. As nations entering an emerging world economy met with historically unprecedented levels of nutritional insecurity and famine, the starving body became key to diverse modernist projects and contemporaneous cultural movements. In Hamsun’s case, the issue of starvation was a potent one given Norway’s status on the global stage; though we rarely think of Norway as inhabiting the margins of capitalist development, recent scholarship of Scandinavian modernism has called attention to the fact that Norway was among Europe’s least developed countries in the nineteenth century, a reality that informed an emerging generation of modernism’s earliest painters and writers.² In *Hunger*, as I will show, Hamsun invoked a history of economic development that endowed the starving body with transnational political significance. Restaging the naturalist novel’s own approach to hunger, *Hunger* reflects the transnational reconfiguration of economic forms, which depended centrally on the leveraging of bodily needs of entire populations for productive ends. In Hamsun’s novel, the body stands as a primary site upon which the transformation of macroeconomic structures are made legible as well as an object of political struggle. In making this

argument, I hope to restore the historically specific quality of starvation to readings of modernism, and place Hamsun within a history of hunger that informed the formal projects of successive generations of novelists.

The Locations of Hunger

Hunger follows a nameless narrator who, having lately arrived in the capital, finds himself unable to procure work, lodging, or sustenance. In his ever more desperate attempts to find food, he moves nearly at random through the streets of Kristiania as he descends into hunger-induced madness. Driven by a single, predominating desire—to eat—the narrator of *Hunger* does not dwell in any significant way on the political and economic environment that surrounds him, much less on his own history. In Hamsun's protagonist, the reader meets a character whose only context is the here-and-now of the Norwegian capital, circa 1890. The novel consequently pushes the cultural and economic forces that condition hunger to the margins of the narrative in favor of the extremes of bodily experience. For this reason, it is easy to read the physical depredations suffered by the protagonist without regard to the cultural or political context in which they arise. In his influential essay "The Art of Hunger" (1970), Paul Auster likens Hamsun's narrator to the protagonist of Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" (1922), arguing that in both texts, hunger metaphorizes the plight of the modern artist. The actions of Hamsun's narrator, he asserts, are not the product of political conditions, but are instead "inspired by nothing but whim and ungovernable urge, the wary frustration of anarchic discontent," and the atomizing experience of urban life (14). For Auster and a host of later critics, Hamsun's novel employs hunger as literary trope in order to figure this distinctly modern form of anomie. Devoid of any "redeeming social value" or concern with "problems of class injustice" (10-11), *Hunger* thereby becomes for these critics a novel about a universal experience of urban modernity and its attendant assault on the psyche, a novel in the mold of *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Ulysses*.³

Yet, at the close of the nineteenth century, Norway was not the industrial center it would become. As Peter Sjølyst-Jackson has recently pointed out, the Kristiania of *Hunger* was “no metropolis; on the contrary, it was little more than a bourgeois province of around 135,000 inhabitants, situated in one of Europe’s least developed countries” (20). Indeed, a growing body of scholarship has established Norway’s status on the periphery of European modernity and seen this liminal position as paradoxically central in catalyzing aesthetic innovation.⁴ Accounting for these economic contexts casts new light on the hunger at the center of Hamsun’s novel. Indeed, while the primary emphasis of Hamsun’s novel falls on the bodily experience of starvation, *Hunger* insistently registers the economic conditions that underwrite his protagonist’s dilemma. At every stage of the narrative, Hamsun’s narrator is brought in to contact with the social institutions born of Norway’s late entry into the global economy, as well as the people that populate this new economy. *Hunger* is replete not only with agents of international commerce and the sailors that pass through Kristiania’s ports, but with the masses of people displaced by the collapse of indigenous economic networks. Hamsun’s narrator, for example, at several points meets an “old cripple” (7) who asks him for change. “I haven’t eaten since yesterday, in Drammen” the man reports (8). “I don’t have a penny and I’m still out of work” (8). Identifying himself as an out of work “welter” [Nådler], his profession as a leatherworker is not recognizable to the narrator. “A welter,” he explains. “For that matter, I can make shoes, too” (8). Starving, this unemployed man is representative of an entire population of workers in transit amid the mass dislocations of economic modernization, a population whose livelihoods depend on an outmoded system of craft labor. Throughout *Hunger*, the human residue of a rapidly changing economic system manifest at the margins of the narrator’s starved consciousness.

