

*The Death of August*

*"On the whole, August achieved a good mix: right and wrong, truth and fiction."*

Transgressive fiction celebrates or foregrounds characters out of place or on the fringes of society. Some, characters and authors both, use delightful ways to escape or create room to stretch out within the perceived madness of everyday life. They live on the edge and find it more comfortable, exhilarating, and sane than normal life. They delight in the gaze that says, "You are not one of us." And they delight in finding ways to provoke that gaze. The real life counterparts of transgressive characters, transgressive artists, likewise find means to provoke that gaze. It's hard to remain on the edge while being swept on a wave of critical appreciation toward acceptability. But the essence of art on the edge is that it keeps playing, keeps a tension, between beauty and danger. It is supposed to be shocking, not humorous. (Danto 112) There are many instances of transgression in the August trilogy in which the vulgar or obscene is the tool of choice. But these are more comic than shocking; the vulgar is not where transgression occurs in Hamsun's August trilogy.

Hamsun's transgressive constructions are domestic couples favorably contrasted to romantic couples. But Hamsun's anti-romanticism smacks right up against August, himself an anti-romantic. August is a character who ultimately must not be admired and this impels Hamsun into a second type of transgression directed at both August and the reader: displacement of character via the unexpected to thwart eros for a character.

One of my favorite short stories is Ernest Hemingway's, "The Killers." It is one of the Nick Adams stories. And it recounts the revenge contract murder of a former boxer, the Swede. The Swede has only a minor role in the story which instead focuses on the interaction in a restaurant where the Swede normally has dinner between the two hired killers, the cook, the owner,

and Nick. The short story tells us nothing about how the Swede came to hide in Summit or what he had done to earn a death sentence. The 1946 Robert [Siodmak](#) film version covers the ground of the story in ten minutes and then use flashbacks to flesh out an effective film noir. This first adaptation featured Burt Lancaster as the Swede and the almost as good 1964 version, less faithful to the story, includes Ronald Reagan as a gangster boss. The psychological plausibility of Siodmak's characters and preservation of mood through expressionist inspired lighting made his embellishment acceptable to Hemingway and his readers.(Booth, 408) I mention this example because, too often, remakes and adaptations disappoint authors, critics, and fans. And when that happens we have an instance of that transgression against a fictional character, the author, and readers that Hamsun embraces in *The Road Leads On*.

Beauty evokes a variety of desires including identification, possession, and participation. A reader might delight in Charles Bukowski's *Post Office* because Hank's struggles resonate with the reader's own unhappy employment. The possessive reaction to beauty includes the desire to devote part of our life to the beautiful object.(Nehamas 55) "That forward-looking element and the risks that attend it are essential to beauty.... My reasons for finding you beautiful include characteristics I feel you have not yet disclosed, features that may take me in directions I can't foresee."(62-63) Plato also coupled perception of beauty to the desire to procreate, to create further objects of beauty with the cooperation of the beautiful object or person. "Despite not knowing what they will make of us, we want to be affected by them." (102) Also, we want to be involved with them in mutual construction. With fiction that might mean taking Bukowski's coping strategies from the novel to the place of employment both to aestheticize life and merge with the fictional Hank. In that case, anything an author might do to belittle Hank also affects the reader.

In the case of August, Hamsun evokes this erotic desire to spend time with this beautiful person and, as we read along, we come to know August and even foresee his reactions to events. And, after establishing a relationship with us like a manipulative lover who waits to tell us he is already engaged or married, Hamsun perversely snatches August away with an unworthy death.

*Hello Love*

Hamsun frequently used deviant behavior to place characters on the edge. Polly the cook in the early story "Zachaeus" takes revenge on Zachaeus' theft of his old newspaper by stealing his severed thumb and serving it to him in his stew. Both the newspaper and the stew are worthless to anyone other than the owners, producing a mix of comic absurdity with the subsequent violence. Both men knew just how to push each other toward violence, like lovers, and the tailored insult prompts Zachaeus to shoot Polly. But the cannibalism is coupled with humor. When Zachaeus asks Polly whether he cooked the finger with the rest of the meat for the crew Polly's indignant response is, "What kind of man do you take me for? I cooked it separately in a completely different pot." (88)

Hamsun had a talent for insult comedy. Think of Glahn turning an intimate moment at a polite party into an opportunity to spit in a rival's ear. The scene is pregnant with sexual symbolism, a cuckolding also mimicking the annunciation. And the reader understands how the outrageous action could freeze the rival. Social convention overrides the natural impulse to violent response in overly cultured men. And in "The Call of Life" the new widow's illicit sex seems more natural, more humane, than the conventional marriage between a young woman and a man thirty years her senior and almost already a corpse. A true advocate of inconsistency, Hamsun also used restraint and understatement to convey the futility of resisting natural impulse, for instance, the ring that is first too tight and later too loose.

