Irina Hron*

“Speak your word and break!”

Figures of Decomposition and (Creative) Recomposition in Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*

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Abstract: By tracing an alternative aesthetics of decomposition and fragmentation, this article offers a new understanding of the literary and poetological strategies Knut Hamsun uses to create a disintegrating text cosmos wherein the idea of ‘creation out of nothing’ (*creatio ex nihilo*) is one key to artistic originality. The article explores the interdependence of different notions of decline and shows that the image of the (biblical) fall is particularly important to the poetics and aesthetic structure of Hamsun’s *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890). Around 1900, ideas of wholeness crumble, a decomposition which is reflected in the well-established philosophical and anthropological experiments of Nietzsche, Bourget and Simmel. Taking some of their aesthetic assumptions as a point of departure, the present paper argues that Hamsun’s novel offers an aesthetic variation on the decline of unity-based concepts, ranging from the subject to religious belief as well as to traditional storytelling.

Keywords: Creation, *creatio ex nihilo*, decadence, decline, disintegration, fragmentation, Genesis, Knut Hamsun, Norwegian literature, unity

Article note: The title quotation is taken from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In the German original, the quotation reads as follows: „Sprich dein Wort und zerbrich!” (Nietzsche [1883], 188).

***Corresponding author: Irina Hron**, Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden, e-mail: irina.hron@lir.gu.se

Echoing the Book of Books: Towards an Aesthetics of Disintegration

Now during those days [...].¹ (Lk 6.12)

The opening sentence of Knut Hamsun's 1890 novel *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890)² captures our attention from the very start by unmistakably echoing the recurring opening words of the Gospels:³ "It was in those days when I wandered about hungry in Kristiania"⁴ (HG, 3). This echo of the stylistic gesture of the Book of Books is, however, not a one-time affair.⁵ Rather, the biblical cadence reveals itself as crucial to the specific poetic composition of the entire text. The term 'cadence' refers to two aspects whose interplay determines the special poetological quality of the *Hunger*-book: On the one hand, it designates an unusual stylistic stance that is continually recurring to the rhetorical gestures as well as to the images and personages of the Bible.⁶ At the same time, *Hunger*'s inventory of biblical images is reduced to an arbitrary assemblage of props and splinters; it disintegrates into both linguistic and figurative fragments of belief of which both the author, and thus, the nameless 'hunger artist', make excessive use. What I would like to suggest here is

1 All biblical citations follow the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV).

2 In this article all citations from the Norwegian original of *Sult* are taken from Hamsun [1890] 2017. References to this edition will be identified in parentheses by SLT, followed by page numbers. The English translation by Sverre Lyngstad (Hamsun 2006), quoted in the running text, will be identified in parentheses by HG, followed by page numbers.

3 See as well Lk 4.2 ("during those days"), Mk 8.1 ("In those days"), 2Kgs 10.32 ("In those days"), Mk 13.19 ("For in those days"), Judg 18.1 ("In those days"), Judg 21.25 ("in those days"), 1Sm 3.1 ("in those days"), Jer 5.18 ("But even in those days"), 2Chr 32.24 ("In those days"), and Rev 9.6 ("And in those days").

4 «Det var i den Tid, jeg gik omkring og sultet i Kristiania» (SLT, 4), corresponding to, for example, «Dette var [...] på den tid» (Num 3.1), following the *Norsk Bibel* (1988).

5 With regard to the specific biblical tone, see for example Lyngstad 2005 who stresses the "incongruity between the solemn Biblical style and the macabre content" (10). Compare further Anne G. Sæbø's article which notes that the author is deeply inspired by the biblical language, the sound of the words, the pantheistic and the stylistic, in particular from the Old Testament and the psalms (cf. 2003, 32). However, neither Sæbø nor Tone Selboe, who states that the *Hunger*-hero rebels against the biblical cadence on which the whole text is grounded (cf. 1999, 151), discuss the poetological consequences of this particular use of the biblical cadence.

6 For further discussion of religion and religious elements, see in particular Ragnhild Ystad's article on "Religiøsitet i Knut Hamsuns *Sult*". While Ystad refers to the ironic use of the biblical code (cf. 2004, 202), Atle Kittang points to the biblical images with their references to the myths of Christ, Job and Cain which form a net of metaphysical meaning (cf. 1984, 47). Compare also chapter 3 in my book *Hervorbringungen. Zur Poetik des Anfangens um 1900* (Hron[-Öberg] 2014).

that this contrapuntal intertwining of a biblical cadence with its own disintegration appears to be the productive moving force behind the novel as a whole.

Tying in with this core assumption and of vital importance for the following close reading of Hamsun's seminal book⁷ is the imagery of falling, unmistakably alluding to the biblical fall, that is, the fall of man.⁸ This imagery structures the text in terms of a semantic field marked by a falling religious cadence and by various depictions of falling away from faith, which culminate in the complete disintegration – the falling apart – of wholeness and unity. In the light of the decline of unity-based concepts, ranging from the literary subject to religious belief as well as to the divine Maker, I show how the text voices the problem of creative originality and primary production,⁹ drawing on the most recent scholarship within the field of decadence studies.¹⁰ Thus, this article offers a new understanding of the literary and poetological strategies Hamsun uses to create a disintegrating text cosmos wherein the idea of ‘creation out of nothing’ (*creatio ex nihilo*) is one key to artistic originality. In eventually tuning down what had once been the chant of the Triune God, the novel functions as a literary archive for highly ambivalent notions of decomposition and (creative) recomposition.

Decomposing Wholes: Falling Away from the Unity of Belief and the Belief in Unity

The figurative concept of falling evokes a central feature of (literary) decadence,¹¹ namely the disintegration of unity and wholeness. In their place, we now find

7 Ståle Dingstad's article “Om *Sult* (1890) – og andre tekster med samme tittel” offers excellent material on the manuscript variants and different editions of the text, ranging from the 1888 excerpt which was later to become the second part of the novel to today's standard version from Hamsun's *Samlede Verker* from 1954.

