



The Everyday Life of a European Man: Knausgård's Literary Project as Social Imagination

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Abstract

Between 2009 and 2011, Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård published a monumental novel project in six parts (over 3,500 pages) in which he described the minutiae of daily life: family troubles, ordinary routines, everyday discourse, drinking, strolling through town and so on. The literary project became a media sensation with translations in many languages, readers all over the Western world, and a lot of interviews and reviews to be found online. Why were the books so successful; what is it in them that engages readers? Drawing on theories of sociologist C. Wright Mills and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, this article argues that this ambitious as well as paradoxical literary project sheds light on the social and cultural position of the late modern subject in a European middle class. Knausgård in his self-narration creates an Everyman, while at the same time fashioning a self as an obsessed artist that is everything but ordinary. In a crucial part of the final book, Knausgård shows us Adolf Hitler as a bitter young man, but also as someone 'whose youth resembles my own'. Here the self-positioning relates to ongoing European history as well as to the lack of historical perspective in our current age.

Keywords: European space, everydayness, life narrative, rhythmanalysis, social imagination

'29 July 2008. The summer has been long, and it still isn't over. I finished the first part of the novel on 26 June, and since then, for more than a

month, the nursery school has been closed, and we have had Vanja and Heidi at home with all extra work that involves'.¹

Introduction

Between 2009 and 2011, Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård published six volumes of a monumental novel of more than 3,500 pages, entitled *Min Kamp* (My Struggle). The size of the project and the title are intriguing,² and the fact that this is a novel narrated by real-life figure Karl Ove Knausgård (b. 1968), describing unscrupulously the details of his private life while also demonstrating how hard it is to make time for writing, illustrates that this literary endeavour is ground-breaking. This life narrative³ that foregrounds a man and his kin in their particular social and generational contexts, is an innovative form of realist literature that represents the contemporary European space as social sphere. As Peter Brooks has argued,⁴ the instinct toward realist reproduction can be considered a constant in the human imagination. With the coming of the modern age, however, realist writing was related to a new valuation of ordinary experience and its common settings and things. In our late modern era, Knausgård pushes realism one step further into an obsession with the meticulous registration of everyday life in order to grasp the particular self. In the representation of his family and relationships, demonstrating his life in all its intimacy and banality, the narrator strives to disclose an inner self. The 'mammoth project of autobiography'⁵ describes in detail the private life of the author, from his youth in Norway together with his parents and brother, up to the present in Sweden, as father of four children and husband of writer Linda Boström.

The project was instantaneously characterized by both critics and readers as controversial, because of the radical ethical dimension to the autobiographical content that identifies family and friends as real people. Knausgård, who is the protagonist of the story as well as the narrator framing all the other characters, definitely disturbs the privacy of others in order to register his intimate thoughts, ideas and neurotic moods. According to Stuart Evers,⁶ Knausgård is brutally truthful about his family relationships, presenting his father as an alcoholic and his wife as depressive, while his children are often experienced as annoying.

The narrator portrays himself as an ordinary man and fixated writer. Striving for truthful representation in undertaking this literary enterprise,⁷ however, he also deliberately constructs alternating perspectives on self-identity, pointing at particular memories, perpetual routines and mundane practices. As such, he demonstrates how he grew up in a particular social sphere and how his feelings and ideas developed in the course of time. All this is done in a plain and conversational language, organized as dialogue and interior monologue giving the novel the feeling of a confession.

The book project, therefore, may not only be framed as a realist novel, it can also be constituted in the tradition of the confessional discourse of modernity in which ‘the individual search to know the self is matched by society’s concern to know, to classify, and to order the range of selves that are out there’.⁸ Knausgård’s project can be related to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* in the sense that both projects are obsessive and create a unique persona.⁹ As James Olney emphasizes, ‘Rousseau intended a “portrait”, not a “book”’: although a text and a volume, it was a presence to be seen and to be felt in the heart, not something to be read and to be grasped by the mind.’¹⁰ This comment also applies to *My Struggle*. The description of details, intimate thoughts and everyday habits and practices establishes a portrait more than a conventional literary plot. This specific feature of the work is reflected upon within the novel itself. Knausgård tells how he, when in 2002 visiting a theatre play in Stockholm, suddenly knew how to continue his writing: he realized that in the end, plot and space disappear and what is left is emotion, the inner core of human existence, the very nucleus of life. He further explains this idea: ‘you found yourself in a place where it no longer mattered what was actually happening. Everything known as aesthetics and taste was eliminated.’¹¹ So, what we read is a novel project which deliberately tries to get *beyond* literature as a formal and narrative composition and pursues the core of human existence. The interesting enigma, then, is how this core of existence is at the same time unique and shared or recognized by others.

This article investigates how *My Struggle* condenses the place of a human being in everyday life in the contemporary Western European space. It asks how the novel project represents contemporary social spheres and at the same time evokes an artistic presence as imagined and ethical experience. To answer this question, I will engage in a close

reading of passages of the book project, in particular from the second novel, *A Man in Love*, and from the essayistic part in the final novel, 'The Name and the Number'. Furthermore, I will relate my reading to ideas on social imagination, everydayness and rhythmanalysis as brought forward by a sociologist and a philosopher. I deliberately use theories outside of literary studies, because they will help gauge the representativeness or realist quality of the book project and understand it in the context of European space and history.

