

Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* and the Serial Self

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In the sixth and last volume of his autobiographical novel series *My Struggle* (*Min Kamp*, 2009-'11), Karl Ove Knausgård describes a phone conversation with his editor Geir Gulliksen in which the latter first suggested to him the idea of publishing his work in serial form. Whereas the Norwegian author initially preferred his magnum opus to be published in one single volume, in order to make a statement with "the fattest novel in Norway" (2015: 61), he soon warms to the idea of a series. "It will be like Dickens and Dostoevsky ... a feuilleton novel!", he eagerly exclaims (2015: 62). The idea is more timely than Knausgård might have expected.

The serial novel is back. Elena Ferrante published her acclaimed Neapolitan novels in four volumes (2011-2014); William T. Vollmann's novel *The Dying Grass* (2015) is the latest installment of his series *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes*. In the same year, Amitav Ghosh has completed his *Ibis* trilogy, and Mark Z. Danielewski has embarked upon a 27-volume (and 21,000-page) novel series titled *The Familiar*, a new volume scheduled for publication every six months. After the popularity of the nineteenth-century *feuilleton*, serials were for a long time considered cheap, mass-produced media, and associated with 'low' culture such as comics, soap operas, and genre fiction. Today, the serial has become relevant again, both as a popular and esteemed cultural form and as a central topic in the theoretical study of literature and media.

However, in the case of *My Struggle*, the fact that the author cut his reminiscences into six distinct volumes in not form of seriality that can be discerned in the work. Not only Knausgård's writing is serialized by being split into separate, consecutive installments: the 'self' that emanates from it is as well. In the mode of self-representation that Knausgård employs throughout these novels, we can identify an aesthetics of seriality that is more akin to social media, selfies, and cartoons than to the *feuilleton* novels of the nineteenth century. In the broadest sense, the present article focuses on the influence of new and

social media and digital culture on the serial in literature. It first introduces and characterizes an emerging cross-medial aesthetic of the 'serial self'. This aesthetic is inspired by the technological potentialities of digital media, and by social media practices like taking a selfie or posting a blog every single day and accumulating these self-representations. The 'serial self' emerging from these practices is marked by continuity, real-time effects, open-endedness, rhythm, repetition, and a thematic attention to the mundane. In this article, *My Struggle* will be embedded in this larger, intermedial framework. Drawing on the work of psychologist Galen Strawson, it will be argued that the self-understanding that emanates from Knausgård's writing is *episodic* rather than narrative or diachronic: the instability of his sense of self over time and the gaps in his memories naturally lend themselves to a serialized presentation in writing.

In *My Struggle*, as the article will proceed to demonstrate, this episodic sense of the authorial self results in a sequential and paratactic, rather than causal and hierarchical, presentation of memorial material. Serial self-representations of this type are increasingly central to our current media ecology. They offer a valuable medium for investigating, materializing, and mapping onto the page the traces left by the passage of time. The article situates Knausgård's literary autobiography within this larger constellation of practices of serializing the self across media. It investigates how serialization effectuates performative and cumulative representations of a 'self' in flux, that dramatize and perform the struggles of the episodic personality in search for continuity.

The serial self in the digital age

Seriality is increasingly central to the current media ecology. As Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann write, we witness a phase of

transformation in the experience and construction of seriality ... that, due to changes in the global media landscape, impacts the contemporary practice and aesthetics of popular culture far more broadly than just in those areas directly affected by digitization. (2014: 2)

Of course, serial media (such as newspapers, novels, photography, and radio) by far predate the digital age. In the nineteenth century, industrialized print production provided a mass readership with

access to cheap books. Serial publication strategies supported the logic and rhythms of an industrialized literary marketplace and drove the demand of consumers (see Allen and Van den Berg 2013: 3-4). Benedict Anderson (1991) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1991 [1960]) already wrote about modern forms of collectivity in terms of seriality, and linked these formations to modern media consumption and serial media forms, such as newspapers, *feuilleton* novels, photography, and radio. These media, they argued, have effectively 'serialized' community and identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

