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Portraits of the Author in a Post-Anthropocentric Mirror

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This article introduces the term ‘performative biographism’ and sees the recent boom in autofictional writing as part of this trend. With Karl Ove Knausgård’s My Struggle as my example, I relate performative biographism to the turn to things in recent theory in order to bring out two aspects of a post-anthropocentric conception of authorship. It turns out that this has relevance for literature’s modes of existence in general.

Keywords: New materialism, object-oriented ontology, Karl Ove Knausgård, My Struggle, performative biographism, Bruno Latour

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Post-anthropocentric theory and autofiction/biographism are two major trends in the literary and academic worlds today.¹ They very much seem to contradict each other – an ambition to move beyond man as the center of the universe versus what looks like a Great Man Theory of Literature. With a reading of Karl Ove Knausgård’s My Struggle, however, I will argue that they can and should be taken together, as their combination will allow a much-needed post-anthropocentric understanding of the new forms of (auto)biographical writing as well as literature in general; an understanding that lays a new course between the Scylla of intentionalism and personalism and the Charybdis of constructivism and textualism.

I have two theoretical arguments. The first one is exceptionalist. I argue that a combination of performance studies and the post-anthropocentric turn makes good sense as a theoretical framework for highlighting the aesthetic specifics of autofiction as part of a broader trend that I would label ‘performative biographism’.² The second argument goes the other way: Such a combination elicits two vital aspects of a post-anthropocentric conception of contemporary autobiographical authorship – which turns out to say something about the social and the not so social life of literature in general.

As for Knausgård, I argue that My Struggle may look like the epitome of literature as a
vessel for the author’s singular subjectivity. This would seem to call for traditional structuralist and post-structuralist critiques of the author as a stand-in for a liberal-humanist conception of subjectivity. On closer inspection, however, the text’s massive interplay with its contexts is not so much a deconstruction of the author-subject as a demonstration of its mode(s) of existence. The fact, famously highlighted by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, that the author-subject is not so much an individual person as a functional principle does not make it an ideological mystification but point to the specifics of its material reality.

**Objects – social or anti-social?**

In an essay on Bruno Latour, Graham Harman points out that Latour’s actor-network-theory, on the one hand, makes him ‘the philosopher of relations par excellence; few if any thinkers have ever granted as much prestige to networks and interactions as he does’.³ Latour’s version of reality consists of actants, actors of any kind, anything that affects anything else, human or otherwise, that form larger networks – galaxies, theories, families. On the other hand, and true to his own object-oriented philosophy, Harman claims that Latour’s actor-network-theory by implication seals every actant – whether they be atoms, quarks, Fidel Castro, Houdini or unicorns – ‘in an utterly specific reality that cannot endure across different places and moments.’⁴ Harman’s essay points to a fundamental disagreement in the turn to things about the very conception of things (and he locates this rift in the work of Latour himself). For ‘relationists’ such as Latour and Jane Bennet it is interaction between actors – human and non-human – that makes something what it is. For the advocates of Object-oriented ontology, such as Harman himself and Timothy Morton, every thing has a surplus that faces away from any and every relation: ‘[. . .] objects have an essence that is profoundly withdrawn’.⁵ Bill Brown’s Thing Theory has a similar bent.⁶ In this view, objects are basically *cøy*, as Bennet put it in an encounter with Morton and Harman.⁷ One way of re-conceptualizing the author in a post-anthropocentric perspective would be to follow Latour and Bennet, and think of the author in relational terms, as an assemblage or a network. This approach, which we will call the Network Theory of the Author (NTA), resonates with the recent boom in biographical writing and related developments in other art forms; forms that blur the distinctions between work, creator and reception. It also captures the fact that many authors and artists are heavily mediated brands in a celebrity culture – whether this happens as part of their work or
happens to their work. Following the Harman-Morton-line would give us the Object Theory of the Author (OTA). In OTA, the author is ‘profoundly withdrawn’, i.e. ‘author’ signifies the utterly singular and nonrelational aspect of the person who did the writing.

Beginning where Knausgård finishes, I will try out two ways of looking for the material author in the mirror of post-anthropocentric theory. OTA is decidedly speculative, and gestures with Giorgio Agamben (his arm twisted) and Bill Brown towards the thingness of an unrelated ‘form of life’. NTA is more hands-on and uses Latour and Bennett to describe Knausgård as a network. This relational portrait of the post-anthropocentric author gets most of the attention here. Since it is based on the argument that contemporary biographical writing is best understood by way of performance studies, it is where I start.

**Introducing ‘Performative Biographism’**

The boom in biographical writing outside of the traditional genres of biography and autobiography, but well inside genres normally associated with fiction, is a literary version of a larger cultural trend that I would term ‘performative biographism’. The first part of the term draws on J.L. Austin’s term for doing things with words. The latter re-signifies an invective – once common in the three Scandinavian tongues as well as in German – for literary scholarship that committed, as Sean Burke has it, ‘the over-prosecuted fallacies of intention, personalism and genesis.’ The question posed by re-signifying ‘biographism’ and pairing it with Austin’s concept is this: What happens when the fallacies of intention, personalism and genesis are explicitly part of the work rather than (bad) interpretative strategies, when the wallowing in private parts takes place in the words on the page?