In what follows, I will firstly foreground the novel series' social sphere by focusing on three sub-themes – family, freedom, and man and woman roles – while drawing on the theory of C. Wright Mills. Subsequently, I will emphasize the literary evocation of the materiality of everyday life. In this section the work of French social philosopher Henri Lefebvre will be used as a frame for the analysis. Thirdly, I will scrutinize Knausgård's reading of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, as he describes it in the essayistic part of the sixth book. The argument constructed in this part of the article is that Knausgård in his self-narration is willing to position himself next to the man who is considered the ultimate example of European evil, in order to demonstrate the radical empathy of literature.¹² The ultimate aim of this article is to understand Knausgård's literary project as a new format of social and everyday life-writing, underscoring a particular human being in a particular European nation, while this singularity can be acknowledged as commonality as well.

Literature as Social Imagination

Sociological imagination, as C. Wright Mills wrote in 1959, is a form of self-consciousness that enables us to understand history and biography within society. The sociological imagination points at how individuals in their daily behaviour and experience become conscious of their social position.¹³ Individuals may understand their own capabilities by locating themselves within their era and class; they can know their own chances in life by becoming aware of their social circumstances. Sociological imagination distinguishes between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'.¹⁴ Troubles, according to Mills, occur within the character of the individual and the range of his or her immediate relations with others. Troubles, therefore, are

a private matter; they have to do with the self and with those limited areas of social life of which a human being is directly and personally aware. Issues, on the other hand, transcend the local environments of the individual and the range of inner life. Issues have to do with the organization of milieu(s) into the historical society as a whole.

To illustrate the differences and interconnectedness of (personal) trouble and (public) issues, Mills explains how unemployment is a personal trouble when in a city only one man is unemployed. But it is an issue when, in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million people are without a job and there are no solutions within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. As Mills claims, at a private level problems can occur that may be recognized at a public level as well. At the public level, however, we distinguish structures and institutions that also go beyond individual lives. What people experience in various and specific *milieus* is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of a personal sphere, we are required to look beyond it.

Mills makes clear that individuals in their environment have to experience and imagine their position and connect it to larger societal and institutional structures. In the context of the analysis and interpretation of Knausgård's detailed writing about his private family life and social background, the relatedness of individual troubles and broader public issues is a challenging idea. One consequence of this relatedness is that we can read the literary book project as a broader description of institutions and social structures and developments in Norwegian and Swedish society. Three typical questions, based on Mills, can be asked in the context of sociological imagination: what is the structure of a society, what are essential features of a certain period, and what differences can be noticed between men and women?¹⁵ The answers to these questions lead to three typical themes which are dominant in *My Struggle*: family, freedom, and roles of men and women. These themes are intrinsically connected on a private and public level, and I will discuss them accordingly.

Family

The modern family is the most salient theme in the novel project, and as such an individual and institutionalized social issue that can be distinguished in North-European society. All volumes are built around

the question how the family works and how it enables room for self-employment and creative talent, while prompting specific roles, for instance, the roles of the son and of the father figure. Let me elaborate on this point.

The first novel opens with the death of the alcoholic father, who passed away in his mother's home. Karl Ove and his brother Yngve have to clean the rubbish that is left: bottles everywhere, soiled clothes, faeces on the living-room sofa. Positioning the death of the father as the opening scene of *My Struggle* underlines the urgency of writing about the trouble of a family and individual positions therein. As Knausgård explained in an interview in 2012: 'I wanted to write something completely different, and I wanted to write about my father ... about his fall, how he somehow changed from being a father, a perfectly ordinary teacher, a local politician, to a divorced, dead alcoholic.'¹⁶

The father, who at first was deemed perfectly ordinary, failed as head of the family by frightening and bullying his sons, divorcing his wife and drinking himself to death. The youngest son, Karl Ove, has to write his father's narrative in order to escape (his own memories of) him and, so we could argue, to mark his own different position as head of a family, as a father *and* an artist. It is because he develops as a writer that he can go beyond the disturbing father figure.

Karl Ove, evidently, believes himself to be a modern man, taking care of his children, being serious about parenthood and the responsibilities involved. He is anxious not to behave as his father did, and he is willing to take up a more feminine role. To illustrate this, I quote a rather ironic fragment:

[I had to go by the rules of the game.] In the class and culture we belonged to, that meant adopting the same role, previously called the woman's role. I was bound to it like Odysseus to the mast: if I wanted to free myself I could do that, but not without losing everything. As a result I walked around Stockholm's streets. Modern and feminized, with a furious nineteenth-century man inside me. The way I was seen changed, as if at the stroke of a magic wand the instant I laid my hands on the buggy.¹⁷

This quote indicates layers of an ambivalent identity: the man in the woman's position feels ferocious but also shapes himself to fit into the modern family structure. It also shows how the protagonist considers

himself from the eyes of others. ‘The way I was seen changed,’ he writes, that is: the moment he walks behind a stroller, he imagines that *others* categorize him as family man, and that women lose (sexual) interest in him ‘because I gave such a clear signal that I was taken’.¹⁸ The ties of family life are visible from outside. Knausgård stereotypes the father figure as not being sexual attractive anymore.

Karl Ove as a young son, constantly tormented by his father, is a different person from Karl Ove as an adolescent, or as a man in love, and father. But in some scenes, for example when changing the diaper of his first child, we definitely recognize the anger and impatience of his predecessor:

She laughed, I pulled some wipes from the packet as fast as I could, she swung round again, I pressed her down and wiped her clean while breathing through my nose and trying not to react to the irritation I could feel was brewing inside me now. I had forgotten to put the full nappy away, she had her whole foot in it, I nudged it to the side and wiped her foot, somewhat half-heartedly, because I knew wipes were no longer up to the job.¹⁹

The writer obviously draws on his own experience when describing the details of the scene with the dirty nappy and the fast-moving baby. Interestingly, when articulating that he does not want to behave as his father did, Knausgård describes thoughts and behaviour that precisely connect him to his father, to the man’s short-temperedness and irritation, the need for alcohol, and the obsession to be left free to live his own life.