Yet, no figure in *Hunger* better emblemizes the economic contexts of *Hunger* better than the nameless narrator himself. Though the narrator never discloses his own history, Hamsun suggests early in the novel that he is likewise a product of a rapidly shifting economy. When the narrator strikes up a conversation with a blind man in a park, he is asked, “You’re a stranger here?” (22). “[H]e had heard right away that I was a stranger, something in my accent had told him” (22), the narrator thinks. This detail illuminates the narrator’s otherwise untold background as one of the thousands of emigrants to leave the Norwegian countryside during a half century of intensive

modernization. As it entered the world economy in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Norway's population suffered from a wholesale remaking of the nation's economic foundations. As economic historian Thorvald Moe explains, after the 1870s Norwegian agricultural and shipping industries underwent massive transformations that necessitated large-scale capital investment. "Old labor intensive production techniques" native to the Norwegian peasantry "were replaced by much more capital intensive ones" (143). These changes upended Norway's existing agrarian society, pushing peasants off their ancestral lands and precipitating waves of emigration rarely seen in Europe to that point. "Surpassed only by the emigration rate of Ireland," Fritz Hodne notes, "Norway's emigration represents the single most important fact of social history in the 19th century" (356).

Hamsun was himself a part of this economically displaced population. Born a peasant in central Norway in 1859, Hamsun's family migrated to the far north of the country in his youth before he embarked on his own emigration to the United States in the 1880s. In the same decade that Hamsun made two transatlantic voyages and began his career as a novelist with *Hunger*, Norwegian emigration peaked, as roughly a quarter of a million people left for settlement abroad, mostly in the United States. As Sjølyst-Jackson notes, Hamsun left Norway "alongside thousands of dispossessed farmers, crofters and day labourers" (17), people displaced by an economy newly oriented toward the market specialization of international trade, a fact which left marks on his work in both formal and thematic ways.

The narrator of *Hunger*, himself a "stranger" recently arrived from the provinces, interacts with the masses of people uprooted by industrialization and comes into contact with the institutions for their management.⁵ Boarding houses that lodge the displaced, shelters for the homeless, and a ubiquitous police force that monitors the poor all proliferate in the Kristiania of *Hunger*. In his peregrinations through the city, Hamsun's narrator comes into contact with all of these populations, as well as an extensive social apparatus that tends to newly superfluous workers, including free meals for the poor (69), Steam Kitchens to provide discounted meals (74), as well as the legions of "bloodsucking" pawnbrokers who slowly deplete him and others of their few earthy possessions (92).

Stressing the extremity produced by bodily want, *Hunger* marginalizes these outward signs of Norwegian modernization; in the depths of his starvation, Hamsun's narrator simply does not consider his economic contexts. Yet, in his most dire moments, the threat of emigration reappears, distorted into a monstrous abstraction and a paralyzing fear. Standing on the docks in second section of the novel, the narrator will look out at the ships anchored in the bay and worry about "[t]he dark monsters" that "would suck me up when night came on" (58). These "dark monsters" [*Uhyrer*] materialize at various moments throughout the narrative as a reminder of the narrator's precarious economic position and the imminent danger of his emigration. In a febrile terror one evening, he will fear the ships that "wanted to suck me up and hold me tight and sail with me by sea and land, through dark kingdoms that no humans had ever seen" (67). Later he will implore himself to seek the help of a local pastor, knowing full well that he is "fighting an awesome battle with the powers of darkness and with big, silent monsters" (82). Wrecked by weeks of near starvation, the threat of emigration is displaced into an abstract fear of being "dissolved into darkness" (68). "This is what it's like to die, I said to myself" (68). It is only in the latter half of the novel that these fears of darkness take on a concrete form as emigration becomes an inevitability; asking a "lame man" if a ship called *The Nun* has sailed, the narrator suddenly realizes that this specific fate has lingered at the edges of his consciousness: "*The Nun*, which I had completely forgotten! The thought of it must have slumbered unconsciously within me anyhow, I had borne it with me unbeknownst to myself" (138). As he turns to leave, Hamsun's narrator gives way to hunger-addled impulse and utters a single word: "Welter" [*Nådler*] (139). Glaring at this lame man as if "from another world," a world beyond Norway, the narrator here implicitly identifies himself with a larger community of displaced workers, including the welter he meets in the novel's opening pages. The formal abstraction of the narrator's waking nightmare resolves into a tangible fear of national dislocation.

More important even than these outward signs of economic transformation is the fact of the narrator's starvation itself. In filtering his depiction of late nineteenth-century Norway through the eyes of a starving man, Hamsun's narrative form evokes a condition common to "developing" nations. In Hamsun's novel, the plight of the narrator may appear as a crisis of emigration and sustenance particular to Norway. Yet, Hamsun's letters suggest that

he was thinking of *Hunger* as a novel with both national and transnational significance.⁶ Writing to Edvard Brandes in September of 1888, Hamsun explained that he hoped to produce a novel almost entirely devoid of Norwegian details: “There is so desperately little of Norwegian in the book I am working on, and I am not indifferent to its fate. I hadn’t wanted to write for Norwegians—there isn’t a placename in the whole book ...” (70). Even as the final text restored the details that make it legible as a tale of Norwegian emigration, *Hunger* remained invested in a condition of economic dependency shared across the periphery. Placing the local experience of hunger and modernization in conversation with transnational concerns, *Hunger* indexes an experience that had gained tremendous contemporary importance during the final decades of the nineteenth century.