The common sense notion of romantic love requires initial infatuation regardless of the relationship's prospects and eventualities. The more reflective concept of romantic love highlights a lover's perception of beauty and other admirable qualities, either already realized or as undeveloped real potential in the beloved. There are numerous instances in *Wayfarers* in which Hamsun humorously undermines both the common sense and intellectualized romantic love. August falls in and out of love (and wealth) with various women such as Mattea who has another lover unromantic enough to tolerate sharing her affections for financial gain. All three sides of the love triangle are immune to infatuation: August quickly transfers his affections elsewhere, Mattea is calculating in the allocation of attentions, and her eventual spouse controls jealousy for practical benefit.

The highpoint of Edevart's life occurs at thirteen when he unmaskes the organ grinder scam and retrieves the missing button for his first love, Ragna. Rather than allow this romance, Hamsun sends Edevart on the road where he meets Lovise Magrete and begin his downward spiral. The next time Edevart sees Ragna he saves her virtue from a visiting skipper she has angered by laughing when his toupee falls off attempting the act. But Edevart's an inept guardian of virtue. Pregnant Ragna tells him that his supposed rescue of her from the skipper came when he wanted to do it a second time. (162-3)

Edevart again takes up the protector role on his return to Polden by volunteering to seek child support on Ragna's behalf from the skipper. He is successful in obtaining some money which Ragna appreciates; but in the mean time she has aborted. Once again he has succeeded at an absurd task. Hamsun kills this romance by transforming Ragna into Edevart's mother. Edevart had taken too long to return to Polden from Doppen with gifts for his family. His mother dies before he can deliver her skirt and cloak, while Edevart is delayed in Doppen by his obsession with

his second love. So the undelivered gifts are bestowed on Ragna. Edevart betrays his family for an adoptive one with Lovise that will never work out. He's either blind or too stubborn at this point to appreciate her loyalty to her first husband Haakon. And his mother's gifts end up with another woman with whom he has no future.

Edevart is a sperm donor. Hamsun allows him sexual relationships with both Ragna and Lovise when these women are married to others. He has biological children with both. Ragna's children do exceptionally well in life and his daughter Haabjorg with Lovise does well enough when she separates from all her parents. Meanwhile, Edevart has no role in his children's lives. It's as if the women, especially Ragna, know he comes from good stock but is too rootless to be a husband and father. His children remind us of the trees August plants and abandons to others.

Edevart is out of step and on the edge wherever he is. Hamsun later attributed his plight to August's influence. But Edevart is out of step from the beginning of the trilogy, provokes frequent attempts from his family to entice him to stay in Polden, and, when he sets off on the wrong course in love with Lovise, it is August who tries to save him. Perhaps Edevart was just the extra, unneeded child in the family who should have been adopted out?

Lovise, the great love of his life, is already married. The husband is supposedly in America, but really in prison - a nice equation. She lives in the wilderness, the only way she could manage to keep her husband's location from Edevart. Edevart is taken by her beauty but his courtship is boring and unimaginative. Edevart does the chores; the seduction scene reverses roles, she comes to him and introduces him to sex. Lovise's affections are prompted by her physical needs in and out of bed. When Haakon is released Edevart stalks her by taking a job at the village store. (128) And when Lovise comes to him on the boat offering affection in exchange for funding her family's trip to America it is difficult to tell who is the biggest pimp: Lovise using the hint that

her third child is Edevart's; Haakon for sending her for the money when she is unable to have sexual relations; or Edevart for trading money for affection without sex. (198) In any case, what helpful Edevart gets is a mock family: someone else's wife who will leave him for anyone willing to take her to America and a daughter who does not know or need him as a father. Edevart values her only for the information she conveys about her mother. (320)

Edevart mistakenly perceives women as timid creatures in need of male protection, while Skaaro's similar perception leads him to see women as opportunities for exploitation. Hamsun stages a beauty pageant on *The Seagull* between Josefine, Beret, and Ragna just before he sends Skaaro to die in the bog. The three women are happy enough to compete for paltry prizes: a few days' wages and the opportunity to flee from the smell of drying fish for a rest in the skipper's cabin. The paltry prizes foreshadow the dismay that Skaaro feels when he later tells Ane Marie that what he wanted from her was no big deal. (61) Ane Marie would have even joined the pageant if she had been asked in the right way. Skaaro, like Edevart, lacks romantic sense; but Hamsun wants us to take Ane Marie's need for courtship as a neurotic product of her lack of children. She is calm once she has two adopted children. Ragna notes that her husband Karolus thinks childless Ane Marie walks around with a shriek between her legs. (172)