My conception of performative biographism draws on performance studies; the original performance of Marina Abramovic’s *Lips of Thomas* (1975) being a good example. Having swallowed honey and red wine ad nauseam in an art gallery, Abramovic cut a star in her belly, whipped her back severely and lay down bleeding on a block of ice with heating fans blowing towards her. After a while the people watching the torturous performance could not take it anymore; they intervened and called for an ambulance. In a way they interrupted the performance, but could only do so because they were part of it. A performance is not a semiotic object, not the signifier for the
absent text and its meaning. A performance is material presence, it is what happens; it is an autopoietic feedback loop of energy between the people present. ‘You don’t have to do it again’ someone shouted as Abramovich cut herself for the third time at the 2005 rerun of Lips of Thomas.  

A lot of contemporary biographical phenomena have structures similar to such performances (but temporarily displaced and spatially distributed, obviously). Texts from a variety of cultural areas, from literary autofiction to social media, make stylized use of personal information, with the author performing alongside it on other media stages. What the text relates concerns real people, and sometimes it calls for reactions from the public – or the people mentioned in the book. The artist can respond, at which point a mediatized feed-back loop is running, often feeding into a new work by the author. And as in the Abramovic performance, a lot of contemporary cultural products involving real people suspend the audience ‘between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives.’ This often creates a strong affective response: Do we call the critics or the cops when Knausgård relates in My Struggle that he may or may not have had an affair with a minor? The suspension on a threshold between art and life amounts to an all-pervasive aesthetics of our time – present in the perpetual promise of mainstream films that they are ‘based on a true story,’ in reality shows, in many forms within literature and the arts. I call this \textit{the aesthetics of the threshold}.  

Approaching art with an inspiration from performance studies involves a change in the conception of the work of art. In our literary context, the work can still be read with all the tools left by a century of text-orientated literary theory and scholarship (as opposed to the strong biographical orientation of 19th century scholarship), but it is also seen as a social experiment involving real things and real people. Thus, performative biographism might be connected to what the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud in an influential (and often contested) essay on the art of the 1990s called \textit{Relational Aesthetics} (2002). ‘Each particular artwork’, Bourriaud suggested of relational art, ‘is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum’. The reception of biographical art, the way we relate to it and attach ourselves to it, is not only something happening after, outside or alongside the work, but also part of it.  

Many of the works to which I would attach the term performative biographism have comparable structures, and My Struggle is a case in point. It came out in six volumes
from 2009 onwards. This not only means that the later volumes can – and do – comment upon the earlier ones, but also that the work documents and interprets the reception of the novel itself. This kind of reference can also be found in oeuvres such as Philip Roth’s or Michel Houellebecq’s with a continuous autobiographical bent. Feedback loops of energy may sound impersonal, but the point is that energy is let loose by the fact that real people are affected in and by works of art and literature, and equally real people are watching this happen. The ethics of such works are often problematic – as Knausgård himself is the first to point out, in the ending of *My Struggle* as well as elsewhere.

The fact that the ethical stakes of Knausgård’s self-dubbed ‘experiment in realism’ is continuously discussed in the novel itself has not spared him from stark criticism in his homeland Norway – accompanying the almost unanimously favorable reviews. The derogative term Reality Literature (‘virkelighetslitteratur’) is in later years frequently applied to autobiographical writing, and newspapers such as *Aftenposten* have been eager to publish stories about people who feel wronged by it. In Sweden, where Knausgård lives, debates have centered around questions of gender in both his media appearances and in his work. Reception in Denmark has been mostly positive, and somewhat concentrated in the academy. Claus Elholm Andersens has published a monograph arguing for ‘the literariness of *My Struggle*’.

This study is polemically directed against work on Knausgård by Stefan Kjerkegaard, Poul Behrendt, Hans Hauge and myself that understands *My Struggle* as part of a new kind of literary production, which makes new terms and approaches necessary. According to Elholm Andersen, this work has forgotten that *My Struggle* is first and foremost a novel.

What is really needed, however, is not a dichotomy between reading *My Struggle* as literature and reading it as something else (probably something allegedly less noble), but a way of dealing with *My Struggle* and the many similar works as a new kind of novel. This novelty is often conceptualized as a new relation between fiction and autobiography; Phillipe Lejeune’s work and the reactions it provoked have been the key point of reference, as the now largely accepted classification of ‘autofiction’ makes obvious.

