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Writing as a Mode of Truth-Telling about Self  
in Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*Olli Pyyhtinen  
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**Abstract**

The article examines the six-volume autobiographical novel cycle *My Struggle* by the contemporary Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard as a case of *parrhēsia*, that is, telling the truth about oneself. The novel poses writing as a problem, in terms of truth. By exploring through *My Struggle* the preconditions, consequences, and difficulty of speaking the truth and how the practice may contravene social norms, the paper tries to get at the role that secrecy and truthfulness play in and for social relationships. In exposing his innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires and revealing family secrets for everyone to see and read about them, Knausgaard exceeded rules that govern sociality and felt obliged to be inconsiderate to others, on whom the parrhesiast practice nevertheless always depends. Ultimately, the novel is a freedom experiment that fails, transcending the boundary between art and life, literature and the social.

**Keywords**

autofiction, freedom, Knausgaard, memory, parrhēsia, secrecy, the social, truthfulness

## Confesiones de un parresiastés atormentado

### La escritura como fórmula para contar la verdad sobre uno mismo en *Mi lucha* de Karl Ove Knausgaard

#### Resumen

El artículo examina *Mi lucha*, el ciclo de seis novelas autobiográficas del autor noruego contemporáneo Karl Ove Knausgaard como un caso de parresia, es decir, de contar la verdad sobre uno mismo. La novela plantea la escritura como un problema respecto a la verdad. Al explorar en *Mi lucha* las precondiciones, consecuencias y la dificultad de contar la verdad y cómo esta práctica puede contravenir las normas sociales, el artículo intenta ver qué papel tienen el secretismo y la sinceridad en las relaciones sociales. Al exponer sus pensamientos, sentimientos y deseos más íntimos, y poner al descubierto secretos familiares para que todo el mundo los pueda ver y leer, Knausgaard sobrepasó las reglas que reinan la sociabilidad y se sintió obligado a ser desconsiderado con los otros, sobre los cuales, sin embargo, siempre depende la práctica del parresiastés. Finalmente, la novela es un experimento de libertad que fracasa y que trasciende la frontera entre el arte y la vida, la literatura y lo social.

#### Palabras clave

autoficción, libertad, Knausgaard, memoria, parresia, secretismo, lo social, sinceridad

## Introduction

In the essay “The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes”, Milan Kundera considers the history of the European novel as a “sequence of discoveries”. According to Kundera, the novel, during the four centuries of its European reincarnation, has disclosed, displayed, and illuminated great existential themes:

In its own way, through its own logic, the novel discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one: with Cervantes and his contemporaries, it inquires into the nature of adventure; with Richardson, it begins to examine “what happens inside,” to unmask the secret life of the feelings; with Balzac, it discovers man’s rootedness in history; with Flaubert, it explores the *terra* previously *incognita* of the everyday; with Tolstoy, it focuses on the intrusion of the irrational in human behavior and decisions. It probes time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examines the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present actions. (Kundera, 1988, p. 5)

As a more recent case, the celebrated and monumental *My Struggle* (Nor. *Min Kamp*; 2009–2011), an autobiographic and introspective novel spanning six volumes by the contemporary Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard (b. 1968), explores all these crucial existential themes. With one exception, though: it knows almost nothing of adventure – apart from the adventure of language, perhaps. In fact, the absence of adventure and thrill is what largely

defines the contents of *My Struggle*. Not much happens in it. On the surface, the book is about Knausgaard’s observations, taken from life. It is about his life as he has lived it, from early childhood to the present, with the sixth and final volume already reflecting on the controversial reception of the published two first volumes. *My Struggle* even stands as a kind of monument to the banality of the mundane.<sup>1</sup> Weeks pass by just like the preceding ones and the author’s namesake protagonist Karl Ove Knausgaard wakes up at dawn to write, smokes cigarettes and drinks coffee throughout the day (both to the extreme), walks his children to the nursery, washes laundry, checks emails, collects his children and spends afternoons with them in a park, shops for groceries, cooks dinner, reads to the children, puts them to bed, works a bit in the evenings, and the next morning pretty much the same routine is repeated.

Due to the uneventfulness, at times the novel can be an exhausting read, indeed amounting to a tiring struggle even for the reader, who is not spared the least detail. *My Struggle* contains vast amounts of the kind of text usually omitted from books before publication at the editing stage (the sixth volume, for example, contains an over 400 pages long essay on Hitler and national socialism). Knausgaard tries to include every event, fact, memory, conversation, and perception, put everything in. The writing’s extraordinary close attention to details has enraged some critics. For example, in *Nation*, William Deresiewicz (2014) complained in utter frustration: “Who cares? I kept wondering. Why is he telling me this? Who is he to think his life is worth this kind of treatment? I wasn’t just bored (even his fans are bored), I was angry about being bored. I felt my time was being wasted”.

1. I intend the notion of “monument” here not as something preserving and commemorating the past but rather, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994, pp. 167–8), as “a bloc of sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves and that provide the event with the compound that celebrates it. The monument’s action is not memory but fabulation”.

