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The Divine and Familial in Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*

Master's thesis in English Literature

Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell

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Abstract

This master's thesis offers a new avenue into the Anglophone oeuvre of Karl Ove Knausgaard; more specifically, in what way the Norwegian author's sophomore novel, *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* (2008), anticipates his later writings. Through the exploration of the novel's Nordic and domestic setting, the biographical elements, and most importantly, the emphasis on Biblical narratives, the thesis seeks to shed light on Knausgaard's hypertextual use of Biblical narratives as a means to extract its universal content. The universal content of the Bible more specifically provides an opportunity to explore his familial relationships, and the scriptural element is thereby especially important since most of the critical focus has previously been on the ethics of the personal. Firstly, Knausgaard's anglophone relevance is accounted for; before looking closer at the different parts of the novel, respectively the scholar and angel hunter, Antinous Bellori; the extended version of the fratricide; The equally extended Noah and the flood; and finally, a look at Knausgaard's lonely alter-ego, Henrik Vankel.

Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven retter søkelyset på forfatterskapet til Karl Ove Knausgård og hans engelskspråklige appell; nærmere bestemt, på hvilken måte den norske forfatterens andre roman (og første på engelsk), *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, relaterer til hans senere verker. Gjennom å se på denne romanen sin nordiske og familiære setting, og viktigst av alt, dens fokus på bibelske narrativ, forsøker denne oppgaven å belyse Knausgård sin hypertekstuelle bruk av bibelhistorier som en måte å trekke ut bibelens universelle innhold på. Bibelens universelle innhold gir mer spesifikt en mulighet til å utforske hans familiære relasjoner, og dette bibelske elementet er dermed spesielt viktig siden det meste av det kritiske fokuset tidligere har vært på Knausgård sin personlige etikk. Først gjøres det rede for Knausgård sin engelskspråklige relevans; før han ser nærmere på de forskjellige delene av romanen, henholdsvis akademikeren og englejegeren, Antinous Bellori; den forlengede versjonen av brodermordet; Den like forlengede Noah og syndeflommen; og til slutt en titt på Knausgård sitt ensomme alter-ego, Henrik Vankel.

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Ad astra per alia porci,

Mattias Bruheim,

Dragvoll, November 2023.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Sammendrag	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
1 Knausgaard’s Anglophone Relevance	1
1.1 Biography	1
1.2 Struggle for Success	3
1.3 Anglophone Responses to <i>A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven</i>	6
1.4 <i>A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven</i>	9
1.5 Hypotext & Hypertext	12
2 Bellori	13
2.1 Sublime Divinity and Ambivalence	13
2.2 The Narrator	15
2.3 Bellori’s Epiphany.....	17
3 Cain & Abel	21
3.1 The Bible Belt	21
3.2 The Fratricide	25
4 The Great Flood	33
4.1 Anna	33
4.2 Noah	36
4.3 Anna, and the Flood	40
5 Henrik’s Struggle	45
6 Conclusion	53
7 Bibliography	57

1 Knausgaard's Anglophone Relevance

1.1 Biography

Described in a recent interview with *The Guardian* as '[t]he most famous Norwegian writer since Henrik Ibsen',¹ Karl Ove Knausgaard was born in Oslo in 1968 and grew up on the island of Tromøya, outside Arendal in the South of Norway, with his parents and older brother.² His father was a teacher and his mother was a nurse. Knausgaard's turbulent relationship with his father would later form the nexus of his authorship, since his father was a man he became deeply afraid of as his childhood progressed (Kuiper 2015). He was a strict and demanding man, who would occasionally turn mean and violent (Ibid). His parents would eventually divorce which led the father into a slow alcoholic decay, where he moved back in with Knausgaard's Grandmother, and years later was found dead in her basement surrounded by empty bottles and dirty dishes (Ibid).

Knausgaard³ went to school in Kristiansand and then studied art and literature at the University of Bergen. As a 19-year-old he was accepted into the prestigious Skrivekunstakademiet (the Writing Academy) in Bergen, and was among others taught by Jon Fosse, another celebrated Norwegian author with considerable international recognition.⁴ Although Knausgaard initially struggled to get published, he eventually made his debut at the age of 29, in 1998. His bibliography now counts around 19 literary works, mostly novels, as well as other collections and works of nonfiction.⁵ He now resides in London with his third wife and their children.

¹ Rachel Cooke, "I learned to lower the threshold": Karl Ove Knausgaard on his process, passions and life after My Struggle', *The Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/oct/01/karl-ove-knausgaard-wolves-of-eternity-my-struggle-interview>> [accessed 25 October 2023].

² Kathleen Kuiper, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (2015), <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Karl-Ove-Knausgaard>> [accessed 21 September 2022].

³ I use the anglicized 'aa' in the spelling of Knausgaard's name instead of the native 'å' (apart from in Norwegian quotations to maintain authenticity), since this is how they spell it in his translated books, as well as in most English language discussions of his work. In Britain, spelling seems to vary a bit with all of these versions in circulation, as shown in the articles from *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/karl-ove-knausgard> [accessed 16 October 2023].

Searching 'Knausgård' in the archive of *The New York Times* yields only one article which refers to Knausgaard's ex-wife, Linda Boström Knausgård, there referred to as 'Linda Bostrom Knausgard'. While instead searching 'Knausgaard', a vast number of articles are found on Karl Ove Knausgaard: <https://www.nytimes.com/search?query=Knausgaard> [accessed 16 October 2023].

⁴ Fosse was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2023: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2023/fosse/facts/> [accessed 25 October 2023].

⁵ Knausgård's Norwegian publisher, 'Oktober', lists all his novels (except his debut novel which was published by another agency): https://oktober.no/Karl-Ove_Knausgard [accessed 18 October 2023].

His debut novel was called *Ute av Verden* (the English version called *Out of the World* will be released in 2024), and it made quite an impression in Norway as it became the first debut work to be awarded The Critic's Prize, handed out by a team of Norwegian cultural commentators.⁶ It touched on a tabu topic, like Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), as it describes how Henrik Vankel, a 26-year-old teacher and protagonist, becomes romantically involved with his pupil Miriam, a 13-year-old child. The second half of the novel alludes to Ingmar Bergman's manuscript for the film *The Best Intentions* (1992) – directed by Bille August – as Knausgaard describes the meeting and unfolding history of Henrik's parents (Henrik is also named after the character of Bergman's father, whose real name was Erik Bergman).⁷ The descriptions of the protagonist's spell as a young teacher in Northern Norway, as well as his ambivalent sexuality and shame, have also drawn comparisons to the Norwegian author Agnar Mykle (1915-1994).⁸ In the essay collection *In the Land of the Cyclops* (2023), Knausgaard himself also mentions that Mykle's novel *Lasso rundt fru Luna* (1954) made quite an impression on him as a teenager (2023: 189).⁹

Knausgaard's debut novel has elements of disguised biography, and represents the first indication of his early attraction to the genre known as autofiction,¹⁰ which he, of course, later very famously explored through the multi-volume opus *Min Kamp* (*My Struggle*).¹¹ The then 20-year-old Knausgaard spent a year as a teacher in the North of Norway, and would develop similar feelings (although far from the extreme extent of Henrik's) for one of his pupils,

⁶ For a list of the winners of the winners of the Critic's Prize, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Norwegian_Critics_Prize_for_Literature_winners [accessed 18 October 2023].

