

## Sigrid Undset: Modern by Surprise

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The Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset is less familiar to today's readers than she should be. She is best known for her multi-volume historical epics set in the Middle Ages, especially the trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920–22) about a woman's life in fourteenth-century Norway, which won Undset the 1928 Nobel Prize and remains the basis of her literary reputation.<sup>1</sup> Both her historical fiction and her other work, which includes fiction, poetry, and essays, are known for scrupulous historical accuracy, sensuous descriptions of nature, penetrating psychology, and intellectual rigor.

Undset was a remarkable writer and a complicated woman. To her contemporaries, her interest in the Middle Ages, her mid-life conversion to Catholicism, and her skepticism of popular Darwinism and social engineering gave her a reputation as an arch-conservative. But she was also a fierce opponent of fascism, a wartime exile, and an ac-

<sup>1</sup>Besides *Kristin Lavransdatter* Undset's historical fiction includes the early novel *Gunnar's Daughter* (1909), set in Viking times, the tetralogy about Olav Audunsson, published in English as *The Master of Hestwiken* (1924–27), set in the thirteenth century, and *Madame Dorthea* (1939), set in the eighteenth century.

tivist for the Norwegian Resistance, which mollified her critics and made her a national hero. Today, more than half a century after her death, her compatriots are alternately awed and aggravated by her blunt, dogmatic opinions, her fearless and formidable intelligence, her passion, and her generosity.<sup>2</sup>

Undset's literary career spans the first four decades of the twentieth century, which coincides with High Modernism in the United States and much of Europe. For historical reasons, however, the movement had very little impact in Norway until after the Second World War,<sup>3</sup> and while Undset's relation to Modernism is important, it fits a national rather than a continental pattern. International Modernists widely abandoned nineteenth-century realism for more formal experimentation, but several factors contributed to the continued appeal of realism in Norway, where the generation of writers active between 1900 and 1940 became known as Neo-Realists. First, Norway's own national tradition was grounded in the thirteenth-century Icelandic sagas, the

<sup>2</sup>In her 1937 history of the Norwegian feminist movement, Anna Caspari Agerholt listed Undset's many offenses against feminists and then sputtered, "despite all this she is such a great writer that she sometimes shoots her theories to hell" (267). In 1989 Gidske Anderson wrote a biography of Undset to satisfy a lifelong fascination with the novelist, yet while describing Undset's views she also lashed out at them. "She offends me, she pains me, she infuriates me," Anderson complains, yet "her tender and often painful knowledge of both the petty and splendid sides of men and women is so comprehensive that it is worth reflecting on much of what she says" (237).

<sup>3</sup>Two notable exceptions are the Symbolist/Expressionist painter Edvard Munch and the novelist Knut Hamsun, who are the Norwegian artists from this period best known abroad. The delay in Modernism's impact on Norway had two main causes. First, Norway was still preoccupied with gaining political independence and shaping its own national identity. Not until 1907 (when Undset was 24) was the country emancipated from four hundred years of foreign rule, only to lose its freedom again a generation later to the Nazi occupation. Second, Norway did not participate in the Great War. It was undergoing rapid economic growth and had no war destruction to repair, and its artists and intellectuals—unlike continental war veterans eager to jettison the burdens of the past—were busy recovering and celebrating a history they

most important body of work in Scandinavia's literary heritage, which are characterized by a stark, laconic realism very different from that of the overfurnished Victorian novel. In addition, Nietzsche was very early an important figure in Scandinavian thought due largely to his Danish champion Georg Brandes, and Nietzsche's own argument that for the "superior man" realism was the only honest, objective approach to the meaninglessness of existence had an impact on many Norwegian writers (Oftestad 29). Women writers, however, often reacted against Nietzschean elitism and subjective angst. For them, Neo-Realism was a choice to focus not on the arcane issues favored by the aesthetes but on the moral and psychological conflicts of ordinary people (Bliksrud "Nyrealismen" 79-80).<sup>4</sup> Con-contradictory as these positions were, both took realism to be an ethical imperative.

Despite such national differences, the issues that led continental artists to Modernism—the loss of a coherent metaphysics after Darwin, the fragmentation and alienation of the self in industrial society, disillusionment with nationalism, war, materialism, and Positivism—were also central to Norwegian artists' thinking and writing. In the early twentieth century both science and politics were heavily imbued with the Darwinist view of an amoral universe in which humankind had no privileged place. Victorians struggling with this revolutionary notion sought to discover or reconstruct alternative "natural" hierarchies that could restore their sense of dignity and control, the most popular of which was the superiority of "virtue."

The 1890s, when Undset came of age, was the heyday of two cultural movements deeply engaged in a quite different approach—Symbolism and its death throes known as Decadence. Nietzsche's exaggeratedly individualistic, anti-social ideal added important philosophical weight to the Symbolist program, already outlined by Baudelaire in reaction to the commercialism, conformity, and cloying moralism of Victorian public sentiment. In order to transcend "bourgeois values," Baudelaire insisted that Symbolist art must have absolutely no moral usefulness. The only true "morality" lay in total withdrawal from commodity

<sup>4</sup>In English- and German-speaking countries, New Humanism was a philo-

culture, a retreat to the “poet’s ivory tower” where pure aesthetics could liberate the sensitive soul from a world contaminated by business concerns. Since the bourgeoisie favored representational art, Symbolists would shun “slavish imitation” for strangeness and inaccessibility, further ensuring the incompatibility of an artistic vocation with social obligation. The formulation of this attitude inaugurated a widely resonant quarrel with mimesis and is often taken to be a pivotal moment in the inception of Modernism (Nicholls 14–15).