My own contention is that the basic liminality in play in this writing is not restricted to literature, not only a function of genre and narrative form, but closely akin to the one performance art draws on, the threshold between ‘the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives’ – to quote Fisher-Lichte once
more. It is legitimate and sometimes preferable to read *My Struggle* as one would any other novel. Indeed, this might be the natural option for readers far removed from the everyday life of the people mentioned in it. I would argue, though, that such an approach misses out on a lot of the action. It misses the action which defines a new literary aesthetics and misses the possible grounds for a post-anthropocentric conception of authorship and literature in general.

**In a Peculiar Way Hollow or Void**

The time now is 07h07, and the novel is finally finished. Linda is coming here in two hours. I’ll embrace her and let her know that I’m finished and that I’ll never do something like this to her and the children again. And then we’ll take the train to Louisiana [the Danish art museum]. I will be interviewed on stage there, and she shall be interviewed on stage there afterwards, because her book has arrived, and it sparkles and crackles in the dark. Then we'll take the train here to Malmö and we'll get in the car and we'll drive home to our house, and all the way I'm going to enjoy, really enjoy the thought that I am no longer a writer. (6, 1115-6)

The ending of *My Struggle* apparently contains a promise: Linda arrives in two hours and then the narrator will promise her never to do ‘something like this’ to her and the children again. ‘This’ must refer to ‘the novel’ in the previous sentence. Thus, the ending is the culmination of repeated concerns about the consequences of the autobiographical project, and in the final, paratactic cadence the initiator of that project hands in his resignation.

However, if what the ending promises is that Linda and the children no longer will be subjected to the consequences of Karl Ove’s use of their names and life stories in his novel, these consequences had not yet begun at the time of writing. The narrator is aware of this: ‘This novel has hurt everyone around me, it has hurt me, and in a few years, when they are old enough to read, it will hurt my children’. But there will be other readers. Knausgård will do ‘something like this’ to his (by now, ex-) wife and children as long as there are readers of *My Struggle* – at least the kind of readers that will connect the names in the novel with real people.

A writer does not fully control the interpretation and effect of her own work. ‘The poem’, Wimsatt and Beardsley once put it, ‘belongs to the public’. The two New Critical church fathers were thinking of poetry, and by extension works of fiction, but their point has a different and specific relevance for biographical writing: How readers
respond to the revealed Knausgård home is not only controlled by the creator of the
text. His promises are only meaningful in relation to the characters in the text itself, not
in relation to the real people referred to in it. After the work's completion, the latter
must continue to live with the consequences of Knausgård's work. The narrator may
promise his textual characters to stop hurting them in the future; the writer may promise
to stop writing, but he remains the author of what he has written, and he does not have
power over the consequences of having used real people's lives in his writing. The
promise at the end of My Struggle is – to quote J.L. Austin, writing about fiction – 'in a
peculiar way hollow or void'.

Writing in Public

Perhaps it is not only the poem – i.e. the text – that belongs to the public, but also the
author. Pierre Bourdieu states that what we perceive as an author's subjective and
singular expression of self is, in fact, a response to the image of the author which is
projected from the outside world:

The artist may accept or reject this image of himself which society reflects back at
him, he cannot ignore it: by the intermediary of the social image which has the
opacity and inevitability of an established fact, society intervenes at the very centre
of the creative project thrusting upon the artist its demands and refusals, its
expectations and its indifference. Whatever he may want and whatever he may do,
the artist has to face the social definition of his work, that is, in concrete terms, the
success or failure it has had, the interpretations of it that has been given, the social
representation, often stereotyped and oversimplified, that is formulated by the
amateur public.

This is clearly intended as a critical deconstruction of authorial autonomy, similar to
Foucault’s famous essay on ‘the author function,’ defining literature as a function of
class society. Looking at literature’s living conditions in today’s media society it is hard
not to agree with Bourdieu in his critique of commodification, stereotypification and
oversimplification – and I am sure many writers (and artists) would testify to a struggle
against general clichés of expectation and interpretation. Yet could one not read the
quotation through My Struggle and then see Bourdieu almost as ‘an unexpected ally’ of
Latour and his actor-network-theory with its emphasis on interaction between material
and human actors? Perhaps Bourdieu’s decentring of the author as the origin of all
meaning needs to be read not (or not just) as a disclosure of the author as bourgeois
ideology, but as pointing the way to a conception of the author as one actor among others. Knausgård, for one, happily testifies to the social origins of his autobiographical novel.

It is a characteristic feature of *My Struggle* that parts of it have been read and commented on by the people mentioned in it. Since this process is incorporated into the novel itself, it must be considered a literary device, not simply a coincidence of the work's creation and biographical background. The work's call-and-response form is especially evident in Volume 6: Knausgård has distributed the manuscript to people mentioned in it and now considers the white-hot criticism of his project from his father’s brother, prints the response from his first wife and narrates the frail Linda's dramatic reactions to her husband’s harsh description of their marriage. Furthermore, the serialized form also allows for the public's reactions to previous volumes to be collected and repeated in the novel.

