

MY STRUGGLE – FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHY TO PERFORMATIVE BIOGRAPHISM

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ABSTRACT. *My Struggle – from Autobiography to Performative Biographism.*

The present article aims at showing that the work of the contemporary Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård, a series of six volumes entitled *My Struggle*, fulfills the criteria specific to various literary (sub)-genres. I will investigate the particularities that raise the most questions regarding the framing of such a work and analyze three categorizations of *My Struggle*, i.e. autobiography, autofiction and performative biographism. The analysis will be constructed especially in the context of Norwegian and Scandinavian literary space, but international perspectives will also be taken into consideration.

Keywords: *autobiography, autofiction, Norwegian literature, fictional pact, truth*

REZUMAT. *Lupta Mea – de la autobiografie la biografism performativ.*

Articolul de față își propune să arate că proza în șase volume *Lupta Mea*, a autorului norvegian contemporan Karl Ove Knausgård, îndeplinește criteriile de analiză specifice mai multor (sub)-genuri literare. Se vor investiga particularitățile care problematizează localizarea operei într-un gen proximal și se vor examina trei posibile încadrări ale acesteia, ca autobiografie, autoficțiune și biografism performativ. Analiza va fi construită în special în contextul spațiului literar norvegian și scandinav, dar vor fi luate în considerare și perspective internaționale, atunci când va fi cazul.

Cuvinte cheie: *autobiografie, autoficțiune, literatură norvegiană, pact ficțional, adevăr*

Introduction

This article investigates the work of the contemporary Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård, a series of six volumes entitled *My Struggle*, by analyzing the particularities that make possible the framing of such a work in three different categories, i.e. autobiography, autofiction and performative biographism.

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Ever since Arne Melberg, in his review entitled *We lack words*, stated that the literary world “doesn’t know what to say about Karl Ove Knausgård or about much else in present literature”² (my transl.), scholars have struggled to prove him wrong and to find words to understand the Norwegian writer. Except for the ‘classical’ approaches, that argue that *My Struggle* is an autobiographical or autofictional novel, an autonarration or simply a ‘hybrid work’, the Scandinavian literary critique has proposed new terms like ‘litterær kentaur’, ‘fiktionsfri fiktion’, ‘performativ biografisme’.

The paper is divided into three main parts, each of them trying to determine whether the novel³ possess the characteristics of a specific literary sub-genre or not. I have chosen a chronological partition, from autobiography, a well-known term, to performative biographism—a new, experimental category.

Autobiography and its further developments

My Struggle has often been discussed as an autobiographical work. The most common shape for an autobiography is “characterized by autodiegetic, i.e. 1st person, subsequent narration told from the point of view of the present”⁴, most often focusing on “psychological introspection and a sense of historicity frequently implying, in the instance of a writer’s autobiography, a close link between the author’s life and literary work”⁵. Even if its most prominent characteristic is 1st person narrative, there are exceptions to be found, works in which the events are narrated in the 3rd person or even autobiographies in epistolary form or in verse (e.g. Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933, Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* from 1976 and William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude: 1799,1805,1850*)⁶.

The list of theorists that dedicated themselves to the study of autobiography is long, but one of the most important and mentioned scholars in this respect is Philippe Lejeune. In his book, *Le pacte autobiographique*, published for the first time in 1975, he tries to clarify some distinctions between autobiography and its related genres (biography, memoirs, journal, etc.) by proposing a definition from the reader’s point of view.

²Arne Melberg, “We lack words” *Aftenposten*, Oslo, 15.Jan.2010 <https://www.aftenposten.no/mening/kronikk/Vi-mangler-ord-233530b.html> -Accessed 04.09.2017: “vet ikke hva den skal mene hverken om Karl Ove Knausgård eller mye annet i dagens litteratur”, (“Vi mangler ord”).

³ Even though there are voices that disagree in calling the work a novel, I consider that since the subtitle on the cover is “A novel” it is appropriate to call it in this way.

