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Knausgaard in America: literary prestige and charismatic trust

Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, the six-volume series of autobiographical novels by a self-declared ex-fiction writer from Norway, has made a profound impact on the transatlantic literary scene. Knausgaard's success with critics and writers of literary standing in the US and Europe signals a gradual shift in the sense of interesting new directions in the contemporary novel.¹ Until quite recently, the discourse of 'the state of the novel today' revolved around an image of realism as a mainstream convention that failed to engage with the contemporary moment. In an often quoted 2008 piece for the *New York Review of Books*, for example, Zadie Smith held up Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) as a 'breed of lyrical Realism' that seemed stuck in the world of 'Balzac and Flaubert' and an Anglophone tradition running through 'Jane Austen, George Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Yates, Saul Bellow'. As a way 'forward' for the novel, Smith commended Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005), which she associated with the post-realist sensibilities of mid- to late-twentieth-century avant-gardes ('Georges Perec, Clarice Lispector, Maurice Blanchot, William Burroughs, J.G. Ballard').² One decade later, to be sure, the realism vs. avant-garde opposition no longer divides the literary field.³ Among the generally acknowledged innovative new trends in the novel, one is represented by a handful of prize-winning writers who combine high literary registers with 'low' elements of genre fiction (especially science fiction and the fantasy novel).⁴ When Colson Whitehead writes about zombies (*Zone One*, 2011), Kazuo Ishiguro incorporates dragons and ogres in a knight's tale set in a mythical England (*The Buried Giant*, 2015), or Junot Díaz frames an ethnic family saga about racial and political oppression with comic-book and fantasy references (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 2007), manifesto-level claims for or against realism seem irrelevant, or as remote as debates about metempsychosis. Yet, a second trend has appeared, almost like a parallel literary universe, in which writers of literary ambition can invoke 'reality' or 'sincerity'⁵ as terms of revitalisation; here, moving 'forward' is defined as blurring the boundaries between

fiction, life-writing, and journalism, and combining the aesthetics of the novel with those of the documentary and the memoir. If David Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010) provided resonant concepts for this trend, Knausgaard's remarkable *My Struggle* gave these concepts a new life by providing a compellingly readable example.⁶ The Knausgaard phenomenon helps us retrospectively to appreciate the family resemblances between such diverse works as Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* (1997), Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), and Rachel Cusk's *Outline* (2014). The reality-hunger paradigm and the 'turn to genre' may form around very different writerly sensibilities, but they occupy similar positions on the literary landscape: both require a certain distance from more conventional space – not only from popular forms of the memoir or commercial genre fiction but also from the 'lyrical realism' Smith characterised as a literary practice that seems 'perfect' in a problematic sense: so 'precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction' that we respond to it with 'a dispiriting sense of recognition'.⁷

The rise of Knausgaard also throws light upon how the distribution of 'institutional charisma' separates writers along various scales of higher or lower merit (for example, prize-winning vs. commercial, serious vs. entertaining, innovative vs. traditional, etc.), and how this affects the way we read them.⁸ Of course *My Struggle* also has a life as a regular commodity that people may or may not find useful. When books are objects with everyday uses (entertainment, self-help, instruction), which imbue them with 'weak values' in Charles Taylor's sense, disagreements about literary taste are as unproblematic as the question of whether one prefers tea or coffee after dinner: *whatever works for you*.⁹ But *My Struggle* became more than a regular commodity when empowered transatlantic institutions, those with the greatest weight in the debates about what can count as the 'state of the novel today', allocated Knausgaard's literary practice to a space of 'new directions' in the literary field, a space rich in field-specific 'strong value'. When commodities become bundled with such kinds of strong value, they can bridge the aesthetic-moral divide and encourage what I call 'charismatic trust', an affective relationship between readers and consecrated literary space that varies across diverse audiences that themselves differ in their capability to elicit trust.¹⁰ In what follows I will explore the relevance of charismatic trust in the transatlantic making of Knausgaard.

