

TRUTH IN KARL OVE KNAUSGARD'S NOVELS

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Abstract: We are trying to investigate how the problem of truth in fiction becomes more problematic in the age of internet where paratexts, interviews, pictures of authors and their private lives further blur the distinction between what is first-hand experience and what is appropriated experience in first person narratives. We are taking as a working example Karl Ove Knausgaard's series where realism seems to be brought to an extreme which, besides the narrating style, is reinforced by information outside the text.

Keywords: truth, fiction, internet, information, insight.

Motto: „What I was trying to do, and perhaps what all writers try to do - what on earth do I know? - was to combat fiction with fiction.” (K.O.Knausgaard)

We are beginning with David Lewis's **Truth in Fiction** and his words that it is, strictly speaking “fallacious to reason from a mixture of truth in fact and truth in fiction” (42) to conclude about truth in literature; that will account for the open end of this analysis. But he adds that this fallacy is in practice not so bad: “The factual premises in mixed reasoning may be part of the background against which we read the fiction” (42); which conveniently justifies our play with these concepts. Truth and fiction are in a counterfactual relationship: without the background of pre-existing recognisable truth in fiction, the other elements would not hold.

Lewis begins his demonstration by taking subject-predicate statements about Sherlock Holmes at their face value to show that formally they are like real-life descriptions with one provision: the strict belonging to their respective worlds (he indeed has a theory of possible worlds that exist simultaneously). To clarify matters one should use prefixed sentences of the type: “In the Sherlock Holmes stories, Sherlock Holmes liked to show off” (38), the abbreviated version “Sherlock Holmes liked to show off” not being accurate in terms of belonging. What we profess is, given that all humans have surprisingly personal, exclusive interpretations of reality, illusions that are fostered to the point of creating a made-up universe of opinions, interpretations and mostly self-illusions, the co-existence of *these* personal worlds with the fictional worlds is not that preposterous and accounts to the same truth value. Lewis's theory of a legitimately co-existing plurality of worlds could be interpreted like that too. The difference is that the fictional worlds are openly so to the professional reader, unlike the personal ones. Our thesis is that the problem of truth in fiction is as oxymoronic a vicinity by established taxonomy as personal fiction and real life should be and as valid an issue.

Fictional truth gains more authority, even substance, when it is reinforced in a series, as with the Sherlock Holmes example: gestures develop into habits, idiosyncrasies are anticipated, the character's routine is unequivocally familiar. An enthusiastic mixture of plans is by no means new as a result of this intimacy: places mentioned in books and maybe later where the film has been shot are readily accepted as solid part of the fictional world without remorse about this world overlap; and such pilgrimage places are many. Objects get a "trans-world identity" (Lewis 41).

Lewis seems to have a problem with narrators pretending to be telling the truth: "The storyteller purports to be telling the truth about matters whereof he has knowledge...nevertheless he plays a false part" (40). But again – truth-wise - how much different is this act of story-telling from the one performed by any one of us interpreting an experienced event, except for what they call themselves, fiction or an account in real life. This is like asking what makes Marcel Duchamp's urinal a piece of art; what places an unmistakable piece of reality in a different traditional category and the answer would be, the *mise-en-scene*, the intention, the loss of real-life functionality. Not being functional because of being "closed under implication" (Lewis 38) - makes truth in fiction be of a lesser value than any other 'truth' that we circulate with claim of solid denotation.

Lewis concludes that this counterfactual relationship that truth and fiction have is "the joint product of two sources: the explicit content of the fiction, and a background consisting either of the facts about our world... or of the beliefs overt in the community of origin." A third source would be "carry-over from other truth in fiction...intra-fictional and inter-fictional" (44). We would like to analyse such mixing of plans in contemporary terms: information from fiction reinforced by information in the media, but we will start by a writer's observations on the process.

In **The Sentimental and Naïve Novelist**, Pamuk affirms - like Knausgaard - that writing is about a field of possibilities, a (mine)field of meanings, with what happens "there" being less important than the "there" itself. Pamuk calls it the secret centre of the novel, only it is not a centre, but everything the novel is made of (25). We just imagine it to be hidden, that there must be more. Readers are optimists looking for clues of it on the surface. It is this presence/absence play which is at work, a search for a meaning that is not hidden, but at the surface; it is the whole, not a centre at all. When looking for the centre, we are looking for knowledge, for truth, but the centre is at best an insight (Pamuk 157) obtained along the way. In looking for this centre, the reader has another truth issue: they start wondering about the authenticity of the details, how much of the *I* in the fictional piece is really the *I* who has lived what the author has lived. The internet richness of information makes the reality of the author more pregnant than it used to be, which further complicates this relationship of the reader with the authorial truth.

In Knausgaard's series, **My Struggle** truth seems unadulterated because of the extremely realistic style, the honesty, but also because of reinforcement of information in the text with information outside it. The first novel in the series begins with his dad's funeral: his and his brother's trip to their home town, the human and physical decay they find their grandmother and the house in, the mountains of alcohol bottles, the crying when seeing his dead father and the hate for him. Karl Ove's perspective is uncommonly close to the facts, being the eye of the boy and later of the teenager who sees things, not of the grow-up who, when intervening, clarifies the content as well as the limits of the perspective: "As your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning. Understanding the world requires you to keep a certain distance from it" (11). Or, as he explains further, when a child, every step is full

of meaning and opportunity, while with grown-ups (his dad in particular who is the crux of his childhood quest), meaning gets dispersed in taxonomically clear concepts, such as *family*, which for the child is an abstract term. (11). The grown-up narrator declares that looking at his children does not bring tears to his eyes as a painting does and this is because the *meaning* real life elements produce, even if one's own children, is not sufficient. Art is about a concentration of meaning and in this respect it resembles the experience of events and possibilities one lives as a child. From this perspective too, the dichotomy truth/fiction loses impetus.

