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Complete Truth and Fuzzy Genres: Reading Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*

George H. Jensen | University of Arkansas at Little Rock
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Abstract | Traditionally, nonfiction is defined as a genre that tells stories which happened; it is a product of memory. In contrast, fiction is, in part or whole, a fabrication, a product of imagination. We seem to accept these distinctions even though, as sophisticated readers, we know the simple dichotomy often dissolves, and we are often skeptical about explicit contracts with the reader. In this essay, I will explore the importance of the truth claims made in nonfiction. While we acknowledge narrative truth and metaphorical truth, there is still something important about 'getting the facts right.' Instead of defining nonfiction as the genre that deals with what is true, we could say that nonfiction is the genre that deals with the difficulty of sorting out what we know from what we don't know and what we thought we knew. If works of nonfiction often point to the difficulty of establishing the truth, then maybe this murkiness of truth should be considered part of the genre, maybe even foundational to it.

If we accept the possibility of a 'nonfictive novel,' might we also accept the possibility of a 'fictive memoir'? Such is my reading of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, which, if it is a nonfictive novel, might push us to the realization that nonfiction is not a genre at all. Rather, it is an approach to genres. Nonfiction, if fully considered, might encompass more genres than journalism, biography, autobiography, memoir, and the personal essay. It might also be applied to some novels, especially to those referred to as autofiction.

Knausgaard pushes us to a further realization about the writing self: the difficulty of establishing truth reflects back on an author's own participation in a text. What is the relationship between authorship and authenticity? Is the author's relationship responsive, responsible? To use a Bakhtinian term, is the author *answerable*? Within the forms and flow of writing, Knausgaard sought access to the truth not just of the world, but of the self and the other. As I shall argue, we need to "know the self," but we can only come to self-knowledge among others. Indeed, it is only by our active engagement within a community that we can fashion an authentic self.

Keywords | Autofiction, Fictive Memoir, Nonfiction, Nonfictive Novel, Genre, Narrative Truth, Authenticity, Writing, Bakhtin, Knausgaard

> Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability.
>
> —Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (2)

My work on this project is influenced by my experiences at the NonfictioNOW conference in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 2017.[1] Before attending this conference, I had attended nonfiction talks at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the River Teeth Nonfiction Conference in 2016, but the influence of the 2017 NonfictioNOW was more profound. On the first day, I participated in a panel on the ethics of nonfiction and was struck both by how much the discussion grew out of the particular problems that the participants were facing in their own writing and how they did not seem to have a framework for working through their problems. Everyone in the room gave advice, but no one, myself included, seemed to have the terminology they needed to reframe the questions being asked or to shift the ground from advice shared among writers to broader concepts: For example, how do these ethical questions relate to the genre of nonfiction? Or, what does this say about the role of style? Or, how does our writing affect our relationship to others? Or, how does writing nonfiction transform the self?

Another unofficial theme of the NonfictioNOW conference that affected how I thought about writing nonfiction—held in Iceland, the conference was truly international, and unambiguously about nonfiction—was the European scholars' lack of distinction between nonfiction and fiction. Participants from Iceland, Sweden, France, Germany, and Great Britain kept saying, "We don't distinguish between nonfiction and fiction; we just tell stories." I may have imagined it, but there always seemed to be a "you silly Americans" attached to the comment. Since then, I have often reflected on this comment but reaffirmed my initial belief that nonfiction is different: when writing nonfiction, we are writing about our world, our truth, our very particular selves. This makes the ethical questions about writing nonfiction different than those of writing fiction, poetry, or drama. It is not enough to say that nonfiction is about writing true stories. There is, I believe, more to it than that.

My views on the differences between nonfiction and fiction were further reinforced by writing a novel, released serially on a website. It began as an extended memoir about suffering and mourning in the aftermath of my wife's death in 2008, and it was not going well. As I read drafts, the voice in some sections sounded like a pompous

[1]Beyond this present essay, the project that I'm referring to is a monograph, *Ethics of Nonfiction*, forthcoming from Palgrave Press.

old man offering advice even he couldn't follow—too detached. In other sections, the voice sounded like a lost soul whining about the difficulties of life—too enmeshed. I just couldn't find the right voice. In the midst of my frustration, a friend, a novelist, kept encouraging me to write a novel while I kept saying: "I don't write fiction. I write nonfiction."

One day, as an experiment, I tried shifting to fiction and everything opened up. Within fiction, I could create a character who was, in my mind, clearly not me. It was okay if he preached or wallowed in his misfortune. The distance allowed me to write. In short, writing fiction, in my limited experience, was quite different from writing nonfiction. When I was writing my memoir, I often wrote about some of my feelings and then, either immediately or when revising, thought, "This is not who I am" or, "This is not how I want to think" or, "I need to write myself into another place." I rarely struck out this material but, instead, added reflections that critiqued or redirected the line of thought. As I was writing my novel, I did the opposite. I felt free to keep exploring the implications of thoughts that I didn't think were healthy or that didn't relate to who I was or who I wanted to be.

The novel—in which a Chair of the Department of English at a southern university simultaneously deals with the death of his wife and issues relating to the harassment of female students in another department—seemed to require a preface arguing that it was, indeed, fiction and that the narrator was not me lest those who know me might think of it as autofiction, or maybe even pure nonfiction. Despite this, many friends who read it kept asking me, "Are you okay?" They were seeing the narrator, the character in the novel, as me.[2] In this essay, I will explore the importance of the truth claims made in nonfiction, *This is me* and *This is not me*.