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What is the point of it all? Why is Knausgaard making us read about his life in such overwhelming detail? Why does he think *his* life is worth treating for 3,600 pages? The literary motifs, however, are quite clear. It is not because Knausgaard would think that his life is particularly interesting or exceptional that he writes about it; on the contrary, he confesses how he feels that he lacks inner greatness. The main character Karl Ove Knausgaard is secondary. *My Struggle* is not some overlong ego trip, a case of narcissistic exhibitionism. The narrator portrays the protagonist, himself, as mediocre. He is just like anyone else, an everyman, *das Man*, a notion with which philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962) characterized the tyranny of the everyday existence of *Dasein*. What matters is what is told through the character's life. *My Struggle* explores the inner life of the subject, rooted in the dense topography of everyday life and fleeting time. Life is a struggle; it is about being in the middle, in emotional turmoil, complex relationships, hardship, boredom, and crises, without pause. Knausgaard saturates the landscape of the mundane by making its minutest details transparent. Thereby it is infused by beauty and meaning, and, paradoxically, every significant detail attains almost a gigantic dimension. "Meaningful, meaningless, meaningful, meaningless, this is the wave that washes through our lives and creates its inherent tension", Knausgaard suggests in volume 3, *Boyhood Island* (2014, p. 9; hereafter I refer to the individual volumes of the novel by their Roman number, I–VI). The same ebb and flow of tides characterizes the entire *My Struggle* cycle and creates the inner dynamic of Knausgaard's writing. In its attention to the minutest details of the life of an individual, *My Struggle* may be said to display one of the advantages of art over scholarship, as described by Georg Simmel (2004a, pp. 55–6): by starting from a narrowly defined problem, Knausgaard's own life (as a struggle), the book carries it to its uttermost limit, and thereby extends the unique and the individual to the general and the typical. It mediates the relation between the particular and the general, turning the personal into something universal, and the universal into something personally lived. Indeed, it is largely the felt resonance with their own life what has made readers fall in love with Knausgaard's novel: while it is about himself that Knausgaard writes, people have felt that they are reading about their own life. As author Zadie Smith (2013) describes her affectionate relationship to *My Struggle* in a review: "You live his life with him. [...] You don't simply 'identify' with the character, effectively you 'become' them".

In this article, I examine not so much what *My Struggle* is about or what has made it the literary sensation that it is as *how*

Knausgaard says what he has to say. The focus on the mode or form of writing to a certain extent aligns my approach with how philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukács saw the task of the sociology of literature. Lukács emphasized that instead of content it should study form, since he thought that "form is what is truly social in literature" (Lukács, 1972, p. 71). However, my reading of Knausgaard's novel differs from the mainstream of the sociology of literature in that instead of treating *My Struggle* as an object of study, I rather think *with* it. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze regarded art as a creative enterprise of *thought*, insisting artists to be also thinkers (Deleuze, 2004; Deleuze and Guattari, 1994; Smith, 2004, pp. viii–ix). This does not mean that painters, musicians, filmmakers, or writers would necessarily think about what they are doing, that writing would come down to spelling out preconceived thoughts, nor that thinking would be reducible to intentional action. On the contrary, it may very well be that when one paints, makes music, writes, and so on one does not think, at least not if thinking is understood as an action that is separate from the creative endeavour itself. The notion of art as an enterprise of thought only means that painters think in terms of lines and colours, musicians in terms of sounds, filmmakers in terms of images, and writers in terms of words. And it means that thought happens, *inadvertently*, as it were.<sup>2</sup> Knausgaard is without doubt no sociologist, and *My Struggle* has no explicit sociological motifs or aspirations,<sup>3</sup> but it poses its own set of problems instead, using materials and techniques peculiar to literature. Nevertheless, Knausgaard's prose does resonate with key sociological themes and can be used to enrich sociological concepts and social theory, and that is what I attempt in this text.

The back cover of volume 1, *A Death in the Family*, states that Knausgaard writes with "exhilarating honesty". It is true that he endeavours to write about his life and its (non-)events as truthfully as possible, without holding back anything. He lays bare his inner life, exposing his innermost secret thoughts, impulses, desires, feelings, and insecurities, while also revealing family secrets and things about his close ones they would probably rather have preferred to keep to themselves. The use of extremely personal material not only sparked a debate over the use of facts, real situations, and real names of people in fiction around the time of the publication of *My Struggle*, but the author was also threatened with legal action by some of his relatives. All this makes the question of truth and truthfulness highly significant. In what follows, I take up the issue of truthfulness by exploring Knausgaard's writing in and of *My Struggle* as a form of truth-telling about oneself. In the lecture course *The Courage of the*

2. This is roughly how Knausgaard sees writing in his book *Inadvertent* (2018), where he explains the reasons why he writes and shares his views and experiences of the creative process.

3. To some extent, however, Knausgaard's prose is sociologically informed. In *My Struggle*, he, for example, mentions in passing sociological ideas here and there and such authors as Marx, Arendt, Serres, Derrida, Foucault, Levinas, Agamben, and Latour (untypical of novels, the final volume of the cycle, titled *The End*, even contains a bibliography).

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*Truth (The Government of Self and Others II)* (2011), delivered in 1984 at the Collège de France, philosopher and historian Michel Foucault examined the role and importance of *parrhēsia*, free-spokenness, in Greek and Roman culture. According to Foucault (2011), the notion of *parrhēsia* is a constitutive component of truth-telling about self in ancient morality: one should always tell the truth about oneself. I examine not only how the practice of *parrhēsia* manifests in *My Struggle* or, more exactly, how the novel *functions* within the dimension of *parrhēsia*, but also the preconditions and consequences of truth-telling. While telling the truth is an important moral imperative, it is not without friction compatible with sociality and its norms. Ultimately, by reading Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, my aim is to get at the role of truth and secrecy in and for social relationships. Truthfulness and secrecy, as Simmel has reminded, are "of the most far-reaching significance for relations among men [sic]" (Simmel, 1950, p. 312). While we are encouraged and even obliged to tell the truth, out of consideration, politeness, and shame we may also withhold and hide some matters, as concealment has positive effects for the maintenance of social relationships.

Before exploring Knausgaard's writing as a parrhesiast practice, I begin by asking in what way can *My Struggle*, as a piece of literature, have a relation to truth in the first place. To what extent may a novel be expected – or is even able – to tell the truth, or does it lie completely beyond the entire question of true and false? After that, I discuss Knausgaard's prose in *My Struggle* as a mode of truth-telling. He is committed to getting to the truth of the story, to writing something that is not simply made up. I examine the characteristics of parrhesiast writing, together with the risks and the paradox of responsibility involved. Then I examine the preconditions of *parrhēsia*. In order to tell the truth one needs to get rid of shame and not think about the consequences of one's words. In this regard, *My Struggle* is ultimately a freedom experiment that fails, but this does not diminish its value. I conclude by summing up how the novel poses writing as a question, in terms of truth, and how it transcends the boundary between art and life, literature and the social.