8 Concepts of falling also play a central role in Linda Hamrin Nesby's 2003 article where she describes *Hunger* as a novel of decline with a downward-sloping curve (cf. 94).

9 Other scholars, including Eveliina Pulkki (2018) and Daniel Rees (2016), have recently explored the depiction of creative power and authorship in *Hunger*. In her 2018 article “Failing Authorship in Knut Hamsun's *Sult*” Pulkki compares two conflicting models of (blocked) authorship quite different from this article's approach. Concepts of creativity also play an important role in Rees's close reading of *Hunger* as presented in his extensive monograph *Hunger and Modern Writing: Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright* (2016, 85–110).

10 In terms of methodology, this article makes the case for understanding decadence less from a historical point of view than from an interest in stylistic and aesthetic practice.

11 In her recent book *Literarische Dekadenz. Denkfiguren und poetische Konstellationen*, Julia S. Happ thoroughly comments on the term ‘literary decadence’ (“literarische Dekadenz”, 2016, 22).

figures of fragmentation arising from a renewed interest in the relationship between part and whole, between one and many.¹² The problem of the coexistence of one and many, once pondered by Plato in his *Parmenides*,¹³ is however treated with a much different focus at the turn of the 20th century. This can be observed in the contemporary philosophical, aesthetic, anthropological and sociological discourses of the *fin de siècle*, which all deal more or less explicitly with the atomization of unity.

Of particular relevance for the poetological consequences resulting from this loss of wholeness are the writings of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Bourget and Friedrich Nietzsche, who openly address the phenomenon of literary decadence.¹⁴ In addition, Georg Simmel's treatises on the philosophy of religion provide insight into the relationship between religion and unity, in particular with regard to the phenomenon of a falling religious cadence, that is highly relevant for the following close reading of Hamsun's text.¹⁵ Whereas Baudelaire in his *Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* (1857) was the first to undertake a positive characterization of decadent concepts, Bourget, in the Baudelaire chapter of his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883), set forth a theory of decadence ("Theorie de la Décadence")

Her monograph sheds new light on (mostly German) literary decadence around 1900, its universal concepts, plurality of discourses and poetic transformations. For further discussion of specific notions of Nordic decadence, see in particular Per Thomas Andersen (1992).

12 More recently, Leonardo Lisi has discussed the modernist opposition of autonomy and fragmentation. His comprehensive 2013 monograph *Marginal Modernity: The Aesthetics of Dependency from Kierkegaard to Joyce* initially stresses the importance of an aesthetics of fragmentation, practised by the avant-gardes, even though his own study mainly focuses on an "alternative aesthetic structure, which [he] term[s] the 'aesthetics of dependency'" (1).

13 Compare: "Now, if someone should undertake to show that sticks and stones and things like that are many, and the same things one, we shall grant that he has proved *that something is many and one*, but not that the one is many or the many one; he has said nothing out of the ordinary, but a thing on which we all agree." (Plato 1983, 6; *italics added*).

14 For a more thorough analysis of this constellation, see once more Julia S. Happ's 2016 monograph which touches upon Baudelaire, Bourget and also Hermann Bahr, before dwelling on Nietzschean concepts in order to show the philosophically complex double evaluation of decadence. Compare also the *Weimarer Nietzsche Bibliographie's* subject index ["decadence"].

15 Apart from that, Simmel's writings allow deeper insight into understanding the interdependence between religion and (falling) monetary value that is also crucial for Hamsun's *Hunger*. Following the maxim that things must be 'worth reading' the protagonist appraises the value of script in terms of monetary value. Eventually, the latter replaces the former entirely. Regarding its function as a source of meaning, the use of money, as outlined by Simmel in his *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900), becomes a proxy for the idea of God. Eveliina Pulkki would make much of the same argument, arguing that "the narrator's own romantic understanding of the immediate monetary value of his work is painfully parodied" (2018, 295).

which took into account the literature of his time. Bourget's theory in turn influenced Nietzsche, who in his *Der Fall Wagner* (1888) elaborated one of his many concepts of decadence in a way that complemented Bourget's metaphors, revealing the paradox of decadence in the form of a 'decadent style'. In both Bourget and Nietzsche, one finds a dominant notion of anthropomorphized pieces that acquire anarchic independence at the cost of the whole:

The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole – the whole is no longer a whole.¹⁶

In accordance with this well-known notion of 'piecework' every unity disintegrates as a result of the emancipation of its individual elements.

Accordingly, the depiction of a starving and hollow subject wandering around in the streets of Kristiania and gradually *falling apart* both physically and mentally, as delineated in Hamsun's ground-breaking *Hunger*-novel, gains immediate significance within the philosophical and anthropological context of its time.¹⁷ Moreover, in the Hamsunian literary cosmos the relation between religious intonation and nourishment which, according to Georg Simmel, proceeds from an opposition between wholeness and disintegration, proves to be of equally great interest:

16 All translations, unless otherwise attributed, are my own. In the German original the quote reads as follows: „Das Wort wird souverain und springt aus dem Satz hinaus, der Satz greift über und verdunkelt den Sinn der Seite, die Seite gewinnt Leben auf Unkosten des Ganzen – das Ganze ist kein Ganzes mehr.“ (Nietzsche [1888], 27).