The description of the youth in southern Norway is based on Knausgård’s personal experiences, but typical family scenes are frequently transposed to a general level, for instance by describing the 1960s family from a distance: ‘The door opened and out stepped a little family. The father, a tall slim man in a white shirt and light terylene trousers, was carrying two suitcases. The mother, wearing a beige coat and with a light blue kerchief over her long hair was clutching a pram.’²⁰ In the pram is Karl Ove himself, eight months old, ‘the baby closed his eyes, lulled to sleep by the wonderful rocking motion’.²¹ Obviously, the writer fictionalizes and does not exactly remember this scene – ‘Of course I don’t remember any of this time’²² – he just perceives the family in which he was born in order to grasp them in their social space

and time. He scrutinizes his parents to understand Norwegian society: ‘They were ... part of the first post-war generation, which in many ways represented something new.’²³ The 1950s/1960s was a time of ‘large-scale centralization’ and of the upcoming welfare state: ‘the time for the growth of systems – the school system, the health system, the social system’.²⁴ It was the time of a revolution, but without violence and irrationality. The narrator looks back at that time and wonders if that creature in the pram is the same person ‘as the one sitting here in Malmö writing’.²⁵

Two observations can be made on the basis of this scene. Firstly, it is the detailed self-narration that marks *My Struggle* as a valuable project of social imagination while depicting a typical milieu of a unique individual. Knausgård realizes where he comes from and which social changes were made possible in the generation of his parents – and subsequently in his own. Secondly, the family into which Knausgård was born is representative of many other families in the post-war period in Northern Europe. The particular milieu that offered the generation of his parents more options on education, welfare and jobs is connected to wider societal structures within Europe.

This social context gets more colour in the description of specific Norwegian villages and regions, houses and places. Parts of Knausgård’s life narrative are connected to explicit localities: his youth in the rural environment of Tromøya in the South of Norway (described in volume 3: *Boyhood Island*), his adolescence in Håfjord in the North, where he works as a teacher after just having finished high school (volume 4: *Dancing in the Dark*), his student years in the city of Bergen (volume 5: *Some Rain Must Fall*) and the years as family man in Stockholm and Malmö (volume 2: *A Man in Love*). Sweden certainly is different from the rough and ready Norway, and again this emphasizes general societal and institutional structures: Sweden as more sophisticated and cosmopolitan, Norway as bold and natural.

Freedom

The second theme marking the individual milieu as well as societal structures in the second half of the twentieth century is freedom, in the sense that the boy, youngster, student is allowed to experience, to

find out, to make mistakes, before he becomes a mature man and head of a family. Importantly, this theme of freedom is underlined by the formal structure of intertwining narration. The story of *My Struggle* is not told as a linear narrative: the volumes are circular and fluid, full of digression and proleptic and analeptic references, allowing the narrator to explore the nature of self and selfhood in light of both romantic and parental love. The suggestion of a spontaneous narrative, of the liberty of telling and building the story is evidently constructed. The non-chronological composition of the narrative was constructed afterwards, when most of the writing was done, as we can read in the final volume. The effect, of course, is that the narrative works as memory works: emotions reorder time and evoke various reminiscences.²⁶ Knausgård's project has been characterized by some reviewers as Proustian, since it can be considered autobiographical fiction based on conscious and voluntary memory. In this case, it often is popular music from the 1970s and 1980s that suddenly brings back forgotten memories and images. Music certainly is a constant in Knausgård's life, and the volumes provide many song titles and conversations on music and lyrics:

I tapped my hand against the steering wheel and sang along to the music. It was Coldplay's latest CD, one I couldn't stand but which I had found was perfect for driving. Once I'd had the exact same feeling as now. When I was sixteen, in love, on my way through Denmark early one summer morning, heading for Nykøbing to a football training camp, all the others in the car apart from the driver and me at the front were asleep. He was playing the *Brothers in Arms* CD by Dire Straits, which had come out that spring, and with Sting's *The Dream of a Blue Turtle* and Talk Talk's *It's My Life* formed the soundtrack to all the fantastic experiences I'd had over the past months.²⁷

Pop music, youth culture, meeting friends, falling in love, studying, reading literature and drinking booze are the happy and decisive events of a private life, and they are described in detail by Knausgård. The individual life is marked by the freedom of *Bildung*: becoming someone, and taking the time to learn, read, reflect and experience. Unscrupulously, Knausgård reveals and analyses who he was, what he did and how he tried to provoke standards of acceptable social behaviour. Hence a scene from the student years in Bergen:

I drank. More darkness. They discussed. I threw in comments, Yngve sent me occasional glances and I could see he didn't like what I said or the way I said it ... I went back, poured more whiskey, almost everything was dark now. 'Look at the park!' I said. 'What about it?' someone said. 'Easy now, Psycho', Yngve said. I dragged myself to my feet, grabbed my glass and hurled it at him as hard as I could. I hit him in the face. He fell forward. Everyone got up screaming, rushed to his side. I stood still for a moment and watched the scene unfolding. Then I went into the hall, put on my shoes and jacket and staggered down the stairs, onto the street and into the park.²⁸

Knausgård undisguisedly describes his younger self, his feelings and activities. As the author explained in an article in *The Guardian* in February 2016, using his own name 'propelled me headlong into my own world, dominated as it was by trifles and inconsequential detail'.²⁹ Remembering implies making private troubles public, and foregrounding the repetitive banality of existence and the rhythm of everyday life.³⁰ Becoming an authentic character implies the sincere writing about feelings of freedom as well as shame.