⁷ '[I]t wasn't until I read *The Best Intentions* that a work of Ingmar Bergman moved me. More than that, *The Best Intentions* changed the way I understood myself and my own family, in particular my father. And it became important to my own writing', in Karl Ove Knausgaard, 'Feeling and Feeling and Feeling', *In The Land of the Cyclops*, trans. by Martin Aitken (Vintage, 2023), p. 190.

⁸ Ane Farsethås made this connection in her domestic review of *En tid for alt* (2004), the Norwegian version of *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* (2008): 'Skammens bok' ('The book of shame'), *Dagens Næringsliv*, 30 Oct. 2004, <https://www.dn.no/skammens-bok/1-1-475102> [accessed 2 September 2022].

⁹ '[A]t least not in the way I was moved by Agnar Mykle's novel *Lasso Around the Moon* for instance, also in my teenage years' (p. 189, see footnote 7 above).

¹⁰ Autofiction: 'Literature where the boundaries are not clearly set between the author's (intimate) life and the fictionalisation of it'. Translated from the Norwegian definition: <https://naob.no/ordbok/autofiksjon> [accessed 2 September 2022].

'The 'autobiographical novel' (sometimes called an autofiction, a 1977 coinage by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky) presents some of the author's own experiences as those of a fictional protagonist, whether in the form of a first-person memoir, [...] or as a third-person account', Chris Baldick, 'autobiografiction', *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-1241> [accessed 2 September 2022].

¹¹ The six respective volumes of *Min Kamp* were first published in Norwegian in 2009-2011. They were translated by Don Bartlett and entitled *My Struggle*, as part 1-5 were published in English in 2012-2016, while part six was published in 2018.

according to his auto-fictitious recollections in *My Struggle* 4 (2015).

1.2 Struggle for Success

Knausgaard would suffer a crisis of faith of himself as a fiction writer after *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* (2008), and wanting to overcome his writer's block he embarked upon the ambitious *My Struggle* project. He wanted to write as honestly as possible about himself, though he had to change many people's names (all of the people on his father's side of the family were given new names in order to avoid any more backlash).¹² Some of the biggest elephants in the room are the death of his alcoholic father, and moreover the turbulent relationship they had throughout Knausgaard's upbringing and adult life, as well as his two marriages, especially his second one to Swedish author Linda Boström Knausgaard, and the children they share. The line between the private and the public, a line Knausgaard faithfully breaks throughout the series, gave way and caused a fracture between him and the family on his father's side and also caused turbulence with his ex-wives, especially his first.¹³

Knausgaard's *struggle* undoubtedly helped sell books, but it also came at a cost, as he tells Jon Henley in an interview in 2012 with *The Guardian* (as well as when his first ex-wife, Tonje, confronted him in her radio documentary about him): 'I have given away my soul.'¹⁴ If *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* helped spread Knausgaard's name overseas, the *My Struggle* volumes made him a household name there. Henley elaborates on Knausgaard's success and its cost:

But literary landmark as it undeniably is, its author readily admits that the work's success is due at least in part to the scandal that's accompanied it. For *Min Kamp* is autobiography: a

¹² 14 members of Knausgaard's family on his father's side posted an open letter in the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen*, accusing *My Struggle: A Death in the Family* for being 'Judas-literature', and threatened to take legal action. The public feud most likely helped boost the domestic book sales because of the media coverage it received: 'We are talking about confessional literature and non-fiction. Judas-literature. It is a book full of insinuations, untruths, incorrect personal characteristics and disclosures, which clearly violates Norwegian law.' Original Norwegian quotation: 'Det er bekjennelseslitteratur og sakprosa vi taler om. Judaslitteratur. Det er ei bok full av insinuasjoner, usannheter, feilaktige personkarakteristikker og utleveringer, som helt klart bryter med norsk lov på området.' Geir Ramnefjell, '- Jeg er venner med de jeg vil være venner med', *Dagbladet*, 20 Nov. 2009, <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/jeg-er-venner-med-de-jeg-vil-vaere-venner-med/65170916> [accessed 1 October 2023].

¹³ Looking back on the domestic outcry the book received, Knausgaard tells *The Guardian*'s Rachel Cooke that there was 'no culture of memoir' back then in Norway (see footnote 1).

¹⁴ Jon Henley, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard: "I have given away my soul"', *The Guardian*, 10 Mar. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/mar/09/karl-ove-knausgaard-memoir-family> [accessed 6 November 2023].

scorchingly honest, unflinchingly frank, hyperreal memoir of the life of one man and his family – and the family has not survived it intact. (Henley 2012)

After the domestic success of the Norwegian original with over half a million copies sold in a country which back then had about 5 million people, meaning 1 in 10 people acquired a copy, the first English edition was published in 2012. The first two volumes sold around 32 000 copies in the United States and 22 000 in the UK, which perhaps would not be regarded as massive numbers, but as Günther Leypoldt points out in ‘Knausgaard in America: literary prestige and charismatic trust’ (2017):

high-cultural authority tends to affect commercial markets with a significant delay. By June 2016, at any rate, Knausgaard’s US sales had reached about 200,000 copies (68,000 in the UK), still not over-whelming but respectable enough to indicate that *My Struggle* critical success was paying off in financial terms. (Leypoldt 2017: 61-62)¹⁵

In one of the more unforgiving reviews of *My Struggle: A Death in the Family*, Michel Faber writes in 2012 in *The Guardian* that:

I’ve consulted Norwegian friends about the translation, and I’d guess that most of the infelicities in the text are due to Knausgaard’s hurried workrate rather than to Don Bartlett’s inadequate skill. Convoluted verbiage such as ‘In addition, an equally hitherto unsuspected vulnerability surfaced’ is a faithful rendition of the original, as are many of the hackneyed phrases (hungry as a wolf, two sides of the same coin, like sand through my fingers, and so on). There is little a translator can do about Knausgaard’s often willfully banal style. (Faber 2012)¹⁶

Knausgaard’s attention to detail is made into banality by Faber, but other voices celebrated his achievement. Around 2014, when the first three volumes of Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* had been published in English, the media hype and publicity around him started to increase. The American author Jonathan Lethem praised Knausgaard in an article in *The Guardian* entitled ‘My hero: Karl Ove Knausgaard’, and Hermione Hobe described how he was set to become an ‘international literary superstar’.¹⁷ In the *New York Times* (where Knausgaard would write

¹⁵ Günther Leypoldt, ‘Knausgaard in America: literary prestige and charismatic trust’, in *The Critical Quarterly*, 59 (2017), 55–69, (p. 61–62).