Intellectual, temperamental, and biographical factors made the convergence of these attitudes with the teenaged Undset’s developing artistic sensibility a particularly potent one. While she shared some of these precepts, she vehemently rejected others: she never abandoned representational art for strangeness and inaccessibility, and she disagreed completely with the mandate that artists should disengage themselves from the world.

Undset’s three major concerns, both in her life and her work, were the troubled relation between science and politics in the early twentieth century, her convictions about the individual’s responsibility to others and to the social body, and her understanding of eroticism. These interests developed early and simultaneously and for her were inextricably intertwined. Together, they not only governed her fictional characters’ views and choices, but they also shaped her own qualified response to the Modernist movement, drew her to the Catholic Church, and determined her reaction to fascism.

## I. SCIENCE AND POLITICS

Born in 1882 when Ibsen was at the height of his career, Undset was reared in the nationalistic, liberal, agnostic atmosphere of Norway’s capital city. Her parents were intellectual, artistic, and unconventional. From an early age she was closely attached to her archeologist father, following his work both in the field and at the National Museum. After a few years of homeschooling, she and her two younger sisters were sent to a progressive coeducational school. She hated it. She felt that everything she had learned at home—scrupulous

scientific method and skepticism of received truths—was betrayed by teachers whose pedagogy included only textbook answers and liberal dogma. She clung to the intellectual principles of her parents, and her home life, rich with storytelling, art, botanical excursions, and uncensored reading, was happy until her father's health began a long, slow decline.<sup>5</sup> By her tenth year he was seriously incapacitated, and she spent many hours reading to him, both from his professional journals (in several languages) and her beloved nature magazines. She also read from his favorite sagas in Old Norse. Though she did not fully understand the language, her lifelong fascination with Norway's medieval history attests that she absorbed more than she knew.

When Undset was eleven, her life radically changed: her father died, and the family was thrust into poverty. She became deeply depressed and throughout her teens remained solitary, cynical, and hypercritical. When the headmistress offered to fund her schooling through to university matriculation, she declined: all she could imagine from a university degree was a career as teacher, and she hated everything she had seen of teachers (Kunitz and Haycraft 1432). She had wanted to be an artist or a botanist. Instead, at sixteen she took a year at commercial college and for the next ten years worked as a secretary at an electrical firm, supporting her mother and sisters.

At this time she also answered an ad for a Swedish pen pal, and her enthusiastic correspondence with Dea Hedberg, an aspiring writer her own age, provides detailed information about her reading, artistic tastes and ambitions, and writing projects over the next decade. Here she reveals a mental state that very closely resembles the Symbolist temperament: narcissistic, socially estranged, despondent, even suicidal. She swooned over dreamy Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry and wrote her own poems about nature, loneliness, and the hypnotic effects of staring into the calyx of a rose (*Kjaere* 30).<sup>6</sup> She also gazed at herself in the mirror. Once while rowing a boat, she nearly

<sup>5</sup>Ingvald Undset had contracted malaria in Italy before his marriage. He also suffered from a degenerative disease affecting the nervous system, which has

followed Narcissus over the edge, but two ideals stopped her: an epiphanic revelation of the beauty of nature,<sup>7</sup> and her sense of personal responsibility. As she explained to Dea, suicide would have been a “sin against mama” (*Kjaere* 33).

It is striking how much the obsessive introspection, social snobbery, and relentless idealism of the Symbolists resemble typical adolescent rebellion and angst. Undset’s own youthful unhappiness, rooted in trauma and loss, was extreme more in degree than in content. Her upbringing and circumstances had led her, like the Symbolists, to disdain conformity and bourgeois materialism, but she differed from them in an essential respect: her social isolation made her excruciatingly lonely, and she craved personal relationships and intimacy. The histrionic narcissism of the art crowd repelled her chiefly because she saw those same tendencies in herself and feared they made her unlovable.

Nonetheless, she realized she was an artist in spite of herself. In 1900 she confessed to Dea,

You see, the misfortune is that I have an artistic nature. . . . First of all this is absolutely not an excuse, it is not a matter of vanity, but it is a bitter, sorrowful truth, which I have just dared to admit to myself. There’s nothing I detest more than artists . . . [and] the artistic temperament’s “introspective” characteristics of egoism, laziness—lack of pleasure, affection for, or interest in others—and such a runaway fantasy that they dream their time away. And that, exactly that, is my besetting sin, to which I give myself up more and more. (*Kjaere* 29)<sup>8</sup>

If this were the sorry state of affairs, however, she pledged that as an artist she would remain responsible to the outside world. In another letter to Dea, written in 1902, she presented her new credo:

I will!