1 Trust and literary value

How do we choose and appreciate fiction in today's extensive field of cultural production? We might well imagine something like a market of literary commodities, a massive warehouse where prospective readers examine the shelves while a supply-and-demand logic determines the price. As Lucien Karpik points out, however, in the sphere of *cultural* consumption, strictly price-regulated forms of exchange are the exception rather than the rule. The reason for this is that in order to base our buying decision purely on supply-and-demand rationalities, we need to know the range of products well enough to make them comparable.¹¹ While such familiarity may well apply if we seek a pint of milk or a loaf of bread, literary products involve cultural frameworks that make them multi-dimensional and incommensurable, so that choosing between them poses a degree of uncertainty.¹² Uncertainty is not exclusive to difficult or 'radical' avant-gardes, but rather pertains to a large range of everyday consumption. If we seek a good wine, an excellent Beethoven recording, or a great lawyer, we might *think* we are consulting an 'open market', but, in fact, we invariably enter what Karpik calls a 'judgment-market' embedded within social networks.¹³ For while it is relatively easy to decide which pint of milk we should buy, it is harder to work out our preference for different Nobel laureates (Bob Dylan vs. Toni Morrison), television series (*Game of Thrones* vs. *Homeland*), electronic gadgets (Apple vs. Samsung), Victorian poets (Whitman vs. Tennyson), or paths beyond 'lyrical realism' (reality hunger vs. genre effects). We commonly assume that audiences make up their minds by trial and error as they give each artefact a thorough good look. In reality, however, the multiplicity of choices require us to fall back on complex evaluation regimes to which we extend a degree of trust – Karpik speaks of 'trust devices [*dispositifs de confiance*]' or 'judgment devices [*dispositifs de jugement*]',¹⁴ that is, public and private networks of expertise, including various kinds of rankings, brandings, or product identities.

Varieties of trust: calculative vs. charismatic

If, as Karpik convincingly argues, trust is key to reducing the opacity of the cultural market, cultural artefacts can produce *two kinds of trust* that Karpik does not distinguish. There is, first, a more simple variety of trust, which revolves around the delivery of concrete kinds of satisfaction. For example, if we trust the wine experts in our local grocery store, we engage in a *calculative* form of trust. Our trust devices become calculative if we know our desire relatively well (we want a wine that suits our taste), and if we have acquired a quasi-statistical sense (based

on our previous experiences) of whether the grocery store experts we have come to know can be expected to be reliable. There is a similarly calculative dimension if we expect the novels recommended to us by familiar trust networks (be it the bookshop around the corner, our favourite critic at the *Guardian*, Oprah Winfrey, the Booker Prize committee, or our most reliable aunt) to deliver what we want from the reading experience. Of course, people want all sort of things from literary texts: pleasure, knowledge, wisdom, catharsis, moral growth, political vision, mindless entertainment, and so on. Consequently, the market of literary singularities has produced a host of competing judgement devices that consumers may trust more or less depending on their subjective needs. And since calculative trust has a basis in a statistical sense of what various groups of people like to consume, it translates well into what Karpik calls 'impersonal' judgement devices,¹⁵ such as the now ubiquitous electronic rating systems of the people-who-bought-this-also-looked-at-that variety, or the 'mega' regimes that govern our trust in certain 'blockbuster' phenomena.

Cultural artefacts also, however, embody the higher and lower materialities of cultural space, and this makes them objects of a more complex kind of trust, one that depends not on the delivery of concrete satisfactions but on our relational perception of an artefact's proximity to the privileged poles within a number of cultural hierarchies. People have a spatial sense of whether a cultural thing is closer to or further away from what they perceive as a site of authority. By sites of authority I do not mean the top-down structures of political power but rather something like centres of 'charismatic value', to use Edward Shils's adaptation of Max Weber's terminology.¹⁶ In contrast to Weber's definition of the charismatic as an 'extraordinary [*außeralltägliche*]' form of authority that in modern society only intermittently disrupts the normal course of organisational rationality and rarely survives 'routinization [*Veralltäglichung*]' or 'institutionalization' (except in the diluted and unstable forms of 'charisma of office [*Amtscharisma*]' or 'inherited charisma [*Erbcharisma*]'), Shils conceives of the charismatic as a more lasting, often low-grade intensity at the level of 'the routine functioning of society' that 'not only disrupts social order' but 'also maintains or conserves it'.¹⁷ While power is the ability to make us do things against our own will, a 'charismatic value center' is an imagined space of moral authority or strong values that elude rational evaluation.¹⁸