⁴ Schwalm, Helga. “Autobiography.” *The living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg, 11. April 2014 <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/autobiography> -Accessed: 28.08.2017.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

According to Lejeune, autobiography is a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality”⁷. Different variations of this definition will be encountered in the attempts to theorize more recent subdivisions of the autobiographical prose that emerged from it, and that are specific to the contemporary literary tendencies.

In order to classify a work as autobiographic, Lejeune establishes the conditions that have to be fulfilled in a work at the same time: the author, the narrator and the main character must be identical and to refer to a real person; the work must be in prose; the point of view of the narrative must be retrospective and the work must depict a story of a personality⁸. Furthermore, the French theoretician introduces an *autobiographical pact* that must be honored in order to call a text an autobiography. It implies that in such a text, there must be an identity between the author, the narrator and the main character⁹. Except for this pact, Philippe Lejeune suggests another one, the *fictional pact*, which presumes that there is no similarity between the name of the author and the name of the protagonist, while on the cover of the book the word “novel” appears¹⁰.

Knausgård’s six-volume novel does respect some of the criteria that this genre imposes, but it is not an autobiography, in a traditional sense. It has, undoubtedly, an autobiographical character, since it reveals explicitly the life of the empirical Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård. There is also an identity between the name of the author, narrator and character clearly expressed, and the title includes the possessive pronoun ‘my’. But the perspective is not always retrospective, the journal pages are written in present tense, the narrative is often interrupted by short essays or reflections and, most importantly, under the title the word ‘novel’ is written.

Moreover, in *My Struggle* these two pacts interfere, the novel meets some conditions from each of them. About this situation, Lejeune noted that “in practice, no example of such a study comes to my mind. And if the case does present itself, the reader is under the impression that a mistake has been made”¹¹. If a work in which such a combination can be encountered, the French theorist would not consider it a novel, nor an autobiography, but simply a lying, deceiving form of writing. But one must take into consideration that *Le pacte autobiographique* was written in 1975 and since then, especially in the latest decades, many ‘hybrid’ works have been published. Researchers in the literary field have investigated the variations of the phenomenon and tried to enhance the substantial work of Lejeune.

⁷ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, Translated by Katherine Leary, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

One of the further developments of the autobiographical pact, which is of interest in this paper, especially because it belongs to the Scandinavian space, is that of the Danish theorist Poul Behrendt, who introduces the concept of 'double contract'. If in Norway the attempts to theorize *My Struggle* have been rather shy, in Denmark a greater number of critics and theorists have centered their work around their Norwegian neighbor's prose. Although the concept proposed by Poul Behrendt was not designed specifically for Knausgård, it has been largely used by several critics and literature students in their articles or papers¹².

In his book *Double contract. An aesthetic novelty*¹³, he elaborates a more solid study on the concept mentioned for the first time in an essay from 1997. He explains that traditionally, between a writer and a reader can be established two types of contract, named earlier by Lejeune *pacts*. A first one, in which the reader is convinced that the facts in the book are real, have really happened and can be empirically demonstrated and a second one, fictional contract, where everything written in the book is pure fiction and it does not have a correspondent in real life¹⁴.

The novelty that Behrendt brings to the understanding of autobiographical literature is that these two types of contract can coexist in the same literary work. They do not exclude each other, as it was once shown by Philippe Lejeune, but they work together in order to give meaning to the text. For the double contract to happen there are two important conditions that have to be taken into consideration. Firstly, there must be a time shift from one contract to another and secondly, a reader deception must take place. Behrendt notes that "In that moment when [...] secret notes are evoked and are named as an integrated part of the work's devices, the double contract emerges in its basic form – it takes the shape of a time displacement in the establishment of two mutual incompatible contractual relationships"¹⁵ (my translation).