But it is now, in the twenty-first century, that the serial is progressively becoming a central topic in the theoretical study of literature and media. Part of the reason, as Denson suggests, is the changing valuation of the serial form (2011: 1). For a long time, serials were considered cheap, mass-produced media, and associated with 'low' culture, such as comics, soap operas, and genre fiction (see Hayward 1997). In the twenty-first century, this negative connotation has largely subsided. Cases in point are the rise of sophisticated forms like narratively complex TV series like *The Sopranos*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *The Wire* (Mittell 2006), the new-found prestige of the graphic novel (Baetens and Frey 2014), and the renewed literariness of the serialized novel (e.g. Danielewski's experimental 27-volume novel series *The Familiar*). As these examples illustrate, the serial has become relevant again as a popular and esteemed cultural form.

In addition, another, related form of seriality surfaces. This article signals forms of intra-seriality (seriality within a single work, such as a film or volume, Eco 1990: 92) that proliferate across different media. A serial aesthetics emerges that is informed by practices like taking a selfie or posting a blog *every single day* and accumulating all these self-representations, instead of making a small selection of 'representative' photographs. Before analyzing this aesthetics of seriality in the work of Knausgård, it is important to reflect on the reasons for the occurrence of this aesthetics today, as an effect of ongoing processes of digitalization.

At a basic level, a prevalent emphasis on scale and seriality in online and off-line self-representations today is related to technologies of data support. More specifically, it relates to the technical possibilities offered by digitalization, such as expanding storage space and the option of erasure. Earlier technological limitations forced us to be selective, to sample and curate. With increasing potentialities of recording and archiving 'everything', the quantification of records becomes a logical preoccupation. Take the example of digital photography. Earlier, when we had to buy the film for a camera and pay to have it developed, and could not erase a picture once taken, this

implied a certain economy in considering the expense of each photograph we chose to take and develop. Moreover, we had to keep track of the number of shots left on the roll, so as not to run out of film and then stumble upon an interesting image. Technical limitations, in other words, force one to be selective, to choose a couple of particularly significant images. Digital cameras, by contrast, encourage us to take more pictures through the availability of abundant storage space. Individual photos are costless, memory space is becoming more vast, and processes of selection can be put off until later. A logical next step in this technological evolution has already presented itself in the form of automatic cameras like the 'Narrative Clip' that takes a photograph every 30 seconds, regardless of what is in the frame¹. As big data theorists believe, we live in an age when selection has become a quaint remnant of earlier times: "the need for sampling is an artifact of a period of information scarcity, a product of the natural constraints on interacting with information in an analog era" (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013: 16-7). This bodes the question how such an all-inclusive approach affects representations in 'analogue' literature and the book-bound novel.

But first we need to ask how an increase of storage space that renders selection unnecessary leads to artistic preoccupations with serial forms. An answer to this question should reflect on the *linearity* of human experience in time. Even if we have enormous amounts of data at our disposal, we are still only able to experience the stored elements in a linear fashion. We read one entry after another, look at one picture and then the next. In many cases, an abundance of information presents itself to us in a linear mode—as a series. This sequential character is at the heart of social media, which operate according to a logic of 'yet another one'. We find such serial structures in blog posts, automated diaries, and other forms of online representation. As Jill Walker Rettberg points out in *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* (2014), moreover, the cumulative logic of the serial is built into today's software and into our habits of reading and sharing online:

As engaged readers or followers of online self-representations, we always crave the next post, the next image, the next bit of the story. The very act of starting a blog or an Instagram or Facebook account carries with it an intention to write or share more, again, another day. (46)

¹See <<http://getnarrative.com>>.

Rather than condensing or selecting a number of representative elements that imply a larger whole, social media have embedded a principle of addition in their software. This results in streams of images and text that can be added onto daily, a potentially interminable flow of fragments.