<sup>6</sup>Undset’s single volume of poetry is *Ungdom* (Youth), published in 1910.

<sup>7</sup>Compare her to the Symbolist poet Mallarmé, who wrote in 1866, “After I had found Nothingness, I found Beauty” (qtd. in Nicholls 34).

<sup>8</sup>All translations from the Norwegian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

I will stand tall, I will not buckle under. I will not kill myself—or my abilities either. If I have them, I will find them and use them. I will *be* what I can be. If I can't become what I *want*, I will become what I can. And if it goes wrong, the fault and punishment are my own. And not God's, the devil's, life's, death's, my father's, my mother's, grandparents', great-grandparents', or anyone else's, living or dead. And human beings ought to treat others as they would like to be treated themselves. But we ought to be accountable to ourselves for everything we do, both to ourselves and to everyone who cares for us. Furthermore, two things are certain: I live, and I shall die. And it is not good to live without happiness. Amen. (*Kjaere* 77–78)

In the same letter she also introduced a concept that would become central to her philosophy: “*We should cultivate ourselves as works of art,*” she wrote, “pure and honorable as though created for eternity. . . . My life is something I want someday to lay in death's hands, perfect or imperfect. . . . I love and honor both life and death so highly that I would be bitterly sorry if I had nothing to offer death” (*Kjaere* 76 emphasis added). Undset thus shared many *fin-de-siècle* attitudes but with this difference: her morbid state of mind was not a product of an artistic philosophy. Rather, her artistic philosophy was an effort to restore health, to rescue herself from her morbid state of mind.

By insisting that an artist's career should be compatible with social obligation, Undset had much in common with the Romantics who had invented the idea of the alienated artist, but who were often political reformers at the same time. The Symbolists, in contrast, insisted on an inward focus, a complete distrust of the kind of rhetorical appeals to a shared human nature exemplified by, say, Géricault or Victor Hugo. The Symbolists' conviction that “individuality” must be won through the assertion of a superior “difference” ultimately dehumanized their art, even to the point of cruelty and violence—not least to the self. As Peter Nicholls observes, when Decadents aligned truth and morality with artifice, they replaced natural life with fictitious life, and in such claustrophobic, aestheticized space the artist had little to do but present a mirror to his own corrupt, “unnatural” self (53–54). Such self-ab-

sorption and cynicism—the kind of solipsistic nightmare perfected by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)—also foreclosed love, which the Romantics had glorified.

Undset tackled this particular problem in her first published novel, *Fru Marta Oulie* (1907), set in contemporary times. Marta is a compulsively unfaithful married woman who mistakes her narcissism for love: “Love, Love!” she gushes to her diary, “I felt day after day how my love made me beautiful and healthy and glowing . . . made me vivacious and bold and infinitely superior” (20). Later, when her husband lies ill in a sanatorium, Marta realizes that her self-absorption has amounted to *cruelty*, that she has been incapable of loving: “I thought of nothing else in the world but my own self,” she discovers; even her secret lover “was of no more concern to me than the mirror on my dressing table” (52).

It was this *fin-de-siècle* narcissism—this arrested stage of emotional development—that most concerned Undset about artists, and she saw it as a crucial factor in the unhealthy connection between erotics and politics as well. In the mid-nineteenth century Europe had experienced a huge surge in population growth, followed by an alarming drop in the birth rate by century’s end. This crisis was widely blamed on the failure of Decadence to police traditional gender roles. “Feminized” aesthetes and dandies, the argument went, preferred to lounge about in salons and boudoirs rather than to propagate, while the emasculating “New Woman” joined the work force instead of remaining at home tending a brood of children. Pessimistic Europeans, who had presumed themselves at the top of the evolutionary ladder, now found themselves fretting about “race suicide” and a world overrun by “inferior” peoples.

Another suspect in the malaise was religion, which evolutionists viewed as the “failed science” of genetically flawed races (Stocking 309). Charcot, Freud, and others studied religious ascetic practices and mysticism as regressive pathological symptoms, a perversion of the healthy erotic instincts needed to keep the population strong. Nietzsche had declared that Europe’s degeneration was due to the irrational ideas of Christ, who had taught that the weak and sickly should

be defended and protected (*Genealogy* 752). Both science and reason showed, Nietzsche argued, that ailing specimens ought to perish, taking their flawed genes with them, but the church had prevailed against nature, attempting to subdue “everything autonomous, manly, conquering, and imperious,” instincts he contended were “natural to the highest and most successful type of ‘man’” (*Beyond* 449). His answer to the crisis of confidence, of course, was the *Übermensch*—the fully “free,” fully rational spirit who would prepare and command the coming master race.

An outspoken Norwegian Nietzscheite was novelist Knut Hamsun, a generation older than Undset and later her *bête noir*. In 1908 Hamsun publicly advocated neglect of the elderly as state policy. Since old people were reactionary and useless to society, he argued, public resources should be directed instead toward energetic, enterprising youth.<sup>9</sup> This was not an unusual idea: some popularizers of science were already suggesting that evolution should no longer be left to chance; careful breeding could give humanity more control over the direction of the species in the future. For prototypes of the revitalized race, theorists looked to civilizations “uncorrupted” by Christianity, and to some, the virile energy of Scandinavia’s rugged pagan past seemed especially attractive, the Viking achievement a sign of the “true greatness” of the Nordic race.