¹² See, for example, the article of Trond Haugen, *Sirkulasjonen av virkelighet*, available at <http://2001-10.prosa.no/artikkel.asp?ID=687> – Accessed at 25.08.2017, Jo Beck-Karlsen's chronicle *Speil og virkelighet* in *Dagbladet*, 17.November 2010, available at <http://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/speil-og-virkelighet/64302677> -Accessed at 25.08.2017, Maria Nielsen's master thesis: *Er jeg mannen i mitt liv? En analyse av sjanger og selvframstilling i Karl Ove Knausgårds*

Min kamp og Vladimir Nabokovs Speak, Memory, University of Oslo, 2012 available at <http://www.duo.uio.no/publ/ILOS/2012/161955/Masteroppgavex-xMariaxNielsen.pdf>, Accessed at 25.08.2017 or Lisa Beck Andersen's paper *Å gi faen og si det som det er: en analyse af, hvordan elementer fra virkelighed og fiktion udnyttes i romanserien Min kamp (2009–) af Karl Ove Knausgård* available at <http://sprogbiblioteket.au.dk/fileadmin/www.nobel.bibliotek.au.dk/linksamling/nordisk/Bach2011nospec9769.pdf> - Accessed at 25.08.2017.

¹³ Poul Behrendt, *Double contract. An aesthetic novelty*, Gylendal, Copenhagen, 2006, (*Dobbeltkontrakten. En æstetisk nydannelse*).

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 20: " I det øjeblik, hvor [...] 'hemmelige noter' fremkaldes og udnævnes til en integreret del af værkets anlæg, opstår dobbeltkontrakten i sin grundlæggende skikkelse – i form af en tidsforskydning i fastlæggelsen af to indbyrdes uforenelige aftaleforhold".

The reader's deception refers to the fact that initially, the reader is lured into one contract – a fictional one, for example – only to later find out that the work is actually established on a prerequisite of a reality contract. One traditional contract is not sufficient for the understanding of such works. This “game” between writer and reader, that takes place on the border between reality and fiction, is necessary for the unveiling of text meaning. Behrendt underlines that “unlike hybrid or fusion concepts like factions or autofictions, that postulate in advance an unity, which (probably) doesn't exist, the double contract emerges from the opposite prerequisite, the reader's deception, which is a moral category”¹⁶ (my translation).

Poul Behrendt provides a useful instrument for the study of such texts that are situated on the borderline between different literary genres or sub-genres, a phenomenon that is characteristic to contemporary literature. Still, its applicability in the case of *My Struggle* might be limited. There is no doubt that the problem of reality vs. fiction is central in the Norwegian work and the reader moves between two different contracts. However, there is no moment of truth exposal, necessary for the double contract to happen.

Autofiction

In this debate around the sub-genre of the prose *My Struggle*, new terms have come up and new attempts of inventing concepts have been seen in many scholars' works. Nevertheless, a well-established theoretical concept that could be adequate to the framing of the novel would be that of autofiction. Although relatively new, it has a long tradition and it has been debated and studied for decades.

The term ‘autofiction’ was introduced for the first time by Serge Doubrovsky in order to describe his novel, *Fils*, published in 1977. On the back cover of the book, he defines his work as a “fiction of strictly real events or facts, if we want, autofiction, of having entrusted the adventure of language with the language of adventure, outside the wisdom of the traditional or new novel.”¹⁷

The emergence of autofiction is also seen in correspondence with the rules of autobiography promoted and enunciated by Philippe Lejeune. Doubrovsky entered in a textual dialogue with his fellow colleague and tried to complete his partition described in *Le Pacte Autobiographique*. As it was formerly mentioned in this paper, in the view of Lejeune, a work in which there is an identity between the name of the author, narrator and main character cannot be a novel. Autofictional works come to solve this problem by demonstrating the opposite thing. Jaques

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 59: “i modsætning til hybrider eller fusionsbegreper som *faktion* eller *autofiktion*, der på forhånd postulerer en enhed, som (muligvis) ikke findes, udgår dobbeltkontrakten fra den modsatte forudsætning, dvs. læserbedraget, som er en moralsk kategori”.

¹⁷ Catherine Cusset, *The limits of autofiction*. 2012 <http://www.catherinecusset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/THE-LIMITS-OF-AUTOFICTION.pdf> Accessed at 03.09.2017.