Shaping wide swaths of the world system in the later half of the nineteenth century, hunger became an important concept for cultures in the throes of economic upheaval. Political theorists like Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus had argued that hunger was the product of unchecked population growth and the interference in free markets. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century, hunger was increasingly seen as not as sad anomaly of capitalism, but an important tool for those who would see it established across the globe. Marx had already begun to revise the discourse of hunger in *Capital* (1867), suggesting that physical want was an integral element in the labor market. By ensuring that laborers had access to just enough food, capital could ensure a ready pool of labors. “Everything,” he asserted, “depends on making hunger permanent among the working classes” (800). Through social institutions designed to help laborers attain a minimum level of sustenance, capital could keep hunger and satiation in a precarious balance and maximize industrial productivity. For core nations like England, establishing a degree of nutritional security amid domestic industrialization was part of a wider agenda of domestic development. As historian James Vernon notes, England “had effectively rid itself of famine or large-scale subsistence crises by the late eighteenth century” (3). Yet, hunger continued to play a role in shaping the social imaginary of both core and peripheral nations as it became a defining feature of “developing” or “undeveloped” lands. “[I]t was in imperial Britain over the past two centuries,” Vernon explains, “that the story of modernity became partially organized around the conquest of hunger, or at least its banishment to lands still awaiting ‘development’” (4).

For countries outside of the industrial core, economic modernization did not always bring a greater degree of insulation from hunger. To the contrary, the industrialization of agriculture dramatically increased the instance of hunger throughout the periphery, precipitating one of longest and most deadly periods of mass starvation in modern history. From 1876 to 1900, between 31 and 61 million people died of famine in the “developing” world, with roughly 10 million dying in India alone in the late 1870s. These famines were not, as many colonial administrators at the time believed, the sad consequence of population growth, as predicted by Malthus. In the same half-century that saw the end of famine in the industrialized West, the colonial world was devastated by famine brought about by imperial design. As Mike Davis has argued, the millions that perished did so “not outside the ‘modern world system,’ but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures” (9).

Though the modernization of agriculture had promised the “developing” world a greater degree of security in times of draught, the rapid capitalization of food markets and the disintegration of time-tested mechanism of providing relief created the very conditions for hunger and famine throughout the world system. By the end of the nineteenth century, the impact of worldwide famine had left an indelible mark on cultures of the industrial and “developing” world, though in different ways. In the land of Smith and Malthus, it was increasingly impossible to see mass hunger as the fault of sloth or backwardness. The hungry were, as Vernon notes, “innocent victims of failing political and economic systems over which they had no control” (3). What was needed, then, were not moralistic programs to improve the industry of the poor, but checks against the system’s occasional misfirings. For those outside the industrial core, however, hunger took on a very different cultural significance, denoting not an economic anomaly but an essential aspect of capitalist modernity, a spur to mass cultural transformation. There was, in fact, no greater catalyst to the “reform” of local economic practices in the late nineteenth century than starvation. As Mike Davis explains, “The great Victorian famines were forcing houses and accelerators of the very socio-economic forces that ensured their occurrence in the first place” (15). In this moment, hunger was mobilized to accelerate and fortify the very capitalist enterprise that had caused starvation in the first place. Far from being an aberration of

modern life, “the inequality of nations” and the mass starvation of entire populations “were as much modern inventions of the late Victorian world as electric lights, Maxim guns and ‘scientific’ racism” (16).

In this context, Hamsun’s efforts to negotiate the particularity of Norway’s situation with those of a larger, transnational economic reality reflect a changing understanding of national autonomy itself. The dismantling of traditional modes of production in favor of specialized industries was closely tied to the monetization of food markets across national boundaries.⁷ This meant that local matters of sustenance were now deeply dependent on circumstances well outside of the narrow confines of national politics. In cultivating the precarity of the periphery, core nations sought to consolidate their political and economic advantage. Yet in placing hunger at the center of the project modernization, they also helped produce an awareness of hunger’s systemic reach. Hunger became, in effect, an inherently transnational problem that helped catalyze an understanding of the periphery’s shared dependency.

What aesthetic forms are appropriate to this new mode of modern dispossession? What genres might most effectively depict hunger and its particular forms of alienation? Crucially, Hamsun does not offer a top-down analysis of starvation as a systemic problem in *Hunger*. Indeed, his nameless narrator is often at a loss for how to explain his predicament. The repeated failure to procure lodging and sustenance produces only confusion in the narrator: “[W]hy did my prospects simply refuse to brighten up? Didn’t I have the same right to life as anyone else [...]? [...] I couldn’t make head or tail of the whole situation” (60). Rather than map the systems that produce hunger, Hamsun filters the experience of starvation through a single, first-person narrator, whose experience takes place within a social context that he is incapable of reading. The experience of hunger becomes a total one, swamping his cognitive faculties in favor of bodily extremity. Early in the novel as he attempts to produce a piece of writing, the narrator notes that his mind simply does not work as it should: “During this fruitless effort my thoughts began to get confused again—I felt my brain literally snap, my head was emptying and emptying, and in the end it sat light and void on my shoulders. I perceived this gaping emptiness in my head with my whole body” (28). The longer his hunger lasts, the

less capable of he is of experiencing his world as anything but a body, hyper-sensitive to the physical world and beholden to ungovernable whims.