Shame is a dominant emotion in the book project and makes *My Struggle* a work that is often uncomfortable to read. Shame is connected to questions of humanness, humanity and humility.³¹ The capacity for shame makes the protagonist fragile, as it constitutes an acute state of sensitivity. Knausgård describes shame after drunkenness, in sexual affairs, the shame of having to be honest when other parents do not take the cleaning job in the nursery seriously. Shame is the other side of freedom, since it has to do with modes of self-regulation in the company of others.³² The nature boy from Norway has to accept the conventions of social life and is embarrassed when making mistakes. Fortunately, some of the freedom and the inability to adapt of the adolescent is still encapsulated in the regular pace of normal life as a grown-up man. In order to write, the author after all has to free himself from social bounds.

Roles of Men and Women

This novel project is all about one individual male; but what about the women, what about the mother, daughters and spouse Linda? We may

point at the various significant roles women in this novel project have: the beloved girlfriend(s), the respected mother, the sympathetic but in a way less reliable mother in law – drinking alcohol when babysitting – and Linda who changes his life – ‘Then I met Linda and the sun rose’³³– but who also makes living complicated. The first impression when Karl Ove meets her is that she is ‘dark, wild, erotic, and destructive’;³⁴ later she is described as a fragile woman struggling against severe depression, a loving mother but also a quite selfish housewife. This we read in a scene in which Knausgård breaks his collarbone while playing football, and she just reacts by saying ‘How am I going to take care of the children on my own for two months?’³⁵ Ironically, the observation of the self in this context is quite negative as well: ‘A man approaching forty wearing an Argentina national shirt and football boots, his long hair tied with an elastic band in a knot like a pineapple on top of his head, howling with pain’.³⁶ Linda’s role in the novel project evidently is crucial: her periods of unreasonable moods and depression, her bursts and lack of energy, her love and restlessness all create a context for *his* obsessive writing and, perhaps, are partly the consequence of it. Knausgård offers a portrait of a marriage that is straightforward and convincing: this is a family life in the 2000s, and certainly not all of it is happy and joyful. But the fact that Linda accepted the publication of the novel project demonstrates her enormous courage and, we could argue, ultimate self-confidence.

My Struggle thus illustrates the life of a modern, well-educated man in a northern European society, taking responsibility as a father while at the same time trying to preserve his own space, and creating a room of his own for writing. The themes of family, freedom and the supposed roles of men and women are central in the book project and provide a frame for the *Bildung* of a young man born in the 1960s and 1970s who in due course becomes a bestselling author. The monumental novel focusing on detailed self-narration opens a broad perspective on societal structures and institutions and on emancipatory tendencies. Writing about the normality of life underlines the singularity of it: the aim of this individual life is to become a writer. The extensive description of mundaneness and the details of everydayness indeed demonstrate the power of the written word in evoking this ordinary life. Writing about personal troubles reveals uneasiness, since Knausgård’s self is always presented in the context of others (father, brother, mother, wife, children) who do

not have a voice of their own. But it also refers to public phenomena and issues and to the rapid social and cultural transformation taking place in the post-war decades. Coming back to C. Wright Mills's social imagination, I argue that the private trouble in *My Struggle* is the physical and mental exertion to become a writer, and the shame and uneasiness connected to this. The public issue brought forward by the book series is the building of the welfare state, resulting in prosperity but also in a form of indifference. Connected to this indifference is the idea that life as such is insignificant:

Everyday life, with its duties and routines, was something I endured, not a thing I enjoyed, nor something that was meaningful or made me happy. This had nothing to do with a lack of desire to wash floors or change nappies but rather with something more fundamental: the life around me was not meaningful. I always longed to be away from it, and always had done. So the life I led was not my own. I tried to make it mine, this was my struggle, because of course I wanted it, but I failed, the longing for something else undermined all my efforts.³⁷

This quote indicates that this real-life narrative is about the curse of the writer who is aware of the existential question, 'Why is all this, all I've got, not enough?'³⁸ Fascinatingly, the answer to the question is less important than the activity of writing itself, the intention to create literature about the everydayness of life. When his mother convalesces after a heart attack and tells him that she thinks she has had a fantastic life, Karl Ove is shocked when realizing that he could not claim that about his own life; he does not care; he might as well die as live. And then he realizes that, 'indifference is one of the seven deadly sins ... it is the only one that sins against life.'³⁹

Everydayness and Reality

Knausgård writes extensively about a middle-class private life, about shaping a family, taking care of the children and managing like other families do. He describes the context of the family: social events and vivacity in parks, playgrounds, nurseries and so on. He focuses on the running of the household, what to buy, cook and eat, and he even zooms

in on the clearing away of the remains of a meal: ‘Scrape the leftovers into the bin, empty the dregs of milk and water from the glasses, take the apple and carrot peel, the plastic packaging and tea bags from the sinks, clean them and put everything on the drainer.’⁴⁰ Intriguingly, this exhaustive description, the elaborateness of the writing down of each minor detail, seems to be in contrast with the above quoted claim that everyday life is just something he endures, not something with a meaning. As an author, he does give meaning to what he endures during the days.