Let me flesh out this definition of charismatic trust relations with another example from food shopping: if we buy a familiar kind of bread, we are squarely in a price-regulated market, where cultural frames of value play virtually no role. Our buying decision in this case does not

rely much on trust at all. If, however, we seek *organic* bread at a farmer's market, say, choosing the right kind of product, which is now multidimensional, requires both kinds of trust outlined above. On the one hand, organic bread inspires people's trust in specific deliverables – one hopes, for example, that it tastes better and may also be healthier than the factory-processed varieties, and the 'farmer's market' concept and the organic branding provide the images or narratives that encourage such trust. At the same time, organic bread also participates in a moral economy that lifts it out of the sphere of the everyday and turns it into a singularity, not in Karpik's sense (when trust devices tell us whether the organic product gives us something we want, healthier and better-tasting food), but in the sense that organic products can embody 'something larger' in our culture. Trust in this case is *charismatic* rather than calculative because it need not be clear exactly what this 'something larger' is. The fact that the affective intensities of 'something larger' are not grounded in clearly statable values justifies the semantics of the sacral that shape the term 'charismatic' (Charles Taylor uses such terms as 'hypergoods' or refers to people's sense of 'fullness' to invoke the conceptual elusiveness of whatever authority our moral perception tells us we are being drawn towards).¹⁹

I think the same tension between calculative and relational kinds of trust pertains to artefacts in the *literary* market. It is possible to read a novel simply for a specific kind of deliverable we might call *the pleasure of reading*, for example. But if the text from which we draw such pleasure happens to have institutional charisma – if the author is James Joyce, say – the aesthetic intensity we derive from it can strike us as more valuable due to its felt connection to 'the higher life of our culture'; reading Joyce then becomes a sacralised kind of pleasure. Of course, we have all at one point or another gone through generic school-room situations, when a highly consecrated text leaves us cold, or when our inability to draw pleasure from a work like *Ulysses* encourages a dismissive attitude towards 'the canon' (a mausoleum of dead works) or 'experimental writing' (a hobbyhorse for disconnected academics). Yet, if we are attuned to the hierarchies of the literary field (materially embodied as they are in the people, things, and practices connected to the field), institutional charisma can produce the nagging feeling that our non-response to *Ulysses* may reveal more about our own rather than Joyce's inadequacies. The way we respond to specific charismatic sites depends on the life worlds and practice spaces we inhabit. It seems obvious that, from the perspective of not-so-bookish audiences, the literary field and its authorities (literary prizes, canons, and the 'culture of the school') can feel so remote that Joyce's charisma rests solely on

popular forms of celebrity (the ‘Bloomsday’ celebration, Joyce T-shirts, an iconic photograph of Marilyn Monroe reading *Ulysses*).²⁰ If we zoom into professional artworlds or literature departments, by contrast, the aura of the canon can suffer from our familiarity with the canonising agents – suddenly we only see a ‘Joyce industry’ propelled by a critical mainstream of ordinary peers. For all of these differences in social and aesthetic attachments and dispositions, however, even non-readers and radical avant-gardists have learned to orient themselves within the symbolic inequalities of public space, and acquired a sense that charismatic value increases in the direction of literary heritage rather than, say, daytime television. It is rhetorically seductive, to be sure, to ‘expose’ the pull of charismatic value as a misrecognised desire for something concrete and mundane, such as, for example, the desire for ‘social distinction’. Of course, it is possible to want to read James Joyce mainly for social prestige, just as one can consume organic food to associate oneself with upper-middle-class lifestyles. Social upward mobility, after all, can become itself a strong value. *Charismatic* strong values, however, promise more than clear-cut deliverables. The association with upward mobility can heighten the attractiveness of charismatic objects, but if social prestige becomes the central attraction, we can drop the semantics of the charismatic or the sacred and speak of calculative trust.

2 Knausgaard in America

How do charismatic and calculative trust economies relate to Karl Ove Knausgaard’s US reception? When Knausgaard embarked on his autobiographical project in February 2008, the Scandinavian book-world knew him as the author of two prize-winning novels (*Ute av verden* (Out of the World), 1998, and *En tid for alt* (A Time for Everything), 2004). Initially he had planned a one-volume autobiographical novel of around 1,200 pages, but, given the large amount of material, his publisher recommended a series of twelve monthly volumes, an idea Knausgaard liked. Eventually financial considerations (including a government subsidy) made the present format of six larger volumes seem less risky. Writing under a tight, self-imposed timeframe, Knausgaard hoped to finish *My Struggle* within a year, though the necessity to get real-life characters to read and approve the manuscript (they were given the option of anonymity), as well as the massive media attention paid to the first volume, slowed down the writing process (the first three volumes appeared in rapid succession in 2009, volumes 4 and 5 in 2010, 6 in 2011).²¹