A prisoner to the frenzied caprices of the body, the narrator endures a never-ending sense of alienation. For example, irritated when he pawns a vest that contains his only pencil, the narrator is driven by an unbridled and illogical impulse to startle a stranger on the street: “All at once my thoughts, by a fanciful whim, take an odd direction—I’m seized by a strange desire to frighten this lady, to follow her and hurt her in some way” (11). Instead of hurting her, he harasses her with incomprehensible statements and erratic behavior that culminates in an experience of self-estrangement: “I was at that moment fully conscious of playing a mad prank, without being able to do anything about it; my confused state was running away with me, giving me the craziest ideas, which I obeyed one after the other. [...] I vaguely felt that it wasn’t I who was walking there on the flagstones with bowed head” (12). As his hunger grows more acute over the course of the novel, the narrator experiences the world as a body in rebellion against conscious control. Later, when a girl mistakes him for an ailing old man, the narrator experiences a fit of anger that manifests as unwilling self-harm: “I began once more to torture myself, running my head against the lampposts on purpose, digging my fingernails deep into the backs of my hands, and biting my tongue in frenzy when it didn’t speak clearly, and I laughed madly whenever it fairly hurt” (88). The narrator is repeatedly forced to confront a body that he neither controls nor understands. What begins as a mildly disturbing sense of alienation rooted in the disjunction between body and mind becomes an all-encompassing experience that verges on madness. Made “a freak from hunger” (87), he is progressively excluded from the institutions human society, including the home, and driven to ever more animalistic attempts to satiate his body. The search for sustenance eventually leads him to try a number of food substitutes—a wood chip, a stone, a finger, a pocket ripped from his clothes—each of which he suffers as a further degradation. Finally, he begs for a bone from a raw meat vendor in the market, which he then devours, causing him to vomit. Rather than give up this last attempt as a failure, he goes on variously gnawing and vomiting: “Frantic, I clenched my fists, burst into tears from helplessness and gnawed like mad; I cried so hard that the bone got wet and dirty from tears—I threw up, cursed and gnawed again, crying as if my heart

would break, then threw up once more. I swore at the top of my voice, damning all the powers of this world to eternal torment" (136). In this moment, the narrator no longer recognizes himself as a part of the human community. He rages against vague forces that ensure his hunger and render him unintelligible to himself.

Because Hamsun places the experience of alienation at the center of *Hunger*, it is tempting to see the novel's concerns as paradigmatic of modernism's later interest in the collision of the metropolis and mental life. Yet, the narrator's actions are set always within clearly discernible contexts of emigration, starvation, and modernization unique to the periphery. These contexts suggest that hunger in Hamsun's novel appears neither as a metaphor for a universal experience of modern anomie nor a proto-existential investigation into the human nature, as many critics of the novel have asserted. Rather, in foregrounding the bodily experience of hunger, Hamsun situated the formal and thematic concerns of his novel within a developmental history of a nation's integration into the economic world system. Reckoning with this history allows us not only to move beyond the critical impulse that would see hunger as a metaphor for the transcendental homelessness of modern life; it allows us to begin to understand the political stakes involved in modernist engagements with hunger and the body. As we will see, Hamsun's efforts to mediate starvation in a modernist literary form places the text in conversation with both ongoing political struggles throughout the world system, as well as an emerging field of modernist literature in which the body would fulfill a crucial political function.

The Performance of Hunger

To this point, I have suggested that the formal experiments of *Hunger*, with its modernist depiction of embodied life, constitutes an effort to mediate the consequences of Norway's integration into the world system. This reading suggests that Hamsun's formal project draws the reader's attention to the real, embodied experience of mass economic shifts and the political problems they entail. Such an understanding of *Hunger*, however, places the

novel in an unlikely genealogy with the naturalist novel, with its overwhelming attention to social problems, particularly those of the urban poor. Hamsun was quite explicit that *Hunger* was an attempt to transcend the priorities and techniques of naturalism—indeed, that his novel was so unlike the dominant trends of the nineteenth century novel that it hardly merited inclusion in the category. As he explained to the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes, *Hunger* “must not be regarded as a novel. There are enough people who write novels when they want to write about hunger—from Zola to Kielland” (*Letters* 114). What principally separated *Hunger* from the naturalist novel, Hamsun averred, was its utter lack of a plot. As he explained in a different letter, *Hunger* is “not a novel” because “[n]one of the usual fictional inventions occur: no marriages, no balls, no country picnics or the like” (118). Yet in laying emphasis on what he called “the mysteries of the nerves in a starving body,” in many ways Hamsun reproduced the naturalist novel’s signature emphasis on the supreme political importance of the body. In fact, as Riikka Rossi notes, “The theme of [Hamsun’s] novel itself—hunger—is a naturalist topic *par excellence*” (421). Hamsun’s decision to place starvation and the body at the forefront of *Hunger* thus stands as something of a provocation, a kind of hinge between the naturalist novel and his own modernism. I want to suggest that in emphasizing the affective experience of starvation and its dependence on macroeconomic structures, *Hunger* recasts the politics of the naturalist novel and the formal conventions on which they rested. In so doing Hamsun’s novel participated in an emerging understanding of the politics of hunger.

