

## Notes on Knausgaard, *My Struggle*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

### What Counts as Good Writing for Knausgaard?

This essay has two postscripts. What follows is a negative review of vol. 1, which I read when it was first out; now *My Struggle* is famous, and it has gotten some very reflective reviews. Thoughts on those at the end.

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It's possible this book may be memorable. It has structural, narrative, and tonal problems that may, in the end, turn out to be strengths. I have no idea why it has gotten so many rave reviews, why it seems "like real life," or why "the public have fallen to their knees in awe." Of all the books over 400 pages that I've read in the last few years, this is the one I thought I was least likely to finish.

It is volume 1 of the author's autobiography, presented as a novel. He is an alcoholic, depressive novelist, whose father was also an alcoholic. Part One is reminiscences of his childhood; Part Two is about his father's death and the funeral arrangements for it.

Knausgaard has a habit of describing everything he sees in a kind of flat, sequential fashion, one moment to the next, as if he was a court recorder. He recounts any number of episodes that have no special interest and no connection to what happens later in the book. Here are two examples.

An example of the sort of trite dialogue Knausgaard tends to record:

"Hello?" I said.

"Hi, it's me."

"Hi."

"I was just wondering how things were going. Are you managing okay down there?"

She sounded happy.

"I don't know. I've only been here a few hours," I said.

Silence.

“Are you coming home soon?”  
“You don’t need to hassle me,” I said. “I’ll come when I come.”  
She didn’t answer.  
“Shall I buy something on the way?” I asked at length.  
“No I’ve done the shopping.”  
“Okay. See you then.”  
“Good. Bye. Hold on. Cocoa.”  
“Cocoa,” I said. “Anything else?”  
“No, that’s all.”  
“Okay. Bye.”  
“Bye.” (p. 194)

And here is an example of dogged description, with apparently only a little nuance. He is waiting to board a plane:

“The cleaning staff scurried up the bridge from the plane. The uniformed woman talked into a telephone. After putting it down she picked up a small microphone and announced the plane was ready for boarding. I opened the outside pocket of my bag and took out the ticket... A man in overalls with ear protectors walked across, he was holding those things like ping-pong rackets used to direct planes into position....” (p. 240)

In another context, this sort of thing could have been like one of Perec’s experiments in description, but Knausgaard has nothing to do with OuLiPo’s interests. Or it could have been a demonstration of the triviality of ordinary life, but Knausgaard isn’t at all like Kavanaugh or Larkin. Or it could have been the sort of writing that is so dependent on language that it just won’t translate; but that couldn’t be the case because there are positive reviews of a number of translations. Or it could have been done in order to find the sublime or the poignant in the everyday: but Knausgaard’s sense of dialogue is flat, and his descriptions are often rote or utilitarian.

It becomes increasingly perplexing to decide just what the book is attempting, short of a total inventory of the author’s life, which is impossible partly because the author has limited recall, and partly because he is, in fact, a depressive and an alcoholic. And that possibility is, for me, what carries the book. There is a kind of dogged deliberation in “My Struggle,” as if the only way to continue is to write, and the only way to write is to write everything: but at the same time Knausgaard doesn’t record systematically; “My Struggle” isn’t rule-bound or fanatical. It’s as if he has put all the energy and concentration he has into this project, writing year after year, writing out each memory in detail, omitting nothing, inventorying his entire remaining memory, but without any sense of what a complete life might look like, or any hope of stitching the parts together.

This sort of unsystematic, intermittently oblivious, partly uncaring attitude toward the obsessive compulsive project of plumbing his past produces strange effects. At first, a reader might expect that each episode will have some

connection to others, or some special meaning or resonance -- as things usually work in novels. Later, when that turns out not to be the case, a reader might reasonably conclude that the author is just writing as best as he can, about whatever he can remember: and then, I think, the book really begins to flag. Knausgaard sometimes interrupts his narratives with meditations, which he apparently thinks are original or interesting; for me they usually aren't. Only a few of the stories in Part One are interesting or unusual. Here is an example of the sort of meditation that is apparently presented as insightful:

"I recognized the feeling, it was akin to the one some works of art evoke in me. Rembrandt's portrait of himself as an old man in London's National Gallery was such a picture, Turner's picture of the sunset over the sea off a port of antiquity in the same museum, Caravaggio's picture of Christ in Gethsemane. Vermeer evoked the same, a few of Claude's paintings, some of Ruisdael's..." (the list continues; p. 219)

Knausgaard did not have an unusual childhood, and he does not describe it in an inventive way. But -- and this is why I kept reading -- there is a strange contradiction between the narrative he wants us to read and the one that emerges as I began to attend to what was going wrong with what I took to be his project of writing a raw, honest memoir.

An example of the strangeness: he spends 200 pages describing his childhood, but he opens Part Two with remarks like this:

"If I had forgotten something in my childhood it was probably due to repression" (given as a throwaway line, and never developed; p. 216)

or

"I remembered hardly anything from my childhood." (p. 189)

Weirdly, he doesn't think it's worth noting that it sounds odd to say that sort of thing after having spent 200 pages describing his childhood in meticulous detail.

He opens the book with a story about a face he thought he'd seen in the sea, and it comes back at the opening of Part Two. But, weirdly, he does not think it is puzzling to simply mention the face, but not draw any meaning from it -- and he never returns to it again. All he gives us is one throwaway line (p. 189):

"the remarkable thing was that I had forgotten it and now remembered."

And very weirdly, he does not seem to notice that a reader might expect the story of the face in the sea to be of some interest to the narrator himself.