Undset believed that race-mythology was the most offensive and dangerous element of this ancestor-worship. Glorifying the Vikings obscured the fact that they had not sailed abroad as cultural ambassadors but as destructive and murderous marauders. The arrival of Christian culture in the North had not meant erasure of a “superior primitive soul,” as some nationalists were claiming; instead, it had meliorated Viking brutality and disregard for human life. She was therefore deeply concerned to see in her own day a growing admiration for brute strength, youth, and “life-force,” in all of which she saw worrisome parallels to the Viking ethic of the right of the stronger.

<sup>9</sup>Hamsun’s lecture, “Ærer de unge” (Honor the Young), was published in

Furthermore, in the parallel with Viking attitudes Undset found a key to understanding the issues of her own era. From her childhood reading of thirteenth-century Icelandic sagas she recognized that both the Viking age and her own century were times of a seismic shift in life philosophies between pagan and Christian world views—but in reverse directions. When the old Norse world became Europe’s last pagan outpost to join the Christian community, the mandate of personal honor based on physical force gradually ceded to its opposite, that is, the ideals of mildness, humility, and forgiveness. Because the ensuing cultural disruption was profound, the new ideas took centuries to fully penetrate the old value system. In her own day Undset observed that Europe was reverting to a “modern paganism”: since Darwin, the old pagan idea of “survival of the fittest” had returned to favor, and once again the cultural disruption was profound. She experienced a sort of cultural *déjà vu*. “I think . . . the reason I understand our own time so well,” she wrote to her friend Nini Roll Anker in 1915, “is because ever since I was a child I have had some kind of living memories from an earlier age to compare with it” (qtd. in Winsnes 2).

In her earliest historical novel, *Gunnar’s Daughter*, Undset made her first artistic statement about the disturbing link she saw between ancient and modern paganisms. Set in Norway and Iceland in the early eleventh century, the transition point between the Viking period and the Christian Middle Ages, the novel reveals how superficial is the early converts’ understanding of the new religion, and how the heroine’s relentless determination to repay force with force destroys all hope of love, harmony, and peace of mind. In making Vigdis Gunnarsdatter strong, capable, and intelligent, Undset plainly reveals the waste of human potential dedicated to such fruitless ends. This was not, she wants readers to understand, a culture it would be wise to emulate, and applying scientific knowledge to achieve such a goal was more than folly—it was a threat to hard-won human rights and liberties.

## II. INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

In her youthful credo to Dea Hedberg, Undset had pledged to remain responsible to others, even if she “had” to be an artist, but how did she come by this imperative? From age seventeen to twenty-seven, she worked a full day at her office job, returning home to her mother and sisters and staying up most of the night to read and write. She described to Dea the stories she was working on, lamented her loneliness, and dreamed about finding love. Certainly, gender issues mandating female caring, nurturing, and obedience were a factor in her acceptance of adult responsibility for her family at such an early age, thwarting her own ambitions and dreams, and then regarding her cynicism and resentment as a personal fault. But she also came to see taking responsibility for others as an answer to the narcissism of Decadence, an externalizing reaction to the suffocating inwardness of that movement. Women and men alike needed to stop navel-gazing, she believed, and instead reach out to care for one another as citizens, neighbors, parents, lovers, because narcissism was not just her personal problem but a widespread cultural one.

At the personal level, responsibility became an even more serious issue when Undset discovered for herself how eroticism could be at perilous odds with morality. Just after the publication of *Gunnar's Daughter*, Undset received an artist's stipend from the government and was at last able to quit her office job: “Finally my own master,” she wrote Dea (*Kjaere* 157). She escaped to Rome and for the first time in her life enjoyed her youth, living among bohemian artists. She also embarked on a love affair with a Norwegian painter, Anders Castus Svarstad—a married man and father of three, thirteen years her senior. They returned to Christiania after a year and for two more years continued their “clandestine” affair while he waited for a divorce.

During this interval she wrote *Jenny* (1911), the novel that made her reputation, a sordid story about a young artist living in Rome who is successful as a painter but longs only for love. While Jenny's career is essential to her, it does not solve the problem of loneliness. She idealizes love as pure and sacred but eventually wearies of waiting for the “true bridegroom” and has affairs with two men whom she does not love—a feckless young man and his even more feckless father. The

novel scandalized readers on both sides of the political spectrum—conservatives by its sexual immorality and feminists by its implication that a woman needed a man to be fulfilled. Undset fully enjoyed the scandal, acknowledging that she had expected nothing else (Winsnes 57).