In part, we can see Hamsun’s emphasis on the interaction between bodies and their environment as an extension of Zola’s understanding of the naturalist novel. Like one of Zola’s characters, Hamsun’s narrator is highly sensitive to his milieu. Wrecked by hunger, he repeatedly finds himself “at the mercy of invisible influences” (13) in the capital. As his hunger intensifies, he is “attacked by small, trivial incidents, miserable trifles that forced their way among [his] ideas and scattered [his] powers to the four winds” (16). This causes him to experience a constantly renewed sense of self-estrangement—what he describes as “a state of utter absence from myself” (57). The stimuli of ordinary life becomes overwhelming in this context: “A dog streaking past, a yellow rose in a gentleman’s buttonhole, could start my thoughts vibrating and occupy me for a long time” (16). The most inconsequential

stimuli—a noise in the street, a woman opening her windows—threaten to become major events that determine the course of his actions: “I seemed to have become too feeble to steer or guide myself where I wanted to go; a swarm of tiny vermin had forced its way inside me and hollowed me out,” he laments (17). This hyper-sensitivity constitutes a dominant concern across *Hunger*, one that is mirrored in the novel’s emphasis on the flotsam and jetsam of daily life. Deprived of nourishment, he becomes “[n]ervous and susceptible” (6), driven to act by the most minor elements of his environment and liable to inflate ordinary stimuli into strange phantoms.

At first glance, this understanding of milieu seems to reproduce the naturalist understanding of literary character and agency. For Zola in particular, literary character was to be understood in terms of physiological laws, a framework in which agency was of marginal importance (if not an epiphenomenon to be ignored altogether). As he explained in his 1868 preface to *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), he chose “protagonists who were supremely dominated by their nerves and their blood, deprived of free will and drawn into every action of their lives by the predetermined lot of their flesh” (4). While Hamsun’s protagonist is “acted on and distracted by everything around [him]” (19), unlike many of Zola’s characters, he remains nevertheless “lucid and self-possessed” (13)—an agent who exerts a degree of control over his environment. This agency is exerted not in an attempt to transform the economic structures that cause his hunger, but rather to dramatize the most dire consequences of modernization. Readers of *Hunger* have long suspected that in repeatedly rejecting assistance from those around him, Hamsun’s narrator actively *performs* his hunger in some fundamental sense, much as Kafka’s hunger artist would do nearly thirty years later. On numerous occasions, the narrator refuses direct offers of aid from acquaintances, avoids situations in which aid might be presented to him, or capriciously gives away money when it comes to him. For example, moments after the narrator identifies himself with the out of work welter and reckons with his unconscious fear of emigration, he encounters a character on the street who had at one point provided him with money. Now, after exhausting his few material and social resources, the narrator’s response is not to ask for further assistance, but to make a spectacle of himself: “With casual audacity, I even move a step away from the wall to make him aware of me. I don’t do it to awaken his compassion but to mock myself, make myself an object of derision” (140). The desire to foreground his

own degradation is repeated throughout the novel, as he rejects the pity of individuals and social institutions, going as far as to give away money he receives anonymously near the novel's conclusion. The narrator's embrace of a performative starvation is reflected in his desire late in the novel to write a one act play about "a gorgeous fanatical whore who had sinned in the temple, not out of weakness or lust, but from a hatred of heaven" (169-70). He explains that "[w]hat interested me about [the whore] was her wonderful shamelessness, the desperate excess of premeditated sin that she had committed" (170). Like the narrator himself, she is a "queer monstrosity of a human being," who revels in her monstrosity and throws her fallenness in the face of others (170). What begins for the narrator as an inability to procure sustenance becomes a grotesque celebration of the extreme impoverishment to which he has been reduced. Most critics have seen this performative aspect of *Hunger* as an experimental literary method without overt political significance.⁸ Yet the resonance of self-starvation could hardly be more political; in working to make himself the most visible sign of the costs of economic development, Hamsun's protagonist exerts his will over the one domain still available to him: his body. Self-starvation becomes the narrator's way of drawing attention to the nutritional insecurity wrought by the forces of transnational capitalism that surround him.