## Autofiction: memory as an art of invention

According to a famous statement by Austrian writer Hermann Broch, "the sole *raison d'être* of the novel is to discover what only the novel can discover" (quoted in Kundera, 1988, pp. 5, 36). Broch's assertion manifests a modernistic idea, according to which artforms differ as to their final purpose, and the justification and value of each is dependent on how well it corresponds to its nature and thus fulfills its potential. The task of the novel is to see what has not been seen before and say what has not been said. It is able to do so insofar as it sets its own particular problems,

uses its own materials and techniques, and has a logic of its own. The kind of requirement of truthfulness applicable to scientific research, for example, does not apply to the novel. Instead of being measured by facts and reality, the novel uses imagination as its driving force. The novel should not therefore be judged by how reliably and accurately it gets the facts right or whether it depicts reality as it is or distorts it. It fabricates, fabulates, makes up, and invents new realities or discovers hitherto unknown modes and segments of existence. Rather than lacking reality, it is in a sense more-than-real: it is not its lack of reality but its excess that ultimately enables the novel to achieve what it alone may achieve.

For Kundera, the novel is able to uncover existential themes in a manner that is different from how philosophy examines them. According to him, here lies the entire not only literary but also moral value of the novel (Kundera, 1988, pp. 5–6). *My Struggle* responds to this call. Yet it is a very particular kind of novel. In it, Knausgaard explicitly announces his aversion for all things fictional and his equal commitment to writing anti-fiction. In *A Man in Love*, which comprises the second volume of *My Struggle*, Knausgaard tells how he had become fed up with fiction and stories over the years. He suggests that we live in a world saturated with fiction: fiction is not only something which surrounds us but through which we come to see the world. As he writes:

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, they were also stories, and it made no difference whether what they told had actually happened or not. It was a crisis, I felt in every fibre of my body, something saturating was spreading through my consciousness like lard, not least because the nucleus of this fiction, whether true or not, was verisimilitude and the distance it held to reality was the same. (II, pp. 496–7)

The idea of a pervasive culture of fiction resonates with sociologist Jean Baudrillard's (1983) suggestion of the dissolution of the boundary between the real and the imaginary. According to Baudrillard, we do not live in reality but in "hyperreality", where everything has become simulation, thus making the sign more real than the reality it represents. In the age of "simulacrum", the feeling of the world disappearing into images and stories also easily results in disjointedness from the world and from our responsibility to others. For example, in the sixth volume of *My Struggle* Knausgaard writes that for Anders Breivik, who killed 77 Norwegians on Utoya island in 2011, the victims were not real

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people, as it were. It is like his acts did not have real consequences for him, as in a computer game, for example. Instead of feeling obliged by the face of the others, the people he murdered were just images and pixels. He was completely blasé.

Countering the culture of fiction, Knausgaard aspires to write something true and meaningful, something that is not simply made up. In a sense, then, *My Struggle* is a work of anti-fiction. It is a novel that sets out to dethrone and discard all novels, a book that tries to finish off literature. It is driven by the will to truth. It is a work of total writing, determined to tell everything about the author's life, without leaving anything out. In a sense, it is a book of existences, capturing and immortalizing Knausgaard's life and the lives of those close to him. It thereby also struggles against the finitude of our fleeting and flickering existence; Knausgaard's writing is through and through accompanied by the commanding presence of unavoidable and immanent death.

One of Knausgaard's main preoccupations in *My Struggle* is with memory, as memories make up our personal narrative and form a significant part of our identity. It is largely thanks to memory that our past continues to exist in the present and we come to obtain an inner biography and a meaningful personal identity. Were one unable to remember past events or form new memories, one would be condemned to live one's life in a perpetual present. Knausgaard's writing brings up and calls forth memories, which he then sinks into the text. "Writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows. That is what writing is about", he suggests (I, pp. 212–3). In the first volume, *A Death in the Family*, Knausgaard tells us about a childhood event of him watching TV at home, alone. While the news is reporting about a fishing smack sunk off the coast of Northern Norway with its crew drown, he suddenly sees the outline of a face emerging on the surface of the sea. He rushes outside to tell his father. This particular memory image is not so much pursued as just happens, in a flash. Knausgaard is thrown into his memories. He suddenly sees his childhood livingroom, the teak television cabinet, snowflakes outside the window, the sea on the television screen, and the face that appeared in it. And, along with these particular images is actualized a whole level or region of the past to which they belong: the 1970s, the time when he was eight and his father thirty-two, the atmosphere from that time, the housing estate neighbourhood, and family life. In Knausgaard's prose, an entire landscape of the past is remarkably evoked along with a particular recollection (*My Struggle* is clearly influenced by Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and Knausgaard also mentions in the novel how he had been fervently reading Proust's work). Writing is thus a crucial act of reminiscence: when the author writes about particular memories, a vast restore of other detailed memories and an entire world of perceptions and inner feelings begins to

unfold (cf. Krell, 1990, p. xi). It is also typical of *My Struggle* that the events are not narrated strictly chronologically, following a linear sequential order, but the text is full of chronological shifts from past to present and back, and so the past (virtually) coexists with the present.<sup>4</sup>

Staying true to his ethos of truthfulness, in volume 3, *Boyhood Island*, Knausgaard likens his memory to a perfect pitch. He writes about how the things of his childhood have sunk in his memory: "Little did I know then that every detail of this landscape, and every person living in it, would forever be lodged in my memory as true as perfect pitch" (III, p. 490). However, it is equally noteworthy how throughout *My Struggle* Knausgaard also constantly questions the accuracy and reliability of his memory, makes fun of his poor memory, ironically likening it to a physical disability. As truthfully as events and experiences may (or may not) sink in the memory, recalling and actualizing them as recollection-images changes or to some extent even reinvents them. For example, early on in *Boyhood Island*, Knausgaard acknowledges how "[m]emory is not a reliable quantity in life" (III, p. 10). This is so because "memory doesn't prioritize the truth. It is never the demand for truth that determines whether memory recalls an action accurately or not. It is self-interest which does. Memory is pragmatic, it is sly and artful, [...] it does everything it can to keep its host satisfied" (III, p. 10). Knausgaard clearly writes for example about the traumatic childhood relationship with his father to set himself free; writing serves a therapeutic end of liberating himself and is for him a way of recuperating from the past, whose weight would have become unbearable had his memories remained locked away. The matters need to be stated aloud to cope with them and to prevent them from falling into oblivion.