In 1912 Svarstad's divorce was finalized at last, and the couple again went south to be married, returning to Rome to the same apartment where they had first met and awaiting the birth of Anders junior. But things did not go well: the child was ill, and doctors advised that he could not survive the heat of a Roman summer. So after less than a year of marriage Undset returned to Norway alone with her ailing infant. She took a house some miles south of Christiania and nursed the baby back to health. When her husband joined her months later, it became clear that the couple had very different ideas about family life. Over the rest of the decade they became increasingly alienated from each other, as Svarstad spent more and more time in his studio in the city, and Undset took on full responsibility for the household. A further complication occurred in 1915 when their daughter was born both mentally disabled and epileptic. In addition, Undset took in Svarstad's three older children—including a seven-year-old, developmentally-delayed son—after their mother had sent them to an orphanage when she no longer could support them. Besides meeting the five children's usual and unusual needs, Undset did all the gardening, canning, and sewing herself and stayed up all night to write.

If taking another woman's husband had not made Undset feel guilty enough, appropriating her predecessor's children certainly compounded her misgivings. Her fiction frequently includes ugly encounters between rival lovers, which may have been drawn from her own experience. Perhaps in compensation, she made demands of herself on behalf of the family that seemed extreme and worrisome to her friends. Nini Roll Anker notes in her memoir of Undset that her friend's sheer stamina and calm conviction were impressive—she was still publishing a book a year—but twice in this period she was obliged to spend time in a sanatorium to recover from exhaustion (36–41). Finally her personal and familial demands became too much, and in 1919, while pregnant with her third child, Undset left Svarstad

in Oslo and moved with her own children to Lillehammer, her home for the rest of her life. Svarstad and his children made regular visits there, but the couple never lived together again; they dissolved their marriage in 1924.

Undset's interest in Roman Catholicism, which developed during this same decade, was also puzzling to her friends, as it has been to many critics. Why, after all, would a liberated female artist from an agnostic academic family begin to admire one of the most hierarchical and patriarchal of institutions? Norway was a Lutheran country and had for centuries been petrified of papism. Even after 1814, when Catholics were again allowed to worship in Norway, they were subject to discrimination; hence before Undset went to Rome in 1909, she had had no personal contact with Catholicism.

Part of the answer lies in Undset's growing dissatisfaction with Protestant teachings about predestination and salvation by grace alone. She discovered that her own view—that people are responsible for their own fate—was more consistent with Catholic doctrine concerning penance and good works. Her conversion was not a sudden epiphanic experience, as some have supposed, but an intellectual and gradual acceptance, as much a surprise to herself as to everyone else. Anker recalled having a “first inkling” of the direction Undset's spiritual life would take in 1915, after hearing her friend's comments on a spate of recent books discussing Christianity. Undset wrote to Anker that before this time she had had neither a particular interest in nor antipathy to Christianity since she had hardly known what it was:

I perceived the church as a very picturesque ruin somewhere in the back of the landscape. Recently I've been looking a little more closely at it. . . . The Church of Rome at least has form—it doesn't offend the intelligence as the various Protestant sects do. Once poured out of the form of the Catholic Church, the whole of Christianity strikes me as a failed, burst omelet. (qtd. in Anker 33–34)

Possibly, Undset's active quest for God began with the near loss of her

infant son in Rome in the winter of 1913, when she read an account of Robert Scott's ill-fated polar expedition and was inspired to think deeply about life, death, and the values that one generation passes on to the next. She incorporated those reflections in a lecture called "The Fourth Commandment" at the university in Trondheim in 1914, designed as an open reply to Hamsun's earlier lecture from the same podium advocating a national youth-cult.<sup>10</sup> Hamsun had denied that youth bore any responsibility to reactionary old people, but Undset turned this idea upside down: it was adults who needed to be responsible to youth, not the other way around.

After conceding Hamsun's Nietzschean point that the goal of humanity was to become more godlike, Undset denied that this could be accomplished by any single person, or that prospects would be improved by the kind of policies Hamsun advocated. Human perfection, she argued, was not a matter of physical strength, beauty, or even intelligence. In explicit rebuttal of the goal of a "superman" who would be "beyond good and evil," she avowed that knowledge of good and evil was the highest human faculty, and that to abandon it would be to return to barbarism. There was no evolutionary "progress" inherent in nature's processes, she explained; on the contrary, progress often required struggling against one's most "natural" instincts and desires, instead making moral choices for the collective good of the species. "All moral ideas are a result of intellectual labor, of observation and experience," she observed: "Nature is amoral, and so are natural human drives; morality awakens when a person consciously takes a position with regard to natural urges" (*Kvinnesynspunkt* 33).

What youth most needed from adults, she argued further, was not more indulgence but good role models, examples for living like Scott's altruism. Directly contradicting Nietzsche, she declared that youth needed to relearn many other old virtues as well, such as justice, honesty, compassion, chastity, temperance, and courage, virtues she admitted had become "half-laughable" to her own generation but which were everywhere needed in the struggle against destructive human

<sup>10</sup>"The Fourth Commandment" was eventually included in Undset's collec-

urges (34).<sup>11</sup> Adults who lived by these virtues would win the respect of young people, who instinctively hate cruelty and injustice and are always alert to hypocrisy. The value of old people, therefore, was the wisdom and beauty of a life well lived, and for adults to earn such respect was their best possible gift to youth.