This brings us to the fundamental paradox in Knausgård that, I argue, also marks the power of the project: the singularity of this literary project is in the details and in the meticulous observation and remembering of everyday activities and performances. As Derek Attridge has claimed, the singularity of a literary work is ‘produced not just by its difference from all other works, but by the new possibilities for thought and feeling it opens up in its creative transformation of familiar norms and habits: singularity is thus inseparable from *inventiveness*’.⁴¹ Details of mundane life are tedious, monotone, routine. Yet in writing about it, the everyday is re-invented and becomes perceptible and meaningful. According to James Wood, details ‘represent that magical fusion, wherein the maximum amount of literary artifice ... produces a simulacrum of the maximum amount of non-literary or actual life’. Wood adds that this is a process whereby artifice is ‘*converted into (fictional, which is to say, new) life*’.⁴² It is the author, Wood continues, who notices seriously, who rescues, redeems and saves life from itself. Wood argues that the writer’s task is to bring colour and life back to the most ordinary things which have lost meaning in time. What is at stake here, I would underline, is the ambiguity of everydayness evoked in the writing. Theorist Henri Lefebvre helps us to provide further insight in what is happening here.

Lefebvre was a French philosopher and sociologist doing what we could call ‘everyday ethnography’. His work focuses on urbanization and capitalism and examines the consequences of these processes on various scales of social reality. Lefebvre’s most prominent work was *Critique of Everyday Life*, published in three extended volumes in 1947, 1961 and 1981. In the 1947 edition of *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre developed a criticism of ordinary life, arguing that everydayness implies ambiguity: it entails familiarity as well as illusion, social

bonds as well as alienation. In the second volume, published in 1961, he sharpened the methodological tools of his theory, and twenty years later he provided a more sceptical perspective of the future. According to Lefebvre, the criticism of everyday life has been carried on by philosophers and artists, and captured in their representation of everydayness is always an illusion: the author capable of representing the mundane life of the ordinary classes does not belong to these classes himself anymore. An interesting example is the surrealist artist, by ‘abandoning the everyday in order to find the marvellous and the surprising (at one and the same time immanent in the real and transcending it), surrealism rendered triviality unbearable.’⁴³ In the same vein, Lefebvre rejects the over-intellectualization of the aesthetic representation of everyday life by modernist authors such as James Joyce: ‘Ulysses demonstrates that a great novel can be boring. And ‘profoundly’ boring. Joyce nevertheless understood one thing: that the report of a day in the life of an ordinary man had to be predominantly in the epic mode.’⁴⁴ Lefebvre, therefore, takes up a position against artists and intellectuals who depreciate the everyday by highlighting privileged experiences and by shaping the everyday into a myth. ‘All we need to do’, he argues, ‘is simply to open our eyes, to leave the dark world of metaphysics and the false depth of the “inner life” behind, and we will discover the immense human wealth that the humblest facts of everyday life contain.’⁴⁵ We are not sensible enough, Lefebvre claims, to get beyond abstract, formal, metaphysical reason in our lives and in our consciousness of it. The everyday is uneventful, and thus the opposite of the spectacle of today’s mass- and media culture.⁴⁶

In accordance with Lefebvre’s critique on the modernist literary tradition, overestimating the ordinary by transforming it into a myth, as well as underestimating the ordinary by underlining only privileged high-brow experiences, we might claim that Knausgård successfully has developed a new way of writing on everyday life by getting ‘inside’ it. It is the conscious performance of alienation (‘an experience of dispossession that occurs in the very moment of imagined possession’) as well as appropriation (encompassing *l’art de vivre*), that turns Knausgård’s work into an innovative and singular perspective on everydayness.⁴⁷

To elaborate this further, we could turn to Lefebvre’s posthumous published work *Rhythmanalysis* (1992), in which he examines the rhythmized organisation of everyday life as a both linear and circular

process on various scales, encapsulating an extreme diversity of facts and phenomena. Cyclical processes are ‘innumerable, from the microscopic to the astronomical, from molecules to galaxies, passing through the beatings of the heart, the blinking of the eyelids and breathing, the alternation of days and nights, months and seasons and so on’.⁴⁸ The linear ‘designates any series of identical facts separated by long or short periods of time: the fall of a drop of water, the blows of a hammer, the noise of an engine etc.’.⁴⁹ Lefebvre argues that people prefer the cyclical over the linear:

The cyclical is perceived rather favourably: it originates in the cosmos, in the worldly, in nature. We can picture the waves of the sea – a nice image, full of meaning – or sound waves, or circadian or monthly cycles. The linear, though, is depicted only as monotonous, tiring and even intolerable.⁵⁰

Knausgård in his novel project seems to be aware of both rhythms and discloses them in the description of daily life, mentioning objects, phenomena, products, moods and ideas, and the repetition in seeing and perceiving them. It is the monotonous return of the same that measures the duration of a life, but also opens a perspective on the lives of others, and thus on the circularity of life as such. This can be explained by a close reading of a rather extensive passage from the second volume, in which the protagonist frequently pauses and smokes a cigarette while thinking about all sorts of topics. We could say that smoking marks a daily rhythm of his personal life, but it also marks a social space connected to this rhythm:

I put on my jacket and shoes and went onto the east-facing balcony where I usually smoked, because it had a roof and because it was rare you saw anyone from there. The balcony on the other side, which ran alongside the whole flat and was more than twenty metres long, didn't have a roof, but it had a view of the square below, where there were always people, and the hotel and the mall on the other side of the street as well as the house fronts all the way to Magistrat Park. What I wanted, however, was peace and quiet, I didn't want to see people, so I closed the door of the smaller balcony behind me and sat on the chair in the corner, lit a cigarette, put my feet on the railing and stared across the backyards and roof ridges, the harsh shapes against the vast canopy of the sky ...