17 For more on the historical context of Hamsun's groundbreaking novel, see in particular Eirik Vassenden's substantial article “En Ildebrand i en Boglade. Modernisme og vitalisme i Hamsuns *Sult* og i *Sult*-resepsjonen” where the author discusses how concepts and categories of 'modernism' have been used to understand Hamsun's work (cf. 2010, 101). Vassenden not only suggests that “there may indeed be something to learn from [...] vitalist perspectives on *Hunger*” (ibid.) but undertakes an exhaustive inventory of both the reception and canonization of Hamsun's breakthrough novel. Compare also Gry Hedin's article “Forfatteren som eksperimentator” from 2011 where she examines the “cross-disciplinary context for understanding issues such as decadence, religion and genre in *Hunger*” (330). Hedin reads Hamsun's 1888 *Hunger*-excerpt explicitly as a cultural product of its time and place, focusing on the text's relation to the natural sciences as were widely discussed in the periodical *Ny Jord* during this time, in particular in relation to Charles Darwin. The present article concentrates, however, rather on notions of decline as reflected in the writings of, among others, Baudelaire and Bourget. Interestingly, texts of both Baudelaire and Bourget were actually published in *Ny Jord* in 1889, something Gry Hedin regrettably does not further comment on, but which I find quite striking since it opens up the widest possible methodological span ranging from vitalism to decadence.

Those needs for filling out the fragmentariness of existence [...], for a unity in and above its confused manifoldness, [...] — all this nurtures notions of transcendence: man's hunger feeds upon these notions.¹⁸

However, instead of focusing on hunger and starvation as “a metaphor for various forms of spiritual hungers” (Wientzen 2015, 208), I would rather like to trace another modernist notion, focusing on the above-described phenomenon of the biblical cadence. In his treatise *Die Religion* (1906) Simmel outlines a relationship between religion and religiosity that is highly productive when applied to *Hunger*. Simmel suggests that religiosity, as the “state or rhythm of interiority without an object”¹⁹ precedes religion, which in his view is the mere objectivization of religiosity. Religiosity thus acts first and foremost as a mode of experience that colors the world's content in a specific way, by “transposing it into a religious key”.²⁰ In this manner Simmel creates an image that is the exact opposite of the phenomenon of cadence or ‘intonation’ in *Hunger*. Whereas Simmel retraces the movement from immanence to transcendence, to the “totality of the [religious] conception of the world”,²¹ Hamsun's text runs in the reverse direction: The anarchy of religious fragments in *Hunger*, as I will show, leads to the successive disintegration of the entire formal ensemble upon which the all-encompassing unity of Christian belief is based.

Disintegration of the Literary Subject and Corpus

In a crucial passage which anticipates *in nuce* the master plan of the novel, the Christian phrase evoking the sacrificial Lamb of God “who takes away the sin of the world”,²² and the description of the incipient bodily and mental decay of the protagonist are explicitly combined:

What was the matter with me? Had the Lord's finger pointed at me? But why exactly at me? [...] I discovered the weightiest objections to the Lord's arbitrariness in *letting me suffer for everybody else's sake*. [...] From that day in May when my adversities had begun I could clearly

18 In the German original: „Jene Bedürfnisse nach der Ergänzung des fragmentarischen Daseins [...], nach der Einheit in und über seiner verworrenen Mannigfaltigkeit, [...] – alles dies nährt die transzendenten Vorstellungen: *der Hunger des Menschen* ist ihre Nahrung“ (Simmel 1906, 9; *italics added*).

19 Simmel 1906, 42: „gegenstandslose[n] Zustand oder Rhythmus der Innerlichkeit“.

20 Ibid., 16: „Transponierung in die religiöse Tonart“.

21 Ibid., 12: „Totalität des [religiösen] Weltbildes“.

22 Compare John 1.29: “The next day he [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’”.

perceive a gradually increasing weakness, I seemed to have become too feeble to steer or guide myself where I wanted to go [...].²³ (HG, 19; *italics added*)

Through a radical process of subjectivization the text employs basic tenets of the catechism, e. g. the imagery of *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), as a model to explain the singular decline of its central character. While searching for the meaning of his progressive degeneration, the protagonist recalls his earlier childhood belief. But this belief, as well, reveals itself to be merely the fragmented shadow of an earlier unity: “Fragments of my childhood teachings came back to me, the cadences of the Bible rang in my ears”²⁴ (HG, 20). Thus, the aesthetics of falling (apart) presented in exemplary fashion in *Hunger* unfolds in the successive disintegration of the literary subject into a hollowed-out hunger artist and is accompanied by the reduction of something once religious to a mere religious cadence.

And indeed, the metaphoric language developed by Bourget and Nietzsche to describe how parts take on a life of their own can be used to characterize this kind of disintegration of the literary subject even more precisely.²⁵ Bourget undertakes his definition of decadence by assuming the systematic decomposition of a totalized, holistic organism:

A society is comparable to a living organism: like an organism, it consists of a collection of lesser organisms, which in turn consist of a collection of cells. [...] If the cells' energy becomes independent, the organisms that make up the total organism similarly cease subordinating their energy to the total energy, and the subsequent anarchy leads to the decadence of the whole.²⁶

Here one can clearly observe the anthropomorphized metaphors of fragmentation that will also later be found in Nietzsche. Bourget depicts a whole organism

23 «Hvad var det, som fejled mig? Havde Herrens Finger pegt paa mig? Men hvorfor just paa mig? [...] [J]eg fandt de vægtigste Invendinger mod denne Herrens Vilkaarlighed at *lade mig undgælde for alles Skyld*. [...] Fra den Dag i Majmaaned, da mine Genvordigheder begyndte, kunde jeg saa tydeligt mærke en lidt efter lidt tiltagende Svaghet, jeg var ligesom bleven for mat til at styre og lede mig hvorhen jeg vilde» (SLT, 16–17; *italics added*).

24 «Stumper af min Børnelærdom randt mig ihu, Bibelens Stiltone sang for mine Øren» (SLT, 17).

25 Compare also Mark Sandy's article on “‘The Last Great Romantic’: Nietzsche's Romanticism Out of the Spirit of Decadence” (2016) where the author suggests that “Nietzsche's relationship to Romanticism and Decadence is both philosophical and poetical in nature” (131). See also Switzer 2019.