Traditionally, nonfiction as a genre is a product of memory which tells stories that actually happened. In contrast, fiction, in parts or whole, is defined as a fabricated product of imagination. This is a commonly accepted definition even though, as sophisticated readers, we know that such simple dichotomy often dissolves, and are often skeptical about explicit contracts with the reader. On the verso of the dedication page of Hemingway's *In Our Time* is the following note: "In view of a recent tendency to identify characters in fiction with real people, it seems proper to state that there are no real people in this volume: both the characters and their names are fictitious. If the name of any living person has been used, the use was purely accidental." I don't know if the note was written

[2]In an essay that questions the separateness and stability of genre concepts, I hesitate to supply definitions that, inevitably, fall short. Still, the term autofiction has a history that's worth noting. Coined in 1977 by French novelist Julien Serge Doubrovsky, autofiction stands for the practice of fictionalized autobiography or—approached from the opposite direction—as autobiographical fiction. In a magazine review-essay, "How 'Auto' is 'Autofiction'?" Christian Lorentzen writes, "the term autofiction has been in vogue for the past decade to describe a wave of very good American novels by the likes of Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Teju Cole, Jenny Offill, and Tao Lin, among others, as well as the multivolume epic *My Struggle* by the Norwegian Karl Ove Knausgaard." Lorentzen continues:

> The way the term is used tends to be unstable, which makes sense for a genre that blends fiction and what may appear to be fact into an unstable compound. In the past, I've tried to make a distinction in my own use of the term between autobiographical fiction, autobiographical metafiction, and autofiction, arguing that in autofiction there tends to be emphasis on the narrator's or protagonist's or authorial alter ego's status as a writer or artist and that the book's creation is inscribed in the book itself.

by Hemingway, his editor, or his lawyer, but, whoever be the "author," it is as much of an admission as it is a denial. Even with such denials, readers often assume Hemingway is drawing on his own experience, that it is, in the end, his story. Mikhail Bakhtin says that readers naïvely read fiction as autobiography (Morson and Emerson 428–429). This "tendency," as mentioned in the note above, may come from naïve readers, but it also comes, to some degree, from Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Hemingway himself for creating characters that are identifiably close to themselves and their friends, many of whom were known to readers of the day.[3] The "tendency," in short, points to a bleed between fiction and nonfiction.

However problematic truth might be, nonfiction is often a story about an author trying to find out what really happened. The truth of seeking truth, of how this journey validates the importance of truth and even changes the author, is as important as the shards of truth that might coalesce in the narration. Because writing nonfiction often ends with shards of truth, the boundaries between truth and fiction, truth and fact, truth and reality (these pairs are not the same) are often blurred. Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, a "novel" in six volumes, some 3,600 pages, is labeled on the back cover of the English translation as fiction, even though the central character is Karl Ove Knausgaard.[4]

[3]As Lorentzen notes, the first use of the very term, autofiction, "occurred not in a work of criticism but in a blurb on the back of the French novelist Serge Doubrovsky's book *Fils* in the late 1970s":

> Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, traditional or new. Interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say, music. (qtd. in Lorentzen)

"So autofiction came to us," Lorentzen continues, "as part of the language of commercial promotion, a way of marketing as new something almost as old as writing itself: the blending of the real and the invented."

[4]Declared "one of the 21st century's greatest literary sensations" (Fox), Knausgaard's completed, six-volume work has garnered surprisingly little criticism in English. (I cannot speak for publications in German or Norwegian, but a cursory web-survey of titles—drawn primarily from foreign-language newspapers and popular magazines—suggests that scholarly attention lags behind his fan-base popularity, even in his native Norway.) For the more extensive discussions in English, see Autrey; Bawer; Boysen and Rasmussen; Erens; Moi and Lunde; Pierce; and Vanzant. A weakness of several of these, however, is that they write of early volumes (typically volumes 1–4), while the work remained unfinished. Maarit Leskelä-Kärki writes of the impact Knausgaard's full six volumes have had on Finnish readers:

> So far, his book series has already changed the way we think about autobiographical writing and the concepts of authenticity, biofiction, and remembrance. As Finnish writer and psychiatrist Claes Andersson recently stated in an essay for *Heisingin Sanomat* newspaper, Knausgârd's book "represents self-confession in a way that extends all the boundaries of autobiography as it turns into an infinite manifest of the power of the Word in an almost biblical sense." (599)

Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir writes of its impact in Iceland:

> One possible cause of the rise of the memoir, and nonfiction more generally, is a certain impatience with the genre of the novel in contemporary culture. The Spanish writer Javier Cercas states in the beginning of his nonfiction text on the 1981 attempted coup in Spain, *Anatomia de un instante*, that he had initially intended to write a novel, but then—because he had read in the paper that many Brits believed Winston Churchill to be a fictional character—he changed his course, gave up on the novel, and decided to write a documentary work instead (13). Karl Ove Knausgârd was on a similar path when he claimed to have started on his mammoth autobiographical tome, *Min Kamp* 1-6 (2009-2013) when he gave up on writing a novel about his father.