The reference Knausgaard makes to his poor memory not only hints at the disparity between involuntary and voluntary memory – that is, the memories he is fed and those that he pursues by will and is able to remember – but one can also take it as a reminder to the reader that *My Struggle* is not a tour de force of perfect pitch reminiscence, but a piece of literature. Knausgaard is definitely no savant with hypermnesia. He is an author writing eminent fictions. As a practice of reminiscence, writing enacts and produces realities. While memory may preserve, reminiscence does not merely repeat and uncover the past as it really is, but partly reinvents it. "[T]he art of memory is not an art of recitation but an art of invention", as Gunnar Olsson (2007, p. 115) aptly puts it. Writing about the past is thereby not so much about rediscovering what already exists as giving being to what did not exist, thereby blurring the boundaries between reality, memory, and imagination. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Knausgaard himself has explicitly acknowledged the mixture of memory and creativity in writing *My Struggle*:

4. This has parallels with Henri Bergson's theory of memory; see Deleuze (1991).

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For me, [...] there has been no difference in remembering something and creating something. When I wrote my fictional novels they always had a starting point of something real. Those images that are not real are exactly the same strength and power of the real ones and the line between them is completely blurred. When I write something, I can't remember in the end if this is a memory or if it's not – I'm talking about fiction. So for me it is the same thing. It was like I was writing a straight novel when I was writing this but the rule was it had to be true. Not true in an objective sense but in the way I remember it. There's a lot of false memory in the book but it's there because it's the way it is, it's real. (The Guardian, 1 March 2015)

It is therefore more apt to call *My Struggle* a work of autofiction than anti-fiction.<sup>5</sup> The term “autofiction” is employed in literary criticism to refer to a form of fictionalized autobiography. It appeared the first time in the novel *Fils* by Serge Doubrovsky, published in 1977. On the back cover, the book is defined as “fiction of strictly real events or facts, if we want, autofiction”. *My Struggle*, too, is part autobiography and part fiction. Its author makes a pact with himself and with his reader not to lie and to recite events as he remembers them. The author, narrator, and main character seem identical. Knausgaard uses his real name and describes real life events, and while doing that he may modify certain facts, but he does so in search for truth, especially the truth about self (see also Tuck, 2015). Modifying some things is more or less unavoidable, also insofar as the prerequisite for literature being meaningful to others, too, and speaking to them and not only to the author him- or herself is that the writing is to some extent distanced from the person of the author. Knausgaard expresses this by noting that “literature must be personal but not private”; when the writing is private “it is of relevance only to the person writing” (*Summer*, p. 126).<sup>6</sup> The literary truth is thus of a particular kind: “the writer has to compromise his or her personal truth, that is to create an ‘I’ with which he or she doesn't fully identify, in order to express something that may be true for others” (*Summer*, p. 126). The novel thereby also hides while it reveals and discloses. *My Struggle*, obviously, is not an immediate presentation of Knausgaard's life and its inner reality, but the writing transforms and translates life into the form of literature by narrating, stylizing, selecting, reducing, arranging, and recomposing. The “sole law” of literature for Knausgaard is: “everything has to submit to form” (I, pp. 217–8). Autofiction needs to constantly balance between being true to art and being true to life. Importantly, this also suggests that the truthfulness of the recollection-images is inseparably tied to the practice of

writing, which actualizes, produces, and enacts them. The text is an artifice of authenticity, giving the impression of true confession. Instead of being just a question of the accuracy of memory, it is dependent on practices: the memories come into being along with the practice of writing.

## Parrhēsia

In his final lecture course at the Collège de France that he gave in Spring 1984, only a few months before his death, Michel Foucault examined a particular set of practices called *parrhēsia* in ancient culture. The practices involve telling the truth about oneself. According to Foucault, although *parrhēsia* also has some technical aspects, unlike rhetoric, for example, it is not a technique concerning the way things are said. Whereas rhetoric amounts to an art in which the person who speaks need not at all believe in what he or she says, *parrhēsia*, on the contrary, entails a strong bond between the person speaking and what he or she says. While the rhetorician may thus also very well be an effective liar, the parrhesiast is “the courageous teller of truth”. Accordingly, Foucault stresses that *parrhēsia* is not a skill or art but a “modality of truth-telling”, “a way of being which is akin to virtue” (Foucault, 2011, p. 14). And, as such, it can be contrasted with other basic modes of truth-telling found in Antiquity and, in varying forms, also in contemporary society. Looking at the contrasts between *parrhēsia* and them also enables us to better get at the characteristics of Knausgaard's writing as a way of achieving and expressing the truth.

Firstly, *parrhēsia* is to be distinguished from prophetic truth-telling. While the prophet does not speak for himself, but in the name of someone else and with a voice that is not his own, the parrhesiast speaks in his own name and expresses thoughts, convictions, and opinions that are his own.<sup>7</sup> Nor does the parrhesiast foretell the truth, but unveils what *is*. In addition, what also distinguishes the parrhesiast from the prophet is that he does not speak in riddles, but says the things that he says “as clearly as possible, without any disguise or rhetorical embellishment”. (Foucault, 2011, pp. 15–6) This applies to Knausgaard, too. He signs the memories, thoughts, and experiences he shares, and aspires to “describe reality as it is” (VI, p. 1010) As he describes the process of writing *My Struggle* in a small book titled *Inadvertent*: “I wanted to get close to reality [...] I would write only about the things that had actually happened, and I would write about them as I remembered them” (*Inadvertent*, p. 37).

5. Stefana Popa (2017) has examined how *My Struggle* could be framed by using the categories of autobiography, autofiction, and performative biography.

6. In the article, I refer to other books by Knausgaard by their individual titles.

7. As uneasy as I am with the use of the gendered masculine personal pronoun, I will nevertheless use it here, since in Antiquity the subjects of truth-telling as discussed by Foucault were male.