This seriality that characterizes blog posts, profile pictures, and other forms of online (self-)representation, also influences media less dependent on digital technology, such as the book-bound novel. In other words, the technological possibilities of the digital addressed above, in turn inform certain aesthetic preferences in a culture where it has become possible to record all our e-mail and text messages, photos and videos. What is more, the aesthetics of seriality goes together with a mode of self-representation and correlate ways of self-understanding that can be described as serial. Before turning to Knausgård's novels, a short note on examples of 'the serial self' across different media is in order. This, in order to be able to later embed *My Struggle* in this larger, intermedial framework of practices. After all, seriality is notoriously 'contagious': it passes from a medium to another and from analog writing to digital media. The remainder of this section will outline the recurring characteristics of the aesthetics of the serial self which include continuity, open-endedness, rhythm, repetition, and a thematic attention to the mundane.

An illuminating example of the practice of the serial self is the autobiographical daily comic strip *Rocky* (1998-) by the Swedish artist and writer Martin Kellerman². As the cartoon dog Rocky ages at the same pace as his creator, Kellerman foregrounds the repetitive and organic nature of the daily comic strip, as it emphasizes the sameness of day-to-day existence, yet also makes us notice change over the longer duration. "Every day a new strip – like a steady rhythm – just as if it imitates life itself," as Øystein Sjøstad describes *Rocky* (2016). Of course, comics are a serial medium par excellence. They have repetition and variation at their structural core and, as Hillary Chute explains, they represent time in a spatial fashion: "Comics locates the reader in space and for this reason is able to spatialize memory" (2011: 108). Comics thus map a human life by diagramming it on the page. In the case of the daily newspaper strip, as Sjøstad argues, this capacity for mapping out a life, one strip a day, creates an even stronger narrative rhythm, one that is similar to the rhythm of human lives.

²□ In light of Knausgård's own poetics of seriality, it is telling that he has expressed his admiration for this 'real-time' narrative comic strip and wrote the foreword to one of the collections (2013b). The author even appeared as a character in the strip after he met Kellerman at a talk show.

The same emphasis on rhythm, repetition, and variation is central to the practice of the serial self-portrait, such as the exhibition *Selfmade* by Dutch author Heleen van Royen, who for years uploaded revealing 'selfies' on social media websites.³ As Rettberg argues, the act of creating and sharing a stream of selfies is essentially a form of self-reflection and self-creation (2014: 12).⁴ Taking the stream-character the self-portraiture one step further, the practice of adapting digital photographs into time-lapse videos even more emphatically brings out the pursuit of continuity. After Ahree Lee's immensely popular video *Me* (2006) and Noah Kalina's *Everyday* (2006), many have used websites like dailymugshot.com to create a time-lapse of their faces, pregnant bellies, or weight loss achievements. As with Van Royen's selfies and Kellerman's comic, the fascination and satisfaction of viewing these clips lies in noticing the changes that occur over time. Thus Lee compares the time-lapse video of her face to the 'vanitas' in painting:

For me personally, the photos serve as a mirror in which I can examine my own image and possibly see myself as others see me. The act of taking and looking at my own photo is similar to what women do every day when they look into the mirror and assess their own appearance. In our culture we demand that images of women be youthful and attractive, but implicit in this sequence is that over time the woman in the photos will age. As in the vanitas tradition of still life painting, implicit in "Me" is the ephemerality of physical appearance and the inevitability of aging and mortality. (Lee, website)

Both Van Royen and Lee point to an understanding of serial new media practices as continuations of a much older tradition in cultural history, including the diary, autobiography, and the self-portrait. It is

³Other famous cases of serial self-photography include the artist Tehching Hsieh who has taken photos of himself every hour for a year for his *One Year Performance 1980–81*; and, more recently, the artist Suzanne Szucs who collected and exhibited the harvest of fifteen years of daily self-photography in Polaroid format (Rettberg 2014: 34-7).