Lecarme states that a work is an autofiction if the “author, narrator and protagonist share the same nominal identity and the generic title indicates that the narrative is a novel.”¹⁸

Another name that must be mentioned here is that of Philippe Gasparini, whose recent work *Autofiction: Une aventure du langage* (2008) is an attempt to enlighten the researches in the field by analyzing autofiction from a historical perspective and highlighting the importance of readers’ reactions. Although he admits the difficulty of providing a good, complex definition, Gasparini articulates the following: “Autobiographical and literary text that features numerous oral qualities, formal innovations, narrative complexity, fragmentation, separation from the self, disparateness and auto-commentary, which tends to problematize the relationship between writing and experience”¹⁹ (my translation).

This definition is the perfect portrayal of the knausgårdian novel that impresses by the particularities of its language, the alternation between long observations, essays, journal pages, analepsis and prolepsis, the merciless depictions of reality, the psychological (auto)analysis and the risks that he takes in his approach of intimate, private problems.

A key dimension of autofiction is the reception of it. Shands, Mikrut, Pattanaik and Ferreira-Meyers mention in the Introduction of the book *Writing the Self: Essays on autofiction* that “autofiction follows the autobiographical novel, but transposed to our times in different ways, partly because readers’ text reception changed”²⁰. The fact the autofiction is particularly connected with contemporary literature is an idea suggested also by Philippe Gasparini, on a conference about the development of the genre. “I will start from the hypothesis that autofiction is the name of a genre or of a generic category. And that this name is applicable, first and foremost to contemporary literary texts”²¹ (my translation).

Ferreira – Meyers brings into discussion the existence of an “autofictional pact”, used already by some scholars in their studies about this genre. This pact implies “an intimate narrative whose author, narrator and protagonist share the same nominal identity and whose text and/or peritext indicate it is a fiction”²².

¹⁸ Karren Ferreira-Meyres in Kerstin W Shands, Giulia Grillo Mikrut, Dipti R. Pattanaik, Karen Ferreira-Meyers, *Writing the Self: Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction*. Elanders, Sweden, 2015, p. 209.

¹⁹ McDonough, Pitcher, Sara. *How to Read Autofiction*. Wesleyan University, Connecticut, April 2011, p. 14: “Texte autobiographique et littéraire présentant de nombreux traits d’oralité, d’innovation formelle, de complexité narrative, de fragmentation, d’altérité, de disparate et d’autocommentaire qui tendent à problématiser le rapport entre l’écriture et l’expérience”.

²⁰ Kerstin W Shands, Giulia Grillo Mikrut, Dipti R. Pattanaik, Karen Ferreira-Meyers, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

²¹ Philippe Gasparini, “De quoi l’autofiction est-elle le nom ?”, *Autofiction.org*. 9. Oct. 2009 <http://www.autofiction.org/index.php?post/2010/01/02/De-quoi-l-autofiction-est-elle-le-nom-Par-Philippe-Gasparini> -Accessed at 20.08.2017: “Je partirai e l’hypothèse que l’autofiction est le nom d’un genre ou d’une catégorie générique. Et que ce nom s’applique, d’abord et avant tout, à des textes littéraires contemporains”.

²² Karen Ferreira Meyres in Kerstin W Shands, Giulia Grillo Mikrut, Dipti R. Pattanaik, Karen Ferreira-Meyers, *op. cit.* p.210.

This autofictional pact is also considered a protection device. Ferreira-Meyers brings Annie Ernaux in the discussion, who states that “the autofictional pact of the peritext (the appearance of the word ‘novel’ on the cover, for example) lifts ‘interior censorship’ and allows the author to go as far as possible in the exposure of familial, sexual and school-related unspoken”²³. It is known that precisely in the case of *My Struggle*, the paratext on the cover helped both the author and the publishing-house to protect themselves from Knausgård’s relatives who threatened them with a lawsuit.