During the years of the Great War Undset read deeply and methodically in medieval literature, philosophy, and theology. In 1919 she issued a collection of five essays written between 1912 and 1919, titled *A Woman's Point of View* (*Et kvinnesynspunkt*). By this time she had become a highly respected literary figure, but her political views were becoming increasingly provocative. Her growing interest in historical Christianity underscored her stiff resistance to contemporary Positivist and political ideas of human progress, and she was sharply criticized for her conservatism. She accepted the charges with studied irony, addressing her concluding essay, "Post-script," to the "like-minded reactionaries" who had suggested the collection (69).

The war had confirmed Undset's doubts that human beings could ever create a perfect society, because utopian schemes chose to ignore human nature "as it really is" (qtd. in Kunitz and Haycraft 1433). Good could never be enough because human instincts are always conflicted. Time after time, the fully human instinct toward brotherhood and solidarity with others had been followed by a reaction—the equally human instinct to assert oneself at other people's expense. Having been fostered in history and prehistory, she later explained that she did "not much believe in progress" (qtd. in Kunitz and Haycraft 1433).

For her, the most burning contemporary issue was whether the evolution of the species had been masterminded by an all-powerful God or could be controlled by human will (*Kvinnesynspunkt* 69), a question she found critical not only for the fate of the species but also for the way

<sup>11</sup>In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) Nietzsche had written, "we believe that severity, violence, danger in the street and in the heart, secrecy, stoicism, tempter's art and devilry of every kind, that everything wicked terrible, tyrannical, predatory and serpentine in man, serves as well for the elevation of the human species as its opposite" (429).

individuals lived their lives. Determinists held that environmental factors robbed people of meaningful moral choices, which to Undset seemed like either a reincarnation of the pagan idea of inescapable fate or a secular version of Calvinist predestination. She was now prepared to argue that the best ideological hope for preserving democracy, personal freedoms, and human dignity came from “original” Christianity as espoused by the Roman Church. The capacity for human depravity and evil was bottomless, she acknowledged, but the Church believed that human beings also possess a bottomless capacity for goodness and wisdom on which they can act—if they choose. The Church’s own history, replete with lasciviousness and corruption and also with the lives of the saints, was proof of this. Thus, whether evolution were to direct people to heaven or to hell, she wrote, the destination they aimed at made a crucial difference (88).

Finally, Cassandra-like, Undset offered the first of many warnings against totalitarianism. Human nature craved inspired leadership, she argued, and failure to accept the objective existence of an all-perfect God led to adulation of strong men posing as gods. The world would always be faced with impostors, she concluded, but whether one believed that God created man or man invented God, it was imperative to keep the distinction between them clear, and “to remember these ancient words: *Soli Deo Gloria*” (glory only to God) (107).

### III. EROTICISM

Undset’s concerns about the fate of eroticism in the twentieth century were drawn both from her experience and observations during her own white-collar years and from the dramatic drop in Europe’s birth rate at the end of the nineteenth century. She quickly took strong issue with the popular misogynistic explanation for the declining birth rate: she believed working women, far from causing the crisis, were its greatest casualties. Industrialism and rural poverty had forced thousands of girls and women to leave home and earn their living among strangers, where their labor—and their innocence—were often exploited. Marriage might well have been their original goal, but their chances were lim-

ited; in Christiania in 1900, for example, women outnumbered men by seven to five (Johansen 21-26).

Furthermore, Undset felt that the inhuman severing of production from consumption had left all society suffering from a pathological disconnectedness that had catastrophic results for relations between the sexes. "When people argue that erotica has too much place in today's literature," she wrote in 1914, "it is a colossal misunderstanding. It has a disquietingly small place" (*Kvinnesympunkt* 35). Rather, the basic mood was a profound anxiety about loneliness, a deep disappointment that sexual relations had no power to heal it, and a growing doubt that anything could.

The fact that lyric poetry was the weakest literary genre in her generation was a telling sign. Rapture with the beloved, which she characterized as a "primal and uninhibited bursting forth of joy," found its natural expression not only in procreation but also in lyric poetry and song (36). By now people had become so estranged that they could not connect emotionally with one another, or couples were so disoriented and impoverished that they had lost confidence in their ability to raise families. This erosion of erotic appetite was a tragedy of major proportions, Undset believed, because eros was an expression not only of sexual desire but also of one's relatedness to others and the whole of nature. The chief victims of this situation seemed to be women like herself who had robust erotic appetites and high ideals about love.

Undset found a powerful example of the kind of rooted erotic feeling that had been cast adrift in modern times in the intense, idealized form of sexual passion of the Middle Ages known as courtly love. Troubadours had elevated erotic passion to a divine mystery, a high spiritual experience on a physical plane. Precisely because it was a mystery, Undset maintained, human eroticism should be kept far away from scientific dissection and government interference (58-59). Medieval poets had always known what modern science could never teach: that taboos and privacy enhanced passion, while public scrutiny killed it.

Many of Undset's "reactionary" positions on marriage should be understood in this medieval frame of reference. The prevailing opinion

among her contemporaries was that the best solution to Europe's sagging libido would be socio-political measures such as public health programs and state-run childcare centers. In 1918 a Norwegian feminist, Katti Anker Møller, published a tract called "Birth-Politics for Women" ("Kvinnenes fødselspolitikk"), proposing that the state, in its own interest, should pay mothers a fee per child (i.e., per future worker) produced. For this Undset had nothing but contempt: children were not "products," she scorned in print, and motherhood was not a "profession." Motherhood was *life*; "birth" and "politics" did not belong in the same sentence (*Kvinnesynspunkt* 60).