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Secondly, *parrhēsia* needs to be contrasted with the truth-telling of wisdom. What the sage and the parrhesiast have in common is that both are present in their truth-telling. Unlike the prophet, they speak in their own name. However, while the sage does not need to speak, but may keep his wisdom to himself, as if in a state of withdrawal, the parrhesiast is obliged to speak. Knausgaard feels obliged from within. It is his duty and responsibility to write about the things he writes. What sets Knausgaard apart from the aforementioned *das Man* is his determination to write. His writing is the only thing that really matters to him:

I wanted to write, that was all I wanted, and I couldn't understand those who didn't, how they could be happy with an ordinary job, whatever it was, whether teacher, camera operator, bureaucrat, academic, farmer, TV host, journalist, designer, promoter, fisherman, lorry driver, gardener, nurse or astronomer. How could that be enough? (II, p. 435)

Without writing, anything would just become meaningless for the narrator and main character of *My Struggle*. Accordingly, while displaying other struggles as well – against his father, an alcoholic who still had a grip of him even in Knausgaard's adulthood; against his childhood shyness and teenage angst; against his heart which belonged to another woman while he was still married – the novel is essentially about the constant struggle to find time, peace, and quiet for writing as a father caring for a young family. In addition, whereas the sage, like the prophet, speaks in riddles, the parrhesiast speaks as clearly as possible. Knausgaard's prose is lucid and readable. Finally, while the truth-telling of the sage concerns the very being and nature of things and the world, that of the parrhesiast has to do with individuals and situations to reveal their truth to them (Foucault, 2011, pp. 16–9). And this also captures the contents of *My Struggle*. It depicts Knausgaard's family, relatives, friends, and acquaintances in a way that they may not like but may in fact be offended and hurt by. But, above all, the cycle is about Knausgaard himself and his relation to self and others.

Thirdly, and finally, *parrhēsia* can be contrasted with the truth-telling of the one who teaches. Like the parrhesiast and unlike the sage, the teacher has a duty to speak: "He is obliged, in a way, to tell the knowledge he possesses and the truth he knows, because this knowledge and truth are linked to a whole weight of tradition" (Foucault, 2011, p. 24). However, what distinguishes the teacher from the parrhesiast is that the former does not take any risk in telling the truth that he has received and must pass on. One does not need courage to teach. In speaking the truth, the parrhesiast, by contrast, takes a risk. Not only does he place at risk the relationship he has with the person to whom he speaks, but he also risks his own position. As Foucault puts it, the "teacher's truth-telling brings together and binds; the parrhesiast's truth-telling risks hostility, war, hatred, and death" (Foucault, 2011, p. 25).

With the courage of a parrhesiast, Knausgaard tries to write of his life as truthfully as possible. In *Some Rain Must Fall*, which comprises book 5 of *My Struggle*, he mentions how he had wanted to write about the death of his father and the impact he had made on him, but "had spent ten years without achieving anything" until he eschewed stories and started to write about his own life truthfully, in a diary-like manner. Then, "all of a sudden, out of nowhere, it was just flowing": "It was like having a head rush or walking in your sleep, a state in which you are out of yourself, and what was curious about this particular experience was that it continued unabated" (V, p. 609). His aim "was to get as close as possible to my life" (II, p. 515), so he writes about his childhood and teenage years; about his relationship to his brother; about the music he had listened to obsessively as a teenager, about books that he has read, and about paintings he feels passionate about; about getting drunk with friends as a young man; about his wife and children; and about the routine flow of time which makes everything so predictable and safe. But above all, he writes about his relationship to his life and about his sorrowful feeling of being a stranger or outsider in his own life: "A life is simple to understand, the elements that determine it are few. In mine there were two. My father and the fact that I had never belonged anywhere" (II, p. 494).

Knausgaard writes fiction based on truth; all the names and events in *My Struggle* are authentic but – as already suggested – they are subjugated to the form of the novel and to literary tropes. Knausgaard felt that, to be able to write about his life truthfully, it was important to just go ahead, without holding back anything. He wished to get as close as possible to things. He tells it all, even the most painful memories and despicable things he has done. He is determined and committed to tell the truth without concealment and reserve. In speaking the truth, he wishes to explore his life as it really is. In *My Struggle*, writing of one's life as truthfully as possible, without hiding any part of it, appears as a practice of self, as a way of investigating one's relation to others, oneself, and truth. And it is telling that it was also mainly Knausgaard's sincerity and truthfulness that was questioned when *My Struggle* was placed under criticism and in dispute. His depiction of the death of his father in the first volume was fiercely contested by some of his relatives. Consequently, he even began to doubt himself and his own version of the events: Is the recollection of his father having lived the last years of his life with his mother and having died surrounded by bottles of alcohol only a false memory? Did Knausgaard exaggerate things? And, worse, did he even exploit his father's death for his own benefit, for the sake of a juicy story with shocking details? Was he trying to gather sympathy for himself? For he admits that on some occasions he had talked to people about his father to make himself seem more interesting in their eyes (VI; *The Guardian*, 1 March 2015). What is at stake here is thus, above all, Knausgaard's truth-telling.

The conflict with relatives shows well how in telling the truth, the parrhesiast takes a risk. As Foucault puts it, "[f]or there to be

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*parrhēsia*, in speaking the truth one must open up, establish, and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him" (Foucault, 2011, p. 11). What distinguishes *My Struggle* from a diary, for example, is that whereas the latter is private, not meant to be seen and read by others, the former is public. It is not intended to be hidden from the eyes of others and remain in secrecy, but it is written for others, to be published and with the intention that people would read it. Parrhesiast practices always require an other, who "must accept the game of *parrhēsia* by listening to the person telling them the truth" (Foucault, 2011, p. 12).

In *The Courage of the Truth*, Foucault depicts how the category of the other presupposed by *parrhēsia* comprises a spectrum of different figures. While in ancient culture s/he could be anyone, in the modern psy-culture the other person involved in the game of *parrhēsia* is usually the doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist, psychotherapist, or the psychoanalyst. The other assumed by *My Struggle*, is, of course, the reader. The readers of *My Struggle* can be divided into two: on the one hand, there are the unindividuated, anonymous others of the larger readership and, on the other, all those – one way or another close to Knausgaard – who are mentioned in the six volumes (and to whom the author also gave the opportunity to read what he had written about them before publishing it). It is particularly the relationship with these individuated others, from family members to relatives, ex-wife, and friends, that Knausgaard's writing undermines. However much the other person is indispensable for the subject to be able to tell the truth about oneself, *parrhēsia* also simultaneously puts the relationship to the other at risk. But *parrhēsia* may not only break or end the personal and friendly relationship with the other to whom one speaks, but the parrhesiast may also place oneself at risk. The legal case threatened Knausgaard's reputation; he might have lost face and credibility as an author. It might have become impossible for him to continue practicing his profession. He might even have been seen as ridiculous, as a public joke. But there was also a financial risk involved, as he might have been made to pay amendments.