Edevart's fate is signaled by a sheep; August is eventually swept under by them, and Ane Marie uses them to draw Skaaro. The bog scene is rife with sexual imagery. Skaaro is drawn by Ane Marie's berries. She points him to the ripe and ready ones across the bog. And she allows him to advance into the bog to the point of no return without warnings or guarantees. It's as if she is thinking, "Anyone who looks for love knows the dangers, so anything is permitted." Hamsun writes: "She knew precisely the point of the fatal area. Everybody knew it. A little green tuft always lay resting on the slime; and if anybody trod on that tuft to save himself it would roll over

and make him lose his footing." (59)

Both forbidden food and the spit in the ear insult are repeated in the trilogy. There is no cannibalism but August feeds Magnus a mouse. The bog and the beauty pageant are significant instances, but the vulgarity is again dissipated. Hamsun disrupts the shocking bog scene by spiritualizing it and then turning to comedy. As Ane Marie watches Skaaro sink, she recalls a broken hearted young woman who chose the bog for suicide so she could pray during her slow death. When later her body was tugged out of the bog, the rope around her head popped it off leaving the rest of the body to the muck: an apt and comic rendering of the power of love.

Skaaro at first acts nonchalant and instead of asking Ane Marie for help asks why she is not helping him. This is a very stupid question given her desire that someone just die for her. He makes his earlier mistake again and tells her, "I'm not so desperately in love with you."(61) But, unlike August, his death has dignity as he throws his watch and wallet with the wages he owes onto dry ground.

The only couple in *Wayfarers* that flourishes is Ezra and Hosea, largely through draining the bog. They are not a romantic couple but attend to domestic details, and have children. Perhaps a case could also be made for Theodor and Ragna. They do not become rich but get along well enough with reduced eros. There are too many relationships included in the three novels for me to comment on here. But a third successful couple is found in *The Road Leads On* - the Old Mother and the druggist. They are caught up in romantic infatuation; but both partners have calculated beforehand escapes from previous lovers and now are blended in their enthusiasm for a child and real estate. I find no successful romantic couples and the one true romantic seems to be the postmaster in volume three whose wife commits suicide over the loss of another man's affections and companionship. Detachment from romantic enthusiasm fostered by domestic duties and

children amount to Hamsun's marriage how to book. Hamsun transgresses the seriousness of romantic love with unexpected humor and its plausibility by bestowing limited insight on male lovers and celebrating the banal.

### *Hollywood Ending*

Only the first volume of the August trilogy has a recent English translation. I grew to like August over the three volumes. The death of August angered me, really. Hamsun had killed off characters before; he was a genuine literary serial killer. But Nagel and Glahn had dignified deaths: their deaths fit their characters; their deaths fit their novels. And they chose the how, when, and why. Even the messy death of Skaaro in the bog had merit, coherently establishing Ane Marie's character for the rest of the trilogy. And Skaaro, unlike August, did either "get the girl" or at least some girls. But lovable August is unlucky in love, sterile and celibate, and is drowned by his maker in a sea of sheep after three volumes of heroic adventures. At least in the first novel, Hamsun's is ambivalent toward August. He allows Joakim to muse to Edevart that if they had grown up without father, mother, and a home they would have been as rootless as August. His attitude toward August in this volume was more favorable than his view on Edevart. I cannot give strict conditions of when an author transgresses against a character. It would be comic to appeal to radical psychological discontinuities when dealing with an author who regarded such fluidness of character as the human condition. The best I can offer is a subjective characterization: an enticement followed by a withdrawal of attractive characteristics that leaves the reader without footing.

August's charm lies in several character traits. On his return to Polden at the opening of novel two he rummages around Paulina's store, examines some boots, and declares them overpriced garbage. He hopes he will be eventually recognized despite the passing of years and

expects to take up relationships with old friends as if he had never left. He does have to drop stronger hints before Paulina recognizes him. But August, at least, does not forget friends.(18) August is eternally optimistic, always ready with a significant plan to occupy everyone's time and resolved to conquer any obstacle. He is also irreverent. August thinks nothing about adding the signatures of the dead to the petition to open a post office while Joakim's reaction to finding his dead father's signature on the petition is outrage. As always, August applies his own special logic to turn a misstep into a moral obligation. The petition should have been submitted years ago and if it had the dead would have supported it. He's merely enfranchising them. August is loose with the truth in the service of whatever he thinks is a just cause. And he consistently rewrites his life, making sure to embellish as he goes along, reconstructing the most unfavorable events in a way that reflects well on August. Ready for adventure, when an adventure goes wrong in reality he rewrites it in memory. He probably really did consider lottery tickets foreign investments. He's like the ancient skeptics who had mild views rather than firm beliefs. This distance from belief means that he is fluid, ready to leave yesterday's commitments as soon as new ones come along. He's not a liar; he cannot be because he does not know what he believes.