Each instalment focuses on a different phase of the author’s life. Book 1 is set in the summer of 1998, when the 29-year-old Knausgaard is

faced with the death of his father. The second volume shifts to Stockholm in 2002, where he starts a new life with the Swedish writer Linda Boström Knausgaard, raising three (eventually four) children as a 'modern' husband with 'a furious nineteenth-century man inside me'.²² Book 3 doubles back to the mid-1970s and early 1980s to look at Knausgaard's upbringing between ages 6 and 13 under the oppressive influence of a moody father. The fourth volume covers Knausgaard's teenage years in the mid-1980s: it charts how the 16- and 17-year-old struggles with his coming of age (while his father, now divorced and living elsewhere, descends into alcoholism) and how he, as an 18-year-old, spends a turbulent year as a schoolteacher in a northern Norwegian fishing village. The fifth volume spans the years from 1988 to 2002, during which Knausgaard is a struggling young writer, a failure at the Bergen Writing Academy, a disaffected literature and art student at the University of Bergen, and a half-hearted husband to his first wife, the journalist Tonje Aursland. Book 6, which returns to 2009, is a kind of meta-novel, exploring the consequences and personal costs of publishing *My Struggle* (his uncle's threats of litigation in response to book 1, Linda Boström Knausgaard's nervous breakdown after reading about their marriage in book 2, and Knausgaard's own insecurities and shame in relation to his autobiographical project).

My Struggle's anglophone life began in March 2012, with Don Bartlett's translation of the first volume (subtitled *A Death in the Family*), followed by annual instalments of the rest of the series (2: *A Man in Love*, 2013; 3: *Boyhood Island*, 2014; 4: *Dancing in the Dark*, 2015, and 5: *Some Rain Must Fall*, 2016). Knausgaard's international readerships seem to have had a more detached relation to his subject matter. In Norway, *My Struggle* caused a literary scandal that electrified the public sphere and produced sales figures worthy of the Harry Potter phenomenon (*My Struggle* sold an estimated 500,000 copies in a language community of only about 5 million Norwegian speakers, a ratio that, scaled up to the US market, would amount to sales of 30 million). In the world-literary sphere, Knausgaard's autobiographical novel shed its social notoriety and became instead a high-cultural literary event, predictably with more symbolic than economic success. Clearly critical acclaim is always difficult to gauge. In an essay for the *New York Review of Books* that featured an illustration of an emperor without clothes, Tim Parks wryly pointed out that, by June 2014, *My Struggle* had only sold about 32,000 copies in the US (22,000 in the UK), not enough, he claimed, to merit the overall sense of a massive literary phenomenon.²³ Parks fails to consider, however, that high-cultural authority tends to affect commercial markets with

a significant delay. By June 2016, at any rate, Knausgaard's US sales had reached about 200,000 copies (68,000 in the UK), still not overwhelming but respectable enough to indicate that *My Struggle's* critical success was paying off in financial terms. There is a noticeable spike in the sales after March 2014, following the intensive reviewing and peer-endorsement of Knausgaard's first two novels (by far the most popular of the series).²⁴

Knausgaard's aesthetics: immediacy and shame

One way of explaining Knausgaard's breakthrough is to try to understand the product he offers. What exactly is it that his novels deliver?

One does not need to read all six volumes to see that *My Struggle* provides an idiosyncratic and new aesthetic that strikes many readers as fresh and addictive. One aspect of this aesthetic concerns the immersive power of Knausgaard's sustained descriptions of the everyday, as his diary-like narration pulls us into blow-by-blow accounts of quotidian events. As many readers have pointed out, Knausgaard's writing achieves 'a perspectiveless immediacy' that produces an experience of radical 'immersion',²⁵ with the result that one does not just 'identify' with the narrator, one 'live[s] his life with him'.²⁶ For example, in volume 2 (perhaps the most accessible part of the whole), we sit through long dinner parties with the middle-aged Knausgaard, listening to drawn-out conversations with his friends and acquaintances; we follow him when he brings his kids to bed, and we witness how he struggles through musical education classes with his toddler.²⁷ Knausgaard has opinions, too, and he often philosophises about ideas ranging from the nature of death (vol. 1) to the essence of the poetic or the aesthetic (vol. 5) to the question of why as a Norwegian he does not like the Swedes (vol. 2). But, whatever ideas emerge, they tend to be contained within the experiential flow of everyday experience. We see the author standing in the kitchen, hear the whoosh of the pan when the steaks go in, the rattling of the lid when the water boils in a pot; we see him stirring the mushrooms and feel a rush of cold air when he opens the kitchen window to let the smoke out.