The performance of starvation in this context was not unique to Hamsun's narrator. In performing his own degradation in this way, Hamsun's novel participates in an emerging politics of hunger, one dramatically on display in the contemporaneous emergence of hunger strikes. By the end of the nineteenth-century, the hunger strike would take root in diverse national contexts as a new, potent form of political protest that marshaled deeply felt anxieties about the effects of capitalist modernity on the bodies of ordinary citizens. Indeed, there is perhaps no better reflection of the inherently transnational stakes of hunger at this historical moment than the hunger strike. Appearing first in tsarist Russia, the hunger strike rapidly spread to British suffragettes in the first decade of the twentieth century, and later to both Irish and Indian revolutionaries.⁹ Though hunger strikes have been deployed in a wide array of political contexts, these acts always "contrast the frailty of the body with the might of authority" (Russell 93) by drawing attention to those bodies that did not benefit from the meliorist promises of industrial modernity.¹⁰ As Patrick Anderson has argued, self-starvation is a deeply political act because it "restages the effects

of institutional and ideological power and reverses the production of those powers at the hand of the faster herself or himself" (10). By spectacularly amplifying the human costs of economic development, like Hamsun's narrator, hunger strikers offer a critical commentary on their place within larger political and economic systems. Deprived of the means of either reversing the effects of modernization or mitigating its most pernicious effects, hunger strikers employed their bodies as sites of political protest, foregrounding the material consequences of global economic shifts on the lives of those at the margins.

If naturalism understood bodily susceptibility to stimuli as necessarily curtailing classical understandings of agency, self-starvation refigures the relationship embodiment and agency in a new way. Acts of self-starvation participate in a logic of personal agency that Achille Mbembe has described in reference to self-sacrifice. Within what he terms a necropolitical order, the constant threat of violence directed toward oneself endows control over one's body with tremendous political potential. As he explains, "The self-sacrificed proceeds to take power over his or her death and to approach it head-on" (38). In effect, self-sacrifice challenges the monopoly on violence and restores a degree of sovereign power to the individual. The hunger striker works under in a similar logic (though usually without intending to take his or her sacrifice to its lethal conclusion). Recognizing the bodily depredations to which they are subject, hunger strikers make their body a weapon against regimes of physical want. In this, they exercise their agency, but a mode of agency that denotes their status as both subject and object. As Anderson explains, the hunger striker sits uneasily at the intersection between traditional binaries of "subject/object and active/passive" (10). Hovering "treacherously on the brink of self-destruction" (10), the hunger strikers exercise a kind of agency whose political currency is derived from foregrounding precisely those limits imposed on them as agents.

Like hunger strikers across the world system, Hamsun's narrator is both agent and object at once. Surrounded by new forms of economic prosperity and deprived of even the most basic forms of sustenance, his actions extravagantly dramatize an economic system that creates superfluous populations, poverty, and hunger. The

performance of starvation in *Hunger* thus anticipates the later body politics of hunger strikers and their modernist contemporaries. What's more, this performance refigures the naturalist understanding of agency, which stressed the body's extreme susceptibility to milieu. Hamsun's narrator foregrounds his body's status as an object, one hypersensitive to milieu, but now in the service of political critique. Like early twentieth century hunger strikers, his political agency resides in performing the fragility and smallness of the body in the face of the most formidable mechanisms of political life. But *Hunger* does more than revise the naturalist novel's understanding of agency; it also challenges the naturalist belief that hunger could be understood by empirically mapping the physiological mechanisms underpinning social life. Even as naturalists like Zola placed the body at the center of their political and aesthetic project, they were not interested in how the affective dimensions of embodiment were imbricated in economics or politics. Forging a literary aesthetic geared toward the bodily experience of hunger, Hamsun placed the body in a new relationship to macroeconomic forces. Dramatizing "the mysteries of the nerves in a starving body," *Hunger* draws the reader's attention toward a political and social context that made the experience of hunger commonplace but nevertheless open to the political agency of those suffering under its yoke. Inscribing the economic forces in the form of the novel itself, Hamsun's novel offers a deeply politicized portrayal of embodied life on the margins of capitalist development.

Modernist Hunger

With naturalism, hunger entered the novel as one of a series of social problems that required a systematic and objective literary form—what, in "The Experimental Novel" (1880), Zola called a "practical sociology" (26). In the naturalist novel, hunger thus easily retains its status as a brute condition of physiological need, grounded in the lived experience of the urban poor and bounded by the nation. But as Hamsun and later writers attempted to integrate hunger into the emerging formal project of modernism, they discarded naturalism's "practical" and totalizing method

in favor of the individual experience of corporeal extremity. The major difficulty for critics in evaluating this later approach has been in situating the affective experience of starvation in relation to modernism's broader historical and political contexts. Plunged into the affective chaos of the starving body, readers are confronted with a phenomenon without a clear etiology—one that can easily seem like a universal condition. For critics, "hunger" thus easily becomes a metaphor for any number of deep existential cravings of the modernist moment, particularly those of the modernist himself. What is the hunger that motivates Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" if not some other kind of hunger—the inexorable need of the artist to give his body and life for the perfection of art? How do we explain the hunger of Hamsun's novel if not as a trope for the spiritual degradations of modern life that might call modernism into life?

