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Michał Kruszelnicki

Dolnośląska Szkoła Wyższa we Wrocławiu.

A Heideggerian Reading of Knut Hamsun's* Growth of the Soil*. Abstract

The article proposes a reading of Knut Hamsun's Nobel Prize winning novel *Growth of the Soil* that will simultaneously follow the interpretive inspirations provided for it by the philosophical thought of Martin Heidegger. The "eco-critical" reading of Hamsun with Heidegger is encouraged by some intriguing similarities to be found between Heidegger's and Hamsun's perspectives of seeing the world and the relations human beings enter with it. It is argued that both Heidegger and Hamsun hoped for an existence that would be sensitive to the significance of the everydayness (both to the things created by man, and those brought forth by nature), but also open to receiving the world as a mysterious and extraordinary gift which exceeds human comprehension. I believe Hamsun's famous novel provides the reader with a fine model of a "poetic dwelling" – the paramount idea late Heidegger was trying to illuminate.

A Heideggerian Reading of Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*

Introduction: Hamsun in the Heideggerian, "eco-critical" perspective

In this paper I propose an interpretation of Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* basing on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's was a specific approach to the literary text which in regard to Hamsun's novel appears inspiring. Heidegger claimed that the primal experience of the poetic word consists in opening the perspective of "Being". The immense influence of Heidegger's thought in the twentieth century can be summarized with perhaps one sentence: he made us realize that the entities or objects we encounter in the lifeworld do not exist in the form of full "presence" susceptible to

an easy appropriation, but they emerge in the form of their being, which means that they "become" rather than simply "are".

According to Heidegger, there are poetic texts which more than others deserve our attention and our listening. It is so because they have a power of disclosing the being of the world. In the language of these texts we can experience being, get closer to its mysterious nature which in real life only seldom gives itself to man in something that Heidegger would call "Lightning" or "Clearing" – a momentary appearance of being and its subsequent withdrawal. Reflecting on the nature of poetry, Heidegger distinguished between the essential poetry (*Dichtung*) – the one that opens the phenomenon of being and the ordinary poetry (*Poesie*) – the one which expresses only a particular experience in words. He saw the prominent representatives of the first type of poetry among a few German poets such as Hölderlin, Rilke or Novalis. Reading such poetry, Heidegger mused, brings about a transformation of the reader's attitude to the text. Instead of reducing the text to the subjective horizon of his or her interpretation, the reader, the interpreter listens to the text and feels *himself* being questioned, summoned by it to a more sensitive participation in the surrounding world.

My intention in this study is to read Hamsun in a way Heidegger would read poetic texts, which, as I hope, will shed a new light on *Growth of the Soil* and allow me to dismiss some of the typical criticisms of this novel. I mean here particularly the argument concerning the "naïve" and "utopian" optimism of the novel's message, its "reactionary" character, and further, the objection concerning the non-typicality of the figure of the protagonist – a simple working man who stands out from the gallery of Hamsun's ambivalent characters. Instead of discrediting the novel as naïve or utopian, I want to give it a chance to reveal its own specificity and seriously tackle the task that it poses to our thinking. Therefore, I will argue that Hamsun's novel is worth reading not *despite* its naïveté but *because* of it. Approached with a proper reading strategy, it can be viewed as an example of Heideggerian "essential poetry" and reveal its message, which, as I hope to show, amounts to a powerful call for a change in our attitude towards the earth which we inhabit so thoughtlessly.

1. „Poetical dwelling"

Heidegger used to say, quite mysteriously indeed, that the most basic, albeit nowadays dramatically forgotten, feature of human dwelling in the world is its „poetical" character. In a famous analysis of one of Friedrich Hölderlin's poems Heidegger interpreted the following words of the poet:

Full of merit, yet poetically
man dwells on this earth
(Heidegger 2003:268)

Heidegger emphasizes that the word „yet" introduces a limitation to human dwelling, which is supposedly "full of merit". This is because all human merits "never fill out the nature of dwelling" – he writes (268). The very essence of human dwelling on the earth lies in its poetical nature. According to Heidegger, poetical dwelling is characterized by a gesture known to all great poets: taking measure of that which surpasses the human being: on the divinity, mystery, the unknown. Let us cite some key fragments from his essay:

> To write poetry is measure-taking, understood in the strict sense of the word, by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being. (…) His dwelling rests in the poetic. (272)

> Man, as man, has always measured himself with and against something heavenly. (…) Man's dwelling depends on an upward-looking measure taking of the dimension, In which the sky belongs just as much as the earth. (271)

In an essay *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry* Heidegger supplements his inquiries into the subject with yet another crucial remark:

> To 'dwell poetically' means: to stand in the presence of the Gods and to be involved in the proximity of the essence of the things (Heidegger 1949: 305).