¹⁶ Michel Faber, ‘A Death in the Family by Karl Ove Knausgaard – review’, *The Guardian*, 25 Apr. 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/25/death-in-family-karl-ove-knausgaard-review> [accessed 6 November 2023].

¹⁷ Jonathan Lethem, ‘My hero Karl Ove Knausgaard by Jonathan Lethem’, *The Guardian*, 31 Jan. 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/31/my-hero-karl-ove-knausgaard-jonathan-lethem> [accessed 6

a two-part 25 000-word essay on the Vikings' journey through America),¹⁸ an article by Liesl Schillinger called 'His Peers' Views Are in the Details' shared how other writers succumbed to *My Struggle*.¹⁹ The success of *My Struggle* also made *The New Yorker* engage Knausgaard to contribute several pieces for them, the latest in April 2023.²⁰ His success with *My Struggle* would see him win awards like *Wall Street Journal*'s 2015 Innovator Award for Literature, *Die Welts* litteraturpris (2015), *Sunday Times* Award for Literary Excellence (2016), as well as the Austrian State Prize for European Literature (2017).²¹

Knausgaard would continue his work away from fiction by releasing *Autumn* (2017), *Winter* (2018), *Spring* (2018) and *Summer* (2018); four essayistic and encyclopedic books about different things related to the different seasons, which was meant for his youngest daughter. Books about football, Anselm Kiefer, and Edvard Munch then followed before he released his essay collection *In the Land of the Cyclops* (2020).²² He returned to fictional form the following year with an ambitious new multi-book project, with the first called *The Morning Star* (2021), and the second novel of the series, *The Wolves of Eternity* (2023), was recently released.²³ A review from *The Telegraph* gives the latter novel four stars out of five,²⁴ and a *New York Times* review praises its emotional level.²⁵

November 2023].

Hermione Hoby, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard: Norway's Proust and a life laid painfully bare', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2014/mar/01/karl-ove-knausgaard-norway-proust-profile> [accessed 6 November 2023].

¹⁸ 'My Saga, Part 1', *The New York Times*, 25 Feb. 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/magazine/karl-ove-knausgaard-travels-through-america.html> [accessed 5 September 2022].

¹⁹ Liesl Schillinger, 'His Peers' Views Are in the Details', *The New York Times*, 21 May 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/22/books/karl-ove-knausgaards-my-struggle-is-a-movement.html> [accessed 5 September 2022].

²⁰ 'Thomas Wågström's Pictures of the Living and the Lifeless', *The New Yorker*, 26 Apr 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/thomas-wagstroms-pictures-of-the-living-and-the-lifeless> [accessed 7 November 2023].

²¹ See footnote 2 for a list of his awards.

²² I refer to the 2023 Vintage paperback edition instead throughout this thesis. See footnote 7.

²³ At the time of writing, the third and fourth books of the series, which have been released in Norway, have not yet been published in English.

²⁴ Simon Ings, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard is back, with 800 pages of mind-bending metaphysics', *The Telegraph*, 12 Sept. 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/non-fiction/wolves-eternity-karl-ove-knausgaard-review/> [accessed November 7 2023].

²⁵ '[H]e brings to life — even celebrates — the complex and ambivalent give-and-take between men, between women and between men and women. These relationships, full of misunderstandings, concessions and reconciliations, feel real, without agenda.' Sven Birkerts, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard's Novel for Our Precarious Times', *The New York Times*, 16 Sept. 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/16/books/review/karl-ove-knausgaard-wolves-of-eternity.html> [accessed November 8 2023].

1.3 Anglophone responses to *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*

There seem to be a consensus both domestically and internationally about the ambition and universality of *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, which of course is understandable given that Knausgaard is leaning on core texts from the Anglophone canon – most notably the Bible. *The Guardian* was among the first overseas periodical to review it, and Salley Vickers' late 2008 review suggests the novel 'may become a cult book', while also questioning some of its stylistic choices:

But it is hard not to wonder if his author began this book as an academic theological study and halfway through decided to transform it into a hybrid fiction by giving his commentaries, and their accompanying thesis, to a narrator who remains too coyly in the postmodernist wings to qualify as part of a fiction. (Vickers 2008)²⁶

The two sides of a debate emerge here, between those who think that Knausgaard's style or form work at the expense of his more thematic ideas in the novel, like the elements of shame, the rise and decline of the divine, science versus religion, and Knausgaard's interest in family and identity – and those who argue that he rather writes in a 'substance over style' type of way – where these themes shine through and help elevate the novel. One could further relate this to what Roy Sommer refers to as 'slow poetics' or 'slow fiction':

slow novels often present readers with particularly complex, unusual, or experimental narrative designs; they dwell on slow themes or reflect on particularly engaging ethical questions and moral dilemmas; in addition, slow narratives may take the form of novel cycles which establish transtextual relationships, extending slowness beyond a single text. (Sommer 2021: 73-74)²⁷

Though Sommer actually relates this to Knausgaard's *My Struggle* series, this also seems relevant for *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*. Knausgaard unconventionally begins the novel as an essay centered on Antonious Bellori, an Italian scholar obsessed with angels, and we gradually learn that the novel as a whole is meant to have been written by the hidden

²⁶ Salley Vickers, 'Divine intervention.' *The Guardian*, 8. Nov. 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/nov/08/karl-knausard-time-every-purpose> [Accessed 4 September 2022].

²⁷ Roy Sommer, 'The Knausgård Universe: Contextual Narratology and Slow Narrative Dynamics', *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research*, 10 (2021), 73–90, p. 73-74, <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/427/609> [Accessed 2 October 2022].

protagonist we do not get to meet until the end of the novel, Henrik Vankel. He revisits Biblical narratives, as his laborious writing style and attention to detail make sure the relatively short Old Testament stories – like the classic story of Cain and Abel and Noah and the flood – are prolonged, and given new life in the provinces of Western Norway. As a vehicle to these stories, is the obscure Italian scholar, his comprehensive theory on angels, and Knausgaard’s isolated alter-ego, Henrik Vankel.

