The Fear of "das Volk":
Karl Ove Knausgård's Reactions to Terrorism

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Looking at the obituaries of the seventy-seven people who were killed in the terrorist attacks in Oslo and on the island of Utøya (22 July, 2011) I am struck by the way they refer to the attacks as a "tragedy." This is by far the most frequent term used to describe what caused the deaths of so many people, many of them children and teenagers.[1] That these obituaries, written immediately after the attacks, refer to "the tragedy at Utøya" and describe the loss as "tragic" makes perfect sense. However, further elaboration is needed if one wants to go beyond the term's everyday use and deeper into the political meaning of the events. This is where Karl Ove Knausgård comes into the picture, as one of the Norwegian authors who tried, very early on, to come to terms with the attacks and to understand them in a broader perspective.[2] He, too, begins with the word "tragedy" as part of his attempt to get a clearer grasp on the events: "Det var en nasjonal tragedie," Knausgård states in an essay that was first broadcasted on Swedish national radio in August 2011. He then continues:

> Men det var ikke som de andre nasjonale tragediene vi har vært med på. Det var ikke som Alexander Kielland-ulykken. Det var ikke som Scandinavian Star-ulykken. Det var som dem en katastrofe, men ingen katastrofe som skyldtes materialtretthet eller brann, det var heller ingen naturkatastrofe, det var en katastrofe i det menneskelige. (Knausgård 2011a, 32:20–32:28)[3]

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[1] These obituary notices were written mainly by politicians from Den norske Arbeiderpartiet (the Norwegian social democratic party) and members of the social democratic youth organization, Arbeidernes Ungdomsfylking (AUF). All the texts were accompanied by photos of each of the victims and published in the daily newspaper *Klassekampen* between early August and early September 2011. They were also shared on several internet platforms and are still available online at: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/terrorangrepet/minneord/ap.php.

[2] For a broader presentation of early literary responses to the terror attacks in Norway, see Langås (2016).

[3] Here and in the following I am quoting from the broadcasted essay with reference to Sveriges Radio's distribution of it on: https://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/126257?programid=2071. The only difference between this version and the one which was originally broadcasted is that this podcast does not play the musical soundtracks in their full length. The translations of the quoted passages from Norwegian to English are my own.

> (It was a national tragedy. But it wasn't like the other national tragedies we have experienced. It was not like the Alexander Kielland accident. It wasn't like the Scandinavian Star accident.[4] As in these cases, it was a catastrophe, but not a catastrophe that was caused by structural fatigue or fire; it was no natural catastrophe either; it was a catastrophe in the human domain.)

According to Knausgård, these events were "tragedies" not because they were the expression of contradictory values embodied in disastrous natural or mythical forces that couldn't be resisted by human powers, as the more classical meaning of the word "tragedy" suggests. In a more modern sense, they were tragedies because they were violent acts that targeted innocent civilians. The attacks were ideologically motivated and intentionally carried out; they were political through and through, and as Knausgård points out in his essay, they have to be understood as part of a broader social framework. He moves from the word "tragedy" to the expression "national catastrophe," thus quickly narrowing it down to a catastrophe "in the human domain" (as opposed to the natural or the mythical domain) and by so doing he already indicates a movement towards a more complex, socially oriented approach to the events.

This article investigates what Knausgård gropes for "in the human domain" by looking into the dynamics of his own reaction to the terror attacks and the various resources he mobilizes in his attempt to come to terms with what happened. The two texts that I will focus on are the already mentioned radio essay and the reflections on the terror attacks as they were presented three months later in the sixth and final book of his novel *Min kamp* (*My Struggle*). I will follow the chronology of these publications and investigate Knausgård's processes of writing and rewriting as an investment in literature, conceived of as a place in which to come to terms with the violent events and with his role not only as an author, but also as part of a collective "we." It is precisely the tension between these modalities that is at stake and that will be considered problematic: Knausgård's own literary voice is caught in a tension between the "I" and the "We."

"I HAVE TO TALK ABOUT THIS"

[4] Knausgård refers here to the capsizing of the oil rig Alexander L. Kielland in March 1980, where 123 people were killed, and to the fire on the car and passenger ferry MS Scandinavian Star in April 1990, which killed 159 people.

Knausgård's radio essay was first broadcasted in Norwegian on the Swedish radio, on August 14, 2011, as part of the program *Sommar i P1*, one of the most popular radio programs in Sweden.[5] In its original production it was 90 minutes long, and in accordance with the tradition and the format of the program, Knausgård was free to choose a theme of personal relevance. Knausgård starts out by dating his own writing: "I dag, når jeg skriver dette, er det den 23. juli 2011" (Knausgård 2011a, 00:27) [Today, when I write this, it is the 23rd of July, 2011]. His voice is calm, and he reads rather slowly, seemingly easygoing and casual, in a low-pitched voice familiar to many of his Scandinavian listeners. He continues by locating himself as a writer and as somebody who is writing about home but from another place than home:

> Jeg sitter alene i leiligheten vår i Malmø for å skrive manuset til dette sommerprogrammet. Ute regner det, himmelen er tung og grå, gatene nesten tomme. Jeg har sett på TV i hele dag. Jeg ser aldri på TV lenger. Men i går hendte det noe forferdelig i verden, men det var ikke i Irak eller Tunisia eller Afghanistan det hendte. Det var ikke i Bagdad eller Tripoli eller Mogadishu det hendte. Det hendte hjemme. Jeg har gråtit flere ganger i dag, det tror jeg alle nordmenn har gjort, for det hendte hjemme. Det hendte hos oss. (Knausgård 2011a, 0:46–1:12)
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> (I am sitting alone in our apartment in Malmö to write the manuscript for this summer program. It is raining outside; the sky is heavy and grey, the streets almost empty. I have watched television all day. I don't watch television any longer. But yesterday something terrible happened in the world, but it wasn't in Iraq or Tunisia that it happened. It wasn't in Bagdad, Tripoli or Mogadishu that it happened. It happened at home. I have been crying several times today, and I think all Norwegians have, because it happened at home. It happened where we live.)

Knausgård draws attention to the very act of writing in a way that resembles his way of addressing his readers in his autobiographical novels (Andersen 2017, 21). And yet, auditory mediations of literature such as this are certainly different from their printed counterparts: one is surrounded by musical sound and voice and immersed in a process of

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[5] One week later, on August 20th, this production of Swedish Radio was broadcasted on Norwegian radio, in the program *Sommerradio i P2*. On the same day, the essay was also published as printed text in the daily newspaper *Klassekampen*, spread out on three full pages of its literary magazine (Knausgård 2011b). At this point, in the transition from radio to newspaper, the essay is given a title: "Navnet og tallet" (The name and the number)—the same title that is used for the lengthy essayistic part in Knausgård's book six of *Min kamp* —and this remained the title of the essay when it was published as part of the anthology *Respons 22/7* two months later, in October 2011 (Knausgård 2011c). Neither in the newspaper nor in the anthology are there any major changes in the wording of the text. In this process of transition from one modality to another, it is the media format that produces the changes.

aesthetic experience. Usually, one is less concerned with—and in fact less able to develop in real time—the processes of decoding, deciphering, and comparing that are possible when the text appears in print. The mode of experience is relational and performative at the same time. Moreover, through the reading voice of the author, the genre creates a peculiar presence and mode of telling that allows the listener to participate in the kind of "person-to-person" modality that is specific to the radio (McLuhan 1995, 299). This participatory mode connects the aesthetics of the genre to the problematics of the "I" and the "we" as it will appear in Knausgård's later reflections on the response to the terrorist acts.

Knausgård's reading takes the listener quickly to his main concern: "Something terrible" has happened out there, and this external event strikes the author remarkably because it has happened "at home," in Norway. He was in a college outside of Århus in Denmark when he heard about the bomb that had been detonated next to the government building in Oslo on the afternoon of July 22nd. Knausgård initially reacts to this information with some kind of distanced resignation. On the following morning however, when he reads in the newspapers that "over åtti mennesker var drept" (Knausgård 2011a, 28:32) [more than eighty people were killed] on the island of Utøya, Knausgård reacts with a "fortvilelse […] som [...] var plutselig og vill" (28:49) [despair that was sudden and wild]. He is not able to relate to the terror attack as a distant event in the external world any longer. He describes how he intensively takes part in the events through the media coverage in newspapers and on television. This involvement has consequences for his work related to the *Sommar i P1* radio program, since it pulls him away from his planned topic: "Det er umulig for meg å snakke om det jeg hadde tenkt å snakke om i dag, jeg er nødt til å snakke om dette" (01:50) [It is impossible for me to talk about what I had planned to talk about today. I have to talk about this.]

The essay tells about sudden and overwhelming affects. Knausgård is surprised by his own reaction and presents it as something almost contradictory to what he learned while being educated in the 1980s, namely that the notion of nationality and national sentiments are merely constructions that originate from romanticism. He juxtaposes this constructivist "lesson" with experiences from contemporary Norwegian culture; his examples are taken from the time before July 22nd and presented at length. He describes the celebration of the Norwegian national day and dwells on the recent massive public participation in the "slow-TV" coverage of the Norwegian Coastal Express

(“Hurtigruten”), a boat trip along the coast of Norway, during the summer of 2011, and the fact that people gathered together and were emotionally moved by this live broadcast that merely consisted of images from the boat trip from Bergen to Kirkenes. These are moving and at the same time almost provoking aspects of Norwegian culture, Knausgård argues. They testify to “dette landets nesten fullkomne uskyld” (Knausgård 2011a, 27:48) [the almost complete innocence of this country]. He locates himself at a semi-ironical distance from this Norwegian innocence, and yet the terrorist attacks also activate in him a strong und urgent sense of belonging to “this country.” Knausgård describes in detail how this belonging is experienced as particularly vivid and intense in certain situations, but he also anticipates how such feelings will fade as time passes.