The last volume deals with the reactions of Knausgaard's relatives and friends to what he wrote about them in earlier volumes. At one point, Knausgaard's uncle threatens a lawsuit to prevent publication of the novel/memoir/autobiography. Knausgaard's first wife, Tonje Aursland, also presented her objections in a Norwegian-broadcast radio documentary (Gundersen), while his second wife, Linda Boström Knausgaard, answered with an autobiographical novel of her own, *October Child*.[5] Yet, despite the "realness" of *My Struggle* and everything that surrounds it, many readers wonder about the accuracy of Knausgaard's vast memory. How could anyone remember that much of his life in that much detail? Could this possibly be anything other than fiction?

Knausgaard himself seems rather unconcerned about genre. He doesn't seem to mind calling *My Struggle* a novel, yet he describes his process as what a Freudian analyst might call automatic writing. With the first volume, he said that his editor brought some form to his draft. After the first volume, according to Knausgaard, his editor didn't change much; in other words, his editor did not try to bring the form of a novel to Knausgaard's string of memories ("Keynote address"). But how do we manage a work that seems to blur genre or defy form? Some read the volumes as memoir, even though it doesn't have the features of a memoir. Others read it as a novel that seems to explode the form of the novel and that is probably as true as most memoirs. It has long sections without the overt presence of a narrator interspersed with shorter sections that are more traditionally narrated, as if to jar the reader back to consciousness, to an awareness that this is not a typical novel, maybe not a novel at all. Even the length means that we must read it differently. Most of us have been trained to read a novel with the expectation that every detail is somehow thematically important, but how can we read 3,600 pages like that? How many people can even skim that many pages? So, it is either a novel that redefines the form of the novel or something else. At the 2017 NonfictioNOW conference, Knausgaard was asked about how he categorized it. He said, "It's autobiography." It's not like typical autobiographies. Whatever it is (Bakhtin might call it "pure confessional self-accounting"), it comes across as brutally honest.[6] Part of that honesty is Knausgaard's willingness to share every memory with his reader, and that is a large part of its appeal. But must every author of a memoir, if it is a memoir, be so completely and brutally transparent?

In *Inadvertent* (part of the *Why I Write* series published by Yale University Press), Knausgaard discusses how literary form enables some "interpretations of the world" while shutting down or disabling others.[7] With *My Struggle,* he seems to have begun with

[5]A renowned author in her own right, Linda Boström Knausgaard was married to Karl from 2007 to 2016. Unlike most others recounted in *My Struggle*, Linda defended her then-husband's inclusion of their personal life-details. In *October Child*, she writes her own autobiographical novel, themed around her periodic hospitalizations (with electroshock therapy) for bipolar depression (Vogel). Published in Sweden in 2019, *October Child* was translated into English by Saskia Vogel in 2021.

[6]See, Bakhtin's "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (reprinted in *Art and Answerability*). Of course, we can only speculate on Bakhtin's likely responses to Knausgaard's experiments in form. But of all modernist critics, Bakhtin perhaps comes closest to anticipating the formal/generic, social, psychological, and epistemological experimentations of *My Struggle*. Throughout the following, I'll be looking for points of intersection between Bakhtinian theory and Knausgaard's practice. Bakhtin, I believe, can help us read Knausgaard.

[7]Early in his discussion, Knausgaard makes this point succinctly: "As important as what form allows a writer to say is what it doesn't let him say" (*Inadvertant* 32). He explains:

a mashup of genres that he then broke from by establishing some rules for himself, as if he were doing an extended writing experiment:

> I wanted to get close to reality, and the genre with which I felt the greatest affinity at the time was the diary. What would happen if I combined the diary's closeness to the self and urge for reflection with the realist step-by-step novel? The rules I would set for myself now were exceptionally simple. I would write only about things that had actually happened, and I would write about them as I remembered them, without doing research or amending my memory to conform to other versions. I also had to write a certain number of pages every day, first five, later ten, and toward the end up to twenty. In that way I simply wouldn't have time to think, to plan or to calculate. I would have to go with whatever appeared on the screen in front of me. (37)

We could say that genres have rules, but it seems like Knausgaard's rules are more about breaking from genre rather than creating a new one—or about blurring several genres.[8]

Interestingly, some have called *My Struggle* a "nonfictive novel," or a true story in the form of fiction. If we accept the possibility of a "nonfictive novel," might we also accept the possibility of a "fictive memoir"? Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* wants to map "a new kind of Heideggerian truth, the truth of the liminal"—or so writes Hayward Krieger, Professor of Philosophy, University of Southern California, in his introduction to Slater's volume. One problem here. The professor doesn't exist. A number of reporters have looked for him. If he does exist, he is rather well hidden (Kirkpatrick). This is the entire text of Chapter 1: "I exaggerate." In the Afterword, Slater writes: "*Lying* is a book of narrative truth, a book in which I am more interested in using invention to get to the heart of things than I am in documenting actual life occurrences" (219). In Chapter 7, which takes the form of a letter to Kate Medina, her editor at Random House (a real person), Slater discusses why she wants the book to be marketed as nonfiction: "We have to call it fiction or we have to call it fact, because there's no bookstore term for something in between, gray matter" (156). It seems to me that she dances around the real reason: She wants to question the nature of narrative truth, and whether or not the narrative is factually true only matters in nonfiction. But what is it? It