The first two sentences speak about the necessity of taking measure of the higher order that exceeds human beings ("measuring oneself against something heavenly", "upward looking"). In being aware of this order and guarding it in its mystery we begin to live poetically, we dwell in a nearness of beings and that which is infinite – gods. According to Heidegger, the greatest danger of our times lies in the forgetfulness of that mystery. "Full of merit", man thinks that he has explained and technologically subordinated the world, but in fact he has only lost his ability to welcome life as something mysterious that surpasses him in the secrecy of its giving.

Heidegger identifies human dwelling with poetry: both the poet and the dwelling man have to take measure of the mystery. However, this taking measure does not mean an intentional search. Heidegger speaks of the necessity of taking this mystery „in a concentrated perception, that remains a listening" (Heidegger 2003: 273). In order for our perception of the world to remain listening, it must be conjoined with an awareness that all we are able to know from it is but a small piece of the world's message; all our attempts at comprehending the mystery are doomed to failure. Heidegger was terrified to see that his contemporaries were taking pride in that the world had longer any mysteries hidden from them. The generations to come were to confirm his catastrophic vision of the world ripped open by human beings who have lost themselves in the technological conquest of the earth.

Now, it is my contention that Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* portrays the ideal of a poetical dwelling. For a start of our analysis I will cite a fragment in which Hamsun describes the inhabitants of Sellanrå who stand under the northern sky and marvel at its curiosities:

> They had this good fortune at Sellanraa, that every spring and autumn they could see the grey geese sailing in fleets above that wilderness, and hear their chatter up in the air – delirious talk it was. And as if the world stood still for a moment, till the train of them had passed. And the

> human souls beneath, did they not feel a weakness gliding through them now? They went to their work again, but drawing breath first; something had spoken to them, something from beyond.
>
> Great marvels were about them at all times; in the winter were the stars; in winter often, too, the northern lights, a firmament of wings, a conflagration in the mansions of God. Now and then, not often; not commonly, but now and then, they heard the thunder. It came mostly in the autumn, and a dark and solemn thing it was for man and beast; the animals grazing near home would bunch together and stand waiting. Bowing their heads – what for? Waiting for the end? And man, what of man standing in the wilds with bowed head, waiting, when the thunder came? Waiting for what?
>
> (Hamsun 1920: 169 / Hamsun 1992: 247)[1]

The flight of the wild geese results in an almost religious effect: humans are confronted with a higher force in the face of which they feel fragile. Their feeling is one of participation in the mystery of being. Let us recall that Edevart in Hamsun's *Wayfereres* was taught by his parents to take off his hat whenever he saw flying geese, and the title protagonist of *August* taught the same lesson to little Roderik when he started to sow seed. In the above description Hamsun suggests that the inhabitants of Sellanrå await something, yet he does not explain just what they are waiting for. He only says that they would stand in the wilds "with bowed head" (*lutet med hodet*).

Now, in a lecture entitled *Gelassenheit* (translated to English as *Discourse on Thinking*) Heidegger spoke of awaiting as a mode of human existence – an existence open to the mystery of being, an *awaiting* that does not become *expecting*, *looking forward* (Heidegger 1966: 68), which would stand for human's typical attempt conquer being and take what it has to offer by force. Feeling that the human is in fact not the master of being but essentially belongs to it as only one of its elements, Hamsun's protagonists make space for the free unfolding of being.

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[1] The reference to the English translation of *Growth of the Soil* is followed by the reference to the original text of *Markens grøde* in Knut Hamsun's *Samlede Verker*, vol. 7, Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1992.