“Hjemme er det som vi står så nær at vi ikke ser” (Knausgård 2011a, 06:22) [Home is what we are so close to that we are not able to see it], Knausgård reads, a line that stands out, almost as some kind of motto or a proverb used as a conclusion. The sentence points to the implicit dimension of belonging, which becomes a key concern in his essay, because crisis tends to reveal this implicit domain. Here the line stands out also due to the sonorous composition: the sentence is followed by a short silence and then a musical soundtrack, Wilco’s “One by One.” The transition between Knausgård’s reading voice and the song creates more of a continuum of sound, a drift from Knausgård’s vocal expression towards Jeff Tweedy’s “One by one the teardrops fall as I write you. / One by one my words come falling on the page” (06:32). The lyrics suggest a continuum between a bodily emotional reaction and its expression in language, which is indeed part of what Knausgård is up to as he continues to explore the various reactions to the terror attacks.

MOURNING AND MEMORY WORK

Knausgård’s response to the terror attacks directs our attention towards images, situations, and expressions, which have become stable elements in a collective Norwegian narrative about 22 July. The radio essay reflects on the news coverage from the very first days after the attacks, one of them being images of Jens Stoltenberg, at that time Norway’s prime minister. Knausgård refers to a film clip that shows Stoltenberg embracing one of the members of AUF, the youth organization of Norway’s social democratic party, which was targeted at Utøya. He describes how Stoltenberg’s face “fortrakk seg [...] av sorg” [was torn by grief] and how it was for a short moment “som om de klamret seg til hverandre og da øyeblikket var over fortsatte Stoltenberg videre”

(Knausgård 2011a, 34:04) [as if the two of them would cling to each other, and as the moment was over Stoltenberg moved on]. Today this is a well-known image; it has been presented on various occasions and in different media, and one particular version was awarded the Norwegian Press Photo of the Year (Årets bilde) in 2011.[6] Anne Hege Simonsen's investigation of news images from July 22nd defines the image as part of a "konstituerende narrativ som strukturerer forståelsen av hendelsesforløpet" (Simonsen 2015, 189) [constitutive narrative which structures the understanding of the course of events]. We can consider the literary reactions in a similar perspective, as they take part in an organization of events and framing at an early stage.

What characterizes Knausgård's early response to the terror attacks and their effects is his peculiar capacity to speak about the feeling of fragility, destabilization, and "wild despair" that takes hold of him and others in the immediate aftermath, and to share and problematize at the same time a newly discovered feeling of national belonging. The essay draws our attention to the first public memorial after the attacks and more specifically to the speech given by Prime Minister Stoltenberg on the occasion in Oslo Cathedral, on July 24th, 2011. Knausgård describes the social interaction in the process of mourning, here expressed in the audible reactions from the audience when Stoltenberg, as part of his speech, mentioned the name of one of the young victims from Utøya: "Han nevnte et navn, og opp fra benkeradene steg et skrik, så fortvilet at det var som det bar i seg all verdens fortvilelse" (Knausgård 2011a, 34:37) [He mentioned a name and up from the rows of seats came a scream of despair; it was as if it contained all the despair of the world]. He comments on this scream of despair as a basic act of sharing a loss: "De opplevde plutselig hva de hadde mistet. Slik fikk vi også oppleve det" (35:06) [They suddenly experienced what they had lost. In this way, we also experienced it]. One could get the idea that Knausgård had been present at the memorial himself, but he had not been. Knausgård's impressions are based on the live television transmission of this event, but even in this broadcast a productive "liveness" appears to have been involved. Borrowing a term from contemporary media studies one could label the broadcasted speech a "ritual media-event," thus emphasizing its potentially integrative function in a situation of crisis and rupture (Couldry, Hepp, and Krotz 2010, 12). According to Knausgård's perspective at this point, the gathering in the cathedral contributes to a

[6] The awarded press photo was taken by Tommy Ellingsen from the newspaper *Stavanger Aftenblad.*

meaningful sharing of the experience of loss. When later, in his process of rewriting, he returns to this collective participation in the grief of others, however, he reinterprets his own affirmation of such processes of mourning from a far more critical perspective.

DISTANCING ONESELF FROM THE EVENT

Knausgård's reactions to the terror attacks are determined by the fact that the events take place during an ongoing writing process. Not only had he planned to talk about a different topic in his contribution to the program *Sommar i P1*, but in the summer of 2011 he was also finishing book six of *Min kamp*. And indeed, one can trace how aspects of the novel are applied in Knausgård's first reaction to the terror attacks.