⁴These streams or sequences of selfies can be seen as what Umberto Eco has termed a "visual list" (2009), a picture containing such over-abundance that seems to continue beyond the frame. Significantly, visual lists were particularly popular during the late Renaissance, when a vast accumulation of knowledge and the publication of an increasing number of books led to an 'early modern information overload' (Rosenberg 2003: 1-9). Rather than being centered on the individual pictures of which they consist, such serial self-portraits rely on quantity and rhythm for their effect.

no coincidence that both refer to classical arts, respectively painting and sculpture: themes of transitoriness and preservation have for ages been central to these arts. Digitalization simply renders such forms of expression more widely available.

Recurring elements of the serial self that we can now discern are 'real-time' effects, a focus on the self and self-understanding, and a foregrounding of the repetitive nature of daily experience. We have moreover noted a preference of the episodic over narrative and causality, an imitation of the rhythms of daily life, and a search for continuity through self-representation. The serial self often concerns the ephemeral, the banal and mundane. It is linear in structure, presented as 'one thing after another', and interminable. It is this form of seriality inspired by new of social media, more than the nineteenth-century form of the *feuilleton*, that informs the specific seriality of Knausgård's *My Struggle*.

Serial self-understanding in *My Struggle*: in search of lost time

From the outset of Knausgård's *My Struggle*, it is clear that this series, like the serial self-portrait, daily comic, and time-lapse video, is informed by a mission to establish a sense of continuity in the face of rapidly passing time. Thus in the first volume, *A Death in the Family* (2012), Knausgård sets out from the existential question "How did I end up here? Why did things turn out like *this*?" (V1: 25). His quest for meaning, it becomes clear, is first and foremost a search for self-knowledge:

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 and serious, and the corners of the mouth drooping, it is impossible not to consider this face gloomy. What has engraved itself in my face? (V1: 22)

Thus, like serial self-photography, Knausgård's writing thematizes the fear of time passing too quickly and the desire to take control over the way one is perceived, with an emphasis on the material traces that time leaves on the body. Repeatedly, by way of such reflections, the author identifies the material and physical traces of time that has

'etched' itself into the body and objects. Expressing desperation over the short-lived and the ephemeral, he looks for the lasting trace, as arguably most writers do. In this respect, critics (e.g. De la Durantaye 2013) have justifiably compared *My Struggle* to Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913). After all, like Proust's before him, Knausgård's purported mission is to retrieve lost time. The author resorts to writing in order to halt the process whereby memories fade, to restore and fix the original experiences and thus regain the meaning that was lost with the passing of time. He seeks to creatively (re)construct a personal history where there are only fragments: "I had no history, and so I made myself one, much as a Nazi party might in a satellite suburb" (V1: 179). Striving to retrieve and ground a sense of self in a fast-changing environment, *My Struggle* longs for permanence. In this sense, Knausgård's mission is not so different from the project of the autobiographical novel in general. It is, however, in the extraordinary, monumental scale on which this self-presentation takes place. This epic scale is supported by the serialized format of the novels.

This serial form entails certain unique possibilities for autobiographical writing compared to single-volume autobiography. For instance, because of its open-endedness, serialized writing complicates the attempt to present the self as a definitive whole. In Leigh Gilmore's words, seriality "rais[es] the spectre of endless autobiography" (2001: 96). Because of this interminable capacity, as Nicole Stamat writes in *Serial Memoir: Archiving American Lives* (2014), the serial form does not claim to transmit a unique identity or 'interiority,' but privileges the ex-centric (6). This makes the serial especially suited to autobiography after Jean-François Lyotard's end of meta-narratives (1984). It lends itself to an abundance of smaller, fragmented stories instead of an overarching narrative structure that binds subject and memories in Aristotelean unity. The interplay of repetition and variation at the structural core of serial narration (Eco 1990) leads to performative and cumulative self-presentations that emphasize how self-image changes over time, sometimes even from one moment to the next. Serial autobiography thus permits the author multiple and ongoing attempts at self-representation, rather than claiming to reflect a fixed sense of self that precedes its representations.