The way the storytelling is done, dilating details, presenting every little gesture is the boy's perspective. But it also keeps you on your toes with a sense of apprehension which is also the boy's: you fear the father bursting violently into his room and the recording of gestures is thus doubled by the reader's intimate response of listening to menacing steps on the corridor. We experience the confusion of the child who lives in constant terror, even when is forced to 'enjoy' time together with his father and share things with him in the latter's attempt to come close to his sons. We also have the adult narrator's view on his father's inability to be different in spite of sporadic attempts, his incapacity to contain his frightening fits of fury, his likely psychiatric problems. Karl Ove's crying at seeing his father's dead body resembles the boy's, whose childhood was punctuated by these humiliating, uncontrollable weeping outbursts, but also comes from a feeling of pity for his frightening father and himself.

The structure is classical: the funeral triggers a quest of comprehension into the past and the account tries to keep to the path of objectivity as much as possible: it records the father's honest attempts to be nice to his sons, but also their rigidity lest something will displease him, which invariably happens. The way the events are being told 'grows' in time as the perspective of the child turns into the teenager's in the way in which the adult narrator registers the transformation of vision and understanding of experience from childhood to adulthood through what we call knowledge: "At length we bring it within the scope of our senses and we stabilise it with fixer. When it has been fixed we call it knowledge. Throughout our childhood and teenage years we strive to attain the correct distance from objects and phenomena. We read, we learn, we experience, we make adjustments. Then one day we reach the point where all the necessary distances have been set, all the necessary systems have been put in place. This is when time begins to pick up speed. It no longer meets any obstacles, everything is set, time races through our lives..." (13). Such integral vision of being and seeing/understanding in a play of closeness/distance also leads to a personal vision of time whose duration is determined by knowledge or a lack thereof. The adjustment of the seeing instrument (the way a camera does), which is here the telling instrument, the story, brings about clarity and some sort of insight, if not meaning. Thus truth lies in the clarity of seeing, the insight reached by telling the story. A death, childhood happenings, later loves all have in the centre the enigma of the father that Karl Ove needs to decipher.

We are not questioning the veracity of facts; they are too banal and commonly recognisable to have been made up. It is the understanding of the facts that preoccupies us; we have our own struggle to understand this man who poses such a problem of understanding, his father. What we know about him from the book is limited: we see him exclusively as the unhinged father; then we try to collect scraps outside this role alongside Karl Ove, as any child does with deceased parents to get to know them as people and social beings, not only as parents. He married young, freshly out of teenage-hood, yet eager to start a life of respectability together with other young couples on a recently populated Norwegian island. We also know that he was a strict, sarcastic, but popular teacher, a correct citizen with an impeccable image, a garden tender.

We know that no children or adult guests were allowed to come over. We know him this way from Karl Ove's childhood, but simultaneously we have the foreknowledge of his later drunkenness, his degeneration, his drunkard's death and wonder all the time at how people can end up. We witness his relationship with his in-laws, fearing ourselves at least a smirk of contempt. But it seems that his sons are his victims especially the younger, Karl Ove, whiny and sensitive, the perfect victim asking to be bullied. He admitted to a friend in a moment of insight that his wife saved his children. Surprisingly he seems to get along with his wife, yet cheats on her when away for studies. We wonder about Karl Ove's mother, so calm, cooking, sewing - blind to the atmosphere of terror in the house, apparently never saving her children from his fury. Maybe in the 70s Norway with the pressures of respectability weighing hard on very young couples, that was seen as legit education.

I looked up pictures on the internet, not only of the author, as I always do, and the women in the book, but especially his father in order to understand him better. There is a picture of him young with the two small children, bearded, slim, handsome, well-dressed; he seems happy and a good father. The enigma of the father becomes more of an enigma. I also read pieces of news on the internet saying that relatives of Knausgaard's stopped talking to him, sued him on account of what he told about the family, the stories of drunkenness and others. This directly reflects on the truth value of the facts, making us wonder - considering the harsh consequences - whether there must be truth in the story or, on the contrary, it is all revolting lies.

I am a visual person: I want to see the face of every writer I read and know as much as I can about them. I remember - to mention just the authors in this text - Orhan Pamuk with his daughter at the Nobel ceremony, the beautiful neighbourhood of Beşiktaş where he grew up; David Lewis with his interesting face and a cat and the information that he was called the Machine in the Ghost; Karl Ove, his wife, his friend Geir, himself in front of his secluded house where he lives with his family now. How much more problematic does truth get with this plethora of information, for clearer is not. In the light of what we discussed in this paper we could treat information with the same attitude we have towards truth in literature and personal fiction in real life: tolerate the existence of both as prerequisites, create a field of possibilities and get at best an insight. Or, in Knausgaard's words, "if they didn't furnish me with insights I became all the richer for intuitions and feelings." (331)

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