The second important aspect of Knausgaard's aesthetic is, of course, the strong 'sincerity effect' produced by his notorious and well-publicised full-disclosure approach. The often ruthless spelling out of his inner thoughts about real people, even when these thoughts are ugly – especially when they are ugly – adds a quality to the text that is not exactly sensationalist in any well-known sense: there is nothing recognisably tabloidy in the novels. The nature of what might be called the 'Knausgaard scandal' becomes clearer by comparison with the German scandal surrounding Maxim Biller's autobiographical novel

Esra (2003). Biller's novel gave a tell-all account of his relationship with an ex-girlfriend that included explicit scenes from their love life. Biller used a pseudonym – Esra – but included facts that made it easy for readers to recognise the real-life people behind Esra and her mother. The explicitness of the account presumably encouraged the German courts to force Biller's publisher, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, to pulp the novel to protect the protagonists' right to privacy, and the German supreme court upheld this decision in 2007, confirming the novel's ban.²⁸ Knausgaard, too, risked legal consequences when a member of his family, offended by his depiction of his father and grandmother, threatened to sue and cause a public scandal, but one would be hard-pressed to find offensive or sensationalist passages in *My Struggle*. The defining aspect of Knausgaard's full-disclosure approach is the interesting tension between the inner and outer forms of the quotidian, the disconnect between how we see Knausgaard interact with real people in everyday situations and the often strange thoughts, the vivid emotional life, and the deep currents of shame at the background of his human interactions. As Knausgaard put it in a recent *Paris Review* interview, *My Struggle* explores 'the gap between what I should think and what I actually think, how I should feel and how I really feel'.²⁹ Exploring this gap with such intensity is something that even the most immersive reality TV cannot do as compellingly as Knausgaard's nonfiction novel can.

Furthermore, Knausgaard's mixture of immersive sharp detail, opinionated rant, and occasional omniscient pointers lends itself to a fast reading pace. In contrast to other kinds of experimental documentary narrative – think of the traditional naturalist novel or the slice-of-life approach we associate with the French *nouveau roman* of the 1950s – Knausgaard's hypnotic narrative delivery makes his writing highly bingeable.

Charisma and recognition

If this aesthetic is what the Knausgaard novel offers, the function of our relevant trust devices – Karpik's social networks or public expert regimes – is to tell us whether what the novel offers is in fact something we want. For example, if a trusted reviewer or a friend reports that Knausgaard's new aesthetic is quite addictive, we might well try it out ourselves. But if our reviewer happens to be the English novelist Zadie Smith, whose often quoted tweet stated that she needed the next instalment of Knausgaard 'like crack', a more charismatic variety of trust comes into play. It is almost impossible, Smith wrote in the *New York Review of Books* in December 2013, to go to a dinner party 'amongst bookish people' in New York without meeting someone who 'felt as

strongly about their time spent under Karl Ove's skin as I had'.³⁰ Even if we disparage Zadie Smith, or find her literary criticism less interesting than her fiction, it is hard to ignore how *My Struggle* fascinates established critics and Knausgaard's peers alike, including some younger novelists acclaimed for new innovative work.³¹ As a result of this recognition, Knausgaard's aesthetic deliverables are linked to a privileged relationship: bingeing on *My Struggle* is now more than just a private pursuit (indulging one's crack addiction), because it connects us with the literary field's centre of charismatic value; that is, with a public space of authority that shapes the rhythms of literary innovation and defines 'the state of the novel today'.