As part of his discussion of Stoltenberg's speech and its resonance, Knausgård draws our attention towards different ways of referring to the victims, most significantly the difference between names and numbers: "I tallet ligger det en avstand," he claims, "og det var den avstanden Stoltenberg opphevet da han nevnte de tre navnene i talen i kirken" (Knausgård 2011a, 36:18) [In the number there is a distance, and this was the distance that Stoltenberg suspended when he mentioned three names in the speech in the church]. This is a point in the radio essay where Knausgård moves beyond the experience of being struck by the attacks and towards a more general perspective on the events. Even if the individual name can contribute to a collective experience of loss, he argues, history will in the long run contribute to the forgetting of the victims:

> Det navnet som […] vi vil forbinde med det som hendte, er navnet til ugjerningsmannen. Slik var det med bomben i Oklahoma. Vi kan navnet på ham som utførte illgjerningen, det var Timothy McVeigh, og vi vet hvor mange han drepte, det var hundre og seksti, men vi kan ikke navnet på en eneste en av dem. De har blitt til tall. Det samme gjelder for alle de store tragediene i det forrige hundreåret. Vi kan navnet på alle de ledende nazistene, og vi vet hvor mange jøder de drepte, men vi kan ikke navnet på ett eneste av ofrene. Vi vet hvem som stod bak massedrapet i Srebrenica og kan deres navn, men vi kan ikke navnet på en eneste av de som ble drept av dem. Bødlene har navn, deres ofre er tall. (35:28–36:16)
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> (It is the name of the perpetrator that [...] we will connect to what happened. This is how it was with the bomb in Oklahoma. We know the name of the evildoer, it was Timothy McVeigh, and we know how many he killed, it was one hundred and sixty, but we don't know the names of a single one of them. They have become numbers. The same is the case for all the big tragedies of the previous century. We know the names of all the leading Nazis, and we know how many Jews they killed, but we don't know the name of a single one of the victims. We know who

> was responsible for the mass murder in Srebrenica and know their names, but we don't know the name of a single one of those who were killed by them. The executioners have names; their victims are numbers.)

In the present context, Knausgård's focus on the name and the number is interesting primarily as one of many examples of topics from book six of *Min kamp* that the radio essay employs in order to make sense of the terror attacks. From the perspective of memory studies after the Holocaust, Knausgård's opposition between the distance of a number and the identity of a name is a well-known figure of thought. In this particular setting, however, it is interesting to notice how Knausgård's emphasis on the name, as that which grants identity, does not really match his own exploration of the dynamic situation in the Oslo cathedral. What appears as significant in this exploration is not solely the name that is spoken by the prime minister, but just as much the interacting voices and the way they involved the others in a process of collective mourning.[7] Yet, this involvement belongs to the expressive and ritual domain and to the kind of phenomenon Knausgård has difficulties grasping when he tries to reflect on the response to the terror attacks in a more disengaged mode.

Knausgård's shift in perspective is significant: from accounts of immediate reactions towards an anticipation of how these events will be remembered in the future. He juxtaposes the attacks in Oslo and at Utøya with other incidents of mass murder, and his perspective tends towards a more general reflection on collective memory. The overwhelming tragedy has here become a case comparable to other cases, and one can recognize how Knausgård, in his attempt to grasp the social dimensions of the terror attacks, mobilizes historical sources and tries out to what extent they can contribute to providing some kind of measure of what had happened: Nazi Germany and the Holocaust become his main points of reference in this endeavor to frame the events.

Poul Behrendt has pointed out how Knausgård, by his scandalous borrowing of Hitler's book title for his own multi-volume novel, had put himself in a position where, from book to book, he accumulated a nominal debt that *forced* him to address this borrowing in book six (Behrendt 2015, 76).[8] Another example of how Knausgård brings

[7] For further discussion of how expressive voice phenomena contribute to making sense of the terror attacks as part of ritualized practices, see Folkvord 2016.

[8] For an overview over the various interpretations of Adolf Hitler's function as a figure in Knausgård's oeuvre, see Aarstein 2018.

material from his novelistic work into the radio essay is the comparison of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to the voluminous text written and distributed by the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik. In book six of *Min kamp*, the reading of Hitler's text from 1925 is extensive, involving a variety of texts reflecting on Hitler as a historical person and various analyses of his time. In contrast, the comparison of the two texts—Breivik's and Hitler's—is kept very short in the radio essay and appears as part of Knausgård's early attempt to clarify what it could mean that the perpetrator is "one of us." Knausgård observes critically how "begge tekstene skaker av rettferdig harme" [both are trembling with righteous rage], and how "ingen av jagene lar seg korrigere, ingen av jagene tar hensyn, og ingen av jagene forholder seg til noe 'du'" (Knausgård 2011a, 41:37) [both of the "I's" are completely without adjustment and without consideration, and none of the "I's" relate to a "you"]. This utterance is followed by a short silence, and then a low frequency, flanging guitar note leads the listener into the gloomy atmosphere of Fever Ray's "if I had a heart, I could love you / if I had a voice, I would sing" (43:48). Here, the lyrics of the musical soundtrack serve as an echo of Knausgård's reflections on the perpetrator's inner life as "[en] verden der den andre ikke finnes" (43:42) [a world where the other does not exist]. This is yet another example of how soundtracks divide the 90-minute radio essay into sequences. They contribute to its rhythm and atmosphere and create breaks in the flow of speech.