To these feedback circuits between, on the one hand, the author and the people he writes about and, on the other hand, those between the author and the public, one can add those between the author and two readers who take part in the making of *My Struggle*. The narrator of the novel is careful to position conversations with his friend, Geir, as a key prerequisite for the novel’s genesis. In the essay ‘Dit ut der fortellingen ikke når’ (‘Out Where the Story Doesn’t Reach’) Knausgård writes more about this:

> There are many ideas associated with writing. One of the most widespread is that it's a lonely thing, something one does alone. I do not agree. On the contrary, in all the fifteen years that I have earned my living as a writer, I have been dependent on help from others. When I wrote the novel *My Struggle*, I read everything I wrote to a friend, Geir Angell Øygarden, every single day I called him and read my work aloud, totalling almost five thousand pages.27

A few lines earlier he writes about the other Geir, his editor Geir Gulliksen: ‘Absolutely everything I write, even the smallest newspaper article, he must read before I can print it anywhere. It is something I am absolutely dependent on and which I also take for granted.’

The narratives in the novel, and indeed instances about the writing of the novel like the one above, are narratives of origin. As in all autobiographical texts, the conflation of author, narrator and protagonist is the key rhetorical device of *My Struggle*, but the unity of voice does not originate in a singular, empirical individual’s solitary subjectivity. This unit is not a maker, but something made, co-created. One might think
of the voice as the voice of the author, but in that case ‘author’ does not signify the empirical Karl Ove Knausgård. Judging by the novel’s own narrative, the voice which the empirical Knausgård found in his novel is shaped by other people’s comments, expectations and reservations, and the seemingly singular subjectivity created in and by his exchanges with these others is the result of a collective effort, of work done in a network, involving, among many other things, the telephone as an indispensable requisite.

In contrast to Bourdieu, the quote above is not about deconstructing traditional conceptions of authorship and subjectivity, and it is not about the author embracing death as writing begins either – as Roland Barthes had it in ‘Death of the Author’. Rather, it shows how these entities come into being: As writing begins, the author is born. Subjectivity, creativity and the author’s identity are collective and material processes. Language – verbal, gestural and written – circulates between actors in exchanges which Bruno Latour would call translations. ‘Everything is translated’, he says: ‘We may be understood, that is surrounded, diverted, betrayed, displaced, transmitted, but we are never understood well. If a message is transported, then it is transformed.’28 This idea of translation rather accurately describes performative biographism, and possibly how literature works and exists in general. Knausgård the empirical person is obviously a strong actor in the Knausgård network, but, according to My Struggle, by no means the only one.

Knausenstein's Monster

Paul de Man finishes his essay on autobiography with these famous last words: ‘Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.’29 Autobiography seems to tell a particular person's story, he argues, allowing her to obtain a face in language. In reality, autobiography is a defacement, a loss of identity inflicted by linguistic tropes and figures. Such poststructuralist theory prevailed when Knausgård studied Comparative Literature, among other things, in Bergen in the 1990s (see volume 5 of My Struggle), and de Man writes about problems also dealt with in My Struggle:

We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is
in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?³⁰

Paul de Man claims not only that autobiography distorts the autobiographer’s appearance in the text, but also that the autobiographical project produces and determines the life being biographed. Knausgård deals with the same idea extensively. It is a central concern of *My Struggle* to document what happens to Knausgård and his family because of his autobiographical project.

For de Man, the defacement of autobiography is caused by ‘the technical demands of self-portraiture’ (and these probably stand in for the general features – such as the evergreen arbitrariness of the sign – attributed to language in deconstructive theory). With Knausgård, the concern is not only language and the genre conventions of autobiography, but also mediatization in general:

The books had come out and were surrounded by an incredible public attention. And that meant that the books got a life of their own and became real, beyond my control, and that was new, because before I had been able to write about anything without it becoming real. It had always stayed in the novel. Now it didn’t stay in the novel, but came to life in reality, with my picture, which was more like a kind of logo, attached to it.³¹

What is explained here is not only what we with Fischer-Lichte in mind could call the feedback loops of energy released by the publication of *My Struggle*, but also the consequences of such loops. Knausgård the writer observes how the Knausgård of the novel turns into a Frankenstein’s monster in the public sphere and confronts him as a foreign and frightening power. Autobiography effaces the distinction between protagonist, narrator and author within the text, but in and around *My Struggle* we watch these distinctions return in a new and more *unheimlich* manner.

The alien rising in the midst of the familiar is not something happening in spite of the autobiographical project, but because of it. This does not, however, have only to do with the technical demands of self-portraiture, as de Man would have it. Another defacement takes place when others read the autobiographical text and send its image or reputation– ‘which has the opacity and inevitability of an established fact’, as Bourdieu put it – hurtling through the largest circuits of the public sphere. As both Bourdieu's phrasing and Knausgård’s quote above point out, the author himself to some extent
loses control of his logo. The social image detaches itself from both the work and its author:

Knausgård had become a trademark, logotype, the newspapers were full of it that autumn and I noticed now what power there was in repetition. People were checking me out. People apologised before they said anything. People did not dare say anything. People came over when they were drunk. It was remarkable. And it was not the books I had written, as they were rather everyday; two sons who bury their dead father and a frustrated father of young children who unclothes himself for the reader; it was the name, and all which that name was about to be filled up by.32

Writing and releasing My Struggle has inflated a large Knausgård and now that logo-thing is filled with the rumblings of the public. It could be processes like these that the narrator in My Struggle alludes to in the finale of the very last volume. Judging by the novel’s own documentation of the consequences of the autobiographical project, one must expect them to continue long after the end of My Struggle.