The autofictional genre is particularly connected with feelings, emotions, real experiences that human beings have been through. “Autofiction usually feeds on extreme and painful experiences: death, illness, abandonment, madness and loss. Going to the heart of a human tragedy, finding a voice that expresses pain, the universality of pain, is what makes autofiction worthwhile”²⁴. The Norwegian novel is an example of how emotions make a story extra-ordinary and how intensity lifts the text from banality.

Truth and memory in autofictions

The question of truth occupies a central place in self-referential literature. While some scholars contest the capacity of autofiction to tell the truth, claiming that it does exactly the opposite, others feel that, on the contrary, it is the closest to the truth genre possible. Catherine Cusset argues in her paper *The limits of autofiction*, that “the only thing that is fictional in autofiction is the language while the facts are real”²⁵.

In a paper about autobiographical novels, Schmitt and Kjerkegaard talk about the capacity that authors have of telling the truth. They consider that “unless readers have access to audio recordings or precise ‘reports’ of their pasts, the only way to write an autobiography is to undertake a constitution of one’s past by means of ‘the bits and pieces available in [one’s] memory”²⁶. It is as close to the truth as possible. But the necessary condition is that the writer has to be honest with what he remembers and to be faithful to his commitment to rendering the life in its raw form. “There can be no compromise with the truth. The acceptance of self-destruction, the sacrifice of oneself and of the other on the altar of literature would be the proof that you are a real writer, a writer for whom literature is an absolute”²⁷.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 213.

²⁴ Catherine Cusset, *loc cit*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ Arnaud Schmitt, Stefan Kjerkegaard, *Karl Ove Knausgaard’s My Struggle: A Real Life in a Novel*. *Auto|Biography Studies*, Vol.31, NO.3, 553-579, 2016, p. 567

²⁷ Catherine Cusset, *loc.cit*.

An interesting perspective on the fallible process of recollection is given by Schmitt and Kjerkegaard, who believe that the writing is used in order to remember, and not the other way round. By putting down what one thinks that remembers, memories come back and the effort is considered sincere. "The fact that Knausgaard misremembers does not brand *My Struggle* as fiction. The key factor is that he writes to remember, he endeavors to remember his life, and he recreates his past and fills the void of oblivion with narrative. To put it differently, it is the narrative effort that needs to be autobiographical for the text to be perceived as a realistic rendering of life".

In the case of *My Struggle* many stated that Knausgård's declared project of telling the truth and nothing but the truth is impossible to achieve because one cannot remember everything from one's life, thus it is condemned to be a lie. But "autofiction is not about factual accuracy, because writing sometimes requires a concentration of facts not to be repetitive and also because memory is not accurate. But the writer has a pact with him/herself, which is not to lie, not to invent just for the sake of fiction, but to be as honest as possible"²⁸.

The Norwegian writer himself talks about truth in his controversial novel. "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's 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 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"²⁹.

In Scandinavian literary tradition, to write in the way that Knausgård does is uncommon, mostly from an ethical perspective and considering the geographical coordinates of the literary space. There have been other appreciated writers that created valuable autofictional works, like Dag Solstad or Tomas Espedal, most recently, but they haven't been regarded as shocking as Knausgård among their readers. Writing about one's private life, picturing real persons with their real names, presenting shameful or disgraceful events has been done once before, in the beginning of the 20th century. Around 1900, the bohemian group "Kristiania Bohemen" was formed and it had a great influence on the literary and cultural life of those times. The leader of the movement was Hans Jæger, a writer, philosopher and anarchist and he promoted the nine commandments that bohemians should follow, one of which was "you shall write your own life". It is the kind of thinking that we can also identify in Knausgård's big project, for the first time ever since the bohemian movement.

My Struggle can be also read as a manifesto. Even if its author doesn't proclaim himself the creator of a new wave in literature, the discourse in the novel goes often in that direction. The ambitions of Knausgård to what concerns

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Fifth book: a novel*, Oktober, Oslo, 2010 (*Min kamp. Femte bok: roman*).

the way one should write are visible in the books through passages like “Just the thought of fiction, just the thought of a fabricated character in a fabricated plot made me feel nauseous (...). It was a crisis, I felt it in every fibre of my body, something saturating was spreading through my consciousness ... because the nucleus of all this fiction, whether true or not, was verisimilitude and the distance it held to reality was constant”³⁰.