> If every chapter of this book is written differently, employing different strategies, for example one in the form of news journalism, another formed as a catechism, a third as a stream of consciousness, the relative nature of the way we understand ourselves and others will be emphasized, at the same time creating a sense that material life is something that goes on irrepressibly regardless of the forms of language, and fundamentally independent of them: the optic may change, but not what it is looking at. […] *All these possible interpretations of the world, all these layers of reality, are made possible through form*, almost independent of what the characters are thinking, feeling, or happen to be doing. (*Inadvertent* 32–33; emphasis added)

[8]Again, it's the con/fusion of genres—of diary-writing and fiction—that enabled *My Struggle*:

> This method came about because I had set out to write about myself, and since we know more about ourselves than about any other subject, it seemed important to avoid the established versions and to seek instead the complexity that lies beneath our self-insight and self-image and which can be accessed only by not thinking about how our thoughts and feelings will seem to others, how it will look, who I am if I think and feel these things. (*Inadvertent* 37–38)

reads like James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces.*[9] It's hard to believe the characters, the dialogue, or the events. In other words, it reads like what Bakhtin would call a monologic novel with metanarrative commentary about the nature of truth.[10] While Slater might want to question the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, she seems to leave most readers perplexed or angry. Slater is right, however, that we are living in an age when truth (or Truth or truths) is not simple.[11]

While we acknowledge narrative truth and metaphorical truth, there is still something important about getting the facts right. It is not, I believe, overreaching to say that democracy depends upon our willingness to try, in an admittedly complex world, to sort fact from fiction. Equally important is an acknowledgment that some areas of nonfiction will remain murky and, beyond this, that absolute certainty is not always a virtue. Instead of defining nonfiction as the genre that deals with what is true, we could say that nonfiction is the genre that deals with the difficulty of sorting out what we know from what we don't know and from what we thought we knew. In short, how do we handle the gray area between fiction and nonfiction? If works of nonfiction often point to the difficulty of establishing the truth, maybe the murkiness of truth should be considered part of the genre, maybe even foundational to it.

Or, Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, if it is a nonfictive novel, might push us to the realization that nonfiction is not a genre at all. It is an approach to genres. Nonfiction, if fully considered, might encompass more genres than journalism, biography, autobiography, memoir, and the personal essay. It might also apply to some novels, especially what is referred to as autofiction and works like Norman Maclean's "A River Runs through It." It might also apply to Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," Sylvia Plath's lyric poems, John Berryman's *Dream Songs*, and William Carlos Williams' *Patterson.* Nonfiction might relate more to how an author answers to their text. Here I'm drawing on Bakhtin's ethical/rhetorical/existential notion of answerability. Bakhtin says we must answer for our texts (*Art* 2); we must claim our texts as part of how we are in the world, which also means assuming responsibility for what we have written. The author of fiction can say, "This is not real; this is not who I am." The author of nonfiction must say, "This

[9]Frey's semi-biographical novel, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), initially failed as fiction, though it became a national best-seller when marketed as the memoir of a recovering drug addict; discovery of its fabrications proved scandalous to the author's reputation.

[10]Whereas the modern novel—in effect, fiction after Rabelais (ca. 1494–1553)—dwells in polyvocality and dialogism, the multiple voices of discourse "can be intentionally curtailed," as Maria Shevtsova notes: "When this occurs, one voice predominates. […] This is the monologic novel" (753).

[11]Kevin Vanzant reads Knausgaard within the context of post-truth culture. He quotes Pierre Hedrich's interview of François Busnel, who "identifies many of the same post-truth quandaries noted by Knausgaard" (Vanzant 682): Writers and journalists, Busnel argues, "substitute their vision of reality for reality itself," such that "objectivity" becomes "a sham"— "the truth has become an opinion like any other" (qtd. in Vanzant 682). Vanzant continues:

> From these shared observations though, Busnel and the likes of Knausgaard soon diverge. The novel is actually more important than ever, Busnel contends, because in this world, it "tells us the real better than anything else." As the news has gotten "weirder and faker," the novel has become the "most credible vector of truth" for Busnel, the "antidote of alternative facts." The narrative novel, less a problem, is more like our salvation. We are now in fact living, Busnel asserts, in "a profoundly novelistic age." (682)

I suspect that Knausgaard would agree, though he'd likely shift terms from novelistic to something more akin to autofictive or, broader (and simpler) still, to narrative.

is how I see myself—who I once was, who I am, and who I hope to become." Taking responsibility for one's texts is more than merely making sure that the facts of a piece of writing align with facts in documents or the memories of others. If we view nonfiction as merely facticity or representation as a mirror image of the material world (ignoring the physics of reflections, which reverses the image), we are thinking in one direction. If we instead view nonfiction as an interpretation of who we are and how we are in the world as well as a commitment to a certain path, then nonfiction is as much about a text transforming reality as it is about a text representing reality. Answering to our nonfictive text as if we embody its truth can be part of how its status as nonfiction is established.