This performative character of serial narration is clearly present in *My Struggle*. Knausgård chose to write six autobiographical novels instead of just one, and structured these volumes loosely according to the different roles he plays in life, such as father (book 2), son (book 1 and 3), lover (book 2), and writer (book 5). But these categories are far from exclusive in their demarcation. Indeed, their contents constantly spill over into one another. How could anyone ever completely

separate these roles? Knausgård's capacity as a father of three is inextricably connected to his own upbringing in the shadow of an oppressive father (if only because of his efforts not to resemble this father). By the same token, his vocation as a writer influences his family life (if only because this preoccupation often causes him to be absent from family obligations). As a sequence of repetitions and variations, *My Struggle's* serial form is able to capture these conflicting and overlapping roles of the 'self' in a manner that would not be feasible as such in single-volume autobiography.

Episodic and Diachronic

Privileging the ex-centric, the serial form also allows Knausgård to emphasize the discontinuities in his sense of self over time. Throughout the six volumes, the author repeatedly points to gaps and absences in relating his memories. He keeps reminding his readers how little there is left of certain periods in his life: e.g. "the years 1969-1974 are a great big hole in my life" (V3: 10); "Now I had burned all the diaries and notes I had written, there was barely a trace left of the person I was until I turned twenty-five" (V1: 312). This incompleteness stems from the trouble he has perceiving the 'I' as a continuous presence with its own personal history. Often while reminiscing, Knausgård is unable to identify with his earlier 'selves':

It is absolutely impossible to identify with the infant my parents photographed, indeed so impossible that it seems wrong to use the word "me" to describe what is lying on the changing table . . . Is this creature the same person as the one sitting here in Malmö writing? And will the forty-year-old creature who is sitting in Malmö writing this one overcast September day in a room filled with the drone of the traffic outside and the autumn wind howling through the old-fashioned ventilation system be the same as the gray, hunched geriatric who in forty years from now might be sitting dribbling and trembling in an old people's home somewhere in the Swedish woods? Not to mention the corpse that at some point will be laid out on a bench in a morgue? Still known as Karl Ove. (V3: 6-7)

An apt way to gain insight into this problematic of identifying with past and future selves, is by considering the work of psychologist Galen Strawson. Going against what he terms the 'psychological Narrativity thesis' ("one sees or lives or experiences one's life as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least a collection of stories") and

the 'ethical Narrativity thesis' ("a richly Narrative outlook on one's life is essential to living well, to true or full personhood"), Strawson distinguishes 'episodic' from 'diachronic' personalities (2008: 189). The Diachronic experiences the self as having a long-term continuity: (s)he naturally sees the self as an ongoing, stable presence that was there in the past and will be there in the future. The Episodic self lacks this sense of continuity, and rather conceives of his or her life as a series of discrete events. What is more, the Episodic naturally envisions the self as different people at the time of each event, and is little or not inclined to understand the own life in narrative terms. Dia-chronics, by contrast, often envision their life as a single narrative with their self as the unchanging protagonist. In order to live in a narrative way, Strawson argues, a person should have both a tendency towards form-finding, a drive to find coherence, unity, or patterns in life's 'raw' materials, and a storytelling tendency, that is, "one must be disposed to apprehend or think of oneself and one's life as fitting the form of some recognized narrative genre" (2008: 200-1). This is not a universal trait; neither is therefore the tendency to make an overarching narrative structure out of lived experience.