Performative biographism

The unique features of the novel *My Struggle* encouraged the occurrence of new terms and concepts in literary analysis. Another Danish critic and scholar who dedicated his work to the establishment of a theoretical frame suitable for Knausgård’s six-volume novel is Jon Helt Haarder. In his book *Performative biographism. A mainstream in the late modern Scandinavian literature*³¹ from 2014 he tries to define the new tendencies that have dominated the Scandinavian autobiographical literature in the last decade.

He explains the need to establish a new term in order to describe the phenomena that are visible nowadays in literature and arts, in general, and are connected with self-exposure. Haarder admits that this kind of practices, of showing yourself to a public and creating art out of it are anything but new. What he suggests is that we should investigate the new developments of old practices and that new approaches should come forward, without ignoring the historical context.³²

In his view, the recent phenomena represent a “broad cultural movement in which artists use themselves and other real people in a concrete, esthetic game with readers’ and public’s reactions”³³(my translation). Although he is mostly concerned with the literary field, he aims at creating a solid basis for the concept, so that it could be applied outside literature as well. In this paper, I will take into consideration only the elements relevant for the analysis of the Knausgårdian prose.

Haarder’s perspective on the new wave of literature takes the shape of performative biographism, a concept in which he combines two types of artistic acts. He states that in order to understand contemporary literature one has to borrow instruments from other fields of study. The simple use of concepts and

³⁰ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Second book*, Oktober, Oslo, 2009 (*Min kamp. Andre bok: roman*).

³¹ Jon Helt Haarder, *Performative biographism. A mainstream in the late modern Scandinavian literature*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 2014 (*Performativ biografisme. En hovedstrømning i den senmodernes skandinaviske litteratur*).

³² *Ibid*, p. 102.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 103: “en bred kulturel strømning der består i at kunstnere (og andre kulturproducenter) bruger sig selv eller andre virkelige personer i et æstetisk betonet spil med læserens og offentlighedens reaktioner”.

terms specific to literary studies does not seem to be enough anymore. Writers themselves have started to mix elements from various spheres in their writings, which requires the same reaction from critics and theorists. Haarder borrows the first term from *performance art*, “a genre in which art is presented “live,” usually by the artist but sometimes with collaborators or performers. It has had a role in avant-garde art throughout the twentieth century, playing an important part in anarchic movements such as Futurism and Dada.”³⁴ This combination of performance acts and the traditional practice of revealing biographical details can lead to interesting further discussions under the name of performative biographism.

Some features of the phenomenon distinguish it from other literary categorizations. Public feedback, moral reaction or the focus on the marginalized elements of life are specific to performative biographism. They can also be identified in the work of Karl Ove Knausgård. Jon Helt Haarder mentions that “the autobiographical reference is a “reality effect” that provokes, calls for reactions. In principle, we react in one of two ways: either morally (...) or by questioning the trueness of what is being narrated”³⁵ (my translation). After the first publication of the novel *My Struggle* the wave of reactions was incredibly big, even shocking, one might say. By using his real name, which is quite uncommon in Norway, the writer made it very easy for those who were curious, to identify his family, relatives, friends and teachers. After reading the first volume, which is abundant in very shameful and degrading details about Knausgård’s father and grandmother, members of his father’s family threatened him and the publishing house with lawsuit and called his book “Judas literature”, full of untruthful stories, in an open letter sent to the Norwegian newspaper, *Klassekampen*. “This is confessional literature, non-fiction we are talking about. Judas’s literature. It is a book full of insinuations, lies, erroneous depictions of persons, purely exposing”³⁶ (my translation).