Again, perhaps we could interpret this in a less unheimlich manner: What we call ‘identity’ is perhaps always a network where something is transmitted, mediated and distorted, i.e. translated in pathways between different actors. Perhaps Knausenstein’s monster is not so uncommon, and not always dangerous?

What Sort of Thing, exactly, is ‘Knausgård’?

If Knausgård is no longer a writer, as he seems to claim at the end of My Struggle, it is not because he has not authored My Struggle, but because the Knausgård phenomenon belongs to the public – as did the poem for Wimsatt and Beardsley. This raises the question: What sort of thing is ‘Knausgård’, exactly? With Latour, we would say that ‘Knausgård’ is a network. With Jane Bennett’s recycling of Deleuze and Guattari we could also say that this thing is an assemblage: ‘Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts’, she writes. Assemblages are not controlled from one place, by one element: ‘The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties’.33 Karl Ove Knausgård and the novel My Struggle may be the most potent elements, but the assemblage consists of many other actors, all with a certain agency of their own. There are many kinds of readers; there are objects such as paper, books, computers, television stations and newspapers; there are academic, literary and cultural institutions and processes with their buildings and concepts such as
novels, literature, celebrity, etc. ‘The meaning’ of such an assemblage of carnal, cultural and literary stuff is not located in the head of the author, nor alone in the words of his texts, and it can hardly be exhausted by a hermeneutics of any kind.

The conclusion in this line of reasoning is not that an author like Knausgård is ‘a construction’. For Latour, subjects as well as beings of fiction, meanings of art works, gods and scientific facts – and in this article, I have added authors to the list – are not ‘constructed’ since this term, in its long and winding history, for realists and constructivists alike have come to suggest that these things somehow ought to have a worthier lineage. No, the indisputable existence of these beings is due to material processes of instauration. Instauration has three important aspects. Firstly, it blurs distinctions between makers, users and what is made. It ‘opens up an enigma as to the author of the construction: when someone acts, others get moving, pass into action.’34 In cases of performative biographism, the distinction between author and work disappears, the author name designates not only an individual but a network instaurated by many actors. Of these, the writer himself often remain the most important, as Knausgård’s sometimes ironic self-consciousness suggests. Secondly, instauration implies that the direction of the initiative is blurred. All actors, everyone and everything involved, contribute in their own way. Creation is by definition co-creation. Thirdly, and this is a decisive ingredient, instauration has to do with quality. If something is indeed instaurated, it is well-constructed, it works. I think it is safe to say that Knausgård works.

And now for the other line of reasoning, the Object Theory of the Author, where I will recycle a passage from Giorgio Agamben through My Struggle and Bill Brown’s Thing Theory.

**Putting itself into Play**

At the end of his essay on the author, Agamben, like Foucault and Barthes did before him, makes the author a symbol for the subject in general. Unlike them and in conflict with the general bent of the linguistic turn, he inserts a ‘living being’ that is, on the one hand, present, on the other hand, unexpressed in the work:

And just as the author must remain unexpressed in the work while still attesting, in precisely this way, to his own irreducible presence, so must subjectivity show itself and increase its resistance at the point where its apparatuses capture it and put it into
play. A subjectivity is produced where the living being, encountering language and putting itself into play without reserve, exhibits in a gesture the impossibility of its being reduced to this gesture. All the rest is psychology, and nowhere in psychology do we encounter anything like an ethical subject, a form of life.35

For Agamben, ‘Author’ seems to signify a potentiality from which the text originated. This potentiality is necessarily unexpressed in the actual text as actualized expression and yet present as the border, so to speak, between the will to expression and the means of expression – the apparatuses of language, literary tradition, institutions etc. These apparatuses (as we know so well from structuralism) should not be seen as tools mastered by an intending subject such as an author; rather, subjectivity is the result of an intended and yet resisted loss of control in encountering them. This, obviously, raises the question: Who or what does the intending and resisting here, what entity is ‘putting itself into play without reserve’? The answer must be ‘the living being’, ‘a form of life’; a singular entity which predates identity in both psychological and social conceptions thereof (and which, on so doing, offers what Agamben considers to be the only possible basis of ethics). In the language of the present essay’s conceptual dichotomy, one might say that for Agamben a Network Theory of the Author presupposes an Object Theory of the Author, a point that is easy to relate to Knausgård.