26 In the French original: «Une société doit être assimilée à un organisme. Comme un organisme, en effet, elle se résout en une fédération d'organismes moindres, qui se résolvent eux-mêmes en une fédération de cellules. [...] Si l'énergie des cellules devient indépendante, les organismes qui composent l'organisme total cessent pareillement de subordonner leur énergie à l'énergie totale, et l'anarchie qui s'établit constitue la décadence de l'ensemble» (Bourget [1898], 24).

made up of autonomous sub-organisms representing the subject and the text, respectively. Using a mixture of organic and energetic metaphors, he proceeds to diagnose various levels of energy within this whole. When the individual constituents or parts acquire an energetically charged autonomy, this leads to an anarchic movement that eventually causes the entire ensemble to dissolve. Moreover, Bourget's organic imagery of 'microbes' teeming in the inside of a hollow whole recalls the Nietzschean "parasitism", a parasitism that exists at the expense of the host.²⁷ It is striking how this corresponds to the metaphors used by Hamsun's starving hero to diagnose his own progressive decay:

There was a merciless gnawing in my chest, a queer silent labor was going on in there. I pictured a score of nice teeny-weeny animals that cocked their heads to one side and gnawed a bit, then cocked their heads to the other side and gnawed a bit, lay perfectly still for a moment, then began anew and bored their way in without a sound and without haste, leaving empty stretches behind them wherever they went.²⁸ (HG, 151)

The beginning of this literary case study in disintegration is unmistakably dated back to the intrusion of parasitic microbes into the body:²⁹ "a swarm of tiny vermin had forced its way inside me and hollowed me out"³⁰ (HG, 19). Hamsun's use of worm metaphor also applies no less to the description of the protagonist wracked by pangs of hunger: "I felt I was myself a crawling insect doomed to perish, seized by destruction in the midst of a whole world ready to go to sleep"³¹ (HG, 31). Hence, the motif of being hollowed out ("udhulet", 16), which in *Hunger* is closely linked to the central eponymous metaphor of hunger, acts as a sign standing for the loss of inner unity. The hollowing out of the body³² is accompanied by the hollowing

27 In the German original: „ein feinerer Parasitismus, ein Sich-Einnisten in eine fremde Seele, mitunter selbst in ein fremdes Fleisch – ach! wie sehr immer auf ‚des Wirthes‘ Unkosten!“ (Nietzsche [1888], 18).

28 «Det gnavet ubarmhærtigt i mit Bryst, bedreves et tyst, underligt Arbejde derinde. Det kunde være et Snes bitte smaa, fine Dyr, som lagde Hovedet paa den ene Side og gnavet lidt, lagde derpaa Hovedet paa den anden Side og gnavet lidt, laa et Øjeblik aldeles stille, begyndte igen, bored sig ind uden Støj og uden Hast og efterlod tomme Strækninger overalt, hvor de for frem....» (SLT, 103).

29 As for the imagery of parasitism, compare also Michel Serre's *Le Parasite* (1980) where the French philosopher discusses in detail the relationship between a parasite and its host body as a model for exchange.

30 «en Sverm af smaa Skadedyr havde trængt ind i mit Indre og udhulet mig» (SLT, 16).

31 «Jeg følte mig selv som et Kryb i Undergang, greben af Ødelæggelsen midt i denne dvalefærdige Alverden» (SLT, 24).

32 Focusing on the body as the means of making the modernist macroeconomic structure of the time legible, Timothy Wientzen shows that "integrating the material body into the formal project

out of the psyche, and this ruinous parallel action leaves the novel’s first-person narrator “hollowed out, spiritually and physically”³³ (HG, 51).

This mental erosion is especially related to the text’s biblical cadence in the twofold meaning noted above. Biblical images and personages acquire an anarchic autonomy in the mind of the starving hero and gradually eat away at the protective binding of the Gospels in their capacity as ‘Holy Script’. The book of belief fractures into individual splinters of belief that begin to fester in the body of the hunger-wracked protagonist. Just as fragments of subjectivity begin to detach themselves from the whole ego that originally held them together, so too does the inner unity of the (once holy) text, and the Gospel as an inspired script disintegrate into a set of picture stories and loose pages randomly bound together.

Finally, in terms of structure, the text’s program consists of a circular figure that ensures its own survival by continually oscillating between states of emptiness and plenitude, represented by the four ‘pieces’ of the novel. This circular figure creates, once again, a notion of *falling* in the sense that it disintegrates at numerous junctures, mostly at the end of each ‘piece’, and begins to spiral downward. In so doing it once more reproduces the movement of the Latin verb *decadere* (falling) which signifies both a downward movement and fragmentation and decline. Using the constants “word” [“ord”] and “bread” [“brød”], Hamsun’s *Hunger*-text combines digestive and textual metaphors to create an economy functioning according to a clear scheme: (1) creative production of a text/word → (2) payment/money → (3) bread/meat → (4) eating/satiation → (1) text etc. Verbalizing this, we may speak of a dependency relationship: the hunger artist is paid in money for writing a text that enables him to buy food. The fourth stage of the chain reaction, satiation, is however never achieved, and thus the circular figure breaks down and must be started anew, continually spiraling downwards.³⁴

Disintegration of the Creator

In the narrative of the hunger book the ‘entities’ of Creator and literary subject meet in a highly subtle and ironically tinged way. God, the highest representa-

of modernism mean[s] rethinking the reigning conventions of the naturalist novel and its empiricist approach” (2015, 221).

33 «aandelig og legemlig udhuled» (SLT, 38).

34 Compare also Per Thomas Andersen’s discussion of *Hunger* in his 2012 [2001] *Norsk Litteraturhistorie* where the author describes the novel’s program in terms of a formulaic narration that is repeated several times (cf. 292). However, due to limited space, Andersen does not discuss in detail the poetological consequences of this circular downward movement.

tive of Christianity, is enthroned as a being who supervises the disintegration of his own creature in every way possible: “And God sat up in his heaven keeping a watchful eye on me, making sure that my destruction took place *according to all the rules of the game* [of art]”³⁵ (HG, 51; *italics added*).