More specifically, I would argue, Knausgaard's *My Struggle* has attached itself to an authorised discourse that emerged around the reality-hunger framework. This discourse revolves around a sense that the conventional novel has been exhausted but can be revitalised by a turn towards 'the real'. Book 2 of *My Struggle* offers a manifesto-like version of this claim:

Over recent years I had increasingly lost faith in literature. I read and thought this is something someone has made up. Perhaps it was because we were totally inundated with fiction and stories. It had got out of hand. Wherever you turned you saw fiction. All these millions of paperbacks, hardbacks, DVDs, and TV series, they were all about made-up people in a made-up, though realistic, world. And news in the press, TV news and radio news had exactly the same format, documentaries had the same format, they were also stories, and it made no difference whether what they told had actually happened or not. It was a crisis, I felt it in every fiber of my body, something saturating was spreading through my consciousness like lard [...] I couldn't write like this, it wouldn't work, every single sentence was met with the thought: but you're just making this up. It has no value. Fictional writing has no value, documentary narrative has no value. The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet.³²

Of course, one could think of a number of objections here. The most obvious of these emerge from the theoretical space of academic scholarship, which is often more attuned to the philosophy of language than practical poetics and therefore encourages a sceptical questioning

of literary authenticity. Reality *as such*, we want to point out to Knausgaard, is *always already* fictional; ‘sincerity, expressed through language, can never be pure’.³³ (*Have you not learnt, Karl Ove, the lessons of postmodernity?*) Such responses, however, miss the performative nature of the reality-hunger claim, and Knausgaard may well rejoice with another passage from book 2: ‘Good arguments, but they didn’t help, just the thought of fiction, just the thought of a fabricated character in a fabricated plot made me feel nauseous, I reacted in a physical way. Had no idea why. But I did.’³⁴ Or as Sheila Heti put it in a 2007 issue of *The Believer*: ‘it seems so tiresome to make up a fake person and put them through the paces of a fake story. I just – I can’t do it.’³⁵ Thus, once we move from a theoretical space (the humanities lecture hall, the scholarly literary history) to a site of literary practice (people as readers and writers in real-life social settings), any text’s relation to the real hinges not on an objectifiable truth claim but on a performative sense of ‘sincerity’ or ‘authentic access to the real’. Having such a sense depends on socially embedded ‘felicity conditions’ that are relatively independent of the scholarly inquiry into the ‘nature’ of literary communication. While in theoretical space we *know* that from a certain philosophy-of-language viewpoint, authenticity is an impossibility because the ‘signified’ always differs from and defers stable meanings, in practical space the question whether *différance* in fact applies depends on the performative felicity of each individual case. When a social performance ‘fuses’ the text with its reader, according to Jeffrey Alexander, ‘the signifiers seem actually to become what they signify’, [s]ymbols and referents are one’, and the text feels authentic.³⁶ As Zadie Smith describes her reading experience: ‘you don’t simply “identify” with the character, effectively you “become” them’.³⁷ If the performative fusion breaks down, however, *My Struggle* becomes arbitrary, a mere performance that may well strike its readers as an inauthentic ‘giant selfie’ or ‘3,600-page blogologue’, as William Deresiewicz contends.³⁸

If we consider *My Struggle* an object of weak valuation, Smith’s and Deresiewicz’s differing views are merely concerned with personal preference (I like Knausgaard, you Proust, whatever works for you). But *My Struggle* became attached to the literary field’s charismatic space, which turned it into an object of strong value. While these charismatic effects have no reasonable basis in the work itself (there is no non-tautological way to prove that either Smith’s or Deresiewicz’s perceptions are ‘closer to the text’), they nonetheless constitute a social reality, produced by the spatial distribution of authority. Charisma objectively *happened* to Knausgaard, in other words, when a majority within empowered taste-making groups – institutions that are closest to

literary ‘Greenwich’³⁹ in the sense that they dominate the ruling definitions of literary innovation) – identified *My Struggle* as a meaningful way forward for the novel. A second, perhaps less relevant, source of Knausgaard’s charismaticisation emerges from taste-makers who treat the ‘state of the novel’ as an index of the ‘state of the culture’. Even negative responses can connect *My Struggle* to ‘something larger’ if they consider the reality-hunger frame either to be ‘symptomatic’ of the way the culture thinks and feels about itself or to respond to larger structural shifts: the rise of an ‘intimate public sphere’,⁴⁰ a ‘neoliberal aesthetics’,⁴¹ a ‘postironic ethos’,⁴² or a ‘new sincerity’,⁴³ to name some obvious candidates.

Reality hunger as a charismatic concept

So how can our relational trust in ‘something larger’ change significantly what we get from *My Struggle*’s immersive full-disclosure aesthetics? In order to think about how attachment to a charismatic ‘reality hunger’ discourse may have transfigured the aesthetic feel of *My Struggle*, it is useful to compare the ‘making’ of the Knausgaard phenomenon to the impact of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* (1964).