The advocate of such a "poetical" attitude towards the world could be seen in sheriff Geissler who compares his role in the northern wilderness to that of a "fog" (*tåke*), while describing his son as a "lightning" (*lyn*) (Hamsun 1920: 399 / Hamsun 1992: 392). The lightning and the fog stand for two different modes of being in the world and thinking about it. At one side we have un urge to illuminate being with the light of human knowledge and exert a violent influence on it demanding that it bring us immediate benefits, at the other side there is an attentive listening to being's, approaching it carefully, with respect, with no egoistic attempt at dominating it cognitively or physically.

The scene showing the inhabitants of Sellanrå standing in the field depicts yet another feature of poetic dwelling. I mean here being able to find one's place in the world that, according to Heidegger, is constituted by four orders: the earth, the sky, the divine creatures and the mortals. Commenting on the meaning of Heidegger's concept of "the fourfold" Otto Pöggeler wrote:

> When Heidegger thinks the world as the fourfold, he is reflecting on the oldest thoughts. Man, still at home in the mythical experience of world, experienced the world as the marriage of earth and sky and he saw himself as the mortal under the claim of God. (Pöggeler 1989: 201)

According to Heidegger's famous expression: „Mortals dwell in that they save the earth (…), receive the sky as sky, (…) await the divinities as divinities", and are "capable of death as death" (Heidegger 1978a: 352). Let us note that all the four *modi* of human dwelling assume that man renounce control over what he will never comprehend: the earth, the sky, the divine creatures and the death. Isak's family take care of the earth as something most important to them. The flight of the geese and the thunder make them realize the eternal power of nature's rhythm, which consists in passing away and approaching death, eternity, where they are likely to meet the Immortals. Hamsun's heroes are aware of their finitude, they accept it, like Isak who does not attach himself to life; he is ready to accept death as death – to leave this life with dignity. Likewise, on Sellanrå the sky is received simply as sky not as a resource for technological appropriation. The sun and the rain, the day and the night are left to their natural

course, the inhabitants do not rebel against the rhythm of seasons or weather. They are aware of higher powers that govern their lives and await their interference at any moment, like Isak, who has never read a book, but "his thoughts often turned to God".

To conclude: taking measure of a mystery that surmounts humans and finding one's own place in the fourfold: these are the features of man's poetical dwelling in the world. It goes without saying that dwelling poetically does not imply reading fragments from Hölderlin or Hamsun hoping that this will grant us a more intense experience of nature. Nor does it amount to praising nature's beauty, as does lieutenant Thomas Glahn in Hamsun's *Pan* or Johann Nagel in *Mysteries*. Interestingly, it seems futile to look in *Growth of the Soil* for typical for young Hamsun explosions of lyricism in describing the landscape. Even if simple Isak and Inger were capable of engaging in such aesthetic ecstasies, as Hamsun's extremists of sensitivity – Glahn and Nagel – they would still be unable to express their thoughts: they are too simple. Poetically dwells the one who realizes that nature speaks to us in a poetical manner, disclosing and concealing itself at the same time, taking away our own words and requiring from us, as poetry does, an effort to understand its message with full awareness that we cannot and should not know everything from it. In *På gjengrodde stier* Hamsun expresses this attitude in the following aphorism: „God bless all that not only is ordinary human speech that we need to sit and understand. Silence is also a blessing from God" (Hamsun 1992: 281).

2. The care for the thing

The inseparable aspect of human dwelling on earth is also to be surrounded by things and to be near to them. Heidegger observed, however, that in the tradition of Western thinking the object exists only in so far as it is "present" for the subject, in the sense of it being understandable, explicable and useful for humans. We cannot think differently about the thing: we always reduce it to a sheer presence to manipulate. This distance between man and the thing has been widened by the progress of technology which by

way of diminishing the distances in time and space has paradoxically increased the distance between us and the material world. Therefore, Heidegger asks:

> What is nearness if it fails to come about despite the reduction of the longest distances to the shortest intervals? What is nearness if it is repelled by the restless abolition of distances? What is nearness if, along with its failure to appear, remoteness also remains absent? (Heidegger 1975: 165-166)

In *Growth of the Soil* one can see the contrast between Isak's family which has learned how to respect and protect the world of things, and the seekers of copper who appear in the mountains. Equipped with heavy machines and explosives they introduce rapid changes into a world created by nature. They extend the state of the "absence of nearness" – as Heidegger calls it – the state in which the world of things is being disregarded and, finally, destroyed.