Two aspects are of particular importance when considering the position of the omnipotent Creator in the *Hunger*-text: firstly, the immanent presence of God who actively intervenes in the affairs of men, making sure that *their* decline goes according to *his* plan. The relation between Creator and creature is therewith presented as a deeply asymmetrical one, as a “basic figure of powerful creation”.³⁶ Here we can clearly observe the aesthetic ambivalence that is so typical around 1900. The disintegration of whole, holistic concepts is simultaneously an act of *creative* demolition that articulates the Nietzschean dialectic of a “beginning in the end” and reveals decadence to be a double-edged phenomenon. Jan Kott has aptly described this variant of creative ambivalence:

A living whole breaks into fragments and dissolves in myriads of animated forms. In other words, we find here the familiar cosmological pattern of the originary whole that is broken into fragments through the act of creation.³⁷

The disintegration of the whole is thus an act of creation and is simultaneously “art functioning according to rules” – i. e., *aesthetics*.

Eradicating Creative Words

Concrete entities like God, the literary subject, or the Gospel as a unifying compendium of Christian doctrine are not the only things threatened by degeneration and anarchic autonomy. These factors gradually also encroach upon language and lexemes, infecting both script and orality.

³⁵ «Og oppe i Himlen sad Gud og holdt et vaagent Øie med mig og paasaa at min Undergang foregik *efter alle Kunstens Regler*» (SLT, 38–39; *italics added*). The English translation is, actually, not fully precise: Lyngstad catches the meaning of the crucial phrase (*efter alle Kunstens regler*) but replaces the rules of *art* (“kunst”) by the rules of the *game*.

³⁶ “Grundfigur der machtvollen Hervorbringung” (Welker 1995, 19). As a thorough analysis of the relationship between Creator and creature in its theological and conceptual consequences would have led me far astray, I can only point to other sources, see for example Christiansen 2007; Haeffner 1991; Lieberg 1982 et al.

³⁷ In the German original: „Ein lebendiges Ganzes zerbricht in Fragmente und zerstiebt in Myriaden von belebten Formen. Wir finden hier mit anderen Worten das vertraute kosmologische Muster der Ur-Ganzheit, die durch den Schöpfungsakt in Fragmente zerbricht.“ (Kott 1991, 207).

Along with using the *techne* of inspired writing³⁸ the hunger artist also appropriates fragments from words associated with acts of creation, with Genesis and with invented or altogether newly created words. These, too, are not merely written or spoken words, but rather ones that have an active effect, *words that do things*.

In Hamsun's novel words are not only created within the text, but in accordance with Genesis and with Johannine scripture, creation takes place *with* the word. The word becomes a weapon or a narcotic and hence acquires a specific efficacy.³⁹ Speech is very consciously used as an instrument of power to inflict injury on others, even on complete strangers: “And I had exploited his fear, had tortured him with my loud talk, transfixing him with every word I yelled out.”⁴⁰ (HG, 149) In a similar fashion the rejected protagonist attempts to revenge himself upon the both despised and deified Ylajali for his humiliation by using his words as a cutting weapon: “I searched for something to say to her for goodbye, some deep, weighty word that would cut into her”⁴¹ (HG, 171). Yet the cutting word “didn't come” (ibid.).⁴² The explanation for this, as I would like to suggest, can be found in the eradication of the performative efficacy of word and speech. Instead of the inspired word the hero falls back on *empty* phrases: “It was just claptrap and rhetoric over again”⁴³ (ibid.). The same thing happens when the hunger artist begins a Job-like lamentation⁴⁴ cursing the cruelty of the Godhead:

38 Holy Scripture contains the most ‘efficacious’ model demonstrating how inspiring speech and inspired listening and/or writing can function. The hunger artist reports such moments of elevated experience. These moments come over him in the form of visions and auditory experiences inspired by the Holy Ghost. Citing the biblical *visio*, the protagonist legitimizes himself as an inspired witness who writes down the words dictated to him. However, the inspiring quality of script disappears instantaneously as soon as its spiritual value is replaced by a monetary one. Compare also Pulkki 2018 who states that “textual production is reduced to its monetary value alone, subject to supply and demand like any other product” (295).

39 Compare Arne Kittang's close reading of Hamsun's novel with regard to *Psychological Deep Structure and Metapoetic Plot*, where he would make much of the same argument, suggesting that “the hero uses language and discourse act as a force of separation and aggression” (1985, 299).

40 «Og jeg havde benyttet mig af hans Frygt, havde pint ham med min højrøstede Tale, spiddet ham med hvert Ord, som jeg raabte ud» (SLT, 101).

41 «jeg ledte efter noget at sige hende til Afsked, et tungt, dybt Ord, som kunde ramme hende» (SLT, 118).

42 «det rammende Ord kom ikke» (ibid.).

43 «Det blev Svada og Boksprog igjen» (ibid.).

44 Compare Job 3.3–6: “Let the day perish in which I was born,/and the night that said,/‘A man-child is conceived.’/Let that day be darkness!/May God above not seek it,/or light shine on it./Let gloom and deep darkness claim it./Let clouds settle upon it;/let the blackness of the day terrify it./That night—let thick darkness seize it!”

I say to you, you holy Baal of heaven, you do not exist, but if you did exist I would curse you until your heaven trembled with the fires of hell. [...] I say to you, I know I shall die and yet I mock you, Our Heavenly Apis, with death before my eyes. You have used force against me, and you do not know that I never bend in adversity.⁴⁵ (HG, 154)

These words, too, die away without being heard and without having any effect. They are nothing more than a faded literary language: “Alas, it was nothing but rhetoric and literature, which I tried to get right, even in the midst of my misery it turned into a speech”⁴⁶ (HG, 155). The same words can, however, also act as narcotics, as do Ylajali’s words at the first and last intimate meeting with the narrator: “Every one of her words intoxicated me, fell on my heart like drops of wine”⁴⁷ (HG, 165). Yet this intoxication lasts only briefly, and when the hero is sober again the young woman has disappeared for good.