In an early 2009 review in *The Independent*, Anna Paterson is intrigued by the premise of Knausgaard’s pseudo-theory:

Next, the scholar's ideas about God as vulnerable to time and to mankind’s devices, and his thesis that angels became trapped on Earth and began to change shape. Eventually, the scholar realises that God is dead and is himself killed, probably by renegade angels.

Finally, a coda about a modern, solitary and disturbed ‘me’. (Paterson 2009)²⁸

Paterson ends her review by commenting on the fine line Knausgaard is treading by penning this ‘speculative tale’:

This kind of speculative tale needs very good telling not to read like mad pedantry or utter tosh. Knausgaard and his translator, who writes like the author’s soulmate, veer close to both. Yet the writing glows with an intense awareness of the here and now, and loving observations of landscapes and objects. In the coda, irony turns to bitterness. The self-harming narrator stands for man alone in a world bereft of meaning. For God is truly dead. (Paterson 2009)

Paul Binding’s ‘Hardly Christian’ appeared in early February 2009, a couple of weeks after Paterson’s review.²⁹ Binding calls the novel ‘a hugely ambitious inquiry into Christianized humanity’s changing awareness of divine purpose, one seemingly endorsed at key points by the manifestation of angels’ (Binding 2009: 20). He moreover mentions the anachronistic setting where Knausgaard’s Biblical stories pan out: ‘All these people have their being in beautifully evoked countryside resembling the “world-landscapes” found in Joachim Patenier

²⁸ Anna Paterson, ‘A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven, By Karl Ove Knausgaard, trans. James Anderson’, *The Independent*, 21. Jan. 2009, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/a-time-to-every-purpose-under-heaven-by-karl-ove-knausgaard-trans-james-anderson-1452075.html>. [Accessed 14. September 2022].

²⁹ Paul Binding, ‘Hardly Christian’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5523 (2009), p. 20. *The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?st=Newspapers&qt=TI~%22Hardly+Christian%22~IU~5523&sw=w&ty=as&it=search&sid=bookmark-TLSH&p=TLSH&s=RELEVANCE&u=ntnuu&v=2.1&asid=beca6a4e> [accessed 25 October 2022].

and early Bruegel, though Javan's home terrain by the fjords feels distinctly Norwegian' (Binding 2009: 20).

Lastly, Binding ponders the role of Knausgaard's angels and how they fit into the larger picture of man's relationship with the divine: 'The very existence of angels – whether cherubim or nephilim – vitiates our own special relationship with the divine, to whom they are (presumably) closer than ourselves. Nor have their recorded interventions much benefited us' (Binding 2009: 20).

Eric Banks' 'Wings of Desire' was an American review that appeared in February 2010. Banks calls the novel 'a throwback to the grand European novel of midcentury.'³⁰ He brings up a similar question to that of Binding in regards to the setting: 'Where are we? Knausgaard roams a strange landscape that resembles nothing so much as the pastoral 1800s Scandinavia of early Knut Hamsun' (Banks 2010). Banks praises Knausgaard for daring to grapple with divine themes that some of the biggest names within the literary canon had embarked upon before him:

Our delight in Knausgaard's virtuosity (and daring) in evoking these dreamy, ersatz settings is the payoff for his gamble in engaging an outsize theme—he is, after all, setting foot on terrain where Dante, Milton, and Blake dared to tread—and for his at times tedious digressions into angel scholarship. (Banks 2010)

In Ingrid D. Rowland's American review 'The Primordial Struggle' in October 2010, Rowland mentions the buzz Knausgaard generated in the literary world with his then upcoming *My Struggle* series as well as the fact that his first two novels prior to that had been domestic bestsellers, and she further claims about *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*:

None of *Min Kamp* has yet been translated into English (the translations of volumes 1 and 2 are underway), but Knausgaard's distinctive qualities as a writer are already abundantly evident in the recently published English translation (by James Anderson) of his second novel, *A Time for Everything (En Tid for Alt)*, of 2004. At just under five hundred pages, it is a strange, uneven, and marvelous book. (Rowland)³¹

Rowland's review concludes a selection of British and American reviews that demonstrates that Knausgaard was already somewhat in the Anglophone literary loop with the translation of

³⁰ Eric Banks, 'Wings of Desire', *Bookforum*, <https://www.bookforum.com/print/1605/a-time-for-everything-by-karl-o-knausgard-5019> [Accessed 3 November 2022].

³¹ Ingrid D. Rowland, 'The Primordial Struggle', *The New York Review*, 14. Oct. 2010, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/10/14/primordial-struggle> [Accessed 21 September 2022].

his sophomore book, although not as established and significant as his later work would make him. Culturally, the novel gained attention for its archaic and epic subject matter, as Knausgaard incorporated Biblical stories, characters, and settings, and channeled them through his own experiences, inner thoughts and familiar Norwegian settings, which anticipate his subsequent blend of biography, essay and nature writing.

1.4 *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*

Although it was predominantly the *My Struggle* volumes that brought Knausgaard his international breakthrough, his first two novels, featuring the same protagonist Henrik Vankel, have received somewhat less critical attention, and present a less explored avenue into Knausgaard's oeuvre and international appeal. I want to look at how they anticipate his later and better-known works, but given how *Out of the World* has not yet been published in English, I will focus on his sophomore novel, *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* (2009), which was first published in Norwegian as *En tid for alt* in 2004. *En tid for alt* (2004) was first translated and published in Britain in 2008 as *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, and later in American as a *A Time for Everything* (2009), which was a more verbatim translation from the Norwegian title.³² One might ask why I am writing about a Norwegian language author for an MA thesis in English? I would argue that Knausgaard is a significant presence within Anglophone literary culture, which began with the translation of his sophomore success.

The paradox of Knausgaard is the fact that although he seemed to reinvent the novel through his use of autofiction and in that regard could be viewed as progressive, he is also interested in quite conservative subjects such as Hitler and the Bible. Apropos the Bible, Knausgaard mentions, in *Summer* (2022), taking a personality test on a radio show in Norway, where he learnt he was radically sadder than the average person, more than normally introverted, and while his imagination was average, his emotions were way over average (p. 154).³³ Knausgaard thereby concluded that he was bad at making up stories, but good at feeling. As a consequence, he learned to set his stories in places he knew, and between people he knew, in ways he himself had seen (Ibid). That was partly the reason why he used some of the stories from the Bible in *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, mixed with stories from

³² My edition is a British paperback edition published in 2009 by Portobello Books Ltd and was first published by Portobello Books Ltd in 2008: Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Time To Every Purpose Under Heaven*, trans. by James Anderson (London: Portobello Books Ltd, 2009).