Because of the immanent risk involved, telling the truth thus requires courage. It would be easier and safer to just remain silent. In speaking the truth one is also faced with ethical dilemmas. The parrhesiast is therefore a troubled figure. Does my obligation to tell the truth override my responsibility to those close to me? May I allow myself or am I even obliged to tell the truth while knowing that it will hurt others; should I speak my heart out regardless of the feelings and integrity of others? Whilst being a part of morality, *parrhēsia* may hence also come out as immoral and irresponsible, colliding responsibilities that are incompatible with each other. The notion of responsibility is ultimately condemned to a paradox, as Jacques Derrida (1995, p. 68) has observed: I cannot respond to the other and fulfil my duty without at the same time risking betraying others to whom, too, I am bound by responsibility. By

responding to the obligation as an author to himself, to his past, and to his readers to tell the truth, Knausgaard, in the same instant, betrays those close to him.

## The face: on shame, secrecy, and sociality

The "father of sociology", Auguste Comte, has been told to have had a mirror on his desk, in which he, like Narcissus falling in love with his own reflection, admired himself and his brilliance after each sentence that he wrote. This literary image of the writing self, catching one's reflection, segues into a scene in *My Struggle*, too. It is 27<sup>th</sup> February 2009, 11:43 p.m. in Malmö, Sweden, and Knausgaard, having just written about the childhood event of seeing in television the mysterious face on the surface of the sea, spots his face reflected on the window glass before him:

As I sit here writing this, I recognize that more than thirty years have passed. In the window before me I can vaguely make out the reflection of my face. Apart from one eye, which is glistening, and the area immediately beneath, which dimly reflects a little light, the whole of the left side is in shadow. Two deep furrows divide my forehead, one deep furrow intersects each cheek, all of them as if filled with darkness, and with the eyes staring serious, and the corners of the mouth drooping, it is impossible not to consider this face gloomy. (I, p. 27)

Here the gaze turned on itself is not so much a case of "the looking glass self" – by which Charles Cooley (1902) referred to our perception of how we are perceived by others – as a manifestation of abysmal strangeness. Whereas Comte, with great adoration, discovered in his reflection himself as a sovereign subject, Knausgaard inspects the reflection of his face and its features as one would observe an external object. While our face likens a unique and recognizable landscape, on whose surface our life, experiences, and memories leave visible traces in the form of blotches, scars, wrinkles, and furrows, it is not his own true face that Knausgaard sees reflected in the window, but someone else's, as it were. The face is almost inhuman. There is something "stiff and mask-like" in it, and thus Knausgaard finds it "almost impossible to associate [it] with myself whenever I happen to catch a glimpse of it in a shop window" (I, p. 28).

The face appears here as the tragic mask. It displays and unfolds the dynamic relationship between surface and depth, with what is perceptible and what lies hidden behind what we see. On the one hand, the face is the mark of our individuality and identity. The face reveals who we are, and thus it amounts to what is the most naked and exposed in us. It renders visible the invisible forces that model the flesh and are manifest in it. To reveal one's face is thereby to reveal oneself, just as to hide one's face means

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to hide one's identity. Emmanuel Levinas (1969, p. 50) suggests that "[t]he way the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we call the face". The other, the you, whom I encounter face-to-face, is irreducible to the image that I have of the person, but exists independently of it. In the famous excursus "Wie ist Gesellschaft möglich?" ("How is society possible?") to the opening chapter of *Soziologie*, Simmel maintains that the you whom I face is for oneself a subject exactly the same way as I am for myself (Simmel, [1908] 1992, p. 45).

However, on the other hand, the face is also a mask in itself, presenting the front of what remains hidden behind, unseen, just as we may *wear different faces* in the company of different people. As is well-known, the Latin word *persona* originally meant the mask worn by theatre actors. The social mask organizes our relationship to society and others, as each one of us assume various social roles. We also try to present ourselves to others in a light that is favourable to ourselves (Goffman, [1959] 1990, p. 18), and thus engage in impression management by accentuating certain matters and concealing others (ibid., p. 74). In book 1, *A Death in the Family*, Knausgaard mentions the existence of a stark discrepancy between the front that he shows to others in face-to-face relationships and his inner self: "I do not want anyone to see me, [...] no one gets close and no one sees me" (I, p. 28). Knausgaard confesses that he never reveals his true colours, his ownmost thoughts and feelings when being in the company of others: "I never say what I really think, what I really mean, but always more or less agree with whoever I am talking to at the time, pretend that what they say is of interest to me" (I, p. 27).

While in his mirror-image Knausgaard only sees the face of a man he finds it almost impossible to associate with, just as in social intercourse he gives others only the mask, the surface that he wishes them to accept, writing functions as a mirror that enables him to confront and see his inner self. Accordingly, *My Struggle* is an attempt to lose the tragic mask and reveal the man behind it, without concealment and reserve, without hiding or leaving out any part of himself. One still gazes upon oneself from the outside, as it were, but tries to accomplish it by making an effort to penetrate the surface and dive into one's self. The truthfulness and objectivity of the introspective gaze is tied simultaneously both to the inside and to the outside:

To write about one's self is in a certain sense the opposite of empathy, since empathy moves from the outer towards the inner, while writing about oneself means moving from the inner towards the outer. And yet both processes aim at the same thing, intimate knowledge and, through that, understanding. When the person writing about him- or herself has moved out of the self, thus incorporating an external gaze, a strange kind of objectivity arises, something which at one and the same time belongs to the inner and the outer, and this objectivity makes it possible to move around in one's own

self as if it belonged to another, and then we have come full circle, for the movement requires empathy. (*Summer*, p. 127)