Undset also felt that efforts to relax restrictions around sexual life—forgoing marriage altogether or making divorce easier, for example—not only threatened families and destabilized society but were also counterproductive for eroticism. On this subject Protestant churches provided no help; they had reverted to the old pagan idea of marriage as a merely human contract, binding partners only to each other and dissoluble at will. This invited partners to challenge one another for default based solely on their sense of personal satisfaction; it implied no higher obligation either to God or society. The chief victims of such lack of commitment, Undset repeatedly pointed out, were innocent children, upon whose stability and good will the future of society rested.

Finally—and startlingly, to secular ears—Undset concluded that the best feature of Christian morality was the concept of sin. Using a parallel with taste, she commented that anyone who could not taste the difference between absinthe and fresh milk profited little from drinking either one. When the concept of sin was diluted, she wrote, people could no longer distinguish between "the intense sweetness of forbidden love and the healthy, thirst-quenching goodness of sanctioned love" (82).

Interestingly, her position on sin did not make Undset more puritanical than the Protestants against whose rigidity on sexual mores many of her generation were rebelling. She acknowledged that most people at some time face situations in which they will choose to break society's rules, and erotic passion could be one such circumstance. But this did

not mean, as some of her contemporaries argued, that such rules should be abolished in favor of “free love.” Rules were established to protect innocent people and as such were evidence of advanced civilization. It did mean, however, that people must be prepared to pay a price for their transgressions—and that price may be high.

After issuing *A Woman’s Point of View*, Undset labored for three years in her ancient timber house in Lillehammer, bodying forth the world of fourteenth-century Norway in her trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* in which she portrayed the medieval society that had adopted and accommodated itself—though not without vigorous struggle—to the pre-Reformation model of Christianity that Undset admired. It is the story of a woman’s life from childhood to death, and especially it is the story of a marriage, one that illustrated the continuing strains between old Norse pagan beliefs, which survived in folklore and custom, and the competing teachings of the Church.

Every feature of Kristin’s marriage—its beginning in reckless passion, its reliance on canon law to justify defiance of parental wishes, its fecundity and preoccupation with maternity, its joys, its sorrows, and its bitter strife—embodies the view of the institution which Undset had discovered in medieval theology and which she was convinced was the best antidote to the low erotic temperature of her own time (*Kvinnesynspunkt* 81–82). Indeed, *Kristin Lavransdatter* resonates more than any of Undset’s other novels with the heightened physical and emotional experiences of women in love. Kristin, her mother Ragnhild, the “witch” Lady Aashild, and Kristin’s rival Eline all sacrifice their moral integrity for carnal joys, and nowhere does Undset suggest that passion was not worth claiming, even at such a high price. As Lady Aashild, who had lost her position at the royal court for her illicit escapade with Herr Bjørn, explains to the young Kristin, “the grandest days are costly indeed,” but she cannot be so naive as to complain that she is left only with “sour, watered-down milk” after she has “drunk up all [her] ale and wine” (I. 49).

It is possible to see all of Undset’s important concerns and convictions about her era—the misuse of science in politics, the role of personal responsibility, the revolt against morality—merging for her in the

sexual crisis. One Modernist writer she admired was D. H. Lawrence, who she felt recognized the real dimensions of the contemporary problem. In a 1935 essay she described him as a writer who “symbolize[d] his civilization at the moment when it has reached a crisis” (“D. H.” 48). “The widespread fear of the results of the mechanization of existence—a slow death from loss of heat—finds voice with Lawrence,” she wrote, although his “perpetual harping on the sexual act, which to his sensitive soul meant communion, holy matrimony, was quite naturally misunderstood by his fellow countrymen.” Unfortunately, she observed, the

new phallus-cult he sought to found no more brings peace and warmth in reality than it does to the eternally restless persons in his novels. But the idea that human blood is such a mystical source of power and warmth, the saving fluid, occurs naturally to men who are fighting against the fear of an ice age. (51–52)

Like many Modernists, Lawrence deeply admired Freud. Undset was suspicious of the Viennese doctor, who first dismissed religion as “unscientific” and then reclaimed the centerpiece of primitive religions, phallus worship, for science. To her the shift made no sense: a sophisticated religious sensibility was replaced by a primitive one, masquerading as modern “liberation.” Asked once whether she thought religion was simply a substitute for sex, she replied, “No, I believe the opposite is true.”<sup>12</sup>

Undset’s own view of eroticism had less in common with Freudian analytic ideas than with French philosophical tradition from medieval troubadours to her contemporaries Denis de Rougemont and Georges Bataille.<sup>13</sup> Over forty years after Undset’s *A Woman’s Point*

<sup>12</sup>The story is anecdotal, but entirely typical. She puts the same idea into the thoughts of her character Paul Selmer in her 1930 novel *The Burning Bush* (166).