In My Struggle, the resistance of a very particular subjectivity to language and literature’s general inertia is an essential dynamic. In its dogged insistence on using language and the genre of the novel – both belonging, we remember, to the public – to tell one man’s very particular and endlessly detailed life story, My Struggle exhibits a subjectivity which, without reservation, puts itself in play. Knausgård, the living entity, becomes a logo ‘outside of my control’, to use the words of the novel itself. Thus, the novel demonstrates the workings of ‘this stupid mechanism’ – as Žižek terms the apparatuses in which our subject is formed.36 However, this demonstration is a gesture in the direction of a life-form, i.e. in the direction of something irreducible to both the subjectivity created and the gesture itself, the gesture suggesting that a potentiality waits outside subjectivisation.

In the last lines of My Struggle, someone who has struggled hard through all of his life and 3,500 pages to become a writer is looking forward to being one no longer. These paradoxical lines amount to an Agambenian gesture and, for the reader, form an encounter with ‘a form of life’. As readers, we watch a living being becoming ‘someone’ through formulation in language, literature, mass media and all the other
apparatuses, but we also sense a form of life that is irreducible to this someone’s specific identity. This might suggest a supplementary and post-anthropocentric explanation for the fascination of performative biographism: We are not only interested in getting to know ‘un individu marquant et célèbre’ as the old gossip-monger had it.37 We do more than recognizing ourselves in Knausgård’s mesmerizing manoeuvres between ‘shame and openness’ – as Toril Moi puts it.38 We do that, but we also watch how a living entity becomes someone in encountering language, literature, mass media and all the other apparatuses, at the same time sensing the life-form that faces away from all this. It seems we are also interested in and identify with something irreducibly other because, just like the author, we – as any other old thing of this world – ‘have an essence that is profoundly withdrawn’.

Losing Face (and perhaps even loving it)

I should like to connect this interpretation of performative biographism in general, and My Struggle in particular, to Bill Brown’s Heidegger-inspired Thing Theory. Brown distinguishes between objects and things, and his idea is that ‘thing’ signifies something outside of the subject-object-structure – ‘the thing itself before it has been made anything’ as Lily Briscoe puts it in Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (which, mind you, is not Kant’s inaccessible Ding an sich). Things are not exhausted by their presence in this structure, or the many other circuits in which something becomes what it is. There is an excess, ‘the vivacity of the object's difference from itself.’39 According to Brown, one way of getting in touch with this excess is coming across a broken object, one that has stopped functioning as object, thus baring (some of) its thingness. The qualities thus momentarily revealed is what Brown calls misuse value.40 The vivacity of Brown’s things and the resistance of Agamben’s author imply a similar excess in relation to the networks in which they appear. This would suggest that there could be misuse value in humans, too.

There are two memorable passages in My Struggle where young Knausgård, in drunkenness and jealousy, cuts his face with a broken glass in front of a mirror in the men's room. This is the version from volume two:

[I] crossed the square again, as though in a tunnel where nothing existed except myself, passed the crowd standing outside the house, through the hallway and into my room where the screen of my computer was lit. I pulled out the plug, switched it
off, went into the bathroom, grabbed the glass on the sink and hurled it at the wall with all the strength I could muster. I waited to hear if there was any reaction. Then I took the biggest shard I could find and started cutting my face. I did it methodically, making the cuts as deep as I could, and covered my whole face. The chin, cheeks, forehead nose, underneath the chin. At regular intervals, I wiped away the blood with a towel. Kept cutting. Wiped the blood away. By the time I was satisfied with my handiwork there was hardly any room for one more cut, and I went to bed.41

In this first version, the protagonist constructs a tunnel away from the social apparatus and his own role in it. Alone he cuts himself ever so methodically down to a piece of meat, until he is satisfied and can go to bed. In the second cutting scene, from volume 5 – which is earlier chronologically – he uses the same method, but more tentatively and cautiously. Afterwards, strangely renewed, he can return to the social game which he was about to lose.

The narrative function and psychological content of these sequences are obvious: They both take place in a social context and revolve around narcissism, self-hatred, shame, losing face, and jealousy in connection with women the protagonist is in love with and later marries. They also have a distinct meaning as autobiographical defacements, having to do with the novel's own logo theme and with performative biographism in general. However, the act of cutting, as a gesture, creates more than so many signs to be interpreted (psychologically, for instance). The self-mutilation creates a human version of Heidegger’s broken hammer, the thing outside the subject-object-structure. The protagonist takes leave of the social order and improvises silently in front of the mirror, developing the thingness of his face and looking it in the eyes; the face which, above all, distinguishes him as a particular person within the apparatuses and thus also identifies him to himself. This is by no means a beautiful or pleasant portrait of the author as a young man. It is excessive and looks more like another version of Knausenstein’s monster, but there seems to be a good deal of both Agamben’s resistance and Jane Bennet’s material thing power in it. This is a thing power, though, that is the opposite of the one found in Bennet’s ‘heterogeneities that are continually doing things’ in that it does not do anything, it just is something.42 A face lost is like a broken hammer, and the stories of defacement in My Struggle may be seen as allegories for paradoxical effects of autobiographical writing. Such writing is not only an articulation of identity in various networks or apparatuses, but also allusions to a material excess.43 According to Agamben, this has nothing to do with psychology; an OOO philosopher would probably say that it has to do with ontology. The object is (in)
the reader and any other thing, too. And so Agamben could be rewritten: ‘nowhere in psychology do we encounter anything like an ethical object, a form of life.’