³³ Knausgaard, *Summer*, trans. by Invild Burkey (London: Vintage, 2022), p. 154.

his own life, and why he set the Biblical stories in Vestlandet, in the Western coastal landscape of his grandparents, which he knew well from his childhood (Ibid). But why exactly did he choose to write about the Bible?

A partial answer can be found in *My Struggle 2: A Man in Love* (2019), which revolves around the time Knausgaard left his first wife, fell in love with Linda Boström, and became a father, as well as trying to write his second novel. He writes:

I had been close in recent weeks in Bergen and the first few in Stockholm, with the story that had aroused my interest about a father who went crabbing one summer's night with his two sons, one obviously me, I found a dead seagull I showed dad, he told me seagulls had once been angels, and we left in the boat with live crabs crawling inside a bucket on the deck. Geir Gulliksen had said, 'there's your opening', and he had been right, but I didn't know where it would lead, and I had been grappling with it for the last few months. (Knausgaard 2019: 267)³⁴

This anecdote seems to be what sparked Knausgaard's interest in angels, and from then he began immersing himself in the Bible. In the next chapter, he writes:

Linda continued with her course, I continued in my collective office at the tower, started reading the Bible, found a Catholic bookshop and bought all the angel-related literature I could get my hands on, read Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, Basilus and Hieronymus, Hobbes and Burton. I bought Spengler and a biography of Isaac Newton, reference works about the Enlightenment and Baroque periods, which lay in piles around where I was writing and trying to get all these different systems and schools of thought to tie up in some way or the other, or to push something, I didn't know what, in the same direction. (Knausgaard 2019: 305-306)

In the following chapter, Knausgaard gives an update on the progress of his project:

Soon the manuscript would amount to a hundred pages, and it was becoming stranger and stranger; after the introduction about crabbing it shifted into a purely essayistic style, and presented some theories about the divine that I had never considered before, but in some peculiar manner, from the premises they set, in their way, they were right. I had come across a Russian Orthodox bookshop, it really was a find, all manner of remarkable

³⁴ I am citing the 2019 edition of *My Struggle 2: A Man in Love* which was first published in English in 2013 by Harvill Secker: *My Struggle 2: A Man in Love*, trans. by Don Bartlett (Vintage, 2019), p. 267.

writings were there, I bought them, took notes and could barely restrain my glee when yet another element of the pseudo-theory fell into place. (Knausgaard 2019: 316)

Most of Knausgaard's ideas seem to be born out of a great deal of research followed by essays, especially suggested from his five and a half years of searching ahead of *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*. In order to compensate for his lack of imagination he finds inspiration in other works which he internalizes and blends with his own impulses, whether it is hints of Nabokov, McEwan, Bergman, and Mykle in *Out of The World*, the Bible and all the various religious scholarly readings in *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, or Proust in *My Struggle*. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Knausgaard is asked if he has experienced any religious ecstasy in his life, and he replies that he has not, but he relates this feeling to the selflessness one feels when gazing at art, or reading literature, without fully knowing why: 'And why should emotions be important, a little movement in your soul? For me, I think I've just substituted literature and art for religion. Yes, that is a very conservative, Romantic part of this project.'³⁵

Somewhat ironically, his recent literary project involves the apocalypse and also lean on Biblical elements, which suggests he still collects inspiration from the Bible. As Dwight Garner writes in his *New York Times* review of *The Morning Star* (2021): 'This is a strange, gothic, Bible-obsessed novel, laced with buzzard-black themes and intimations of horror. It is set over two days in late summer. A cluster of characters gaze into the same mesmerizing sky' (Garner 2021).³⁶

In short, Karl Ove Knausgaard can be described as a successful international writer whose works have sold well in English-speaking countries and have sparked considerable interest and debate among English-language readers, critics and academics. His writings are clearly autobiographical, but they are categorized as fiction because he spends a great deal of time describing things that are not essential to biography – trees, leaves, landscapes – and brings to life creatures and characters who are not factual or historical (in a literal sense), such as angels and Biblical personalities. It is this mixture of elements that we now turn to in the next chapters, which will attempt to show how this obscure novel anticipated his success as he integrated hints of autofiction into his re-exploration of divine narratives.

³⁵ James Wood, 'Writing *My Struggle*: An Exchange', *The Paris Review*, (Issue 211, 2014) <https://www.theparisreview.org/miscellaneous/6345/writing-my-struggle-an-exchange-james-wood-karl-ove-knausgaard> [accessed 16 October 2023].

³⁶ Dwight Garner, 'In Karl Ove Knausgaard's Horror-Tinged New Novel, a Mesmerizing Star Appears in the Sky', *The New York Times*, 20 Sept. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/20/books/review-morning-star-karl-ove-knausgaard.html> [accessed 16 October 2023].

1.5 Hypotext & Hypertext

Before looking more closely at the specific content in *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* (2009), it is necessary to present a couple of theoretical terms that will be discussed throughout the thesis, since they refer to a repeated pattern of Knausgaard's in the novel, which is a rewriting, or re-exploration of certain works, a phenomenon that Gérard Genette (1930-2018) referred to as the relationship between *hypertext*, and its originator, the *hypotext*.³⁷ Since some of the moments in *My Struggle*, as already shown earlier, refer to his time of writing *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, while other passages may refer to similar situations that occur in both *My Struggle* and *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, one can thereby regard the latter novel as a hypotext, and the former as a hypertext.

The thesis focuses on Knausgaard *as well* as the text, in contrast to perhaps more poststructuralist methods of analysing literature, where the author's significance is ignored, in favour of the text and its reader. Never is the latter idea more clearly stated than in Roland Barthes' (1915-1980) 'The Death of the Author' (1967), where he famously claimed: 'the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author' (Barthes 1967: 521).³⁸ This is however a somewhat dated claim, and is further challenged in *The Story of "Me"*: *Contemporary American Autofiction* (2018): 'autofiction can be read as a reaction to these ideas but also as a corrective to the hyperbolic and somewhat premature claim that the author is dead' (Worthington 2018: 63).³⁹ Although I am aware that the 'author-character Knausgaard' of *My Struggle* might not always be aligned with the author Karl Ove Knausgaard, as touched upon in *The Abyss or Life is Simple: Reading Knausgaard Writing Religion* (2022),⁴⁰ the passages and quotations included in this thesis from the *My Struggle* series, are strictly those that relate to *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* in some capacity, and/or offer quintessential information or context that are relevant to my discussion.

