

## Sult

*K.Hamsun*

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I am familiar with the book, or rather with the existence of which. In my library I have had for a long time a Swedish translation where the cover shows the emaciated face of the partially unhinged Swedish actor - Per Oscarsson - who starred in the eponymous movie from the 60's. It is a classic, and having recently picked it up in the original at my most recent visit to Oslo, there is no excuse not to dip into it. Hamsun if any, has a controversial reputation in Norway, one of the results of enjoying a long life is that there will be plenty of opportunities to make a fool of yourself, but not worse than his books being very much still in print. I did read a book by Hamsun in my youth, but that is almost forty years ago, incidentally an almost unfathomable span of time at that age. Nevertheless I found it hard to get engaged, maybe because of many conflicting duties and diversions, and most of it I read during the last two days.

In many ways the novel strikes you as rather modern, something that a recent writer such as Knausgård may have concocted. In other words, it is a novel that almost obsessively focuses on the minutiae of the daily life of the protagonist who is clearly the alter ego of the author himself. As such he is hardly a sympathetic figure, although inevitably engaging our sympathies, however reluctant those may have been bestowed. He is a pathetic figure, down on his heels if anyone was. Starving, divested of most of his clothes, unshaven, unwashed, and limping around the city. Of course he is a writer, most autobiographical accounts are of writers for some strange reasons. And not one without talent as subsequent developments would disclose. He is not turned out of doors by newspaper editors, instead he is from time to time given some money to keep himself afloat. Thus his only worldly possessions apart from his tattered clothes are some sheaves of papers, fitting into what must be a generous pocket, and a stump of a pencil doing a lot of work. So in a way not much happens, which adds to the tedium of the narrative, and as such no doubt a faithful rendering of what it means to be starving. It is mostly a case of actually starving, meaning being constantly aware of the lack of food and thinking of food all the time and killing the same, as there are few opportunities for distraction and entertainment, so time hangs heavy on you. If there are few such diversions you have to make them up yourself, and given the limited opportunities, they are bound to be rather pathetic, reflecting the circumstances in general. One such is to pester two young ladies causing them a mixture of irritation and fascination. As a reader one surmises that this will have a follow up, as it actually will, if much later in the book. One of those young ladies takes a fancy to him of sorts, hanging around outside his apartment, because after all he manages to keep a room, although he is in arrears as to his rent, what else can you expect, and in constant fear of his landlady. One day he picks up some pluck and asks her what she is up to. He cannot see her face, veiled by a shroud, but he can see that she is young and has a nice bust. His invitations are turned down but he is allowed to accompany her to her home, and he trips on clouds while he walks at her side through the city. At her place she gives him a hug

and a kiss smack on the mouth, and promises him a rendez-vous a few days later. She makes good on her promise, and when they meet outside her home he prevails on her to take him up to her apartment temporarily vacated from mother and maid. A seduction scene ensues, a slow undressing one button after the other and a promise to get to kiss her breasts. But then something goes foul, as it surely is bound to do in such a tense and charged situation. There are confessions and admonishments, and in the end he is forced to leave the premises short of any kind of consummation for reader and protagonist alike. Later on he will meet her again, but now with another suitor. Had he been taken on a ride? In the interim he has moved to another boarding place, where he once again lives on credit, but is soon thrown out of his room, where he is desperately trying to write a masterpiece in the form of a medieval play, to make place for a more promising guest and repair to the family kitchen where the husband in the family spends his time playing cards, while the children go on a rampant pestering a demented grandfather. The scene is almost Dickensian. Further work on his masterpiece is impossible and soon he is out in the cold again. Of the play nothing comes out in the end and he shreds his manuscript into pieces, and shortly thereafter enlists on a boat heading for England. End of story to the relief of reader and protagonist alike.

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