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE SOCIAL

Only weeks after the violent attacks, when many of the reactions to the terror attacks either focused mainly on the victims or presented the perpetrator in established stereotypes of evil, Knausgård's approach appears as far more differentiated. Anders Behring Breivik should be considered "one of us"; this is his viewpoint on the situation, thus anticipating Åsne Seierstad's concern as it is expressed in the title of her 2013 non-fiction book about Breivik as "en av oss" [one of us].[9] His take reflects on Breivik and his acts, considering them as part of social processes in Norwegian culture. The question we have to raise, Knausgård claims, is "hva det er i vår kultur som gjør at en så stor avstand

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[9]See Seierstad 2013. For a critical discussion of the relationship between Seierstad's book title and her portrayal of Anders Behring Breivik, see Rees 2018. Rees's main objection is that Seierstad's book never lives up to the ambition of this title. Even if Seierstad does not make Breivik into a monster, she tends to ridicule him and never succeeds in making any narrative sense of "the ideologically driven domestic terrorist" (Rees 2018, 3).

kan oppstå i et menneske at det kan gjøre det han gjorde" (Knausgård 2011a, 44:37) [what it is in our culture that enables such large distance to develop in a human being that he can do what he did]. Of course, this is a question that cannot, at this time or later, be answered definitively. However, by operating on this level of questioning, he makes this particular issue an object of collective attention. It is through this movement that it is possible to deal with the social dimension of the events and thus to go beyond the tragedy of the experience.[10]

Knausgård can then evaluate one of the ways in which Norwegian society reacted to the violent events, namely through the so-called "rose-marches" in the streets and the various public memorials that took place in Oslo and in many other cities and places in the wake of the terrorist attacks.[11] How are these ritualistic responses to the terror attacks to be understood? What do they *do* to the catastrophic event? In his first attempt to come to terms with the violent events, Knausgård is affirmative in his evaluation of these collective responses ("manifestations"), but in a way that also marks his awareness of how a national "we" can develop into a dangerous social force:

> Vi som er her, hører sammen, er det manifestasjonene sier. Og vi vil godt. Det er en helende kraft. Vi vet at den også kan være farlig og ødeleggende. Tror vi den er farlig, blir den farlig. Tror vi at den er helende, blir den helende. For gemenskapen er oss selv. (Knausgård 2011a, 46:48–47:09)
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> (We who are gathered here belong together, that is what the manifestations say. And we want well. That is a healing power. We know that it can also be dangerous and destructive. If we think that it is dangerous, it becomes dangerous. If we think that it is healing, it becomes healing. Because the community is us.)

At this point in the radio essay, the author raises his voice and reads with more variation in tempo: slowly in the first part of the sequence, when stressing the "we," the belonging together, and with emphasis on "godt" [well], then speeding up. These prosodic aspects are integral to his way of addressing the listener, and Knausgård is here recognizing the community that has expressed itself in the aftermath of the attacks as a "we" of good intentions. In his attempt to translate ritual forms into language, he stresses the healing power of such collective manifestations without leaving aside that such forms might also

[10] Knausgård expands his analysis of the perpetrator in the essay "Det monofone mennesket," written one year later and based on material from the trial for Anders Behring Breivik that took place in Oslo Tingrett (Oslo District Court) from April 16 to June 22, 2012.

[11] For further analysis of these reactions as part of the broad public response to the terror attacks, see Døving 2017 and Jordheim 2013.

be destructive. Again, the listener is made part of a “we”: a community whose social dynamics *can be* healing.

The radio essay could have ended in its reflections on the “community as us,” but it does not. Instead, Knausgård follows up with a recollection of a moment of pause in one of his writing sessions on Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 documentary film on the Holocaust, *Shoah*, that took place several months before July 22nd. In our context, it is worth noticing how we are again relating to the auditory and to the act of listening. He tells how he was smoking a cigarette on his balcony in Malmö when he suddenly heard a child laughing in his immediate neighborhood. “Det var en så hikstende, overveldende og lykkelig latter, fullstendig hengitt til gleden i øyeblikket, at den fylte også meg” (Knausgård 2011a, 49:01) [It was such a gasping, overwhelming and happy laugh, completely devoted to the joy of the moment, that it also filled me]. Knausgård does not see the laughing child, but he hears it. He recognizes a male voice as well and assumes that what he hears is a father playing with a little child, three or four years of age.

One could have expected that such a recollection, the memory of the playing child, would be the source for yet another reflection on the notion of interaction and trust as discussed earlier in the essay. And this is the case, though not in the sense that the trust of the child was conceived of as a source of hope. In this concluding passage of the radio essay, the trusting child is already located within a different horizon, determined by a catastrophe that has already happened. This is how Knausgård frames his own listening experience: “Jeg hørte noe, og det jeg hørte var godt, og da jeg hørte det forstod jeg plutselig, med en slags nådens klarhet, hva vi hadde mistet i Holocaust” (Knausgård 2011a, 48:15) [I heard something, and what I heard was good, and when I heard it, I suddenly understood with some kind of clarity of grace what we had lost in Holocaust]. The spontaneity of playful interaction is first recognized simply as “good” but then, in the next sentence, identified as the reminder of something that is already lost. This loss is not individual; the author refers to a collective loss in the past that keeps determining the present. Again, Knausgård makes the listener part of a “we,” but this time it seems to be a universal, post-Holocaust “we.” This is yet another example of how Nazi Germany and the Holocaust serve as reference points in Knausgård’s search to find a measure for the violent events that have made him reflect on his own belonging to a community.