<sup>13</sup>It is worth noting that French academic study of courtly love and medieval romance first took root in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, when French scholarship was trying to emancipate itself from German influences (Hult 195–98). Undset’s own aversion to things German was rooted in her family history and manifested itself early in her life.

of View Bataille published *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957), a study that echoes her views to a startling degree. At first glance Undset and Bataille seem unlikely companions—he a Nietzsche disciple, a libertine, a Surrealist, whom she never mentioned and with whom her path never crossed—yet like her, Bataille understood and emphasized the religious dimension of eroticism and its essential component of risk. (His well-known influence on Foucault and Baudrillard is thought-provoking: could Undset be seen as a proto-postmodernist?)

Bataille maintained that eroticism is different from simple sexual activity in being “a psychological quest” independent of the natural goal of reproduction (11). Its purpose, he wrote, is essentially a spiritual one, to taste “continuousness” with the universe, to be released from a “discontinuous” existence as solitary individuals. Thus, he argued, eroticism is “primarily a religious matter” rather than a biological one (31). Furthermore, to understand either eroticism or religion one “must have an equal and contradictory experience of both prohibitions and transgressions.” As Undset had in 1914, he explained that prohibitions or taboos exist precisely *because* of the irrational elements in human nature, and the fact that they are regularly transgressed does not mean that they are valueless; indeed, quite the opposite: only in their transgression do they acquire meaning. A meaningful or “successful” transgression includes both disobedience and respect; it “suspends a taboo without suppressing it,” because “unless a taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance” (37).

To use Bataille’s terminology in the medieval context from which Undset drew, the “successful” transgression of the famous lovers Tristan and Yseult is due to a magical device, a love potion, which renders them innocent while guilty—allowing passion to triumph over loyalty without denying the virtue of loyalty. Tristan and Yseult are remembered not because their passion “won” over loyalty, but since passion and loyalty were equally valued, their transgression brought about intensely conflicting feelings. “The inner experience of eroticism,” Bataille explained, “demands from the subject sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This is the religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure and anguish” (38–39). These certainly are the feel-

ings that afflict Undset's Kristin Lavransdatter, both in her battle of wills with her father over her choice of Erlend Nikulausson as suitor and husband and in her pilgrimage to St. Olaf's shrine at Nidaros, where she hopes to purge her terror of God's punishment for the child she has conceived in sin.

Undset was acutely conscious of the difference between Kristin's sin with Erlend and the kind of casual adultery being committed by her contemporaries. In 1917 her modern heroine Harriet Waage, comparing her own sad destiny to that of Tristan and Yseult, laments that "they sinned from ecstasy; we sin from misery and boredom" (*Splinten* 213). Bataille, too, argued that secular attempts to "liberate" eroticism from its religious context threatened its survival altogether. Without taboos "eroticism was no longer a sin, and since [people] could no longer be certain of doing wrong, eroticism was fast disappearing. In an entirely profane world nothing would be left but the animal mechanism" (128).

Animal mechanism and, Undset would add, a despairing auto-eroticism, the spiritual void of narcissistic fixation. Such moral ambivalence and cultural narcissism was her era's *Zeitgeist*, and from it she warned against the dangers of demagoguery—false gods with bogus scripts for socially or genetically engineered human perfection that promised mirror-gazing as the ultimate fulfillment. In her own view, humanity would always need the corrective of the divine: "I have seen how a hunger and thirst of authority have made large nations accept any ghoulish caricature of authority," she wrote in 1940, a few weeks before the German invasion of her country, "[b]ut I have learned why there can never be any valid authority of men over men. The only Authority to which mankind can submit without debauching itself is His whom St. Paul calls *Auctor Vitae*—the Creator's toward Creation" (qtd. in Kunitz and Haycraft 1433–34).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The cultural crisis that propelled Undset's religious quest made her vast corpus of writing on Christianity—her *Catholic Propaganda* (*Katholsk*

*Propaganda*), as she wryly titled one of her apologetics—the linchpin of her political activism, and her activism was the mature flowering of her lifelong concerns about the misuse of science in politics, the individual's responsibility to others, and the fate of eroticism in the modern world. She lived to see her worst nightmares about the future of European civilization come true. Her outspokenness against Hitler's regime led to the banning of her books and the confiscation of her royalties in Germany. Warned to flee during the early hours of the invasion of Norway, she spent the war years in exile in America. Her elder son was killed in the Resistance; nieces, nephews, and friends suffered in concentration camps; and her Lillehammer home was used as a brothel by vindictive German officers. Meanwhile, she did her own "soldiering" on the lecture circuit, where she repeatedly warned Americans to prepare for the dangers facing them and the world.

Undset returned to Norway in 1945 exhausted, ill, and aged by grief. She never wrote fiction again. For the next four years until she died, she did all she could to help family, friends, and neighbors recover their lives and fortunes, and for her wartime work she received her country's highest civilian honor, the St. Olaf's Cross.

Forty-five years earlier, when she was twenty, Undset had written to Dea, "We should cultivate ourselves as works of art. . . . I love and honor both life and death so highly that I would be bitterly sorry if I had nothing to offer death." Death must have been moved by her offering.

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