If it was people I wanted to see I had to lean forward and look down to the yard on the other side, where faceless figures occasionally appeared in the windows, in the eternal merry-go-round between rooms and doors: a fridge door is opened, a man wearing only boxers takes out something, closes the door and sits at a kitchen table, somewhere else a front door is slammed, and a woman in a coat with a bag over her shoulder hurries down the stairs, round and round it goes, and over there what must be an elderly man, judging by the silhouette and the paucity of movement, is ironing; when he finishes he switches off the light and the room dies. So where would you look?⁵¹

Linear repetition, in this case putting on a jacket and shoes and going to the balcony to smoke, is a daily personal activity and marks the monotony of actions and movements, as Lefebvre would say. But sitting down and smoking also leads to the observation of others in their daily circuits, their cyclical rhythms. The consequence of sitting, smoking and watching is that the cyclical and linear become intertwined. 'Time and space, the cyclical and the linear, exert a reciprocal action: they measure themselves against one another...everything is cyclical repetition through linear repetitions,' as Lefebvre wrote.⁵² Knausgård's description of the daily cigarette ritual encapsulates the serious gaze upon others in their own lives.

This can be connected to yet another rhythm in the project: the ongoing collection of stories and memories, the simultaneity of describing and analysing details, the everyday as disturbed by the contingency of sudden reminiscences. It is as if there is no plan at all in story-telling, as if the words just continue to flow, as if the author were writing blindly. Knausgård underscores this activity in an article in *The Guardian* (2016):

I started with something that happened when I was 16 and I was going to a New Year's Eve party with a friend. The story could have been told in two sentences ... But in the book that episode took up 100 pages. While at the time I had no idea what I was writing or why, it is abundantly clear to me now: I was writing about life the way it appears to an uninformed 16-year-old, in all its enormous banality, and only when I had done so was it possible for me to write about my father's demise, about death in all its enormous banality...now those events represented nothing more than themselves, being so much a part of my own trivial experience.⁵³

Writing about a New Year's Eve party develops into the story of the death of the father. Circular rhythms and phenomena give rise to a book project in which time as such is thematized and understood as both circular (cosmic, nature) and linear (social practices) at the same time. The everyday implies the concreteness and materiality of the mundane, but also what can be recognized as *life*: the rhythms of bodies and moods, of endings and re-commencements. Within the theoretical frame of Lefebvre we can accentuate that Knausgård in writing elaborately about his own life resists mythification and touches upon the social timescales of the second half of the twentieth century.

The Disturbance of the Everyday

We have explored the social imagination and the rhythm of everydayness in *My Struggle*. My claim is that these aspects are decisive for the singularity of Knausgård's literary project. All six novels establish the continuation of an ordinary private life in all its details, memories and (un)exceptional events, and at the same time underline the potential of literature in its analysis and description of the reality of life. One part of the book, however, disturbs the ongoing everydayness, namely, the extensive essay that is part of the final novel. This essay, entitled 'The name and the number', takes up over three hundred pages.⁵⁴ We could consider it the intellectual justification of the novel project, and read it in that frame.

The essay starts with a reflection on fiction; the author ponders on what he has been doing and reiterates that his writing about everyday reality is done in order to escape reality. In a world in which everything is becoming fiction, in which screens are everywhere, even on our mobile phones, so that we constantly live in two realities at the same time, a novel writer should not add another fiction; he should focus on reality *as it is*.⁵⁵ The outcome is an 'experiment within realism', not something encapsulated in literature, as Knausgård stresses. To reach the core of this 'raw and random' reality, the author argues that the name is needed: *Knausgård*. The name refers to a person not sympathetic to himself – but authentic, real.

The first part of the last volume – the part before the extensive essay – recounts the resistance of members of Knausgård's extended

family to his use of his own name, the name of his father. An uncle threatened to go to court to forbid the publication of the book project, and demanded the names of all of the father's side of the family be changed. Knausgård and his publishers, after taking legal advice, eventually agreed. Knausgård describes how currents of shame and *angst* went through him when he realized what he had written about the *real* people in his life. He was writing literature, but in fact had moved beyond literature and affected people in their own lives.

As mentioned, in the essay Knausgård ponders about producing something other than fiction. His aim was to write about reality, seen from the perspective of someone physically imprisoned in reality, but longing to go beyond triviality into clear elevation.⁵⁶ This paradoxical position has already been discussed, but here in the final volume something new is added: the reflection on reality is extended with an analysis of Hitler's biography *Mein Kampf*. The striving for realist writing, the realist 'experiment', so to say, is countered here in the analysis of the words and life of a historical figure with abject fascist ideas which had huge immoral consequences. The novelist dives into history to gauge what reality is about. Obviously, the title *My Struggle* already anticipated this moment of analysing Hitler's life narrative, even though it could also have been understood as a general description of the harshness of life. James Wood took the title as explanation for the life-long struggle with the father figure;⁵⁷ another critic somewhat maliciously suggested that the Hitlerian title could have some connection with Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun's Nazi sympathies.⁵⁸ Reading the final volume and particularly the extended essay, I argue that the struggle is not (only) about the father and death, but about reality, history and sociality as well. Knausgård's attempt to humanize the young Hitler and to place him in the context of his era transforms his own autobiographical project: it becomes less private and less indifferent to the world, and demonstrates how every single life story of man born in Europe in the twentieth century somehow relates to contemporary European history and sociality, that is, to in- and exclusion and the 'us' versus 'them' discourse.