SKEPTICISM AND (SELF-)CRITICAL RETROSPECTION

Major changes are made when Knausgård deals with 22 July in book six of *Min kamp*. The genre and the textual environment are different: Knausgård reflects on the terror and the reactions to it as part of the 400-page part of his novel that is centered on his reading of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Here, the reflections on the terror attacks of July 22nd amount to two pages, a minor part of a volume that consists of 1120 pages altogether. In these two pages, however, his reaction to the events unfolds in ways that are significantly different from the radio essay.

Knausgård now approaches 22 July from a very specific thematic angle, namely how national socialist propaganda in the Third Reich appealed to human emotions. One of his key references in his writing on Hitler is the German philologist Victor Klemperer (1881–1960) and his influential analysis of the language in Nazi Germany, which was published in the book *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen* (1947; *The Language of the Third Reich*). Klemperer analyzes Hitler's propaganda in depth, how it contributed to shaping individual and collective identities, and in Knausgård's novel this very aspect serves as the textual connection between this period in German history and the events in contemporary Norway:

> "Du er ingenting, ditt folk er alt", lød et slagord fra nazi-tiden, skriver Klemperer, og akkurat det budskapet ble direkte og indirekte gjentatt og gjentatt. Folket, lød det overalt, Tyskland, lød det overalt, vi, vi, vi lød det overalt. (Knausgård 2011d, 774)
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> ("You are nothing, your people is everything," ran a Nazi slogan of the time, Klemperer notes, and this was the message, directly and indirectly, repeated and repeated again. The people, came the cry. Germany, came the cry, we, we, we, everywhere. (Knausgård 2018, 809))

Knausgård here relates to a very specific historical experience, that of the national "we" as a state-monitored exclusive "we." What he does is mobilize a historical voice, the voice of a marginalized Jewish intellectual who, according to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, was no longer a part of "the people." Victor Klemperer was excluded from the national "we" of the Third Reich, an exclusion that could have costed him his life. The historically informed reader might find it puzzling or even problematic when Knausgård then moves directly from this account of the marginalized other in National Socialist Germany to his own experience of not being part of a "we": "Selv har jeg aldri følt meg som en del av et vi; alltid, helt fra jeg var liten, har jeg følt meg utenfor" (Knausgård

2011d, 774) [“Personally I have never felt myself to belong to any we; right from when I was small, I have always felt myself to be on the outside” (Knausgård 2018, 809)].[12]

As pointed out in the research literature on Knausgård, his ambition has never been to explore historical connections in order to articulate something valid about historical contexts, but rather to explore various cultural resources in order to be better able to “skildre et sinn” (Farsethås 2014, 297) [depict a mind]. Accordingly, one could say, this particular reference to Klemperer serves as an introduction to Knausgård’s autobiographical reflections, and indeed, he goes on to explore his own experience but deals with belonging and not belonging in a sense very different from Klemperer’s concern:

> Det har aldri vært slik at jeg har følt meg bedre, at det har vært derfor jeg har følt meg utenfor, nei, det har alltid vært det omvendte, at jeg ikke har vært god nok til å være en del av et vi, at jeg ikke har fortjent det. (Knausgård 2011d, 774)
>
> (Not because I have thought myself better did I feel to stand apart, quite the opposite; I have never been good enough to be part of any “we,” never deserved it.)[13]

Knausgård presents this as a lack, an experience of being inferior until the role of the writer allowed him to connect this role as an outsider to something positive: “Da var det å være alene legitimt, jeg var noe eget, en kunstner” (Knausgård 2011d, 775) [“Being on my own became legitimate, I was something special, an artist” (Knausgård 2018, 810)]. After such reflections on exclusion, belonging, and finding one’s place, Knausgård proceeds with his new perspective on the terror attacks in Norway. The events are now put in perspective as events that *did* something to the experience sketched out above, to Knausgård’s own feeling of not being part of a “we”:

> I sommer opplevde jeg for første gang noe annet. Det var paradoksalt, for jeg var alene da det hendte. Likevel følte jeg meg som en del av et vi, og den følelsen var

[12] One of the critics who have problematized the tendency towards reduction of complexity in Knausgård’s reflections on Holocaust and the Third Reich, specifically how the lack of historicization and ethical reflection contributes to “Gleichmacherei” [intellectual levelling], is the German author Angelika Klüssendorf (Klüssendorf 2015). Other German reviewers, such as Ulrich Greiner, praise even this dimension in Knausgård’s “Autobiographie-Projekt” as part of his “incredible seriousness, his radicality” (Greiner 2017, 41).

[13] Cf. Knausgård 2018, 809. The English translation by Martin Aitken and Don Bartlett of Knausgård’s novel is elegant but sometimes too far from the original Norwegian text. In order to be as precise as possible, I will therefore, although the translations given in the following largely comply with the published English edition, modify the translation of those passages that I find slightly misleading with respect to Knausgård’s style.