This incarnation of August is already biologically old but still keeps restarting his life trying to get it right. He has come back to Polden to start a family and anti-romantic August tells Paulina his purpose never bothering with the romantic preliminary focus on the mother to be. Paulina prefers to direct her attention to the local preacher; she is still interested in being loved for herself. And by the time she eventually shows some interest in August he has decided she is too old for him since she is about his own age. His transformation into a dirty old man has begun and when he flirts with Ragna he asks about the availability of her daughter Esther first. When Ragna rebuffs his advances because he is old and bald August is convinced his future family must be with

a young woman interested in him as a provider.(46)

I particularly liked his attitude toward Ane Marie, still desirous of children that her husband cannot provide. August jokes about solving her problem and when she shows interest in a tumble August backs off and finds her foster children instead.(163) August is infectious with venereal disease and at least temporarily sterile. But neither condition would be reason enough to keep the old sailor from bedding Ane Marie. He's always willing to have sex with any woman who would have him, so willing that Edevart has reported him to the local physician as a danger to the community. And sterility would just make sex with Ane Marie a fraud and he has never been reluctant to engage in fraud. As always, August has a ready explanation for his alternative plan. This time it is that Ane Marie, "...would be obliged to wait the better part of a year." August is so considerate.

Unlike Edevart, August is not content to be a sperm dad which is all Ane Marie can offer him. August remarks that Ragna's son Roderick takes after Edevart and that both daughters, Esther and Johanna, resemble Edevart. August openly and repeatedly confronts Edevart both about "all his bastards" and Edevart's passive acceptance of secondary status with Lovise along with sympathy for her husband.(364) "He was a stinker! A convict and all that went with it! You should have kept a tighter grip on her, Edevart; she didn't take you seriously enough. It should have been me!"(375) Here he shows admirable loyalty to a friend through risk of the relationship in a confrontation meant to shake Edevart out of depression. Even the recognition of his own envy is an endearing realization of loss. And instead of stroking our sympathy for Edevart, Hamsun makes us feel like kicking him just as August did.

August is direct with friends, and foes. Edevart only tells August he reported him to the physician long afterwards. I also liked August's mooching, acting like he was family by not

paying for his room and meals. August has his priorities in life straight – planting tobacco while the town starves. You expect him to remark that men do not live by bread alone. Worthless Kristofer causes all sorts of trouble and contributes nothing to the community. Only August has the sense to stick a knife in him.

Near the end of novel two Ezra remarks that August was unselfish and a mixture of good and evil. Most interesting people and literary characters are. My first edition copy of the 1931 English edition of *August* formerly belonged to the Kansas City Library. It is in decent condition for a second hand 78 year old, like August. But some responsible citizen ripped out pages 383-4: August's drunken party with the topless native girl. Hamsun prepares for this scene with a burlesque of the Orpheus-Eurydice legend with August substituting an accordion for a lyre. There are romantic obstacles: this Eurydice, like Lovise, has been deserted by a husband; and August is also married, fleeing from the daughter of the local ruler whom he discovered too late is a hermaphrodite. At the moment of truth, Eurydice demurs and offers the explanation that she will see her husband the next day at the fair. August's insistence earns him a couple knees to the groin so he knocks her unconscious. Like Eurydice she rises from the dead and, unlike Ragna, does it twice with August. This fantasy is August's lesson in the ways of love for Edevart. Unlike the moralistic Kansas reader August does not need to edit his life. He has a conscience; it showed in his regrets of the gang rape. But he also has an honest awareness of the excesses lovers expect. Despite his lack of productivity and excesses August is still an attractive vibrant character and the reader looks forward to his future adventures.

Then in volume three August changes and becomes a drag on existence. August is unaware of Edevart's death until long afterwards in *The Road Leads On*. Edevart, like Skaaro, has been granted a noble exit drowning in a storm while trying to retrieve August back to Polden. This

reader had become so bored with Edevart that he thought Edevart was lucky August gave him an opportunity to die. But, for all we know, Edevart used this opportunity to sneak off to America. By the very vagueness of his death, no body ever washes up, Hamsun treats him better than he does August. Readers who were attached to Edevart can imagine a romantic reunion with Lovise in Elroy, Wisconsin or perhaps death in a shootout with the James Gang in Northfield, Minnesota.