The *Brillo Box* is an extreme example of conceptual art. A wooden box, painted in white and silk-screened with red and blue, it mimics the 1960s cardboard cartons for commercial steel wool soap pads that Warhol’s assistants found in a supermarket. In terms of its formal-painterly language, the *Brillo Box* has obvious limitations. As Arthur Danto pointed out in 1964, in order for this bland object to produce the powerful aesthetic effect it evidently had on contemporary audiences, it required ‘an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld’.⁴⁴ The conceptual frames provided by the 1960s cultural establishment (a questioning of the nature of art and the nature of the art museum, for example) and the rising authority of these conceptual frames – not their truth-value as propositional claims but their charismatic materiality as social ‘things’ within the 1960s artworld – enabled the *Brillo Box* to rise above eccentric nonsense. In a similar way, I think, Knausgaard’s aesthetic has been transfigured by the material authority of conceptual narratives about the state of the novel today: the ‘reality hunger’ and ‘sincerity’ frameworks were the conceptual programmes that gave Knausgaard’s literary practice an important edge. Without the charismatic pull of these conceptual frames, *My Struggle* might well be what Knausgaard always said he expected it to become when he embarked on his autobiographical project in February 2008: no more than a personal attempt at a self-therapeutic diary that would be of interest only to a few bookish Norwegians. At the same time,

Knausgaard's acclaimed aesthetic realisation has served to fill the reality-hunger frame with an attractive sensuous manifestation that heightens the concept's persuasiveness.

This interplay between two kinds of perceptions – the aesthetic feel of Knausgaard's hyper-realist text vs. the pull of conceptual 'reality hunger' frames that embody charismatic sites within the literary field – raises interesting media-theoretical questions. How, for example, might institutional charisma affect our experience of music? If Beethoven lost his authority overnight – if he suddenly became a minor composer, a sort of Walter Scott of music, historically relevant but musically uninteresting, even trivial – would it change our experience of his Third Symphony? Hardly, one would expect, given the highly somatic nature of musical languages habitualised over time. But since literature as a medium tends to fall somewhere between relatively somatic and relatively conceptual forms, we need to look at each individual case. In the case of Knausgaard, it is plausible to claim, I think, that reading 3,500 pages of immersive quotidian events might strike more readers as a chore without the charismatic conceptual frames. Perhaps this is what James Wood meant, when he said in his *New Yorker* review of volume 1: 'even when I was bored, I was interested'.⁴⁵

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Lisl Schillinger, 'His Peers' Views Are in the Details: Order Reprints', *New York Times*, 22 May 2014, C1.
- 2 Zadie Smith, 'Two Paths for the Novel', *New York Review of Books*, 20 November 2008; <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/11/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/>.
- 3 See Mark McGurl's discussion of Smith's essay in 'The Novel's Forking Path', *Public Books*, 1 April 2015; <http://www.publicbooks.org/fiction/the-novels-forking-path>.
- 4 For a good discussion of this, see Jeffrey J. Williams, 'Generation Jones and Contemporary US Fiction', *American Literary History*, 28:1 (2016), 94–122 (pp.112–13).
- 5 See Adam Kelly, 'The New Sincerity', *Postmodern / Postwar – and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 197–208; and Johannes Völz, 'The New Sincerity as Literary Hospitality', *Security and Hospitality in Literature and Culture: Modern and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Jeffrey Clapp, Emily Ridge (London: Routledge, 2016), 209–26.
- 6 Knausgaard recently noted the relevance of Shields's argument, but stressed that he read *Reality Hunger* after finishing his series. See Kyle Buckley, "'The Novel Is Like a Room' – An Interview with Karl Ove Knausgaard", *Hazlitt*, 4 November 2014; <http://hazlitt.net/feature/novel-room-interview-karl-ove-knausgaard>.
- 7 Zadie Smith, 'Two Paths for the Novel'.