Finally, taking into consideration the threefold decomposition of creator, creature and creative word, creation seems no longer a religious issue but, as I would argue, an *aesthetic* one. This is of utmost importance for the relationship between Creator and creature, as well as for the notion of creating presented in the *Hunger*-book. It is from an *artistic* point of view the protagonist tries to challenge his Maker – whom he addresses again and again throughout the whole text. In recomposing the fractured conglomerates of Biblical mosaic stones, he tries to establish himself as an artist, as *the* Artist, and consequently – as a Creator himself.

Recomposing Creation: The Aesthetic Inversion of the Scriptural Order of Genesis 1–2⁴⁸

In one of the most intricate passages of Hamsun’s novel, the prison scene in the book’s second part, the ultimate sacrilege is committed, namely the aesthetic in-

45 «Jeg siger dig, du Himlens hellige Ba'al, du er ikke til, men hvis du var til, saa skulde jeg bande dig slig, at din Himmel skulde dirre av Helvedes Ild. [...] Jeg siger dig, jeg ved, at jeg skal dø, og jeg haaner dig dog, du Himlens Gud og Apis, med Døden lige for Tænderne. [...] Jeg siger dig, du har brukt Magt mod mig, og du ved ikke, du alvidende Nul, at jeg aldrig bøjer mig i Modgang.» (SLT, 105).

46 «Ak det var bare Boksprog og Litteratur som jeg prøvet at faa godt til endda midt i min Elendighet, det blev Tale» (SLT, 182).

47 «Hvert af hendes Ord berused mig, traf mig i Hjærtet som Vindraaper» (SLT, 113).

48 Portions of this chapter appeared in German in my monograph *Hervorbringungen. Zur Poetik des Anfangens um 1900* (2014). All previously published material has, however, been revised and expanded in the present context.

version of the scriptural order of Creation. The creation narrative from Genesis, the divine book of generation and production, is narrated *backwards*. In the form of a rivaling ‘reverse narration’, composed of numerous fragments of the First Book of Moses, the protagonist categorically declares war – on God the Creator:

Did you frame my heart in your sleep? I say to you, my whole body and every drop of blood in me rejoice in mocking you and spitting on your grace. From this moment on I shall renounce all your works and all your ways, I shall curse my thoughts if they ever think of you again and tear off my lips if they speak your name.⁴⁹ (HG, 154)

The *Hunger*-text uses both the inversion of the creation narration and the archetype of *creatio ex nihilo* as poetological concepts in order to place the rebelling subject in the position of God. This archetype of *creatio ex nihilo*, conceptually speaking, expresses the idea that a deity creates the universe from nothing, as opposed to a *prima materia*.⁵⁰ From a philosophical and theological perspective it describes the act whereby the Creator brings the entire substance of *some thing* into existence, out of a radical state of non-existence (*nihilo*). However, the preposition *ex*, “out of”, does not imply that no-thing is to be conceived as the material out of which a some-thing is made. Rather, the *ex* means the negation of precedent material, out of which the creation proceeds. And, most notably, it describes an *order of succession*: existence *after* non-existence. The latter is of particular importance for the close reading of *Hunger* as a reverse creation narrative. Considering the role of Genesis more generally,⁵¹ it is crucial to acknowledge the “literature-creating and literature-defining impulse coming from the Bible as category of thought”.⁵² Constantly recombining fragments of the First Book of Moses, the hunger artist struggles for the negation of the Christian God’s antecedent creativity as I will show in the following close reading of one of the most mystifying scenes of the whole novel.

The prison scene opens with the nameless narrator reporting himself to the police as homeless (“husvild”, 51); he had lost his keys and nowhere to sleep and

49 «Dannet du mit Hjærte i Søvn? Jeg sier dig, hele mit Liv og hver Blodsdraape i mig glæder sig over at haane dig og bespytte din Naade. Jeg siger dig, jeg vil fra denne Stund forsage alle dine Gærninger og alt dit Væsen, jeg vil forbande min Tanke, om den tænker paa dig igjen, og rive mine Læber af, om de atter nævner dit Navn» (SLT, 105–106).

50 For an illuminating discussion of the figure of *creatio ex nihilo*, see especially May 1978. See also Scholem 1970; Bauks 1997; Löning/Zenger 1997 and Welker 1995.

51 For more on the importance of Genesis in literature, see for example Lieb 2009 and Frühwald 1999.

52 „literaturschaffende[n] und literaturprägende[n] Impuls, der von der Bibel als Denkform aus[geht]“ (Lieb 2009, 43).

thus opts to stay overnight in the city prison. Just the day before his landlady had ordered him to move out as soon as he could. Unsheltered and without a home to call his own, he finds himself debarred from the community (of believers),⁵³ and thus banned from his very own resting place: “therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden [...]. He drove out the man” (Gen 3.23–24).

Requested to identify himself to the police officer on duty, the hitherto anonymous protagonist gives himself the pretense of the highly respectable name of a journalist with the Norwegian newspaper *Morgenbladet*:

Name? the officer on duty asked.

Tangen – Andreas Tangen.