> så sterk og god at jeg gråt. Det vil si, det var en av grunnene til at jeg gråt. Det fantes mange andre, for det jeg skriver om nå, var massakren på Utøya, hvor en nordmann, bare noen år yngre enn meg, gikk rundt i skogen og skjøt ned barn og unge, en etter en, sekstini stykker. (Knausgård 2011d, 775)
>
> (This summer I experienced something different for the first time. It was paradoxical, because I was on my own when it happened. Nevertheless, I felt myself suddenly to be part of a "we," and that feeling was so strong and so good that I wept. At least that was one reason I wept. There were many others, for what I am writing about now is the Utøya massacre, where a Norwegian man, only a few years younger than myself, walked around in the woods on that tiny island shooting the young people who were gathered there one by one, sixty-nine lives in all. (Knausgård 2018, 810))

This passage of the novel appears as a condensation but also as a reinterpretation of something Knausgård was trying to grasp in his radio essay, namely that the intensity in his own reaction to the terror attacks was related to a feeling of belonging to a "we". It is conspicuous that the feelings of being struck by the terror attacks are given another quality in the retrospective view of the novel. They are now referred to as good and at the same time characterized as far more dubious than in the earlier text, and they are connected to the history of the writer, to how this "we" has been his concern since he was small.

Knausgård follows up this self-observation with a presentation of images and impressions from the attacks and from the public reactions to them, a recycling of selected parts, bits and pieces from the first essay, after which he returns to his own need to be part of a "we." In this self-presentation, however, both his reactions to the terror attacks and the very notion of being a part of a community are now reflected in a far less dynamic way: In the novelistic discourse, there is no positive notion of collective mourning. Instead, the very need for community is presented as some kind of an amorphous force, an unexpected urge, and as "suget etter vi-et" (Knausgård 2011d, 776), a "craving for the 'we.'"[14] At this point and in the context of his examination of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and its time, Knausgård distances himself from an emotional reaction that he is not able to understand:

> Nå, når jeg er ute av det, kan jeg ikke forstå de følelsene. De virker falske, suggerert fram, jeg kjente ingen av de som døde, hvordan kunne jeg sørge slik

[14] In Knausgård 2018 this is translated to English as "the pull of the we" (811), a translation that misses the bodily dimension of the Norwegian expression.

> over dem? Og hvordan kunne jeg føle en så sterk tilhørighet? De var helt ubestridelige, de feide alt annet til side de dagene det varte. (Knausgård 2011d, 776)
>
> (Now that I am out of it, I have difficulty grasping those feelings. They seem false, induced only by the power of suggestion. I knew none of the dead, how could I grieve for them as much as I did? How could I feel such a strong sense of belonging? And yet, the feelings were completely incontestable, and swept everything else aside during the days that it lasted. (Knausgård 2018, 811))

Knausgård describes himself as "now" being removed from these feelings, and from this position it is the emotional engagement with people he did not know personally that appears questionable to him; it is the previous feeling of belonging to a larger "we" that constitutes the problem. One gets the impression that what Knausgård has taken from Klemperer's reflections on "das Volk" and the "we" is merely a decontextualized notion of the "we" as a manipulated mass.

If we go back to the radio essay and draw a comparison with book six of *Min kamp*, we may suspect that the novel serves as the genre in which Knausgård writes himself out of the "we"—the community that he had discovered and reflected upon in the radio essay. His strong participation in a national process of mourning is followed by an equally strong creation of distance. The most peculiar aspect in Knausgård's reorientation, however, is the way he creates distance by problematizing collective manifestations *as such*. In book six of *Min kamp,* he does so by comparing his own emotional participation in a national "we" after the terror attacks to the ideological manipulation of the people that took place in Nazi Germany during the 1930s:

> Og hvordan kunne jeg føle en så sterk tilhørighet? [...] Først etterpå forstod jeg at det må ha vært de kreftene, den enorme kraften i vi-et som fylte det tyske folket på trettitallet. Så godt må det ha vært, så trygg må den identiteten de ble tilbudt, ha vært. Alle flaggene, alle faklene, alle manifestasjonene: slik må det ha virket. (Knausgård 2011d, 776)
>
> (How could I feel such a strong sense of belonging? [...] Only afterwards did I understand that these must have been the same forces, the enormous power of the "we" that filled the German people in the 1930s. That was how good it must have been for them; that was how securing the identity they were offered must have been. All the flags and banners, all the torches, all the demonstrations: That was how it worked. (Knausgård 2018, 811))

Already in the radio essay Knausgård referred to German history in his reflections on the terror attacks in Norway on July 22nd, 2011. He did so in three different ways: Firstly, by comparing the Norwegian terrorist with the executioners appointed by the Nazi regime and stressing that he, the perpetrator, will be remembered by his name, whereas his victims will be forgotten; secondly, by comparing Anders Behring Breivik's compendium with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*; and finally, in the conclusion of his essay, by postulating the Holocaust as a determining point of reference for our contemporary encounters with the other. But here, in the novel, which was published in November 2011, a significant shift has taken place: it is no longer the perpetrator, but rather the collective reactions to mass murder that are juxtaposed to the Third Reich. In the quote above, these reactions are compared to the National Socialist manipulation of the German people in Nazi Germany, a comparison indicating that such collective expressions are primarily to be conceived of as homogenizing practices.[15] This deserves more critical attention.