The affectless dialogue, the dull anecdotes, the supposedly trenchant meditations, the unsystematic systematicity, do create an unusual tone, and I read the book

through even though I became increasingly convinced that Knausgaard is not aware of the particular grating effect that his desultory, compulsive, flat, unremitting narrative produces.

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Postscript, 2013

Volume 2 is now out in English, and there are signs Knausgaard will become a major figure. At the end of 2013 Rivka Galchen named vol. 2 as the "most interesting literary development" of the year, saying it is "substantive, comical, and artistically singular." (New York Times Book Review, Sunday, December 15, p. 43.) It is singular, but it is loose, unreflective about structure, unaware of readers' plausible expectations, and relentlessly simpleminded about how the everyday has been put into prose.

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Second postscript, May 2014

Volume 3 is now out in English, and it's gotten an excellent review by Ben Lerner, [www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake).

I am surprised at how widely it's being accepted that Knausgaard is a major novelist -- or, in Lerner's assessment, a largely successful anti-novelist, who is out to end the novel and literature in general by avoiding selection. (By recording everything.) As Lerner notes, that sets up a tension between the endlessness and lack of selectivity in the writing, in which the entire world spills onto the page, on the one hand, and the idea of plot, structure, or development, on the other. This is how Lerner puts it:

"Of course Knausgaard does leave things out (why, I wonder, is sex described in less detail than cornflakes?), selects among scenes and sentences, but we are caught up in the fiction that he doesn't. Yet that childish sense of open-endedness, in which everything is equally interesting, is countered by another fiction: that the meaning of 'My Struggle' will be revealed at its end, secured by the author's death (at least his death qua author). The former fiction is a fiction of formlessness, the undifferentiated, an infinite verticality outside time; and the latter is a fiction that gives form, the imposition of shape on experience, a syntax of events. The constitutive tension of Knausgaard's work, its internal struggle, is the push and pull between these two fictions."

Here "death" stands in for the novel and literature in general, and it is a reasonable synecdoche. For me Lerner's way of putting things raises two questions, both of which cannot be definitively answered for English-language readers until the final 3 volumes are translated. The two questions are:

1. Can the supposed lack of structure, choice, taste, plot, style, and skill – the things that ruined volume 1 for me – be adequately understood as a bid to escape from literature? I agree that "breaking of the vessel of art, the renunciation of fiction, literary suicide – these are fictions, and they're the devices on which the power of 'My Struggle' depends"; but does the mass of unstructured writing actually work as an escape from fiction?

2. Can the supposed lack of structure, choice, taste, plot, style, and skill be understood as a representation of what Lerner calls "the undifferentiated mass of experience"? Can the flood of "raw" experiences, especially the uninteresting, unremarkable, everyday ones, represent experience?

These are two distinct questions. The first is about strategy: can a novelist put an end to the novel by putting everything into it except the structures that would have made it literature? The second is about experience: is it "experience" that is represented in "My Struggle"?

(I note that the first question is separate from the possibility, which Lerner ponders, that the book might conclude with death, and therefore conclude as literature: the question pertains to the strategy itself, not whether this 6-volume project succeeds. Apparently "My Struggle" does have an ending; it does end with "death": i.e., it has an arc, it does rehabilitate and motivate its formlessness. And apparently, too, Knausgaard has not defeated the novel, even for himself, because he has told an interviewer he is at work on another. But this first question is about strategy, not result.)

My answer to both questions is no. To the first question: I am not persuaded that proposing to have laid down the nameable skills of the novelist is a strategy to avoid literature. Some Oulipean strategies do bypass some parts of literature, but this strategy is too knowing, too deliberate, and – though I recognize this won't be a popular opinion, given the many enthusiastic reviews of "My Struggle" – too easy. It's too easy to fill 6 volumes with a spew of uncurated thoughts. It's true the novel "cracks," as Knausgaard himself says ("I thought of this project as a kind of experiment in realistic prose. How far is it possible to go into detail before the novel cracks and becomes unreadable?") but that does not mean literature is left behind or even effectively critiqued. It would be as if someone tried to "ruin" the sonnet by interpolating thousands of extra lines.

To the second question: the undifferentiated mass of experience supposedly rendered in "My Struggle" is itself a trope, an idea about the continuum of sensory experience that comes in part from Hume, Bergson, and de Certeau. "My Struggle" is a large-scale rehearsal of what counts, in such theories, as "raw" experience.

So I doubt the project of "My Struggle": it is not an effective anti-novel, and it does not break through conventions to represent real experience. We need to begin to ask more closely why we think, as Lerner does, that "it's amazing."

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Third postscript, December 2014

Knausgaard continues to become more famous. In the current "Paris Review," there's an interview with this telling moment: the interviewer asks him about the beautifully written opening pages of vol. 1. He answers:

"The whole time I was writing these six books I felt, his is not good writing. What's good, I think, is the opening five pages of Book One, the reflection on death. When we were publishing that first book, my editor asked me to remove those pages because they are so different from the rest, and he was right—he is right—it would have been better, but I needed one place in the book where the writing was good. I spent weeks and weeks on that passage, and I think it's modernist, high-quality prose. The rest of the book is not to my standard. [Laughter from audience] I'm not saying this as a joke. This is true."

I believe him when he says this, but then I can't understand how we are meant to understand his insouciance about the lack of writing quality in the remaining volumes. He seems oddly unreflective about that: unwilling to reflect. Perhaps that odd moment of intentionally poor self-reflection is one of the qualities that draw people to him. But of course the interviewer doesn't notice the anomaly of an author sincerely noting the quality of one one-hundredth of his output, and then not minding.