For Hamsun's protagonists the objects which for some would seem most trivial, mundane and meaningless are prodigious gifts delivering the most profound emotions and approached with the greatest respect. Recall the moment when Isak orders and admires his freshly bought tools:

> He took up the other things: the harrow, the grindstone, a new fork he had bought, all the costly agricultural implements, treasures of the new home, a grand array. All requisite appliances – nothing was lacking. (Hamsun 1920: 27 / Hamsun 1992: 160)

> He slowly takes out the horse and leads it into the stable: ay, here is Isak putting his horse into the stable! Feeds it and strokes it and treats it tenderly. (27 / 160-161).

In the next chapter Hamsun gives a picturesque description of yet another objects appearing in Isak's house:

> One day he brought home a lamp. […] They lit it the same evening, and were in paradise; little Eleseus he thought, no doubt, it was the sun. […] Then one day he came back with a clock. With what? – A clock. This was too much for Inger; she was overwhelmed and could not say a word.

> Isak hung it up on the wall, and set it at a guess, wound it up, and let it strike. (…) Of all good things, here in a lonely place, there was nothing better than a clock to go all the dark winter through, and strike so prettily at the hours. (35 / 165-166)

An ordinary object of daily use, such as a lamp or a clock, enchants Isak's family because they realize what exactly they are being gifted with by it. In the famous description of a jug constituting a part of the lecture entitled *The Thing* Heidegger claims that the thing's task is to provide space for the eternal play of four elements of the world. The thing, if conceived of properly and not merely as an instrument for human's activities, gathers the earth and heaven, mortals and divine ones into nearness.

In order to understand this vague idea let us try to think with Heidegger about the jug. The jug gives us the gift of drinking. Drinking water from it, we drink a part of the sky, for it is the sky that blesses the earth with morning dew and rain, fills the rivers, lakes and seas; we also drink a part of the soil, which is in the water in the form of minerals. As mortals we drink from the jug to satiate our thirst, to live, but also for pleasure. In the past, when ritual drinks were poured into jugs, people did it in order to endow with them with the presence of the infinite ones, the gods. "In the gift of the outpouring – Heidegger concludes – earth and sky, divinities and mortals, dwell *together all at once*" (Heidegger 1975: 175).

By way of such a poetic, metaphorical language Heidegger wanted to sensitize men to the exceptionality of the material world surrounding us, something we often overlook and disrespect. He wanted to teach us the reverence for the thing as a gift, which we learn to appreciate only when we are deprived of it. It is a strange and terrible attribute of our human existence – this blindness towards the everyday reality. Thus Maurice Blanchot reasonably noticed that the everyday is something that is "most difficult to discover", something that constantly hides itself and "escapes" (Blanchot 1961: 355, 364). Heidegger tried to bring it near to us. Let us stress, however, that his position is not that the thing is regarded and treated properly if we assign some kind of an artificial "divinity" to it – it would be all too easy to ridicule his thought in this respect. What he has in mind is that the thing becomes a thing only

when one is able to see its interrelation with all other things and how indispensable they are for one another.

The fragments of *Growth of the Soil* in which Hamsun tries to seize the escaping everydayness, lay his hand on it, see the things in their nearness to humans seem to me of high literary value. The significance that Isak and Inger assign to the ordinary lamp or a clock presents them as being able to think and experience the things not as useful elements of the decoration of their house, but as things in themselves, in their essence which comes down to gathering the world's fourfold into one place that is the human house. The light shed by the lamp in the middle of mountains and forests evokes the image of paradise, gives the inhabitants the feeling of security and allows them to enjoy the fruits obtained from the earth. The clock strikes the passing hours making the mortals aware that one day they will stand before the divine ones, which at the same time encourages them to remain humble and modest in life. And there is yet another phenomenon connected to the presence of those two objects in Isak's house. As readers we can easily sense that the space of the house became a space that protects and gives the feeling of security only after the lamp and the clock had appeared there. Without things the house would only be emptiness inside four walls. Furnished with things, it becomes shelter. Hereby in the novel an old wisdom comes to voice whose Heidegger was only one of the exponents: it is the things that let a certain space be what it is, making of the house a symbol of confidence, intimacy and peace.