³⁷ 'A hypotext designates a text whose form and/or content inspires – or is reflected in – a later text or hypertext', thus the term hypertext "designate[s] literary texts which allude, derive from or relate to an earlier work or hypotext", in Martin Bronwen and Felizitas Ringham, *Key Terms in Semiotics* (A&C Black, 2006), p. 99-100.

³⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), p. 518-521.

³⁹ Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), p. 63.

⁴⁰ 'Placing boundaries around authorship also became an important recurring theme in our discussions. Karl Ove, the protagonist across *My Struggle*, shares a name and other attributes with Knausgaard, the author. But they cannot be the same', in 'Introduction: A Knausgaard Reading and Writing Collective', *The Abyss or life is Simple: Reading Knausgaard Writing Religion*, ed. by Courtney Bender and others (The University of Chicago Press, 2022), p. 10. Kindle eBook.

2 Bellori

2.1 Sublime Divinity and Ambivalence

A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven (2009) opens with an introduction to the 16th century scholar Antinous Bellori, which serves as a backdrop to Knausgaard's angels, which then effectively are Bellori's angels (and this meta narrative is further complicated by the presence of Henrik Vankel, which we will come back to).

More concretely, the novel begins with the then 11-year-old Bellori's sighting of two angels on his way back from fishing in the mountains of his native Tuscany, in Italy. A rich and detailed retelling of what Bellori allegedly experienced, based on Bellori's own notebooks and a biography, which may, or may not, be fictional.⁴¹ Bellori becomes disoriented on his way back from fishing, and as day turns into night he notices 'a small prick of light float[ing] in the darkness' (Knausgaard 2009: 9). A small part of Bellori thinks it could be his father with some men looking for him, but he has his doubts as he has strayed so far off the trail, and he sees that '[o]ne holds a torch in his hand, the other a spear. Both wear chain mail under their cloaks and each has a sword hanging at his side. The glare from the torch encircles them and makes it look as if they're standing in a cave of light' (2009: 10). As he carefully approaches, he sees the two cloaked angels first standing by, then wading into a river, and desperately wants to 'be in their presence' (2009: 10). He then comes to realise, as he gets a closer look at the two and notices their wings, that they are actually angels, which fills him with 'fear and happiness' (2009: 11). This ambivalence is similar to the experience of the *sublime*, which the *Collins Dictionary* defines as a combination of awe and admiration, but also a slight element of fear – a recognition of one's own insignificance in a larger scenario: it is often experienced in nature.⁴² The sublime quality of the angels are further described, as Bellori has to seek shelter after discovering them: 'But he isn't able to look at them, even though he *wants* to; his closeness to them *overwhelms* him and for a long time he lies quite still with his eyes closed and his face pressed to the ground' (Knausgaard 2009: 11, *my italics*). A similar sensation is embodied in William Blake's 'The Tyger', in an

⁴¹ From *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* (2009): 'The Italian historian Guido Bergotti, who wrote what is perhaps the most exhaustive biography of Antinous Bellori, *The Angels of a Heretic* (1964)' (p. 247).

⁴² 'Sublime: Adjective. [O]f high moral, aesthetic, intellectual, or spiritual value [...] inspiring deep veneration, awe, or uplifting emotion because of its beauty, nobility, grandeur, or immensity [...] from Latin *sublimis lofty*', *Collins English Dictionary* <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/sublime> [accessed 22 March 2023].

imaginative encounter with nature that allows the speaker to explore sensations of respect and terror:

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?⁴³

Often, the romantic sublime is a *religious* experience: nature reveals the immense power of the force that creates it. When Bellori *dares* to look again at the angels, it is with a fixed stare of wonder and admiration: ‘This time it is only with the greatest caution that he allows his gaze to close in on them’ (Knausgaard 2009: 11). He discovers that the angels’ faces are ‘white and skull-like, their eye sockets deep, cheek-bones high, lips bloodless. They have long, fair hair, thin necks, slender wrists, claw-like fingers. And they’re shaking. One of them has hands that shake’ (Ibid). The angels are described in a way that borders on something from a horror film – like humans, but supernatural also, and not human. One of them appears weak and ill. Bellori then sees one of the angels as it

tilts its head back, opens its mouth and lets out a scream. Wild and lamenting, it reverberates up the wall of the ravine. No human being is meant to hear that cry. An angel’s despair is unbearable, and almost crushed by terror and compassion Antinous presses his face into the earth once more. He wants to help them, but he can’t do, he wants to be something to them, but he can’t be, he wants to run away from that place, but he can’t run. (Knausgaard 2009: 11)

Once again, Bellori is filled with ambivalence, and this becomes a zero-sum-game where all he can do is nothing. Instead, he watches as the angels catch a fish with their spear, break its neck, and devour it raw (p. 12). They suddenly discover Bellori and when they stop in front of him, he is once again lying with his face to the ground:

He hears their breathing, and feels the darkness that emanates from them, the icy coldness. He’s never been so frightened in his life. Even so, he wants them to stay, it is as if something inside him discerns the vacuum their absence will leave, that he will long to

⁴³ Facsimile reproduction of the 1794 illuminated manuscript, published by The William Blake Trust and the Tate Gallery William Blake: ‘The Tyger’, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43687/the-tyger> [accessed 27 March 2023].

return here, to this moment. Perhaps that's why he stretches out his hand and reaches out for them. (Knausgaard 2009: 13)

This is how the narrative interlude about Bellori concludes, and Knausgaard goes back to his essay on angels. The meeting with the angels, and our understanding of its part in the larger whole of the book, is left unfinished and suspended: it is a cliff-hanger of major proportions.