[...] I hit upon this far-fetched name on the spur of the moment and tossed it out without any ulterior motive.⁵⁴ (HG, 72)

In so doing, he solemnly (“højtideligt”, 51) presents himself as a creative figure, a ‘Lord of the Names’⁵⁵ reminiscent of Adam who “gave names”.⁵⁶ He is finally taken in as a guest prisoner and shown up to a prison cell in the reserved section. The cell is unmistakably described as a paradisiac place: “The *bright* cell looked *friendly*; I felt *safely* indoors and listened with pleasure to the rain outside. How could I wish for anything better than such an *excellent* cell!”⁵⁷ (HG, 73; *italics added*). Thus, the protagonist enters a bright and safe enclosure,⁵⁸ a re-

53 This is reminiscent of the figure of “transcendental homelessness” [“transzendente Obdachlosigkeit”] (Lukács 1994, 32) Georg Lukács describes in his *Die Theorie des Romans* (1920). Lukács refers directly to creative production when he says that the last basic principles of creating have become homeless (ibid., 31).

54 «‘Navn?’ spurgte Vagthavende. / ‘Tangen – Andreas Tangen.’ / [...] jeg hittede dette fjærntliggende Navn i Øjeblikket og slyngede det ud, uden nogen Beregning» (SLT, 51).

55 The nameless protagonist incessantly creates names for both himself and others, e. g. Wedel-Jarlsberg, Ylajali, Happolati and Kierulf.

56 Compare Gen 2.19–20; *italics added*: “The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field”.

57 «Den lyse Celle saa venlig ud; jeg følte mig godt og vel i Hus og lyttede med Velbehag til Regnen udenfor. Jeg skulde ikke ønske mig noget bedre end en saadan koselig Celle!» (SLT, 52) In a recent article on “Dance and Dizziness” Gediminas Karoblis suggests that Hamsun recurrently “creates images of acrophobia, spatial and motion discomfort” (2015, 175–176), i. a. referring to the darkness in the prison cell. Thus, the author obviously does not take into account the description of the cell as bright (“lys”), friendly (“venlig”), excellent (“koselig”) and safe (“godt og vel”).

58 The highest degree of attaining possible fulfillment in *Hunger* acquires traces of transcendence and is marked by unmistakable light metaphor. What at first appears to be an obvious opposition (light/dark) is rendered paradoxical by the appearance of still another state: that of purity. Emptiness (*nihilo*) thus does not just characterize the prison scene or the desolate, emptied organism of the hungry protagonist, but also his immaculateness. This is once more reminiscent

served, i. e. exclusive room of his own: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden” (Gen 2.15). Once more the cell inmate replays the scene of imprisonment in his mind and reenacts the biblical scene of naming and denominating, following Genesis 2: “and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man *gave names*” (Gen 2.19–20; *italics added*).

All of a sudden, by a change of tense from past to present-tense narration,⁵⁹ the text’s as well as the protagonist’s point of view are modified and the latter steps into a new order of things:

I *sat* down on the bed and *heard* the key being turned. [...] All of a sudden the *gas goes* out, so strangely all of a sudden, without diminishing, without dwindling; I *sit* in utter darkness, unable to see my own hand or the white walls around me – nothing.⁶⁰ (HG, 73; *italics added*)

This sudden change of tenses marks the central incident of the prison scene: the protagonist steps out of the Creation. He is out of tune with the scriptural and temporal order of the (past-tense) creation narration, and by changing time zones he enters a state of unmediated presence.⁶¹ Without warning the light goes out, “without diminishing, without dwindling”⁶² (HG, 74), and the nameless hero is no longer able to see. His eyes are shut and he takes off his clothes: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Gen 3.7). Here we can clearly observe how the text incessantly confronts us with a very precise *reversed* version of what happens in the biblical creation account. While the eyes of the paradise dwellers are opened, the prisoner’s eyes are shut: “I closed my eyes”⁶³ (HG, 74). While Adam and Eve begin to understand that they are naked and seek to dress, the hero takes off his clothes: “I got undressed”⁶⁴ (HG, 74). This is how Hamsun’s

of the paradox of a decadent (Nietzschean) “ascent in decline”: plenitude in emptiness, emptiness in plenitude.

59 For other examples of the use of tense change, see for example Benedikt Jäger 1998 who suggests that the use of the past tense can be read as the tense that marks the moments of overcoming (cf. 65).

60 «Jeg *satte* mig paa Sengen og *hørte*, hvor Nøglen blev vreden om. [...] Saa *slukner* pludseligt Gassen, saa forunderlig pludseligt, uden at tage af, uden at svinde ind; jeg *sidder* i dybt Mørke, jeg kan ikke se min Haand, ikke de hvide Vægge omkring mig, intet» (SLT, 52; *italics added*).

61 Gry Hedin discusses the eye-catching change of tenses from a quite different point of view, arguing that this change is a result of the decomposition of the subject into an acting, a contemplating, and a reflecting one (cf. 2011, 341).

62 «uden at tage af, uden at svinde ind» (SLT, 52).

63 «Jeg lukked Øjnene» (ibid.).

64 «Og jeg klædte mig af» (ibid.).

nameless protagonist, step by step, continues his backward inspection of the creation narrative. After the gas goes out, light and darkness are no longer separated and in the blackness of the jail cell, all distinctions dissolve: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.” (Gen 1.3–4). Accordingly, the protagonist finds himself in a world of utter darkness and is thus taken back to the undivided chaos:

The darkness had taken possession of my thoughts and didn’t leave me alone for a moment. [...] I stared out into the darkness – and never in my born days had I seen such a darkness. There was no doubt that here I found myself before a special kind of darkness [...].⁶⁵ (HG, 74)

By delving into a darkness without form and void,⁶⁶ he returns to the beginning, he is *in* the beginning, in the “desperate element which no one had previously been aware of”⁶⁷ (HG, 74). – “*In the beginning when God created*” (Gen 1.1).

This backdrop may be described as an originary scene arising when the order of creation is extinguished and everything returns to a state of utter darkness, of ultimate chaos. This causes the prisoner to be certain that he is finally dissolving and becoming one with the darkness – a motif of complete atomization. Once more the changing of tenses highlights that something remarkable is about to happen: “*I lay back to try and fall asleep, but in reality to fight the darkness once more. [...] Suddenly I snap my fingers several times and laugh. What the hell was this!*”⁶⁸ (HG, 75; *italics added*).