3. The problem of technology

From the reflection upon the status of things I now pass to yet another eco-critical problem raised in *Growth of the Soil*. It is the problem of technology and accelerating civilization that enters the world of Northern people. The example of this is not only to be seen in the advanced equipment for copper exploitation that appears in the mountains together with merchants and workers, but also in the object of Isak'a greatest proud: his new grass-mower.

If it true that Hamsun had an ambivalent, if not hostile attitude to modern technology and modern civilization, it is not that certain that his protagonists would also go along with it. In what follows I want to challenge the interpretation that in *Growth of the Soil* Hamsun persuades us to return to a simpler life close to nature and afar from civilization.

First, let me just remind that Martin Heidegger's philosophical tools again prove useful in analyzing the problem of technique as it appears in Hamsun's novel. According to Heidegger, modern technology is a consequence of the way western philosophy used to conceptualize beings, and we already know that it used to regarding them in terms of full presence. Such thinking contributes to depriving nature of its autonomy and making of it a resource manipulated so that it would serve human's needs. Heidegger provided many examples of how the modern man challenges nature, demanding that it furnish him goods and energy. In an essay entitled *The Question Concerning Technology* he compared modern technological exploitation of the earth to the technology in the years past, exemplified in the work of an ancient peasant. Today, Heidegger writes:

> A tract of land is challenged in the exploitation of coal and ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order appeared differently when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In sowing grain it places seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which *sets upon* nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. (Heidegger 1978b: 320)

What makes the modern technology differ from the former usage of tools is the manner in which they are used. Technology, taking its name from the Greek word *techné*, used to let man bring forth the hidden essence of a substance that was being affected by a tool. For example, an old windmill, built naturally into the scenery, would let people use the wind for their purposes without making any damage to nature. An old bridge used to connect two sides of the river for centuries, constituting a mutual

neighborhood of the river and the land inhabited by people. Today it is the river that is built into the modern hydraulic power plant and set upon so that it can provide a water pressure. Modern technology also lets the new quality of being come into presence, but it is doing so by way of challenging being, rushing it, urging, demanding that it bring immediate economic income. A part of nature is disregarded and forgotten in its integrity and becomes meaningful only as a resource.

From the first pages of *Growth…* we see Isak collecting more and more sophisticated tools which are to enable him to improve his work on the soil and help in the maintenance of his household. Each of Isak's interferences in nature changes it, but it does so in the positive sense of using technology. Cutting trees discloses the forest's potency to become a field for grains and a pasture for animals. Processing the wood in the lumber-mill reveals the hidden truth of a tree as timber for erecting buildings that will accommodate the growing family and the animals. Hamsun is obviously fascinated with this process of bringing out the potency out of the wild land which only now, thanks to balanced technology, lets co-exist *both* nature and humans:

> Oh, the little green tracts in a forest, a hut and water, children and cattle about. Corn waving on the moorlands where naught but horsetail grew before, bluebells nodding on the fells, and yellow sunlight blazing in the ladyslipper flowers outside a house. And human beings living there, move and talk and think and are there with heaven and earth. (Hamsun 1920: 363 / Hamsun 1992: 369).

In *Growth of the Soil* technology alters the landscape, certainly, but it does so in such a manner, that the landscape begins to serve the purposes of nature as well as men – like the device for irrigating the fields introduced to Isak by Geissler.

It thus becomes clear that Hamsun was not strictly against technology or civilization; he only wished that it would serve the protection of the world, not its destruction. The right way of using technology, according to Heidegger and Hamsun, does not amount to the return to primitive times of human's struggle for survival, but to something that today might be called "sustainable agriculture" which intends to support farmers and the rural communities without causing irreversible damages to

the environment. This is how the essence of being is to be protected. Being affected by technology is ought not to be challenged and destroyed, but protected and conserved as a thing.