- 8 On institutional charisma, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) 303 fn 35; and *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 196.
- 9 See Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–44.
- 10 A literary artefact can gain strong value from various social domains, including the religious, political or civil spheres, each with specific rites of valuation. In Knausgaard's case, strong value emerges from the literary field.
- 11 Lucien Karpik, *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities*, trans. Nora Scott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 112.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 131.
- 16 See Edward Shils, *The Constitution of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), sect. 2.
- 17 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), 141, 146; Shiels, *The Constitution of Society*, 120.
- 18 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 28.
- 19 See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 20 See Jonathan Goldman, 'Afterlife', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ulysses*, ed. Sean Latham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 33–48 (pp.34–7).
- 21 See Karl Ove Knausgaard, *Min Kamp*, 6 (Oslo: October 2011), part 1, which I accessed through the German translation; *Kämpfen: Roman* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2017), 70–73. See also 'Karl Ove Knausgaard on the Shame of Writing about Myself', *Guardian*, 25 February 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/26/karl-ove-knausgaard-the-shame-of-writing-about-myself>.
- 22 Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, bk 2, *A Man in Love* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 90.
- 23 'Raise Your Hand If You've Read Knausgaard', *New York Review of Books*, July 2014.
- 24 Nielsen Bookscan figures for the UK show that out of a total of 82,000 sold items by May 2017, 41,700 were accrued by book 1: *Death in the Family*; 15,400 by book 2: *A Man in Love*. On the US sales figures, see Scott Esposito, 'The Struggle against Language', *Quarterly Conversation*, 44 (13 June 2016); <http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-struggle-against-language>.
- 25 Nicholas Dames, 'Knausgaard's Novel Degree Zero', *Public Books*, 1 September 2014; <http://www.publicbooks.org/fiction/knausgaards-novel-degree-zero>.
- 26 Zadie Smith, 'Man vs. Corpse', *New York Review of Books*, 5 December 2013; <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/12/05/zadie-smith-man-vs-corpse/>.
- 27 Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, bk 2, *A Man in Love*, 75.
- 28 See Ralf Grüttemeier (ed.), *Literary Trials: Exceptio Artis and the Theories of Literature in Court* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 141–58.

- 29 James Wood, and Karl Ove Knausgaard, 'Writing *My Struggle*: An Exchange', *Paris Review*, 211 (Winter 2014); <http://www.theparisreview.org/miscellaneous/6345/writing-emmy-struggle-em-an-exchange-james-wood-karl-ove-knausgaard>.
- 30 Zadie Smith, 'Man vs. Corpse', np.
- 31 See Sheila Heti, 'So Frank', *London Review of Books*, 36:1 (9 January 2014), 21–2; and Ben Lerner, 'Each Cornflake', *London Review of Books*, 36:10 (22 May 2014), 21–2.
- 32 Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, bk 2, 561–2.
- 33 Adam Kelly, 'The New Sincerity', 201.
- 34 Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, bk 2, 505.
- 35 Sheila Heti, 'Dave Hickey', *The Believer* (November/December 2007); http://www.believermag.com/issues/200711/?read=interview_hickey.
- 36 Jeffrey Alexander, *Performance and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 55.
- 37 Zadie Smith, 'Man vs. Corpse', np.
- 38 William Deresiewicz, 'Why Has "My Struggle" Been Anointed a Literary Masterpiece?', *The Nation*, 13 May 2014; <https://www.thenation.com/article/why-has-my-struggle-been-anointed-literary-masterpiece/>.
- 39 See my 'Shifting Meridians: US Authorship in World Literary Space', *American Literary History*, 27:4 (Winter), 768–87.
- 40 See Lauren Berlant, 'Introduction: The Intimate Public Sphere', in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–24.
- 41 As Walter Benn Michaels recently put it, with reference to Sheila Heti and David Shields: 'Think Margaret Thatcher: "There's no such thing as society, only individuals and their families." No literary theorist could better describe the fundamental commitment of the memoir, although a generationally updated version would probably add friends to family' (*The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 167).
- 42 Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 169.
- 43 Kelly, 'The New Sincerity'; Völz, 'The New Sincerity as Literary Hospitality'.
- 44 Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy*, 61:19 (15 October 1964), 571–84 (p.580).
- 45 James Wood, 'Total Recall: Karl Ove Knausgaard's "My Struggle"', *New Yorker*, 13 August 2012); <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall>.

“Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. No, read in order to live.”
Gustave Flaubert. Ricardo Piglia was an assiduous reader, that most embattled of today’s pastimes. He published a book called *El Último lector* (The Last Reader, 2005), in which he celebrates not speed in reading, as often done in schools, but slowness. In the epilogue, he quotes a line from Wittgenstein: “In philosophy the winner of the race is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets there last.” Piglia called sharp readers “private eyes,” in honor