

thrall to writing alone. But there is an urgency and political force to the inventions here, and a rigor to their peripheral limitations. In Krzhizhanovsky's novel *The Letter Killers Club*, friends convene to invent perfect concepts, articulating them to one another without writing. This same faith in conjecture as an intrinsically moral form shapes the most surprising elements of Krzhizhanovsky's short stories.

Denise Dooley

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Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book One*. Translated by Don Bartlett. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2012. 441pp. \$16

Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book Two*. Translated by Don Bartlett. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2013. 573pp. \$26

In her introduction to William Eggleston's book of photographs *The Democratic Forest*, Eudora Welty writes, "They focus on the mundane world. But *no* subject is fuller of implications than the mundane world! When you see what the mundane world so openly and multitudinously affirms, there is *everything* left to say." This statement reveals Welty's enthusiasm and generosity in proposing a critical stance toward art: the mundane, twentieth-century art's predominant subject of choice, enables an attitude of openness and affirmation about the world. It also changes the artist's position in her work: if there is everything left to say, then the work of saying it, the struggle to find what there is to say, is part of the artwork. This conception of the mundane is taken up in Karl Ove Knausgaard's monster, 3,600-page work, *My Struggle*. The book's project is to record and shape an attitude towards the world, and he means to include, describe, and appraise absolutely *everything*. One sense of the title is about art: Knausgaard's struggle is to make the mundane more than mere detail and less than mere implication. The work demonstrates how an exhausting, encyclopedic style is necessary to the ethical and aesthetic ambitions of narrating a life.

The death of Knausgaard's father is the backdrop for the events of Book One. His father leaves his family and his profession, takes up with another woman long enough to have a daughter, then abandons girlfriend and infant, moves back in with his mother, and drinks himself to death. Though the style is thoroughly descriptive, including pages of uninterrupted dialogue, *My Struggle* fudges the nontrivial distinction between autobiography and novel. Knausgaard's intention to "write reality"—as he puts it—contains an implicit criticism of fiction, as if an invention were somehow insufficiently recalcitrant to the writer's craft:

Hardly a day passed without the sky being filled with fantastic cloud formations, each and every one illuminated in unique, never-to-be-repeated ways, and since what you see every day is what you never see, we lived our lives under the constantly changing sky without sparing it a glance or a thought. And why should we? If the various formations had had some *meaning*, if, for example, there had been concealed signs and messages for us which it was important we decode correctly, unceasing attention to what was happening would have been inescapable and understandable. But this was not the case of course, the various cloud shapes and hues meant *nothing*, what they looked like at any given juncture was based on chance, so if there is anything the clouds suggested it was meaninglessness in its purest form.

In this typical passage, Knausgaard makes the mundane visible while reflecting on why it is overlooked: if the clouds were signs, we would attend to them, read them; if matter had meaning beyond the meaning we give it—that would *be* something. Knausgaard’s sustained attention to what is otherwise fleeting becomes the means to interpret the world; this is the ethics of his project and a précis of his aesthetic. But there is a paradox here: the closer he looks the less meaning he finds, and the less he finds the more he recognizes it must be made—by more looking. This is a sort of tautology an appeal to authority might resolve. Or, as we notice here, a joke might relieve:

Standing there on the drive and looking down at the ground while he read, I was thinking that this is a great and privileged moment, but not even this thought had time to settle, for the moment occupied by the poem, which its originator read in its place of origin, was so much greater than us, it belonged to infinity, and how could we, so young and no brighter than tree sparrows, receive it? We could not, and at any rate, I squirmed as he read. It was almost more than I could endure. A joke would have been apposite, at least to lend the everyday life in which we were trapped some kind of form. Oh, the beauty of it, how to deal with it? How to meet it?

Knausgaard has a traditional, romantic view of the arts, and of artists. When, as a student, he and two friends interview a prominent but prickly poet named Hauge, he realizes they are out of their depth, confronting an author, a man of real authority. “A joke would have been apposite,” he writes—meaning that it might provide comic relief to diffuse a new, disorienting encounter of beauty, whether it is in nature or in feeling inadequate to a person of great importance. But a joke is also a trope—“some kind of form.” The struggle is to find the form that meets life on its own irreducible terms. Hence Knausgaard’s insistence on the real, not even changing the names of characters drawn from real life. (The threat of legal action forced him to change at least one character’s name in Book One.) It is Knausgaard’s world, Knausgaard’s struggle; his friends, enemies, and lovers just live in it.