At first glance, Knausgård displays all the characteristics of the episodic personality, which would explain the large gaps in his memory between different phases of his life. This becomes especially clear when we now consider his above-quoted reaction to photos of himself, which precisely foregrounds a lack of a diachronic or 'narrative' sense of self. He misses the continuity of a subjectivity that was there in the past, is still the same person in the present, and will be there in the future, and instead conceives of his life as a series of discrete events. The photographs in his personal archive he describes as "voids," incapable of transmitting meaning, even less identity. Whereas they do succeed in capturing a general *Zeitgeist*, Knausgård feels that they are highly impersonal: "One might imagine that these photos represent some kind of memory, that they are reminiscences, except that the "me" reminiscences usually rely on is not there" (V3: 8-9). In terms of Roland Barthes's famous distinction in *Camera Lucida* (1981), the pictures from Karl Ove's youth have a 'studium'. They transmit (cultural) knowledge or information, in this case about an era: we get a sense of what people wore, the colors, the interiors of rooms, the activities people engaged in. But to Knausgård, they lack a 'punctum,' a personal meaning that "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (Barthes 26-7).

Knausgård further reveals his episodic personality when he critiques the convention of assigning one name that supposedly refers to a coherent and stable identity across a lifetime. This fixed name is in

discord with the rupture that the author experiences between earlier episodes in his life and the present (a rupture that is reinforced by his habits of destroying memory objects when a period of his life has ended). Why, he asks, do we not choose different names for different phases?

[I]sn't it actually unbelievable that one simple name encompasses all of this? The fetus in the belly, the infant on the changing table, the forty-year-old in front of the computer, the old man in the chair, the corpse on the bench? Wouldn't it be more natural to operate with several names since their identities and self-perceptions are so very different? Such that the fetus might be called Jens Ove, for example, and the infant Nils Ove, and the five- to ten-year-old Per Ove, the ten- to twelve-year-old Geir Ove, the twelve- to seventeen-year-old Kurt Ove, the seventeen- to twenty-three-year-old John Ove, the twenty-three- to thirty-two-year-old Tor Ove, the thirty-two- to forty-six-year-old Karl Ove - and so on and so forth? (V3: 7)

In his understanding of these earlier selves as others, Knausgård engages with an age-old conflation between identity and unity of recollection. Underlying these observations is John Locke's (post-Cartesian) distinction, in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, between 'man' as a physical unity, and personhood or individual identity:

as far as any intelligent being can repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far it is the same personal self. For it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and actions, that it is self to itself now, and so will be the same self, as far as the same consciousness can extend to actions past or to come. (Locke 1991: II: xxvii: 10)

There may, in this conception, be more than one person in the same man, if they are conditioned by different streams of consciousness that cannot be integrated. When one seeks to represent a selfhood informed by such a conception of identity in writing, problems can be expected to arise with applying an encompassing narrative form of beginning, middle, and end.

Knausgård, by adopting this episodic take on identity and memory, goes against the notion of self as a fixed continuity and stable unity that precedes its recording in writing. As much as he longs for a strong sense of personal history, all Knausgård has to work with are

little bits and scraps: "This ghetto-like state of incompleteness is what I call my childhood" (V3: 10). At the same time, as we have seen, the author expresses a longing for continuity and a wish to map the transformation of selfhood on the page over a longer duration of time. His self-representations are episodic and open-ended. *My Struggle* therefore gestures in the direction of an understanding of the self as serial: model for self-understanding that goes back to Locke, yet attains new currency today in an age of new media. Like the daily selfie and the blog post, Knausgård's serial novels promote a sequence, an accumulation of representations of the self, rather than an integrated identity as a storehouse of memories. The remainder of this article will look more closely at the specific techniques and strategies Knausgård employs in order to transfer his memories onto the page in a serial fashion.

Mundane Struggles: the rhythms of daily life

What was it all about? Why did we do this? Were we waiting for something? And in that case, how could we be so patient? Since nothing ever happened? Nothing at all! Only always the same! Every fucking day! Rain or wind, hail or snow, sun or storm, we did the same thing. We got wind of something, went there, came back again, sat in his room, got wind of something, took a bus, biked, plodded over there, sat in his room. In the summer we swam. That was it.

What it was all about?

We were friends, that was all.

And waiting, that was life.