To be able to write the way as he did, Knausgaard felt that he needed to be free (VI, p. 1009). It was important to be free "from people looking at you" (The Guardian, 1 March 2015). The negative attention that we may receive from others is the prime trigger of shame, and so *parrhēsia* in the Knausgaardian manner requires above all that one gets rid of shame. Knausgaard had to make himself indifferent to how others may perceive him and think of him as a result of what he writes. A great number of scholars who have contributed to the sociology of emotions – such as the aforementioned Simmel and Cooley as well as Norbert Elias and Erving Goffman, for example – have addressed how shame operates as a crucial mechanism in social life. Knausgaard suggests the same in the sixth and final volume of *My Struggle*. As people want to avoid both feeling ashamed and shaming others, they behave in a manner that is appropriate and expected of them. However, the fear of shame also prevents people from saying the truth, and thus it stands in conflict with *parrhēsia*. Shame regulates the degrees by which we, in social relationships with others, may say what we really think, making us hide the truth or at least parts of it.

Shame is intimately connected to secrecy. The secret plays a highly significant role in and for social relationships. Simmel, for example, maintains that establishing social relationships necessitates that one knows something of the other, but this knowledge is also necessarily limited and thwarted (Simmel, 1950, pp. 309–10). Its limitations and distortions are partly due to the fact that there is something psychologically unattainable in the other (Simmel, [1923] 2004b, p. 188; 1971, p. 246), but they also have to do with discretion: out of consideration for others, we refrain from telling it all. One must respect the other's privacy. We know more about others than they voluntarily reveal about themselves, but for the sake of tact it is not polite to tell it all (Simmel, [1906] 1993). In volume 6, *The End*, Knausgaard, too, emphasizes how secrecy regulates our social relationships: "The social dimension is based on taking one another into consideration. We also do this by hiding our feelings, not saying what we think, if what we feel or think affects others" (VI, p. 1009). He also reflects on this a few hundred pages earlier, when he suggests that "the social world is a game that proceeds according to certain rules, some things are hidden, some are shown, and that in a way we live an illusion" (VI, p. 360). Therefore, "the genuine is the opposite of the social", Knausgaard proposes (VI, p. 363). The relation of secrecy and openness implied here relates in a fascinating manner to Simmel. Relationships, Simmel stresses, "presuppose a certain ignorance and a measure of mutual concealment" (Simmel, 1950, p. 315). In this sense, the secret, the hiding of realities, may have positive effects for the maintenance of social relationships. It "offers", as Simmel puts it, "the possibility of a second world

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alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former" (Simmel, 1950, p. 330).

Given that sociality is subjected to secrecy, the parrhesiast writing that *My Struggle* evinces is only possible by transgressing sociality. In *The End*, Knausgaard remarks on the individual volumes of the cycles:

[I]n their every sentence [I] have tried to transcend the social world by conveying the innermost thoughts and innermost feelings of my most private self, my own internal life, but also by describing the private sphere of my family as it exists behind the façade all families set up against the social world, doing so in a public form, a novel. (VI, p. 826)

In his prose, Knausgaard describes "what no one wants to be described, in other words, the secret and the hidden" (VI, p. 1009). In a sense, *My Struggle* presents an anti-Goffmanian experiment, driven by uncompromised disregard for impression management and respect for the personal integrity of others. For Knausgaard, literature in general and *My Struggle* in particular is an attempt to contravene social norms (VI, p. 1009). Literature should provide an escape from sociality and how it is based on the hiding of reality: "But isn't literature precisely a *sanctuary where the rules of the social game don't apply*? Isn't literature the only place where it is possible to be absolutely truthful, since writing is one of the *few social acts which take place beyond the social realm*?" (*Summer*: 126; italics added) Complete honesty is not possible within the plays of sociality, as those plays are structured according to secrecy. It is perhaps possible only in literature.

To tell the truth, Knausgaard felt he needed to be inconsiderate to others and not think about the consequences of his writing. To write like that necessitates turning away from the world, stepping outside society – to some extent even outside of humanity, as Knausgaard himself suggests in an interview (*The Guardian*, 1 March 2015). To contravene social norms means taking a step that may lead us into the inhuman, because "[t]o be human is to be several. To be social. The social world is a community" (VI, p. 358). In this sense, despite their obvious differences, there is a disturbing similarity between Knausgaard's act of writing, exposing those close to him in a merciless and direct manner, and for example the terrorist act perpetrated by Breivik on Utoya island. That is also the reason why Knausgaard shortly writes about Breivik in the sixth volume, as "he formed a coherent part of the thesis of *My Struggle*" (*The Guardian*, 1 March 2015). Parrhesiast writing becomes an immoral act, even an art of cruelty. "Ruthlessness" is its "very core and justification" (*Summer*, p. 126). As Knausgaard proposes in *The End*, volume 6 of *My Struggle*: "To write these things you have to be free, and to be free you have to be inconsiderate to others. [...] Truth equals freedom equals being inconsiderate" (VI, p. 1009). For Knausgaard, all the ruthlessness that writing may display is thus justified and even demanded

by truth-telling. Truth needs to be told for example about his authoritative, tyrannical father who ultimately drank himself to death. Knausgaard does not spare words on anyone near him. The directness with which he writes about real situations, people, and his relationship to them can be felt as rude and disrespectful. But it is toward himself that he is the most ruthless. He does not present himself in a light favourable to him. Quite the contrary, he exposes all his faults and weaknesses: his insecurities, selfishness, patheticness, and cowardness; the reckless drunken whims; how he cheated on his first wife; as well as how he rants and raves at his children and occasionally grabs them physically when he loses his temper.