Book Two, subtitled “A Man in Love,” begins with Knausgaard in the midst of parenthood, in all its banality. The central scene in this book is the birth of his firstborn, Vanja. The hours in the hospital leading up to the birth scene with its singular sensations—his wife and daughter smeared with blood (“a sharp, somehow metallic smell came from them both”)—is an outcrop of significance, and soon left behind. Time continues to pass; the extraordinary becomes routine. Knausgaard’s life (and prose) fills with children, their bodies and their care: pushing them in the stroller, dressing, changing, feeding, and feigning interest in the concerns of the parents of his children’s school friends.

The first time we took her out was the third day, she had to go for a checkup and it was like we were transporting a bomb. Obstacle number one was all the clothes she had to wear because the temperature outside was more than fifteen degrees below. The second was the child seat. How do you attach it in a taxi? The third was the eyes that studied us in the reception area.

The fragile infant—“a bomb”—grows into a demanding toddler, dumbing down part of every day. The fear Knausgaard feels for the baby is leavened with guilt about parenting: if insufficiently cautious, he is in danger of failing as a parent. His daughter is swaddled excessively to protect her from Knausgaard’s failure to install a car seat—a task he is expected to perform well simply because he has a child. Here perhaps the joke is on the author: parents will sympathize with Knausgaard’s fatherly anxieties because they know his specific struggles firsthand, though certainly they will also be those who have the least time and patience to read him.

Knausgaard’s views on the responsibility of his gender are traditional, and proudly unconstructed. He reserves the right to leave his attitudes unexamined, precisely it seems because he never tries to justify their often cringe-inducing consequences. Even dissecting the dissolution of his first marriage—he leaves his first wife for Linda, a woman with whom he’d fallen in love at first sight years before—Knausgaard does not spare details. Vain and petty, he holds grudges, and wields them. His struggles to be a good person are rudimentary; he often fails, and describes these failures quickly.

By putting everything into *My Struggle*, we might think that Knausgaard has interpreted Thomas Mann’s remark that “an epic is sublimated boredom” as a challenge he is daring his readers to rise to. Beyond the consuming, everyday demands of the body—eating, excreting, sleeping, thinking, making love, smoking and drinking, aging and forgetting—is the struggle with form, how to say everything while not saying just anything. How does one devote attention to the mundane in such a way that it does not become the “merely” beautiful or “merely” true? How should one attend to what *demand*s attention

while not acquiescing to it only as a demand? His inclusion of facts ordinarily elided in fiction and memoir—dressing, making coffee and tea, turning the car key in the ignition, riding the subway to the studio where he writes—is curious. He expresses irritation with the mundane as much as he praises it, as if he wants to get back to writing about the life he is too busy living.

Next to nothing has been written about Knausgaard's provocative title—*Min Kamp*—which is clearly meant to evoke Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf*. (Knausgaard's title is changed in translation in countries where Hitler's work is banned.) It is a gesture typical for Knausgaard: he absolves himself from being explicitly offensive by showing us how thoughtful and open he is about himself. It is another way in which we are meant to see his capacious project as radical. But, to return to Welty's statement, we might raise a crucial problem: what are the implications that close examination of the world *affirms*? For Knausgaard the mundane is impervious to abstraction: a meaning cannot be extracted from it. But the first volumes of this ongoing project demonstrate—and, I suspect, later volumes will continue to do the same—that this road of excess leads to a conventional palace of wisdom.

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Richard Owens, *Ballads*. Buffalo, NY: Habenicht Press, 2012. 120pp. \$12

Balladry, like the US House of Representatives, in the language of today's best demagogues, is supposed to be "close to the people"—close to their traditions, their affections, and their prejudices. But under the control of its own scholarly, adjudicating representatives, balladry, too, belies congressman John Boehner's claim that the "voice of the people will be heard through our majority." This kind of claim presumes an impossible immediacy between the thought and expression of the folk and the decision making of those who act on their behalf in the political arena or in the republic of letters. In the afterword to *Ballads*, his collection of experimental lyrics, Richard Owens makes clear that in the history of British balladry an elite minority has always spoken through the voice of the people. Owens recounts the famous moment in which Bishop Thomas Percy rescues a manuscript of forgotten ballads from being used as his housemaid's kindling, and how Percy reworked the volume for publication as *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). For Owens, Percy destroys the ballads a second time when he tries to save them: what gets lost in Percy's (and all subsequent) ballad rewritings is the subterranean current of populist energy, embodied in the housemaid's fire, that would have returned oral tradition to its originary status as a thing of the air—as the "epiphytic," as