2.2 The Narrator

Before we return to Bellori's final meeting with the angels, the narrator in the subsequent chapter offers a history of angels. He begins by addressing the *cherubim*, the 'chubby, rosy-cheeked little boys that throng the paintings of the late Renaissance and Baroque period', linking their popularity with the angels' gradual decline: 'Many will say that the angels got what they deserved, because they didn't have the sense to stop, but allowed themselves to be tempted further and further into that world they had been sent to serve, until finally they got caught up in it' (Knausgaard 2009: 13). This record of a decline of general interest in angels, at odds with the essay – which records a continuing *personal* interest in them – is the first sign of a narrator who is out of sorts with his own time, eccentric and perhaps even unreliable. This is strengthened by the narrator's personal compassion for the angels: 'It strikes me that the terrible fate they suffered isn't wholly commensurate with their sins. But that's my own view' (2009: 13). In a critical essay entitled 'Angels', Sullivan also discusses Knausgaard's narrator:

the flat voice in which the narrator speaks of angels – as, for example, 'The origin of angels is uncertain' – forces the reader to accept their existence. One could refuse to read on, but if one does not refuse then one is complicit. The problem is no longer whether angels are real. The problem is what kind of beings they are and what they are up to. (Sullivan 2022: 111)⁴⁴

We later learn in the novel's 'Coda', which we will take a closer look at in chapter 5, that the entire work is written by Knausgaard's protagonist from *Out of the World*, Henrik Vankel, who is undergoing an existential crisis on a remote island, prompted by the complications of his relationship to his pupil and the death of his own father. The narrator discusses the origins of angels and their Biblical importance, and returns to this ambivalent status, on the one hand

⁴⁴ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, 'Angels', in *The Abyss or life is Simple: Reading Knausgaard Writing Religion*, ed. by Courtney Bender and others (The University of Chicago Press, 2022), p. 105–127. Kindle eBook.

describing their obscurity, and on the other hand their familiarity: ‘Such ambivalence is natural, because angels’ most important characteristic is that they really belong to two worlds, and always carry the one into the other’ (Knausgaard 2009: 14). This duality of purpose emerges again some pages later: ‘Traditionally, angels are the link between the divine and the human, at once messengers and the message itself’ (Knausgaard 2009: 18). Moreover, ‘[t]hey don’t belong here, just as they don’t belong in heaven; transition between the two is their element’ (Ibid). The narrator relates this to the two angels who visited Lot, before Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, and asks how it could be that the angels showed Lot, of all people, compassion:

I believe the explanation is simple. Angels can, as is well known, assume any shape. But what is less well known is that the shape they assume contains an element of danger for them, as well. If they inhabit it for too long, it will take them over entirely. (Knausgaard 2009: 19)

This explanation is key to both the narrator’s and Bellori’s theory on angels and their gradual decline. This also alludes to the angels’ ultimate transformation into seagulls, which is presented as the final twist in the ‘Coda’. The angels spent a considerable amount of time in Lot’s residence, watching him bake bread for them, and it is implied that they get caught up in this trivial existence, as they told him to take the people who mattered to him and head for the mountains before they unleashed their fury on the two cities, like the narrator suggests: ‘As soon as Lot was out of sight, they came to themselves again, understood how weak they’d been, and took it out on the two cities’ (Knausgaard 2009: 19). The key to the angels, then, is that they have a divine status that is capable of becoming human – or at least earthly – and this is what fascinates Knausgaard about them: the possibility of this world and the other overlapping, in figures who are at once divine and human, but also trapped and endangered. As Sullivan puts it: ‘No longer able to serve as intermediaries, they are pathologically dependent on us, constantly seeking our approval. And we keep them around because they still reveal something of what it means to be human’ (2022: 111).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See footnote 4.

2.3 Bellori's Epiphany

Bellori's *On the Nature of Angels* is divided into three parts: the first, according to the narrator, charts all 189 angelic appearances in the Bible; the second discusses what can be said about the angels based on these appearances; the third discusses the angels' non-Biblical appearances, and ultimately asks the core question: 'can the nature of the divine undergo change?' (Knausgaard 2009: 32). Bellori claims, according to the narrator, '*It is not the divine which is immutable and the human which is changeable, he wrote, the opposite is true and is the real theme of the Bible: the alteration in the divine from the creation to the death of Christ*' (Knausgaard 2009: 33).⁴⁶ When the narrator returns to Bellori around 400 pages later, after expansive chapters on Cain and Abel, and on Noah and the great flood (which we will return to), he expands further: 'God becoming man altered not only humanity for ever, but also the divine. The balance between the earthly and the divine was completely upset, and marks the definitive turning point in the history of the divine' (Knausgaard 2009: 417). A similar comment is made by the character of The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'.⁴⁷

On the Nature of Angels did not receive the attention Bellori perhaps had hoped for or expected; as a matter of fact, it 'vanished into the great void, as if it had never been written' (2009: 422). The narrator describes Bellori as desperate to set out and prove the existence of angels: 'He knows that he's right. He knows that the angels are fallen and that they're on earth. He knows that the way to heaven is barred to them. He's written about it. To no purpose' (Knausgaard 2009: 422). His work had been ridiculed by the few who read it, and he had to make it his mission to prove that angels existed. The narrator looks closer at Bellori's apparent resignation: "*We know nothing. Nor is there anything to know*" (427). After writing this, Bellori was silent for two years, something the narrator suggests has to do with what he saw when entering the chapel in Padua:

He was in Padua, where there is the Cappella degli Scrovegni, famed for its Giotto frescoes with their motifs of Christ's Passion. It's difficult to prove that it was the sight of them that led to a two-year hiatus in his writing. But despite that, I'm fairly certain it's what

⁴⁶ Knausgaard has quoted Bellori's notebook by applying italics.

⁴⁷ "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead." The Misfit continued, "and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance." Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*: (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), (p. 132).

happened. (Knausgaard 2009: 433)

The narrator further claims:

The key lies in Giotto's picture of Jesus. Not just the key to Bellori's silence, the importance of which mustn't be exaggerated, but also to the fate of the angels on earth. *That* was what silenced him. He understood why the angels were imprisoned here, and so terrible was this insight that he distanced himself from everything he'd thought and done up to then. (Knausgaard 2009: 433)

Knausgaard, who holds a degree in art history, describes one of the fresco paintings as such:

The picture of a Christ who has just relinquished his spirit, as Mary kneels before him, while the angels above them seem to be *breaking forth* from the sombre heavens. Their movements are violent and expressive, they fill the sky with motion and drama, in contrast to the lifeless Christ, the grieving Mary. The picture is condensed: there is redemption here, resignation, adoration, sorrow. It shows the moment when Jesus is most like us: he's dying, he's dying like a man, at the same time as he's moving away from us, in an impossible movement, a reverse death, presence and absence at one and the same time, God and man. (Knausgaard 2009: 437)

Knausgaard captures the duality that the painting contains – the pull between the divine and mankind which thus speaks to the duality of Christ. The angels in the painting are described as such:

One of them closes his eyes, his mouth twisted in tears, as he clutches his face with both hands, fingertips to his cheeks as if about to claw himself. Another is pictured in a strangely distorted posture, the upper half of his body lifted as if in ecstasy. A third opens his arms as if in embrace or surrender. The angels' grief is frenzied. And Bellori couldn't even have thought about it, it must just have flashed on his mind as a certainty in the moment he saw them. God was dead. (Ibid)

This Nietzschean conclusion was thereby what, according to Knausgaard/the narrator's interpretation, completed Bellori's theory, but unlike Nietzsche's prophet Zarathustra who felt the urge to share his epiphany,⁴⁸ Bellori waited for two years: presumably, he exited the

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1969), originally published in 1883: 'Could it be possible! This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is Dead!*' (London: Penguin Books), p. 41.

chapel, believing that God had metamorphosed into Christ and become human, and effectively died on the cross, leaving the angels behind, as grieving prisoners on Earth. The angels' decline, transformation, and imprisonment on Earth was a direct consequence of the death of Christ. Bellori had learned the answer, but as his following prolonged silence would assume: 'it brought him no satisfaction, no peace, no happiness. Just fear. And then sorrow. And then despair' (Knausgaard 2009: 438).