What I am suggesting is that we need to find new ways to read nonfiction that go beyond a desire to maintain a simple boundary between fiction and fact. Writing on volumes 1–3 of *My Struggle*, William Pierce points to the chasm between art and life, language and experience:

> Rarely has consciousness been depicted with so little distorting filter. William Deresiewicz writes in *The Nation* that "Knausgaard's honesty is not a literary fact; it is a biographical one—a fact about the author, not the character." But this is an illusion. Beyond the most general details, we don't know Knausgaard's life. The book's directness is on a different register altogether, accessible to readers with no reference to the writer's history. (219)

In Pierce's either/or reading, Knausgaard's achievement is textual, and by no means existential. At best, the text gives us an illusion of reality:

> Knausgaard has gathered the props of his life and produced the play afresh. He has created a persona or consciousness-on-the-page that, I think it's fair to say, taps some recognizable vein of himself, and has sent that character through episodes that resemble the landmarks of his own experience, down to time spent with friends with the same names, even the same hair color. But already we've entered the project's fictional dimension. Knausgaard's reimagining—his restaging—transforms this from a memoir of the author's life to a fiction built on the framework of a life. (220)

Hence, "the book is and isn't his life, the character is and isn't him, Gabriel is and isn't Karl Ove—because he wants us considering the distance between the depicted and the real" (Pierce 222). The text, Pierce concludes, cannot achieve presence: "You, me, Knausgaard, the chair you're sitting on—none of it is made of words. For Knausgaard, the greatest gift art can confer is an awareness, which comes in the form of awe, of that final measure of lifelikeness that art can't reproduce. Art refreshes and refines our sense of the *je ne sais quoi* of reality—because reality is the one thing art cannot be" (222–23). Pierce's reading, needless to say, is traditionalist in seeking to maintain such binaries as fact/fiction, presence/absence, experience/fabulation. Through paragraphs that follow, my disagreements with this sort of reading shall become clear.

In the opening of volume six of *My Struggle*,[12] Karl Ove Knausgaard, the character on the page, is waiting for the publication of volume one, which readers worked through in some distant and extended past, or 2,448 pages ago. Knausgaard has called it a "novel" of "day-to-day life." He also calls it an autobiography, which he wrote relying entirely on his memory without any supplementary research. Now, as publication of the first volume looms, he has sent volume one to some of the relatives and friends who are "characters" on its pages, and he is nervously awaiting their reactions. It is unclear whether he sent a draft or proofs, but it is clear that the work is already in production. There might be time to fictionalize the names of some "characters" and maybe cut or revise some sections, but momentum is building. Knausgaard has invested much in the project. He wants to see it published. Now, the time of the "novel" and the time of the reader seem to merge. Volume six is like a serpent that has begun to eat its own tail, and, as his uncle accuses Knausgaard of distorting the truth, the author is shaken. The first five volumes, a memory dump, an essentially monologic inscription of Knausgaard's emerging identity, begins to shift in volume six toward the dialogic.

In the forthcoming volume one, Knausgaard wrote about the death of his father who had been drinking too much and living with his mother in squalor. After reading it, Gunnar, Knausgaard's uncle, begins to send the author emails, accusing him of "verbal rape," threatening a lawsuit, pointing out what he feels are errors and distortions. The threats send Knausgaard into a downward emotional spiral. In one of his many phases of trying to analyze and justify what he had written, he imagines, as he is in the process of doing laundry, what it would be like to defend himself in a court of law:

> Why not fight back? I straightened my shoulders, and there, in the midst of all of the journalists and inquisitive onlookers, perhaps a hundred in total, I began to speak, vividly and full of insight, about the relationship between truth and the subject, literature's relationship to reality, delving into the nature of social structures, the way a novel of this kind exposed the boundaries to which society adhered but which remained unwritten and were thus invisible insofar as they were melded into us and our self-understanding, and how they for this reason had to be breached before they could be seen. But why did they have to be seen, my defense lawyer asked. There is something all of us experience, which is the same for all human beings, I replied, but which nonetheless is seldom conveyed apart from in the private sphere. All of us encounter difficulties at some point in our lives, all of us know someone with a drinking problem, mental issues, or some other kind of life-threatening affliction, at least this is the case in my experience; every time I meet a new person and get to know them, some narrative like this will eventually come to the surface, a tale of sickness, decline, or sudden death. These things are not represented and thereby seem not to exist, or else to exist as a burden each of us must bear on our own. (184–85)

[12]The Norwegian volumes appeared between 2009 and 2011. Translated by Don Bartlett, the first two volumes in English appeared in 2013, the third in 2014, the fourth in 2015, the fifth in 2016, and the sixth volume (translated by Bartlett and Martin Aitkin) in 2018—a span of five years total.

This is a small sample of Knausgaard's reflection on why he wrote in such detail about his life; this self-analysis of his project takes many forms and extends across the 1,152 pages of the English translation of volume six.

What we have in volume six might very well be the most extensive reflection of any author on the ethics of his own work. In fact, I know of no other work that covers such an expanse of time that it begins to comment on the reception and impact of the work's publication. At one point in volume six, he extensively analyzes the ethics of Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, a short novel about the death of Handke's mother, and he seems to conclude that his book is different. Bakhtin might agree. He would say that events are singular, and so are books and their contexts. The ethical decisions of the author of one book are not easily transferred to another. Bakhtin, I believe, would also say that in writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, the author is exploring how to live with others, so it makes sense that we would bring others into our process—in effect, to engage in dialogue.[13] While Knausgaard may have written volumes one through five monologically in isolation, he is trying to manage the impact of his writing on others in volume six. He is answering for what he has written in earlier volumes.

Even when he is not directly addressing the impact of his writing on his life, the lives of those around him—including the potential impact on his children—the writing seems to take the controversy, which soon became frontpage news in Norway, and placed it in a new perspective. Shortly after the imagined courtroom scene, Geir, his lifelong friend, visits him. Geir shares a story about how his downstairs neighbor had complained about Geir's loud footsteps so often and so irrationally that he decides to go to "war" with him. He buys a pair of clogs and starts stomping around in his apartment. Is Geir suggesting that Knausgaard needs to quit trying to appease his uncle and go to war?