"DAS VOLK" ON TRIAL

This is a turn or at least a significant shift of accent in Knausgård's take, a pattern of thought that tends towards disconnecting the individual and the collective. In this part of Knausgård's rewriting one gets the impression that he is unable to imagine that there could be an "I" in the "we" or, put differently, that there could be any real potential in the capacity of individuals to express their reaction collectively or to "act in concert," as Hannah Arendt once phrased it (Arendt 1970, 44).

In the novel, Knausgård reworks perspectives he had opened and shared with his readers and listeners through the radio essay. While in the earlier text he related to the collective in a more dynamic way, in the novel, skepticism has taken over. While the radio essay gave a broader presentation of his own and others' reactions, presenting reflections on how experiences were shared in ways that could contribute to healing, the novel operates with different parameters. He reflects skeptically on his own participation

[15] Knausgård's reflections on Hitler and the Third Reich as they appear in *Min kamp* have been subject to a vivid Scandinavian debate about how a novelistic presentation can be assessed with respect to its ways of dealing with historical events. See for example: Jordal 2012, Helland 2015; 2016; 2017, Munk 2016, Knausgård 2016.

in a collective "we," on the fact that the author himself has been so moved by a nationally determined feeling of community.[16]

In this, there is actually one particular aspect in Knausgård's pattern of thought that overlaps with Anders Behring Breivik's perspective. Both in his compendium and in court Breivik compared AUF, his target in the massacre at Utøya, with Hitler-Jugend, i.e. with an indoctrinated group, the passive and obedient collective. These are certainly very different speech acts belonging to different contexts but, all things considered, where they still meet is in their rejection of a positive dimension of the collective. In the context of Knausgård's novel (which is certainly not a systematic approach to social sense-making or to the history of the Third Reich), this failure to recognize the collective as a founding dimension can be traced back to his skeptical reflections on social life with the others as a source of alienation. Social frames, he suggests, "holder oss på plass i et bestemt liv, det vanemessige liv, i hvis blikk hele verden løser seg opp og blir det samme" (Knausgård 2011d, 605) ["keep us in place within our particular lives, our routine lives, from whose viewpoint the entire world dissolves and becomes the same" (Knausgård 2018, 629)]. These patterns of thought align with the author's reflections on Martin Heidegger's "*das Man*" as "vi-ets diktatur" (Knausgård 2011d, 790) ["the dictatorship of the 'we'" (Knausgård 2018, 826)] and the reduction that, according to Knausgård, takes place when "det unike og enestående blir sanksjonert og trukket ned, trivialisert til et nivå der alle kan si noe om det" (Knausgård 2011d, 771) ["the unique and unexampled [is] trivialized to such a level as to become amenable to commentary by all" (Knausgård 2018, 805)].

In retrospect, the most striking thing about Knausgård's early response is therefore how the terror attacks make him discover and explore a sense of belonging that he was not previously aware of. In that sense, Knausgård reaches a complex level of understanding of the collective, although this is not maintained when he deals with the terror attacks in the novel. In the essay, he is able to show how social and relational aspects appear to him in a situation of rupture. This is told and reflected in a way that in many aspects corresponds with established sociological insights of how "[crises] reveal to a collective the grounds of its collective identity. Like individual trauma, a societal crisis

[16] A retrospective critique of the collective manifestations can be traced in other parts of the fictional literature that deals with 22 July as well. See Folkvord and Warberg (2019) for an analysis of this particular aspect in Jan Kjærstad's novel *Berge* (2017).

is both a shock and an opportunity, revealing and making available for reflection what otherwise remain deeply hidden" (Eyermann 2012, 568).

In the novel, however, it is as if Knausgård has already lost hold of such insights, or maybe it is rather that here he is up to something very different and operating within a frame that configures the events differently. In book six of *Min kamp* the reflections on the terror attacks are squeezed into a gigantic autobiographical project. They are integrated in the larger context of this work in a way that turns our attention away from the terrorist and the victims. Instead, one gets the impression that it is the very notion of the people—"das Volk"—that is on trial, since many Norwegians, including the author himself, were so strongly moved by the attacks on their fellow citizens that they expressed this publicly and collectively.

In a broader perspective then, the most interesting aspect is how in Knausgård's process of writing and rewriting one can trace an ongoing search for way to respond to events that have no precedent in Norwegian history, events that cannot be encountered with an established repertoire taken from previous situations. And even if we are witnessing an author who himself seems to be missing the power of his own seminal contribution, there is an insistent voice to be recognized in Knausgård's reaction to the terror attacks, the voice of somebody who was courageous and sincere enough to offer his early response to an event that could first only be labelled as "catastrophic" or "tragic."

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