The challenge posed by any analysis of modernism and hunger thus depends on reconnecting starvation to its historical determinants and political contexts, rather than its ever-multiplying metaphors. As Alys Moody writes, "Hunger is suspended between, on the one hand, the lure of its ahistoricism, its embodied universality and its structural withdrawal from the world, and, on the other, the echoes of history and nation and place that cling to it" (*Non-lieu* 272). While modernist depictions of hunger might emphasize affective extremity, they nevertheless call for readings that do not evacuate hunger of its literal and historical significance. Resisting the universalizing power of metaphor will require a stricter attention to the political contexts of modernist hunger, including the transnational dilemmas of sustenance that underwrote the political transformations of the period.¹¹

Looking at the relationship between hunger and modernism from this perspective, we may begin to discern a tradition that places Hamsun in conversation with an ongoing history of the body, one that animated both hunger strikers and a generation of novelists. Indeed, Hamsun's project in *Hunger* suggests a number of similarities with not just Kafka, but Beckett, whose work was marked by an abiding attention to hunger and starvation. As Moody notes, "Living out their lives against a backdrop of constant, grinding deprivation, his characters ... almost never have enough to eat" (*Tasteless* 55). This concern with hunger manifests in Molloy's sucking of stones (also practiced by

Hamsun's protagonist), the infrequent nourishment of the protagonists of *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, as well as the abundant hunger of plays like *Waiting for Godot*. Yet, the place of hunger and starvation within these texts is often read in purely metaphorical ways, either as a kind of generalized desire (a hunger *for* something) or as a trope for the formal evacuation of content. As such, Beckett's works are often described as "anorexic," "starved," "lean," or aesthetically "gaunt" (55). Yet, for Beckett the aesthetics of hunger were rooted in the real consequences of modern history, particularly the raw political history of Irish hunger.¹² The Irish famine cast a long shadow over both the anti-colonial struggles of twentieth-century revolutionaries, as well as the formal project of Irish modernists like Beckett, who relentlessly returned to starvation, but without necessarily implying a strict correlation between the world of his novels and Ireland. Instead, like Hamsun, hunger in his novels retains its literal value by alluding to those contexts—both colonial and capitalist—in which hunger and famine were used as political tools. The starving bodies that populate his novels are not the tragic poor of Zola, but rather unreformed and unreformable spectacles of hunger; they are bodies that both passively register their place within the power structures of capitalist development *and* actively foreground the failures of modernization through a pageantry of deprivation. Reconciling macroeconomic conditions to their localized consequences, modernists like Hamsun and Beckett vest the body with a peculiar agency to perform the degradations to which it is subjected. These bodies are grandly feeble—incapable of changing the large systems upon which they depend for sustenance and provocatively visible as the residue of economic development.

For a rising generation of writers like Hamsun, integrating the material body into the formal project of modernism meant rethinking the reigning conventions of the naturalist novel and its empiricist approach. What's more, it required a new kind of materialism, one which understood the body's integral role in the ongoing reorganization of national economies and their integration within the world system. In the final pages of *Hunger*, Hamsun's nameless protagonist departs Kristiania. Crazed by months of near-starvation, he submits to the dark monsters that have plagued him by enlisting on a freighter bound for Cádiz. Aboard the ship, "wet with fever and fatigue," he looks back at the city and notes that "the windows shone so brightly in every home" (197). Against this

image of comfy domesticity and human sociality, Hamsun presents his narrator in the process of becoming a part of that vast, international fraternity of laborers rendered superfluous by an emerging global economy. Offering readers a new perspective on the affective experience of starvation, *Hunger* inscribes an experience common throughout of the margins of capitalist development at the end of the nineteenth century. The wholesale transformation of economic life across the “developing” world precipitated a shared experience of starvation that endowed hunger with new political qualities. These would underwrite a wide array of political movements of the twentieth century and configure the role of the body within the emerging formal projects of the modernist novel.

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¹ The lure of metaphor is extremely common in the critical discourse of hunger. In the introduction to a recent special issue on hunger in the journal *symplokē*, Zahi Zalloua casually transmutes the question of physical hunger into a trope of ethical criticism itself; "hunger" for Zalloua denotes both "bodily desires and curiosity" (7), as well as a critical "hunger for *particulars*" (8) and "a hunger for otherness" (9).

² As recent scholarship by Toril Moi and Arnold Weinstein has shown, Norway was the site of one of the earliest manifestations of literary modernism. Moi's *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (2006) and Weinstein's *Northern Arts: The Breakthrough of Scandinavian Literature and Art, From Ibsen to Bergman* (2008) both return to the announcement in 1883 of "the modern breakthrough" in Scandinavian literature by Danish literary critic Georg Brandes. Other critics, including Leonardo Lisi and Peter Sjølyst-Jackson, have recently explored the significance of economic dependency on Scandinavian modernism. Cf. Lisi's *Marginal Modernity: The Aesthetics of Dependency from Kierkegaard to Joyce* (2013) and Sjølyst-Jackson's *Troubling Legacies: Migration, Modernism and Fascism in the Case of Knut Hamsun* (2010).