(Knausgård V4: 176, my translation)

The author's lack of a diachronic sense of self translates to non-narrative, serial ways of mapping his memories onto the pages. Instead of telling a life story from birth to death, Knausgård present his life according to principles of accumulation and listing. As in medieval chronicles and annals (see White 1980), the experience of time that underlies these presentations is non-hierarchical. The author does not decide for the reader what is of lesser and greater import. Instead, time is presented as paratactic⁵ and open-ended, hinting at an experience of reality in discrete, rather than continuous, time. The events within one passage are placed in serial relations instead of being causally

⁵Parataxis (Gr. *Paratassein*, to arrange side by side) is the juxtaposition of clauses or phrases without coordinating or subordinating conjunctions. For instance: 'It was cold; it snowed' or 'hard winter; deficient in crops'.

connected. Hereby, 'non-events' count for just as much as the 'high points' of human history. Put in a sequential order, everyday trivialities, personal milestones like the birth of the author's children, and historical events are all put on the same level. One such series, for instance, comprises the events of two months in a few lines: the release of the debut single of Supergrass; his drunken attendance of a concert; all the clothes, records, and books bought in two months' time, his goings-about on a trip to London, and his successful wedding proposal to his girlfriend (V5: 546). In contrast with the usual emphasis accorded to marriage in the narration of one's life, the last event presented in this list recedes and becomes one element in a chain of unrelated occurrences.

Besides being non-hierarchical, enumerations like these affect the scope of autobiography because they transcend the individual focus and transmit a broader picture of the times. Knausgård does not only report the events of his own life, but also of the contemporary culture that surrounds him: "808 State released *808:88:98*, the Pixies *Doolittle*, Neneh Cherry *Raw Like Sushi*, The Golden Palominos *A Dead Horse*, Raga Rockers *Blaff*. People started purchasing their own computers" (V5: 299). These paratactic constructions lack causality: the purchase of computers is by no means caused by the new release of Raga Rockers. The reports present an open-ended and potentially endless notation of time. Sequences like these simply enumerate actions ('I did this, then that'), chronicling the events of Knausgård's life without asking *why* they occurred. In such a presentation, events derive their meaning from the fact of their inclusion in the record. The emphasis is not on a narrative unity of experience and causality, but on a cumulative effect of disparate data.

A last device that effectively serializes memory in *My Struggle*, is the inclusion of lists and enumerations in the series. These are the clearest instances of intra-textual seriality: seriality within one volume. Knausgård makes lists of the objects in his mother's house that have been there since his childhood (V2: 312); all the people living in his street when he was a kid, including names and occupations, as well as their children's names (V3: 15-6); all his schoolmates, hierarchically organized into who excelled at certain activities (V3: 174); all the books he read as a kid (V3: 304-306); and all the girls in his class, categorized by characteristics he remembers (V1: 40). Conventionally, we recognize a list on the basis of the formal features that are applied to a sequential presentation of items. In Knausgård's lists, there is no such formal patterning. Instead, we recognize them by a repeated syntactical function: "There was... And there was ... Then there was ..." (V1: 40). Contained within a block of linear text, these collections of formally

diverse items impart the reader with a sense of the list's potential infinity. Listing replaces narration with a presentation of similar elements according to number, and thus construes a serial order of events.

As in the daily selfie or the stream of blog posts, then, Knausgård accumulates fragments of memory and self-knowledge without turning it into a coming-of-age story, and without selecting pivotal moments. Instead, he includes everything without compression: all his former girlfriends, all his classmates, and all the times he cheated on his ex-wife. In a thematic sense as well, *My Struggle* emphasizes repetition with slight variation, with an insistence on the banal. Indeed, Knausgård's inclusive urge to preserve leads to a plenitude of trivial details—16 lines are devoted to making tea (V1: 76), 9 lines on the attacks of 11 September 2001 (V5: 625). The reader has to plow through these elements in the linearity of the codex, which makes for a serial experience of moments that mimics the rhythms of daily life. The following passage brings across this rhythmic aspect:

Scrape the leftovers into the bin, empty the dregs of milk and water from the glasses, take the apple and carrot peel, the plastic packaging and tea bags from the sinks, clean them and put everything on the drainer, run hot water, squirt some washing-up liquid, rest my forehead against the cupboard and start washing, glass by glass, cup by cup, plate by plate. Rinse. Then, when the stand was full, start drying to make room for more. Afterwards the floor, which had to be scrubbed where Heidi had been sitting. Tie the bin bag and take the lift down to the cellar, walk through the warm labyrinthine corridors to the waste disposal room, which was strewn with filth and slippery, which had pipes hanging from the ceiling like torpedoes, adorned with torn plastic ties and bits of insulation tape, a sign on the door proclaiming *Miljorom*, Milieu Room, a typical Swedish euphemism, throw the bags up into one of the large green rubbish containers, suddenly reminded of Ingrid, who the last time she had been here had found hundreds of small canvasses in one of them and had carried them up to the flat, imagining this would fill us with as much happiness as it did her, the idea that the children would now have enough painting material for several years into the future, close the lid and walk back to the flat, where at that moment Linda was tiptoeing out of the children's room. (V2: 478)

This passage is quoted at length to offer the reader a sense of the reading experience of *My Struggle*, which presents us with pages on end of these moment-to-moment descriptions. Knausgård's rendition

of his serial self succeeds in transferring a life-like experience of routine and repetitiveness, yet one that allows us to discern variation and transformation in the longer duration. As argued throughout this article, serial self-representations of this type constitute a valuable medium for investigating, materializing, and mapping onto the page the traces left by the passage of time. It should be noted that such a serial self is by no means a new conception of subjectivity. Laurence Sterne, who was thoroughly inspired by Locke's philosophy (see Moglen 1975), already wrote in one of his *Sermons*, "in the same day, sometimes in the very same action, [men] are utterly inconsistent and irreconcilable with themselves" (1819: XI:143). It is precisely this mode of self-understanding that is currently re-emerging under the influence of digital media, as a linear, yet interminable process of creation. We can now clearly grasp the difference between Knausgård and Barthes who, in *Camera Lucida*, was still looking for a unique essence, even if he questioned its existence—hence the metaphor of 'punctum' as a point of puncture, conveying the 'real' self as lying deeper. "I could not express this accord except by an infinite set of adjectives" (70), Barthes writes of the associations the punctum triggers in him. Conversely, as argued, Knausgård *does* opt for such an infinite series of associations, of (self-)descriptions and (non-)narrative fragments rather than an essence or punctum. In this respect he is closer to van Royen and Lee in presenting the self as open-ended: "I wanted everything to last and go on forever. All ends were frightening" (V3: 394). It has become clear that serialized writing, which lends itself to performative and cumulative representations of a 'self' in flux, is also a particularly suitable medium in which to dramatize and perform these struggles of the episodic personality in search for continuity.

When it comes to their representations of human subjectivity, we have seen that the novels in the *My Struggle* series gesture towards a self-understanding that is serial or episodic rather than narrative. They give voice to a subjectivity that is not necessarily continuous and does not build or fixate identity through chronological, causal relations or associations. Rather, the *My Struggle* series presents a human life in terms of discontinuous, paratactic 'selves' that simply follow one another. This occurrence of a serial aesthetics that can be analyzed across several media could very well point us to a gradual transformation in self-representation and memory writing under the influence of digitalization: from the narrative or diachronic to the episodic and serial. Such an aesthetics is particularly current in times of big data, big science, big humanities, and other projects that are increasingly geared towards the large-scale and long-term. At the very

least, possible alternatives are presently opening up to stories as a primary way of presenting human lives. Just like online forms of autobiographical representation, *My Struggle* reinvents epic forms out of the episodic and converts ephemera into the monumental.

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