The English translation of volume three was hard to locate but I needed to see what future Hamsun had constructed for my favorite August. Perhaps he owned a diamond mine in South Africa or a banana plantation in Cuba? Instead, Hamsun's third incarnation of August is as a landlubber, busy body, handyman in a domestic small town where he specializes in patching up romances and advising married women. August is no longer even the most interesting character. The crude, elemental Aase is the character on the edge. This servile August starts low and spirals further down. Instead of cherishing and embellishing past adventures he hides his identity. Esther recognizes him and he asks, "Leave things alone! I'm not the kind of man you should know!"(73) Admittedly, August fears he is still wanted for murder. But he's killed people before without turning into a recluse. Hamsun made this August a zombie unable to battle his way back into life. The lottery money, the return of his name, and freedom from fear of prison enlivened him slightly but he now lacks a grand vision for money and instead gambles, helps the poor, looks to impress a poor young girl, and takes up sheep herding.

Hamsun transgresses; he harms both August and the reader. It is a common sin in artistic adaptations. But it is rare to see an author do this to his own characters and audience. August is now lacking in affect, only mildly thoughtful when learning of Edevart's death and uninterested in others from Polden. August would have told Esther at who her father was. He no longer tells outrageous stories even for children. His major difficulty with Aase is that she perceives his lust

and calls him on it. When she flashes him he acts outraged even though the old sailor sees nothing new.(211-2) He wants to remain the lovable busy body grandpa beyond lust. And now when he mumbles from the sidelines of life “It should have been me,” it expresses self pity not resolve.

(260) The August who beat a woman for sex and raped another now resorts to bribes and begging.

(443)

Hamsun makes this August shallow. He shows no interest in Paulina when she brings his lottery winnings even though he formerly loved her. And he does not suffer at all when his newly beloved Cornelia is kicked to death by one of his gifts. August finds no time for her funeral and no sympathy for her boyfriend Hendrick. (461-4) He is glad she is dead because now no one will have her. The August who formerly played to win now settles for a tie. It is impossible to reconcile this August even with the contemporaneous version who is sensitive to Mrs. Hagen’s suicide when the druggist marries. She is a failure at her grand plan of life just like August but still gets to choose her own death. Hamsun has turned on August in an unsubtle manner that mars his art.

He tries and fails to foist blame on August for his death. August allows delay on the crucial wall that would have saved him, August bought all those sheep, and August would have been more alert if he had slept. And, anyway, it is undignified to be busy with work at an advanced age. And August insulted Aase. Zombie August has forgotten what he knew: no one is as interested in your life as you are. When he was building grand houses, draining bogs, and entertaining others with stories it was for his own aggrandizement. Now he seeks face by serving others, especially those most removed from the edge.

Hamsun could have drowned him at sea or even in a little lake, let him be shot by a jealous younger rival for Cornelia, or send him to a vague fate like Edevart so readers could creatively fill

in the blanks for themselves. Instead August caters to the local great man and is afraid to ask the visiting Englishman not to shoot for just one afternoon. Hamsun makes August religious, conventional, and ashamed at the moment of death. Hamsun makes the reader see him die leaving August no possibility of escape. No newspaper reports on his contributions to the community or even the joy he brought to life. Instead he is supposed to be an incarnation of the predominant spirit of the age, a sheep who dies for sheep who abandon him.(535-6) This is a long way from the balanced, mixed evaluations of August in the previous novels.

August on the one hand embodies Hamsun's anti-romanticism in his practical approach to romance. Yet he lacks the domestic inclination of Ezra and instead fosters industrial development. Hamsun is troubled that August's life amounts to nothing but he knew that nothing was where everything eventually goes. And he knew that moments of bliss were, as Emerson wrote, the only way to participate in eternity. That was how August lived, until *The Road Leads On*. The fact that lives have no ultimate purpose makes them meaningless, but not absurd. August's life was for the most part no more absurd than Ezra's. If Ezra and Hosea are fulfilled by life on the farm then it is through moments of realization they find intrinsically worthwhile. It is a life that fits their individual natures. August, the orphan, finds domestic life unsupportable but does find joy in planning a factory. He creates; but he is not suited to stay and manage a factory until he retires. Hamsun cannot criticize August's lack of cosmic purpose without also criticizing Ezra. And he makes a good case for both characters within his naturalism. So all Hamsun can do to force his intellectual point is scale back August's vision, drain him of his eternal youth, and make us despise him. August deserved a Hollywood ending.

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