Knausgaard does not offer simple answers to Geir or himself, and I suspect that readers of *My Struggle* will never tire of arguing about the ethics of the project. Should he have shown earlier drafts to relatives and friends, and invited them into his process much sooner? Should he have done research and checked facts? Should he have changed names? Knausgaard explores all of these issues and more, but what seems central to his reflections in volume six is that he should tell the truth about himself and the world he lives in, which also means telling the truth about others. Yet, he seems to have been entirely unprepared for their reactions. When Knausgaard is discussing Uncle Gunnar's emails with Christina, Geir's wife, she asks: "Weren't you expecting it?" He answers:

> "No," I said. "Not even close. I thought maybe he might be a bit peeved, but I hadn't anticipated anything like this, I've been really naïve, as it turns out. I thought I was writing about stuff that happened, and I hadn't imagined people could object. I realized it might annoy a few people, I was prepared for that, and maybe they'd want their name taken out, but I never envisaged anyone would want to stop it. Or get so ridiculously worked up." (287)

It is interesting that Knausgaard starts to reflect on self and his project once others enter into his process. Certainly, one of the reasons for writing about others is so that they can

[13]See Bakhtin's essay collection, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

challenge our view of self, our memories, our constructed stories, that is, if we choose to bring them into our writing as early readers. As Bakhtin says, it is others who consummate us and give us, in fragments, an objective view of ourselves (*Art* 15). It would make sense to include their reactions in our process, but Knausgaard seems to have written in isolation, not even sharing drafts with his wife. As mentioned earlier, he set up rules for writing the "novel" and then he wrote rapidly, including all his memories, without research, fact-checking, or judgment. This might be true for volumes one through five, but volume six is different.

In the middle of volume six, sandwiched between Part I and Part II, is a 439 page personal essay titled "The Name and the Number." It is hard to know what to make of the extended essay, which covers a wide range of topics. It almost seems as if Knausgaard took all of the contextualizing comments one finds in a typical novel, cut them from the rest of the book, and then stitched them together into a single place. Or, he is giving the reader a survey of the intellectual work behind his book. Knausgaard begins the essay with a long discussion about the ramifications of changing names in nonfiction works. Even though his uncle wanted him to change the names of all Knausgaards in the work, including that of Knausgaard's father, he decides he cannot change his father's name; instead, he leaves his father unnamed. Then, he begins a discussion of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, in part to explain why he borrowed the title of his work from a book that set the Holocaust in motion. Except for a single sentence where he notes, almost as a throw away, that Hitler's father had changed the family name, the analysis of *Mein Kampf* seems a long digression. But, then, there are moments when Knausgaard seems to be fearing an identification with Hitler, where he strives to make a distinction.

Knausgaard writes, Hitler "turns his problematic social background to his advantage, at the same time as he keeps private that which would ruin his trajectory" (511). In his work, Knausgaard does not seem to keep anything private. According to Knausgaard, "Hitler's I is constrained by its feeble mastery of form, inability to mold the language into any true expression of the I and the emotions by which it is pervaded, all he can do is seek to copy the formal qualities of others, in the simplest of ways, a cliché" (630). In his work, by contrast, Knausgaard breaks with the restrictions of form, writing a work that cannot neatly be placed in a standard genre. Knausgaard critiques the language of the Nazis, which "did not first arise in *Mein Kampf*, but was gathered and concentrated there and through the author of that book disseminated into an entire society with the aim of turning it completely on its head" (634). In his book, Knausgaard executes an extended analysis of Paul Celan's "The Straightening," a poem that he believes counters the language of Nazis. We come to realize that Knausgaard's *My Struggle* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* are doppelgängers, the product of mimesis, or counter-mimesis. Much of Knausgaard's reflection in this extended personal essay—which breaks into the narration, jarring the reader—comes from the willingness to explore an identification with Hitler and the effort of crafting distinctions.

Writing before the publication of the English translation of volume 6, Pamela Erens interprets Knausgaard's title in existentialist terms: "The struggle the novel's title refers to is Knausgaard's struggle between conflicting impulses, aims, and pressures; or, put another way, it is his struggle to be at one with his life. And this universal struggle he conveys with tremendous power" (205–06). But, surely the sixth volume's discourse

on Hitlerism complicates matters. In an intriguing (if controversial) essay, Benjamin Boysen and Jesper Lundsfryd Rasmussen situate Knausgaard's project within the intellectual context of "new materialism." They read his work not as an existentialist exploration of selfhood, but as a dissolution of the self within a larger lifeworld:

> Knausgård's international breakthrough, his six-volume series of autobiographical novels *My Struggle* (2009–11), subscribes to the same basic tenets of the critique raised by key voices within the "material turn." In novelistic and essayistic form, Knausgård expresses the same intense dismay with (post)modernity. He, too, feels that modernity has replaced reality with fictions (narratives, images, concepts), which both purport a flattening equality with and maintain a firm distance from that which is mediated. [...] He draws attention to a smouldering violence and rage behind the premodern longing to annul or dissolve human subjectivity in the search for an immediate, undifferentiated unity with the world (which is part of Knausgård's literary ambition). (12)