However, despite all his strivings to be free and tell the truth without concealing anything, ultimately Knausgaard is forced to admit to himself that he has not been able to say it all. The paradox of parrhesiast writing is that while requiring a disregard for others, it is still dependent on others; without the *you*, whom one addresses, there is no language and no speaking or writing subject. It is to the *you* that the *I* addresses itself, writes to, and pronounces itself as a writing subject. The freedom experiment of *My Struggle* is thereby bound to fail: "I have never even been close to saying what I really mean and describe what I have actually seen" (VI, p. 1010). Knausgaard hesitates, pulls back, stylizes things, starts to censor himself, is conscious of how others may perceive the text and how it may affect them, and thus cannot but become cautious. Nevertheless, the failure does not diminish the significance of the effort. On the contrary, it is perhaps precisely in *how it fails* where the greatest value of the experiment lies, as it renders visible the inescapability of sociality and how such mechanisms as shame and secrecy regulate our actions. *My Struggle* cannot but step outside the confines of literature and enter the social. In the sixth and final volume of his work, Knausgaard suggests of *Mein Kampf*, after which he has ironically and provocatively named his novel, that as a symbol of human evil it is much more more than just literature:

Hitler's book is no longer literature. What later happened, what he later did, the axioms of which are meticulously laid out in that book, is such that it transforms the literature into something evil [...] *Mein Kampf* is more than text. In it the door between the text and reality is wide open, in a way quite unlike any other book. (VI, p. 483)

Knausgaard's efforts to the contrary notwithstanding, the door between the text and reality remains open in *My Struggle*, too, and it is here where the similarity between Hitler's auto-biography and Knausgaard's autofiction novel lies. Knausgaard's writing is inevitably embedded in the meshwork of social relationships. No matter how hard he tries to write free from social norms and expectations, without considering the consequences of what he writes, his writing nevertheless does affect his close ones, and this cannot but affect his writing.

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Parrhesiast writing is inevitably out of the bounds of literature. Therefore, by trying to break literary taboos and social norms it not only uncovers them, but also participates in testifying to their power.

## Conclusion

In the article, I have examined Karl Ove Knausgaard's writing in and of his six-volume autofiction cycle *My Struggle* as a practice of telling the truth about self. In its permeated introspection, the writing is concerned with the enigma of the self and with the question of how the self can be grasped. It tries to get to the bottom of the relationships, situations, motifs, thoughts, and memories that shape and constitute the main character and real person Karl Ove Knausgaard. It is because of this that the novel is also to a great extent preoccupied with the question of memory and how memory forms a significant part of our identity or self: reminiscence evokes an entire region of one's past and a world of experiences, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts.

Nevertheless, *My Struggle* should not be read as a sheer representation of reality. The main character is not a perfect copy or simulation of the living and breathing Karl Ove Knausgaard, but more or less a literary invention and an "experimental ego",<sup>8</sup> black marks on a white page. The book is not a treatise evincing a theoretical interest in the self, but a novel exploring the enigma of the self through the logic and techniques of literature. What is more, while *My Struggle* incorporates details from the life of its author, it is also conspicuously a book on *writing*. It poses writing as a problem, in terms of truth. Knausgaard sets out to write about his life as truthfully as possible, without concealment. The novel is a freedom experiment, exploring the possibility of writing and literature. For Knausgaard, writing is possible only when it is ruthless and free from shame and its workings in social life. Writing, therefore, appears as a practice that is inherently social and yet necessitates the transgression of the social. However, ultimately, as I argued above, the freedom experiment fails and thus comes to testify to the power of sociality and its norms. To tell the truth just might be the most difficult thing there is. Lying is much easier and in many cases also socially more acceptable than truth-telling, as sociality demands secrecy and is premised on it for the sake of consideration, politeness, and fear of shame. From our early childhood we are brought up in a culture of secrecy, and there exist social institutions maintaining and requiring the practice of lying, inscribed in politics and advertising, for example. When one tells the truth one crosses a line and risks not only one's relationship to others, but also one's own position.

Not surprisingly, then, Knausgaard's noble literary aims regarding unrestrained truthfulness easily become subject to dispute. At least two critical points suggest themselves. The first has to do with the morality of writing. The parrhesiast act of telling the truth may come out as immoral, since by exceeding social norms and rules it violates morality, which is a notion of the social world, the we ruling the I, and stands above the truth (see also VI, p. 826). By what right does the author expose the lives and secrets of those close to him? Is not the violation of the other's privacy that his writing carries out a continuation of the age-old form of aggressivity that nowadays is both institutionalized (let us only think of bureaucracy with its documents, or the media and the exposure it seeks) and justified morally (with the right to know having become of primary significance among the rights of subjects) (Kundera, 1988, p. 152)? Does it attest to the turning of the political axis of individuation in the dispositive of modern disciplinary power: instead of those using power, it is those subjected to it who are individuated, exposed, and transparent, while power itself becomes anonymous, secret, and coded (Foucault, [1975] 1991)?

Second, besides violating the privacy of others, is *My Struggle* also a continuation of the machinery of confession? With the notion of confession, Foucault referred to the procedures by which the subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth of him- or herself, which is capable of having effects on the subject him- or herself (Foucault, 1980, pp. 215–6). In the machinery of confession, psychoanalysis and Freud figure as episodes, but so do the confessional and the Christian method of direction of conscience. To some extent, *My Struggle* is part of the same lineage. What is more, with Knausgaard, truth is not even forced out of him, but he tells it most willingly, out of his free choice. In a sense, then, *My Struggle* fits perfectly the age where self-exposure has become an obligation and a norm. Social media is an obvious example. In 2013, Facebook reported that its users had uploaded 250 billion photos, and were uploading 250 million new photos each day. However, Knausgaard's literary motives are not simply confessional. While the novel seems to manifest radical self-exposure, Knausgaard does not seek (self-)exposure for the sake of (self-)exposure, that is, write just to become acknowledged and noticed. He writes to see rather than to be seen. His writing is driven by the will to truth, to understand the self and its relation to culture, its being-in-the-world. Like modern art, it makes the conditions of representation its object, asking under what conditions could writing be free and tell the truth. Besides being an utterly personal endeavour, *My Struggle* is also a literary experiment, which maps the interaction between art and life, literature and the social, and puts the boundary between them to the test, trying out to what extent it is possible for writing

8. Cf. Asher and Kundera (1987, p. 127).

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to break away from the social world and its rules and forces. It relentlessly explores the scope and potential of literary freedom, making an effort to expand what the novel is and what it may be capable of, and what possibilities open up for oneself as a writer.

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