Looking more closely at the essay, the first impression is that it is a rich text, overloaded with ideas and references to other literary works, paintings and artistic experiences, while the main line is the analysis of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The central argument is that Hitler's name still

is known to almost everyone, while the names of the 6 million people who died in the gas chambers have disappeared. The name is not in balance with the number. Knausgård starts by reading some poems by Paul Celan in which ‘the name’ or the loss of the name is foregrounded. In Celan’s poetic language a ‘you’ is addressed, but this ‘you’ is not someone who should be understood as ‘the reader’; the poem is not a mirror. Knausgård suggests that language is a social activity and demands an ‘I’ and a ‘you’, who together can form a ‘we’.⁵⁹ In Nazism the ‘you’ disappeared in the mass.

The occasion for reading *Mein Kampf* lies in the fact that Knausgård and his brother found a small Nazi medal (the German eagle) among his father’s things and the book *Mein Kampf* in the house of their grandmother. Somehow Nazism entered the family. It was only after the publication of the first novels, however, that the author started reading Hitler’s text. The outcome of this reading is that Knausgård places Hitler in his historical lower-middle class, in a petit-bourgeois Austrian context, and refuses to believe that the man as a young boy was already evil. His violent and oppressive father, the death of his brother and mother, and the poverty of the lower class in a provincial town were decisive aspects of this life. Becoming a painter was a way out of this misery, but the young man was not talented and not radical enough. He was a damaged person, not able to bind himself to another human being, or to form friendships and intimate relationships. Hitler stood ‘beyond the social’, Knausgård writes.⁶⁰ But then the First World War occurred, and Hitler was immediately at home in the army, as the radical simplification of life. The Hitler we know today, Knausgård claims, was created by the First World War.⁶¹ Knausgård quotes frequently from the memoirs of August Kubizek, a youth friend of Hitler, and from the biography of Hitler by British historian Ian Kershaw. Knausgård also critiques Kershaw’s view that the Holocaust was something Hitler did and was destined to do, and not something for which we have to feel responsibility today.

Knausgård spends many pages analysing Hitler’s antisemitism and propaganda, and connects these to ideas in other books and opinions of same period (Jünger, Zweig, Hamson, Kafka, Ford, Heidegger and others). Knausgård considers *Mein Kampf* a badly written book; it has no style, no intimacy with form, and it lacks serious arguments. Hitler’s ‘I’ lacks a ‘you’; it is unaccountable and therefore immoral. Hitler could

not see himself in the eyes of others, and he had no self-awareness and no empathy with others. His self-identity was absorbed by a phantom 'we', the German *Volk*. What enabled the atrocities of the Third Reich was a strengthening of this 'we', and therefore the reduction of the multiple 'I'. In a fascinating passage, Knausgård reveals that he has only known one moment in his life when he himself felt part of a collective 'we': that was when Anders Breivik in July 2011 shot sixty-nine young people on Utøya Island. Knausgård experienced the collective when watching the news and seeing the pictures of the island. Only later, he writes, did he understand that this power of the 'we' must have been the same for the German people in the 1930s. The collective offers an identity.

Knausgård unsettles the mythological image of the ultimate evil person. Hitler was, just as Breivik, the true fanatic with megalomaniac fantasies, low self-esteem and extreme anger. In both lives, a real, grounded-in-itself 'I' did not exist. This observation brings us back to the book project. Knausgård explains that his first motivation to write about the self was to overcome the social, to express the absolute personal and intimate in a public form, the novel. Soon, however, he had to acknowledge that morality lies in the 'we' within the 'I', and thus ultimately is social.⁶² The novel is the literary form of the social, and as such is concerned with human relationships and the way in which the reality that we constitute and which surrounds us is communicated.⁶³ Literature effectuates empathy and can never only be about an 'I'.

Conclusion

This article claims that Knausgård's novel project communicates intergenerational memory and reveals the everydayness of life and its circular and linear rhythm. The novel project opens up a perspective on social spheres and the contemporary reality in Europe. Karl Ove Knausgård is unscrupulous in his self-exposure and invents a new form of the novel that reflects on the effectiveness of realist representation. He seeks a form of uncompromised aesthetics that at times reaches a universal dimension.⁶⁴ In the final volume, the story about his life and about becoming a writer is alternated by a comprehensive essayistic section on the life and times of Adolf Hitler. The novel's everyday plot

is here deliberately disturbed, by treatises on bourgeois identity, art, the sublime, Nazism and the lack of identity. Knausgård, in the final book, continues his private narrative – how Linda is suffering from manic depression and how the children get older and wiser – and at the same time excels in intellectual reflections on Western culture and literature.

The paradox of the book project is that literature on private individual troubles marks public and general social issues as well. Interestingly, Knausgård's critique of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the final novel approaches that of Henri Lefebvre; Knausgård argues that the modernist novel makes ordinary human beings larger as representatives of history, but makes them smaller as well, due to the disappearance of their ordinary uniqueness in the description. *Ulysses* never became a generally read book – that is, read by young and old, rich and poor – instead, it became the myth of the difficult novel: 800 pages in one day.⁶⁵ This is a significant statement for a writer who has become a bestselling author in his time. When he wrote about his private family life, he apparently foresaw how his own novel project would not be considered mythical but very down-to-earth.