That there is life or agency in things is a general dogma in the turn to things, and for some of the relational materialists such as Bennett this ought indeed to form the basis of a new, post-anthropocentric ethics, an ethics respecting that things can act, and in that way author other things – as the glass did with young Knausgård.

Coda: Death and the Author

I began where Knausgård ends; let me end where he begins. In the introduction to My Struggle as well as in many other essayistic passages, Knausgård works as a critic of ideology, distinguishing between a kind of imaginary order epitomized by modern media and a recalcitrant and repressed materiality epitomized by death – the ultimate fact of our own thingness: ‘It might thus appear that death is relayed through two distinct systems. One is associated with concealment and gravity, earth and darkness, the other with openness and airiness, ether and light.’

Even if Knausgård’s dichotomy consists of two systems rather than something relational versus something unrelational, the quote is worth comparing to the duality that I have been charting: The author as a lively network versus the author as a withdrawn object (or thing, depending on what specific body of theory we apply). What the comparison brings out is the fact that the two systems are related in both cases, though in a different way. According to Knausgård, the essayist, the massive overflow of pictures and fictions of death represses the grim material reality of death. I would, however, claim that Knausgård, the narrator, shows us two equally distinct materialities in a kind of material double aspect theory: The material vitality of the Knausgård assemblage alludes to that other, equally material, but somehow withdrawn figure of the author. In this framing, the two-faced post-anthropocentric portrait of the author does not only stand in for certain conceptions of subjectivity – as the figure of the author did for both Barthes, Foucault and Agamben – but also for a duality in literature itself. For literature, too, has both private and public lives.

Literature is, on the one hand, something made or performed by what and who interacts with the work; all literature is instaurated in feedback-loops. This, however, implies that the work is never finished. As literary scholars know so well, there are myriads of interpretations of canonical as well as noncanonical works, performed by lay
as well as professional readers in all keys and in all sorts of historically and institutionally changing networks. In fact, I would say that what we call literary theory signifies the body of different institutionalized ways of instaurating literature – regulating (e.g. in the form of teaching and scholarship) what counts as actors and how much agency they have in the instauration: power, the words on the page, influences, historical circumstances, the author’s biography, the unconscious, the implied author etc. Yet the work is not any one of its instaurations; it is, in its own way, withdrawn.

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1 The term ‘Post-anthropocentric theory’ is meant to signify an overlap between Actor Network Theory, Stuff Theory, Thing Theory, New Materialism, Speculative Realism, Object-oriented Ontology (OOO) and Assemblage Theory. Even if there are fundamental differences between them, these theories share an interest in things and an ambition to undo the linguistic turn of the 20th century and its many forms of social constructivism as well as Kant’s Copernican Revolution. Thus, the rather diverse turn to things, sometimes also referred to as new materialism(s), has a common, decidedly post-anthropocentric bend.

I thank everyone at the Uses of Literature project, University of Southern Denmark. (see https://www.sdu.dk/en/om_sdu/institutter_centre/c_uol). Special thanks to Alastair Morrison for invaluable help with my English and my argument and to Camilla Schwartz for pretty much everything (and Agamben). Very special thanks to the incomparable Rita Felski for her inspiration and highly productive response to an earlier version of the present essay. Also, I owe thanks to Peter Simonsen and Toril Moi for helpful suggestions and to the Materiality, Literature and Aesthetics group at University of Southern Denmark, not least its helmsman, Sten Pulz Moslund.


4 Ibid.

6 Thing Theory has many similarities with Object-oriented ontology, but there are fundamental differences as well in that OOO is more post-anthropocentric, much less interested in the human/non-human-interaction, see e.g. Graham Harman: “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer. Object-Oriented Literary Criticism’, New Literary History, Volume 43, 2, (2012).


8 In “The World Author in us all: Conceptualising Fame and Agency in the Global Literary Market’ Rebecca Braun maps the specifics of literary celebrity in relation to celebrity in general (Celebrity Studies, 4 (2016)). Günter Leypoldt focuses specifically on Knausgård in ‘Knausgaard in America: literary prestige and charismatic trust’ (Critical Quarterly, Volume 59, 3,(2017)). For him, My Struggle ‘provides an idiosyncratic and new aesthetic that strikes many readers as fresh and addictive.’ (p. 62). I agree, as does Toril Moi in ‘Shame and Openness’ (Salmagundi, 177 (2013)).