Moreover, the press engaged itself in a “detective” work and tried to find out how much of what is being told in the books is true and to what extent. For instance, *Morgenbladet*, a respected Norwegian newspaper, published in January 2009 an article entitled *Defense for a dead man (Forsvar for en død mann)*. Its writers took a trip to the hometown of Karl Ove Knausgård, where he used to live with his father and interviewed former neighbors, locals who knew the

³⁴ <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-performance-art.htm> accessed at 25.08.2017.

³⁵ Jon Helt Haarder, *op. cit.* p. 105: “den (selv)biografiske reference er en virkelighedseffekt der provokerer, kalder på reaktioner. I princippet reagerer vi på to måder: enten moralsk (...) eller ved at betvivle sandheten av det fortalte”.

³⁶ Lisa Bach Andersen, “*To don’t care and say it as it is: An analysis of how elements of reality and fiction are used in the novel series My Struggle (2009-) by Karl Ove Knausgård*,” Nordisk Sprog og Litteratur, Nordisk Institut, Aarhus, 3.March 2011, p. 4: “Dette er bekendelseslitteratur og sagprosa, vi taler om. Judaslitteratur. Det er en bog fuld af insinuationer, usandheder, fejlagtig beskrivelser af personer, ren udlevering”. (*Å gi faen og si det som det er: En analyse af hvordan elementer fra virkelighed og fiktion udnyttes i romanserien Min Kamp (2009-) af Karl Ove Knausgård.*

family, took pictures of their old house and talked to past teachers, in an attempt to verify the accuracy of what was portrayed in the novel, as well as subtly accusing the writer of being immoral³⁷.

As mentioned before, an important role in performative biographism is played by the reactions that it generates and how they influence the further evolution of the work. The element of feedback from the critical apparatus affects the esthetics of the work. After the publishing of the first volumes *My Struggle*, the public had reactions that influenced the writing of the next parts in different ways. The author was forced to produce a certain number of pages so the process of writing was going really fast and the quality of the text might have been affected. Also he censured himself and he tried to be more public-orientated. Schmitt and Kjerkegaard support this idea by stating that “the serialized format obviously contributes to the textual lushness, while adding complexity to the reception process”³⁸.

In this kind of literary projects, particular attention is dedicated also to elements that are not normally seen as meaningful, rich or relevant in the context of writing a consequential work. “Art gains authenticity by seeking for the uncultivated, the raw, the corporal, the low cultural left overs, in short, all that in the past had been removed and considered irrelevant for art”³⁹(my translation). Knausgård’s novel is based on this kind of peripheral, mundane details, considered irrelevant, shameful or repugnant elements, that normally make the work heavy, difficult to read and to follow, things that would be left outside in a classical novel.

Conclusions

My Struggle is, nevertheless, a controversial novel that has dominated the literary world in the last decade. By possessing unique features, it has challenged many theorists and critiques that have tried to establish some theoretical grounds for a better understanding of it. This paper showed how different literary concepts and terms can be useful in the attempts of finding a framing sub-genre for the Norwegian work. Aside from stretching different directions for further analyses of the novel *My Struggle*, this multitude of viewpoints can be understood as symptomatic for the challenges that contemporary literature has to face. Although it might be the most famous example at the present time,

³⁷ *** [Defense for a dead man](#), Morgenbladet, Oslo, 29. Jan. 2010 – Accessed 28.08.2017, ([Forsvar for en død mann](#)).

³⁸ Arnaud Schmitt, Stefan Kjerkegaard, *Karl Ove Knausgaard's My Struggle: A Real Life in a Novel*. Auto|Biography Studies, Vol.31, NO.3, 553-579, 2016, p. 572.

³⁹ Jon Helt Haarder, *op. cit.*, p. 115: “Kunsten vinder autenticitet ved å opsoøge det uopdyrkede, det rå, det korporlige, det lavkulturelle affald – kort sagt alt det der på forhånd har vaeret sorteret fra som irrelevant for kunst”.

Knausgård is not a singular case. Authors from Scandinavia and all around the world have published all kinds of writings that question the issue of literary genre and the already established rules of literature, in general. Thus this controversy around the nature of Knausgårdian prose can be also seen in a global perspective and can open new directions in literary theory.

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