It is again sheriff Geissler who best verbalizes Hamsun's pre-Heideggerian intuitions concerning the meaning of technology. Now, it is worth recalling that enigmatic Geissler visits and helps only the habitants of Sellanrå, ridiculing and disregarding the other farmer – Brede of Breidablik. The key to his behavior is offered in his conversation with Isak, at the end of the novel:

> Ay, turning the means to an end in itself and are proud of it! They're mad, diseased; they don't work, they know nothing of the plough, only the dice. (Hamsun 1920: 401 / Hamsun 1992: 393)

Geissler thinks here about those villagers who in the exploitation of copper in the mountains saw a quick way to get rich and surround them with luxurious gadgets. According to Geissler, the goal should not be the means that is, production of copper, but the harmonic development of the northern terrains, the one that would account for both the needs of settlers and the needs of nature which hosts them. Technology should let the possibilities of the earth be brought forth, but do it sensibly, with responsibility for the earth and in cooperation of people and nature.

Hamsun portrayed the harmonic way in which Isak's household develops. Isak never begins to organize his farming blindly, without a previous plan. Just like a sculptor, who looks tenderly at the piece of wood as at the potency to become a beautiful shape, Isak is also an architect of the soil, somebody who only after he hears its call for care and concern starts changing it and making use of its goods. This attitude Hamsun depicts in the beautiful scene when Isak sits in the forest and looks down on his land:

> All is quiet around him, and God's blessing on this quiet and thoughtfulness, for it is nothing but good! Isak is a man at work on a clearing in the forest, and he looks out over the ground, reckoning what is to be cleared next turn; heaving aside great stones in his mind--Isak had a real talent for that work. There, he knows now, is a deep, bare patch on his ground; it is full of

> ore; there is always a metallic film over every puddle of water there--and now he will dig it out. He marks out squares with his eye, making his plans for all, speculating over all; they are to be made green and fruitful. Oh, but a piece of tilled soil was a great and good thing; it was like right and order to his mind, and a delight beyond… (Hamsun 1920: 171-172 / Hamsun 1992: 249)

4. Literature, poetry, language: opening the world

With Heidegger I am trying to think about Isak and his family as of momentarily affected, overwhelmed by the call of being that surrounds them. Inger must have felt such a call, when she was once standing and listening to the mysterious song of fish in a small mountain lake:

> North of Sellanraa there was a little tarn, a mere puddle, no bigger than an aquarium. There lived some tiny baby fish that never grew bigger, lived and died there and were no use at all – *Herregud*! no use on earth. One evening Inger stood there listening for the cowbells; all was dead about her, she heard nothing, and then came a song from the tarn. A little, little song, hardly there at all, almost lost. It was the tiny fishes' song. (Hamsun 1920: 168-169 / Hamsun 1992: 247)

I am trying to imagine what Inger must have felt hearing this song. And also what little Sivert felt when he observed the wild ducks chasing each other in the forest's lake. Let us cite the fragment where Hamsun described this experience:

> Sivert, walking one evening by the river, stops on a sudden; there on the water are a pair of ducks, male and female. They have sighted him; they are aware of man, and afraid; one of them says something, utters a little sound, a melody in three tones, and the other answers with the same. Then they rise, whirl off like two little wheels a stone's-throw up the river, and settle again. Then, as before, one speaks and the other answers; the same speech as at first, but mark a new delight: *it is set two octaves higher!* Sivert stands looking at the birds, looking past them, far into a dream. A sound had floated through him, a sweetness, and left him standing there with a delicate; thin recollection of something wild and splendid, something he had known before, and forgotten again. He walks home in silence, says no word of it, makes no boast of it,

> 'twas not for worldly speech. And it was but Sivert from Sellanraa, went out one evening, young and ordinary as he was, and met with this. (Hamsun 1920: 353 / Hamsun 1992: 362)

These adventures of Inger and Sivert could be compared to what Heidegger was describing as a moment when a man finds himself standing in the "clearing", or "lightning" of being (ger. *Lichtung*). Let us imagine that we walk through a dark forest but suddenly we come out at a glade bathed in sun. To stand in the „lightning of being" means to enter such a bright space. The lightning of being is not, however, any particular place. It is rather a kind of spiritual, existential experience. In this experience the world, the thing, the place momentarily reveals itself to us not as neutral presence or objectivity, but in its being which for a moment enchants us profoundly. This being of beings conceals itself and we are returned to the state of our indifference to the world.