From a broader perspective, the hero’s confrontation with darkness is reminiscent of the mythical night journey, a symbolic descent into the realm of ultimate nothingness – into *nihilo*. Yet instead of a fall into darkness the opposite occurs: a leap, a sparkling act of creation. Out of nothing – *ex nihilo* – arises a word, innocent and free of any meaning. It appears in the state of a ‘pure’ signifier that (as yet) signifies nothing; it is a word in a state of innocence, immediately following its own birth: “I imagined I had found a new word. I sit up in bed and say, It

⁶⁵ «Mørket havde besat min Tanke og lod mig ikke et Øjeblik i Fred. [...] Jeg stirred ud i Mørket, og jeg havde aldrig i mine Levedager set et saadant Mørke. Der var ingen Tvivl om, at jeg her befandt mig foran en egen Sort af Mørke» (ibid.).

⁶⁶ Compare Gen 1.2: “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep”.

⁶⁷ «et desperat Element, som ingen tidligere havde været opmærksom paa» (SLT, 53).

⁶⁸ «Jeg lagde mig tilbage, forat forsøge at falde i Søvn, men i Virkeligheden for atter at kæmpe med Mørket. [...] Pludselig knipser jeg i Fingrene flere Gange og ler. Det var da som bare Fan!» (SLT, 53; *italics added*).

doesn't exist in the language, I have invented it – *Kubooa*. It does have letters like a word – Christ, man, you have invented a word....*Kubooa*...”⁶⁹ (HG, 75).⁷⁰

The undermining of God's creative power reaches its climax in the use of the divine creation formula when the protagonist exclaims: “I sit up in bed *and say*” (ibid.; *italics added*): “God said”.⁷¹ With the discovery, i. e. the creation of a new word which does not yet exist in the language, the prisoner, by choice, subverts the almighty power of God. Putting himself *in* the beginning, the initial starting point of Creation, he challenges the omnipotent Maker who creates *with* the word. But the obstinate protagonist goes even one step further – he creates *the* Word. The creation narrative from the First Book of Moses is narrated backwards; that is – it is taken back. Thus, God's antecedent creativity is *taken back* and the subject is no longer belated; it takes the place of God and is thus able to be primarily creative.

At this point, we would suppose the hunger artist to be satisfied; he has challenged and outplayed his Creator. But realizing the power of his own transgression, a transgression symbolically enacted as a move against God Himself, he still has to breathe life into his very own creation: “and [God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen 2.7). Therefore, the incarcerated protagonist desperately seeks to fill out the empty word by successively filling in different meanings. Yet each of these meanings is quickly rejected. It goes without saying that he begins with the word “God”, after which he tries out a whole arsenal of words (“amusement park”, “cattle show”, “padlocks”, “sunrise”, “emigration”, “tobacco factory”, “knitting yarn” [HG, 75] et cetera)⁷² in order to fill out the ‘empty word’. However, he does not succeed in arriving at a final decision and the word begins to torment its creator. He tries to rest from the word which he had made,⁷³ but fails because “nothing seemed to [him] good enough for this rare

69 «Ha! – Jeg inbildte mig at have fundet et nyt Ord. Jeg rejser mig op i Sengen og siger: Det findes ikke i Sproget, jeg har opfundet det, *Kubooa*. Det har Bogstaver som et Ord, ved sødeste Gud, Mand, du har opfundet et Ord....*Kubooa*...» (SLT, 53).

70 In accordance with my reading, Arne Kittang reads the word as “pure difference” (305) and stresses that “creativity and writing are preconditioned by nothingness” (Kittang 1985, 306). For differing views on the *Kubooa* scene, see for example Erik Østerud's interpretation of the prison scene as an inversion and parody of the hermeneutical process of interpretation (cf. 2002, 54). See also Peter Mæleng's article where the author suggests that the structure of *kubooa* coincides with the narrator's ambiguous [bulimic] body image (cf. 1994, 130).

71 Gen 1.3, 1.6, 1.9, 1.11, 1.14, 1.20, and 1.24.

72 “Tivoli”, “Dyrskue”, “Hængelaas”, “Solopgang”, “Emigration”, “Tobaksfabrik”, “Strikkegarn” (SLT, 53–54).

73 Compare Gen 2.2; *italics added*: “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and *he rested* on the seventh day *from all the work that he had done*”.

word”⁷⁴ (HG, 76): “And God saw that it was good”.⁷⁵ For a long time the sleepless prisoner seeks to find a meaning for the empty ‘shell of a word’ until he finally comes to believe that he will die of it. The inversion of the creation (narration) has proved to be beyond his power and he is caught in the logic of his own hubris.

Finally, the passage ends in silence – with the negation of the protagonist’s counter creation. After the first glimmer of light penetrates the cell, he folds his hands in a religious gesture⁷⁶ and completely forgets his word. He has lost the battle against God. Nonetheless, for a brief moment, he had become a creator who has his being of himself and gives being – to a word, his own original *word creation*.

What remains, in any case, is the matter of creative originality, creative rivalry and creative power. Thus, Hamsun’s *Hunger*-text introduces an aesthetic variation on the narrative of creation and recounts the story of how text, language and the creative subject itself come into being.

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⁷⁴ «intet var [ham] godt nok for dette ualminderligt sjældne Ord» (SLT, 54).

⁷⁵ Gen 1.10, 1.12, 1.18, 1.21 and 1.25.

⁷⁶ Compare: “I sat up on the floor, folded my hands, and waited patiently for daybreak.” (HG, 75). («Jeg satte mig overende paa Gulvet, folded Hænderne og ventede taalmodig paa Dagens Frembrud.», SLT, 56).

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