³ Robert Ferguson, for instance, argues, "Save for a few external details, such as the presence of horse-drawn carriages in the streets, *Hunger* remains eerily and thrillingly undated" (112). Citing Hamsun as a predecessor to Joyce and Woolf, Ferguson argues that the real protagonist of *Hunger* is "consciousness itself" (112). Riechel likewise collapses the real economic difference between Kristiania and the metropolises of Europe in order to universalize the experience of Hamsun's narrator: "It does not ... matter, in a discussion of Hamsun as Modernist ... that Christiania [sic] was not a major city in the 1880s" because Poe had already provided the template for "Modernist experience of the city" (38).

⁴ In his recent book *Marginal Modernity* (2013), Leonard Lisi has traced a philosophical genealogy of a modernist "aesthetics of dependency," one which arose "not at the core of European culture but at its Scandinavian margin" (1). Elizabeth Oxfeldt's *Nordic Orientalism* (2005) likewise stresses the importance of economic marginality within nineteenth-century Norwegian culture. She argues that a form of cultural Orientalism took hold in nineteenth-century Scandinavia to figure a variety of intra-European political and cultural relationships, including the relationship between periphery and core. In her analysis, Norway emerges not only as peripheral to the core of Europe, but to its Scandinavian neighbor, Denmark, as well. For a more general consideration of Scandinavian modernism within the economic world system, see Lisi's entry on "Scandinavia" in *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism* (2011).

⁵ Sverre Lyngstad has suggested that in *Hunger* Hamsun deployed a well-worn literary trope of nineteenth-century literature, "that of the young man from the provinces trying to make his career in the capital" ("Introduction" xvi). This interpretation picks up on Hamsun's efforts to depict his narrator as a "stranger" to Kristiania even as it misses the novel's emphasis on the economic conditions of his migration.

⁶ As Peter Sjølyst-Jackson has argued, *Hunger* is simultaneously "the most obsessively site-specific text of Hamsun's entire authorship" (27) and one which lacks "historical locatedness" (25) as an exclusively Norwegian novel.

⁷ As Davis explains, after 1870 "the price of wheat in Liverpool and the rainfall in Madras were variables in the same vast equation of human survival" (12).

⁸ As James McFarlane has argued, Hamsun's narrator "craves hunger, feeds on lack of food; starvation, however much it may weaken his bodily frame, alerts his mind, nourishes his powers of observation and heightens his consciousness" (575). Paul Auster would make much the same argument in "The Art of Hunger." More recently, Arnold Weinstein has argued that *Hunger* "prophetically stages a war against the laws of both God and flesh, seeking in writing, imagination, and performance, diverse ways to get clear of all constraints" (7). For Weinstein, the performance of hunger does not constitute a political protest; instead, he sees the depredations of the protagonist as a "hilarious joust with reality and necessity" (7). In emphasizing the autonomy of the aesthetic, these analyses participate in what Jameson has called "the ideology of modernism" (*Singular* 161).

⁹ It is telling that the most dramatic acts of hunger striking occurred in and against Britain. While in the industrial core, hunger was understood as an aberration of the improvements promised by capitalism, elsewhere in the world system, including across the British Empire, hunger was understood as a necessary condition and perpetual threat to rapidly transforming societies. The hunger strikes of British suffragettes thus stand in an interesting relationship to other instances of self-starvation since they were not subject to the same forms of nutritional precarity that obtained in the British Empire. The hunger strikes of suffragettes (which provoked sometimes-lethal instances of force feeding) borrowed the longstanding tradition of gendered asceticism, but yoked it to emerging political realities in which physical want was used as a tool in various economic and imperial enterprises.

¹⁰ This is true even of hunger strikes by Irish republicans in 1981, which claimed ten lives. Their starvation symbolically leveraged the image of the Irish famine and the degradations Ireland faced on account of colonial indifference. As Maud Ellmann writes, “By hungering, protestors transform their bodies into the ‘quotations’ of their forbearers and reinscribe the cause of Irish nationalism in the spectacle of starving flesh” (14).

¹¹ Resisting the metaphors of hunger seems in many ways to have been the very point of Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist.” Indebted to Hamsun’s work, Kafka was opposed to the metaphorical reading of literature, which, as Maud Ellmann explains, led him to thin “out the allusive and associative fabric of the story until it is very difficult to treat [hunger] as a metaphor for something else, or for some rich and hidden amplitude of meaning” (*Hunger Artists* 66). The starving body spectacularly on display in Kafka’s story is not a figure for a deep existential longing, which would make “hunger” a figural surrogate for the creative endeavor of the artist himself. Rather, Kafka’s narrative demonstrates how easily the spectacle of starvation is, in Ellmann’s words, “starved of sense” (67).

¹² To this historical frame we might also add WWII and its aftermath in France, when Beckett was known to have suffered from prolonged periods of hunger, if not starvation.