"Knausgård's professed writerly goal," they continue, "is to reinstate an archaic pre-cultural presence untainted by the universal and the social" (12). It is an "unmediated thing-like and sensuous reality" that Knausgaard longs for, one that seeks to "escape the universal, human relations and reality as mediated by human, cultural or social meaning" (Boysen and Rasmussen 13). They quote him directly:

> What I was trying to do was to reintroduce a closeness, trying to get the text to penetrate that whole series of conceptions and ideas and images that hang like a sky above reality, or cling to it like a membrane enclosing the eye, to reach into the reality of the human body and the frailty of the flesh, but not in any general way because generality is a relative of the ideal, it doesn't exist, only the particular exists, and since the particular in this case happens to be me, that was what I wrote about. That's how it is. It was the only goal I had, and that's the reality of the matter. (*My Struggle* 6:178)

It is within this yearning for "an immediate, undifferentiated unity with the world" that Boysen and Rasmussen explain Knausgaard's identification with Hitlerism—certainly not with the latter's violence and antisemitism, but with its call to *Vernichtung*, to an annihilation of the individual within a larger social-material reality. They write: "The presence that Knausgård is pursuing is a presence demanding and boding the absence and even annihilation of human reality, since human reality (the social, the relational, and the universal) is a fictious non-entity obscuring reality as it is in itself" (13). While I, personally, incline toward an existentialist reading, Knausgaard's exploration of self is unafraid of paradoxes—even those that express a negation of self.

Part of that negation is mirrored in the Hitlerian doppelgänger, which comes to reflect the author's shadow-self. After writing about the "I" and the "we," the warring-twins Cain and Able, and René Girard's "scapegoat mechanism" as a means of reducing violence within a community,[14] Knausgaard declares:

[14]See, Girard, René. "Mimesis and Violence." *The Girard Reader*, edited by James Williams. Crossroad, 1996, p. 12.

> But repetition is also tabooed, the emulative and the echoic, imitation, mimesis being likewise associated with peril, and according to Girard this is quite fundamental. In some primitive cultures twins are killed at birth. Mirrors too are often associated with danger; some cultures forbid the imitation of others, whether by gesture or the repetition of utterances, the doppelgänger has always put fear into people; many religions prohibit the depiction of their deity. (*My Struggle* 6:688)

Much of culture and its rituals are unavoidably based on mimesis—that is, on (mirror-)representations of the self and/as other. Hegel says our identity is tied to others. Lacan says we develop an identity as we recognize ourselves in a mirror. And Jung (whose archetypal psychology is invoked in the doppelgänger) says we develop our conscious identity by suppressing the other we do not wish to become, which then forms the shadow-self. The more we run from our opposite, the more that evil other controls us.[15] And so we write. As we write about self, Knausgaard seems to say, we unavoidably encounter our doppelgänger.

One of the lessons we can learn from witnessing Knausgaard's reflection is that the ethical impact of a work of nonfiction is so complex that it can be paralyzing. Knausgaard does more than worry about the present impact on his relationship with his uncle, wife, brother, and friends; he also worries about the future impact on his children. As publication nears, he seems surprisingly vulnerable. Did he so lose himself in his project that he is now unprepared to defend it? Writing honestly about the self, if we provisionally accept that it is possible, involves a dissolution of self.[16] This was, perhaps, even more profound for Knausgaard who avoided established forms like memoir. Should he have done more to put himself back together, in some way return to form, before he began to share volume one?

From Bakhtin, we have learned that literary form cannot be separated from human values. Form is a way of testing and reaffirming values, a way of connecting with tradition and exploring a place in the world that is changing at an accelerating rate. Form might provide order, but the writer also needs to find ways to break from order. Knausgaard does that quite well. What he might have missed is the way that narrative can provide solid ground and a path—or a series of paths. We should think of order and disorder as part of the same process, as a dialectic. We should recognize our connection to others and our independence, as dialogic. In "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book," Bakhtin writes:

[15]"The shadow," writes C.G. Jung, "is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real" (9: ii). In terms descriptive of Knausgaard's shadow-self exploration, Daryl Sharp elaborates: "The shadow is composed for the most part of repressed desires and uncivilized impulses, morally inferior motives, childish fantasies and resentments, etc.—all those things about oneself one is not proud of" (Sharp).

[16]In *Inadvertant*, Knausgaard suggests as much:

> What I wanted with this book, which was eventually titled *My Struggle* and grew to six volumes, was to erode my own notions about the world, allowing whatever had been kept down by them to rise to the surface. The only way I could accomplish this was to abdicate as king of myself and let the literary, in other words writing and the forms of writing, lead the way. (38–39)

> Not merging with another, but preserving one's own position of *extralocality* and the *surplus* of vision and understanding connected with it. But the real question is Dostoevsky's use of this surplus. Not for materialization and finalization. The most important aspect of this surplus is love (one cannot love oneself, love is a coordinate relationship), and then, confession, forgiveness […] finally simply an active (not duplicating) understanding, a willingness to listen. *This surplus is never used as an ambush, as a chance to sneak up and attack from behind.* This is an open and honest surplus, dialogically revealed to the other person, a surplus expressed by the addressed and not by the secondhand word. Everything essential is dissolved in dialogue, positioned face to face. (299; emphasis added)

Understanding another without "merging with another" means listening, offering our surplus, what we understand about the other, with love, in dialogue. It is the process of learning to live with others and the process of building community *through writing and in writing*. In "The Essay in Dark Times," Jonathan Franzen writes:

> One of the mysteries of literature is that personal substance, as perceived by both the writer and the reader, is situated outside the body of either of them, on some kind of page. How can I feel realer to myself in a thing I'm writing than I do inside my body? How can I feel closer to another person when I'm reading her words than I do when I'm sitting next to her? The answer, in part, is that both writing and reading demand full attentiveness. But it surely also has to do with the kind of *ordering* that is possible only on the page. (7)

For some reason, we feel more open to ourselves and others in genres like the personal essay and memoir. In sum, the truth of nonfiction is complex, situated, and grounded. Said another way, it is human. It is part of a dialogue. While it might be entirely appropriate for an author to make these claims, we should not assume they are self-evident or transparent. Readers will likely contest some or all of them, especially readers who are also mentioned in the text. This, too, is part of the process, part of answerability.

In an interview with Joshua Rothman, Knausgaard said, "Well, you can never read an authentic 'I,' an authentic self. I think it's impossible to free yourself from the social being you are. I remember seeing an interview with Ian McEwan where he used the word 'selflessness,' and I really understood what he meant: that's the dream for a writer. That's a precious place to be—and if you are there then you are authentic" ("Knausgaard's Selflessness"). If being authentic means being free "from the social being" and being "selfless," then *authenticity is nowhere*. How is it possible to be authentic in isolation? Seneca and the Stoics wanted to explore the role of the self within a society. Hegel understood that our identity is always tied to others. Bakhtin founded his ethics on polyphony, the interplay of independent voices. Authenticity and ethics are about learning to live with others within a community. We need to "know the self," but we can only come to self-knowledge among others. This is how we should view authenticity: as something like the process of *Bildung*, exploring the potential of the self, not in isolation, but *within a community*.[17]

[17]For Hegel, who was once the headmaster of a boys' school, *Bildung* (literally, "education") is the process of developing individuals so that they will be capable of dialectical thought—or, said differently, capable of embodying truth. In *The Spirit and Its Letter*, John H. Smith writes,

Late in *My Struggle*, Knausgaard asks, "What good would all of these feelings and musings do?" (1052). He seems to be asking, "What is the value of care of self?" I will let James Baldwin provide an answer:

> I have always been struck, in America, by an emotional poverty so bottomless, and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep, that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life. This failure of the private life has always had the most devastating effect on American public conduct, and on black-white relations. If Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would never have become so dependent on what they call "the Negro problem." (*I Am Not Your Negro* 56)

If we fail to come to terms with our own subjectivity, how can we relate to others? How can we teach? How can we even raise our children? As Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*, which was published in 1962 but is even more resonant as I am writing in 2022 in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who kept his knee on Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds: "It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and clarity not to teach your children to hate" (99–100).

Authenticity is not about achieving absolute knowledge of the self. It is about realizing that what we hold inside—guilt, shame, anger, trauma—affects how we live among others.[18] Authenticity is more important than feeling at peace with oneself; our

> To see why the process of *Bildung* as described by Hegel is best conceived not in vague terms but as taking place in language and leading to a proper form of linguistic expression, one can consider two processes that Hegel opposes to *Bildung*. In the one, "natural consciousness" *remains trapped in its habitual behavior* and does not rise above its inner imaginings or representations (*Vorstellungen*) or recognize itself as a rational agent in an external world. In the other, a consciousness insists on its freedom to act in the world and *to impose itself forcefully on external objects* with the power of its willful reasoning (*Räsonnieren*). In both cases subjectivity dominates, either by lacking abstract knowledge of that which is other than itself or by dominating that Other which it views as its opposite. (17; emphasis added)

The process of *Bildung*, for Hegel, begins with a movement outward toward the world and others followed by a return to the self, with consciousness transformed in the process. This movement, the very flow of consciousness, includes exploring "a model of representation" that "derives from practice of reading, imitating, translating, and writing […] to develop a historically grounded sense of self-expression" (Smith 20–21). We cannot know ourselves apart from others, and expression is never pure. We speak from others to others. As we write in a genre, even if this act is imitative in our early attempts, we experience "the self's loss into and gradual appropriation of the Other of tradition" (Smith 21).

[18]In exploring the theme of shame, Toril Moi and Anders Firing Lunde make similar observations: "Knausgård's project," they write, "is at once literary and existential" (207):

> His artistic mission is to create a work that is "committed to reality," a work in which language grasps reality and makes it visible. Existentially, Knausgård writes to change himself. *My Struggle* is Knausgård's struggle to escape his inauthenticity and become real, a struggle which takes the form of an obsession with the experience of shame, the predominant theme in *My Struggle* […]. In other words: Knausgård writes at once to create something authentic and to become authentic himself. (207)

Here, too, Bakhtin comes to the fore:

> But what guarantees the inner connection of the constituent elements of a person? Only the unity of answerability. I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood

subjectivity affects others. Reflection and confession are part of our journey. Writing imperfect stories, full of gaps, fissures, and uncertainty, moves us past stories that become self-imposed borders. And so we work within and toward genres—call them fictive memoir or nonfictive novel—that dissolve into narrative and metaphoric truths, bringing us into dialogue, making us answerable.

Much is at stake.

in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. But answerability entails guilt, or liability to blame. It is not only mutual answerability that art and life must assume, but also mutual liability to blame. (*Art* 1–2)

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