14 In fact, the initial reception of the first volumes was so jubilant that several Norwegian critics reacted. The writer Jan Kjærstad (‘Den som ligger med nesen i grusen, er blind’, Aftenposten 7 January 2010) and Ejvind Tjønneland (Knausgård-koden, Oslo: Spartacus 2010), professor in Literature at The University of Bergen, accused the newspaper reviewers of having lost all critical sense.

15 A new form of biographism seem to be at large, one that fuses moral concerns or outright moralism with commercial media logics: By now, even works that do signal a fictional contract can have that contract overruled. An article by Knausgård editor Geir Gulliksen’s ex-wife claiming that the novel is really about her seem to have sealed the fate of the otherwise favorably received Story of a Marriage (forthcoming in English). In Sweden, the director Roy Andersson claimed that he – really – is Hugo Rask in Lena Andersson’s Wilful Disregard (2015); in Denmark, Lars von Trier made a similar move on Jenle Hallund’s Mænd bærer min kiste (“Men carry my coffin’, 2015).
There have been several rounds of controversy involving, not least, confrontations with the feminist veteran and polemicist Ebba Witt-Bratström (incidentally the ex-wife of one of the key figures in the me-too-scandal surrounding the Nobel Committee, Horace Engdahl). One of the rounds began in Dagens Nyheter (11 May 2015) when Witt-Bratström strongly criticized Knausgård’s depictions of the attraction between a young teacher and his 13-year-old student. Knausgård responded a week later with a long and angry essay about Sweden in general. Some of this made it into the international press, see e.g. Elias Groll: ‘Famed Writer Karl Ove Knausgaard Declares War on Sweden, “Land of the Cyclops”’ on Foreignpolicy.com, available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/22/famed-writer-karl-ove-knausgaard-declares-war-on-sweden-land-of-the-cyclops/ (Date accessed 14 August 2018). Questions of gender and sexuality are certainly important in and around My Struggle. The curious role assigned to his – back then – wife Linda is a case in point. However, what is relevant in this context is not so much the content of the debates surrounding My Struggle, but rather the fact of the novel’s potential for creating feedback-loops of energy.


These arguments are similar to the one later made by David Shields in Reality Hunger. A Manifesto (London: Hamish Hamilton 2010). In fact, the concept of reality hunger was used in Danish many years prior to Shield’s book. Virkelighedshunger is an anthology on ’the new realism’ in the visual arts, edited by Britta Timm Knudsen (Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 2003). In the background, Hal Foster’s Return of the Real. Art and Theory at the End of the Century looms large (Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1996).

Arnaud Schmidt and Stefan Kjerkegaard’s ‘Karl Ove Knausgaard's My Struggle: A Real Life in a Novel’, a/b: Auto/Biography Studies Vol. 31, 3,( 2016) is an enjoyable reading of My Struggle which fuses a focus on genre and referentiality à la Lejeune with an interest in the interaction between Knausgård’s text, the nationally specific paratexts of Scandinavia and France respectively and a concrete reader – the last being Arnaud Schmidt himself, the French specialist of ‘Self-Narration’. See his ‘Making the Case for Self-narration Against Autofiction’, a/b: Auto/Biography Studies Vol 25, 1, (2010).

Since the English translation is not out at the time of writing, translations from volume 6 are my own from the Norwegian original: Min kamp 6 (Oslo: Oktober 2011). Otherwise I use the English translations.
21 Min kamp 6, p. 970.


25 This artistic struggle (towards Merlaeu-Ponty’s parole parlante, one might say) is important in Knausgård’s recent work on Edvard Munch, Så mye lengsel på så liten flate (‘So much longing on such a small surface’, Oslo: Oktober, 2017).


28 Bruno Latour: The Pasteurization of France, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1988), p. 181. See in this context also Rita Felski: ‘Comparison and Translation. A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory’, Comparative Literature Studies, vol. 53, 4, (2016). The translation of a distinctly autobiographical novel from one of the world’s smaller languages and literatures into the big circuits of the English-speaking world is, of course, a case in point here. The amount and kind of energy the novel releases in its original context is transformed into something very different in the destinations of the various translations. Thus, Schmidt and Kjerkegaard’s ‘Karl Ove Knausgaard's My Struggle: A Real Life in a Novel’ deals with the consequences of a ‘transport of a literary work from one region to another’ (p. 554) – from Scandinavia, that is, to France. The fact that the original title of My Struggle is impossible in the German-speaking world would be another example of the fact that we are dealing with different things and different networks rather than just with ‘the same’ novel.


30 Ibid p. 69.

31 Min kamp 6, p. 938.

32 Ibid p. 979-80


38 Toril Moi, ‘Shame and Openness”, *Salmagundi* no. 177, Winter 2013.


40 Brown, obviously, draws on Heidegger’s tool analysis in Being and Time.


42 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 123.

43 For Harman ‘allusion’ is ‘the hint at the reality of the [broken] hammer’ which, though, never makes it ‘directly present to the mind’ (‘The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer’, p. 187).