Inquiring about the essence and the phenomenology of Sivert's and Inger's experiences we do nothing else but ask the famous Heideggerian questions: "what is being"? What is the being of beings"? In spite of his constant attempts to make his language metaphorical enough to give it a clear expression, Heidegger knew there is no language that could express the truth of being. Likewise, Hamsun says that Sivert's experience "was not for wordly speech". That's why neither Inger, nor Sivert speak about what they saw when they were alone in the woods. It is not communicable. It is to remain their own epiphany. These are the moments when language reaches the limit of the expressible, the limit of its own possibility. In such a situation we can choose one of three ways. We can either follow logic trying to explain it linguistically, or resort to illogical, albeit poetical, speech, or remain silent.

But what about literature? Is it able or – put in other words – does it have the necessary means to show the being of beings and confirm that a poetical language is capable of doing so?

According to Otto Pöggeler: „the thinking of the truth of being has its basic character in the silence which lets concealment be concealment. Thinking does not discuss one thing in order to be silent about what one (…) cannot discuss; rather, its

silence is eloquent, its discourse is silent; that is, it gives revealment back to concealment" (Pöggeler 1989: 223). The poetic word which makes an effort to express being, has to abandon a traditional discourse and the ambition to "adequately" present reality; it has to situate itself on the paradoxical borderline between speech and silence.

I have an impression that Hamsun follows exactly this path. We can see how he unfolds a description of Inger's or Sivert's epiphany just to suddenly cut off the narration and change the subject completely. What is more, when depicting his heroes' confrontation with the miracles of nature, Hamsun is careful to keep his language at the most simple level. At the moments when language cannot meet the demand of expressing the impossible, Hamsun reaches only for the most simple, ordinary words, or he remains silent. I like to think that only such an „eloquent silence", as Pöggeler puts it, permits the expression of that which cannot be named in words: the arrival of the mystery of being.

It was poetry that eventually seemed to Heidegger most privileged in its ability to capture being in its happening, in its truth. The philosopher can think being, but he cannot express it, make it close to the reader the way a writer or a poet can. It is easier for literature and poetry to make a certain linguistic „leap" which later Heidegger saw as the only way of revealing something inexpressible in that which is expressed (Heidegger 1971).

Jacques Derrida once said that "there is in literature (…) a chance of saying everything without touching upon the secret" (Derrida 1995: 29). Literature enables us to lay our hand on the secret, without completely tearing off the curtain that covers it. Describing the imaginary worlds, literature gives us the scent of cognitive and aesthetic fulfillment but at the same time it leaves us in the intensity of continual, everlasting curiosity.

Thanks to Hamsun's descriptions, the places observed by his protagonists – this sky, this earth, this lake – become the "lightning (clearing) of being" which for one instant, while we read, restores to us a genuine sense of what it is to be at home in the world. All this happens *thanks* to language and *in* the language: "The language is at

once the house of Being and the home of human beings" (Heidegger 1978c: 262). Outside language being cannot be positively experienced. Where there is no language, being remains for us distant, closed and ungraspable, no matter how intensively we mesmerize it with our eyes, or try to "ecologically" feel into it or "aesthetically" live through it. The poetical word, however, opens it for us, and does it independently of the writer's knowledge and intentions. The poet is able to name that which exceeds him, being himself a messenger of a higher, arcane force.

Conclusion

The final word for the conclusion of my paper would be the following: both Heidegger and Hamsun felt that the modern world is heading towards disaster. Their works, however, speak to us differently than traditional literature or ecological philosophy constantly calling for action – sometimes much too loudly. Heidegger and Hamsun did not persuade us to undertake actions in order to change the alarming state of affairs. The significance of their work was rather to call us to reflect upon the other way of thinking about the world – other than thinking *technologically* and *pragmatically* (McWhorter 1992: 3). It conveys a message about the necessity of holding back man's passion for controlling the world and directing him onto a path of a more "poetic" existence, an existence open to the mystery, the unknown, that which is worth thinking[*].

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