About the Author

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Notes

- 1 Karl Ove Knausgård, *A Man in Love, My Struggle: Book 2*, Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett (London, 2014) 3.
- 2 The title, obviously, refers to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, a work that is discussed in detail in the final part of the novel project. To Evan Hughes

- in *The New Yorker*, the title demonstrates a ‘bizarre audacity’, even though the author cannot be accused of anti-Semitic sentiments. See <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/why-name-your-book-after-hitlers>, accessed 21 February 2018.
- 3 Life narrative is the umbrella term for stories representing a life. The concept includes autobiography as a retrospective narrative and is also used to cover more heterogeneous self-referential and self-reflexive practices. See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis & London, 2010).
 - 4 Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven & London, 2005).
 - 5 Tim Parks, Raise your hand if you have read Knausgård, *New York Review of Books*, 19 July 2014.
 - 6 See Stuart Evers, ‘A Man in Love by Karl Ove Knausgård – Review’, www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/11/man-in-love-Knausgård-review, accessed 5 March 2017.
 - 7 Arnaud Schmitt and Stefan Kjerkegaard, ‘Karl Over Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*: A Real Life in the Novel’, *a/b AutoBiography Studies*, 31, 3, 553–579.
 - 8 Peter Brooks, *Enigmas of Identity* (Princeton and Oxford, 2011) 10.
 - 9 Persona in the sense of ‘public image’ is based on the revelation of very private thoughts and acts.
 - 10 James Olney, *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago and London, 1998) 176.
 - 11 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 232.
 - 12 Morten Høi Jensen, ‘Me, Myself, and Hitler’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6 September 2015.
 - 13 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford, 2000) 5.
 - 14 Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 8.
 - 15 Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 6–7.
 - 16 Jon Henley, ‘Karl Over Knausgård: “I have given away my soul”’, *The Guardian* 9 March 2012. See <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/mar/09/karl-ove-Knausgård-memoir-family>, accessed 5 March 2017.
 - 17 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 100–101.
 - 18 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 101.
 - 19 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 453.
 - 20 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 1.
 - 21 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 2.

- 22 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 6.
- 23 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 3.
- 24 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 3.
- 25 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 6.
- 26 See Kate Kellaway in *the Guardian*, ‘Some Rain Must Fall by Karl Ove Knausgard Review – Gripping account of early manhood’: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/29/some-rain-must-fall-karl-ove-knausgard-review-fifth-volume>, accessed 5 March 2017.
- 27 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 611–12.
- 28 Karl Ove Knausgård, *Some Rain Must Fall*, My Struggle: Book 5, Translated from Norwegian by Don Bartlett (London, 2016) 247–8.
- 29 See: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/26/karl-ove-knausgard-the-shame-of-writing-about-myself>, accessed 5 March 2017.
- 30 Wood, James, ‘Total recall: Karl Ove Knausgård’s My Struggle’, *The New Yorker*, 13 August 2012.
- 31 E. Probyn, *Blush, Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis & London, 2005) xiii.
- 32 N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford, 1994) and Sam Binkley, ‘The Civilizing Brand, Shifting Shame thresholds and the dissemination of consumer styles’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 12:1 (2009) 21–39.
- 33 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 2014, 197.
- 34 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 197.
- 35 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 657.
- 36 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 656.
- 37 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 75.
- 38 Henley, ‘Karl Over Knausgård: I have given away my soul’.
- 39 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 663.
- 40 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 607.
- 41 Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Chicago 2004) 11. Attridge’s italics.
- 42 James Wood, *The nearest thing to life* (London, 2015) 36, Wood’s italics.
- 43 Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis, Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Translated by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London & Oxford, 2014) 51.
- 44 Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis, Space, Time and Everyday Life*, 49.
- 45 Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis, Space, Time and Everyday Life*, 152.
- 46 Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life, Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford, 2006) 18.
- 47 Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, 136.

- 48 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, one-volume edition (London & New York, 2004) 84.
- 49 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 84–5.
- 50 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 85.
- 51 Knausgård, *A Man in Love*, 72–4.
- 52 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 18.
- 53 See: Karl Over Knausgård, ‘The Shame of Writing about myself’, *The Guardian*, 26 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/26/karl-ove-knausgaard-the-shame-of-writing-about-myself>, accessed 5 March 2017.
- 54 I make use of the Dutch edition here, since the final novel has not yet been translated into English.
- 55 Karl Ove Knausgård, *Vrouw, Mijn Strijd* 6, Uit het Noors vertaald door Marianne Molenaar (Breda, 2015) 374–375.
- 56 Knausgård, *Vrouw, Mijn Strijd* 6, 375.
- 57 ‘The Hitlerian title refers not only to the usual stations of the bildungsroman but also to two fierce battles. One is with the author’s father, who left the family when Knausgård was a teen-ager, and then drank himself to death. The other struggle is with death itself, in which writing is both weapon and battlefield. See, Wood, ‘Total Recall, Karl Ove Knausgård’s My Struggle’, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall>, date accessed 5 March 2017.
- 58 Evan Hughes, ‘Why name your book after Hitler’s?’, *The New Yorker*, 11 June 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/why-name-your-book-after-hitlers>, accessed 5 March 2017.
- 59 Knausgård, *Vrouw, Mijn Strijd*, 441.
- 60 Knausgård, *Vrouw, Mijn Strijd*, 685.
- 61 Høi Jensen, ‘Me, Myself, and Hitler’, 2015.
- 62 Knausgård, *Vrouw, Mijn Strijd* 6, 764.
- 63 Høi Jensen, ‘Me, Myself, and Hitler’, 2015.
- 64 Schmitt and Kjerkegaard, ‘Karl Ove Knausgaard’s My Struggle: A Real Life in the Novel’.
- 65 Knausgård, *Vrouw, Mijn Strijd* 6, 384.