Bellori comes across angels for the last time towards the end of his life, as the narrator imagines him returning to the place by the mountainside in Tuscany where he first saw the angels all those years ago. He senses their presence and spots one mid-air: 'almost fifty feet above him, almost obscured by the mist, one of them was flying' (Knausgaard 2009: 452). He sees one of the angels having a seizure, similar to the shaking angel he saw by the river when he was eleven, which can now be explained seen in context with their imprisoned state on Earth. He sees the light of five fires, including a burning wheel (p. 455). In *My Struggle 5: Some Rain Must Fall* (2019)⁴⁹, Knausgaard includes an essay entitled 'Fire', about fire and the divine, that he wrote for a Norwegian magazine.⁵⁰ In the Old Testament the divine often reveals itself through fire, and Knausgaard claims that it is now, in a modern, secular, and rational society, impossible, even ridiculous to discuss the divine, considering its archaic reputation, and he uses the analogy of a burning train and a general state of emergency as the only scenario where modern people might, out of contention, invoke higher powers:

You sit there unable to move, in the escalating heat, until it becomes unbearable and in your helplessness you pray to your God, the Almighty, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, whom you have never been closer than at this moment, for this is how He reveals himself to us now, in his purest and most beautiful form: a blazing train in the forest. (Knausgaard 2019: 644)

Bellori watches unnoticed as the five angels devour a deer calf: 'Horried, Antinous looked on as two of them turned on each other, while the two others crouched over the animal carcass and began to rip and tear at it with their teeth' (Knausgaard 2009: 457). In the same essay on fire, Knausgaard claims the divine 'also has this mysterious alien and merciless nature, which causes us to both fear and admire it' (Knausgaard 2019: 642). Antinous sneaks out, but falls

⁴⁹ I am citing the 2019 Vintage Paperback Edition. First published in hardback by Harvill Secker 2015: *My Struggle 5: Some Rain Must Fall*, trans. by Don Bartlett (Vintage: 2019), p. 644.

⁵⁰ The Norwegian text, 'Ild', published in *Vinduet* in 2000: <https://www.vinduet.no/prosa-lyrikk/ild-kortprosa/> [accessed 27 March].

asleep on his journey back, and when he awakens, he stumbles upon two separate footprints close by which lead him to the two angels he first saw all those years ago by the river (p. 458). One of them is helping the other angel, who is trembling, to walk. He surmises that this must be the Archangel Gabriel, who he saw help the trembling angel catch a fish with a spear all those years ago. The name Gabriel means ‘divine healer’, which explained why he was assisting the other. The narrator further surmises that the other angel is Michael, who was once God’s general: ‘God was omnipotent, Michael was like God. When God died, Michael went from being the almighty to being the dead’ (Knausgaard 2009: 459). Bellori eventually makes eye contact with Michael: ‘There was a truth about him. He’d seen it in the angel’s look. Now he understood that truth. But he didn’t know if he could live with it’ (Knausgaard 2009: 460). Bellori’s epiphany from the chapel of Padua is thus even further strengthened by this experience.

Gabriel leaves what Bellori assumes is a deceased Michael in the snow, and Antinous precedes to pick him up and carry him home. He leaves him in his basement overnight and as he writes down what he saw, he ponders the way Gabriel laid Michael down in the snow: ‘Raphael had looked at him in the way a mother looks at a sleeping child. She goes out, and then she comes back next morning’ (Knausgaard 2009: 464). The last thing Bellori wrote in his notebook was that he abruptly had to go check on something, and the narrator suggests it has something to do with Michael in the basement (p. 464). A corpse was found in the woods later that year and Bellori’s biographer claims it was the body of Antinous (p. 464-465).

This thus concludes the dissection and discussion of Bellori, and it is suggested that his exhaustive search for answers lead to his own demise. The narrator moves on to discuss how angels started showing themselves to people again, through chubby toddler cherubs and to the seagulls that we know them as today. Knausgaard further explores two Old Testament narratives: Cain and Abel, and Noah and the flood, which the next chapters will look into.

3 Cain & Abel

3.1 The Bible belt

Though he is best known for writing about the self in a style that floats between biography and fiction, a feature of all of Knausgaard's fiction is his close observation of small details. It was therefore a challenge to represent the culture and setting of the Bible when neither were familiar to him: 'I was trying to create a gestalt, although without much success – there were so few props, sandals, camels and sand, not much more, perhaps the odd sparse bush as well – and my knowledge of the culture was close to zero' (Knausgaard 2019: 369).⁵¹ His solution was to move location to somewhere more recognisable: 'Once I had written in a notebook, "The Bible enacted in Norway" and "Abraham in the Setesdal Hills". I had Cain hitting a rock with a sledgehammer in a Scandinavian landscape at dusk' (Knausgaard 2019: 386). Knausgaard's mother's family is from Jølster in the Western part of Norway, and he often spent summers there during his childhood. Jølster is a picturesque mixture of fjords, mountains, forests, and farms and is the clear inspiration and backdrop/location for the chapters on Abel and Cain, as well as for Noah and the flood.

Before considering Cain and Abel, it is worth mentioning that Knausgaard comes from the region called Agder, or Sørlandet, which 'is known as the Norwegian Bible belt' (Bender 2022: 8).⁵² In an article on regions and religion in Norway, Pål Repstad points out that a majority of Christian revivalist movements through the latter half of the 19th century originated there (p. 126).⁵³ Statistically, one should perhaps not read *too* much into this as research finds that only 2 out of 10 members of Sørlandet's population go to church or Christian meetings on a regular basis, while in Norway as a whole, the number is 1 out of 10 (p. 126). However, we are not looking at statistics – we are dealing with the cultural background of an author. And it is useful to know that many of these Christian communities find 'the state church of Norway too inclusive and too soft, both in dogmatic matters and issues of lifestyle' (Repstad 2009: 126). Repstad claims that although 'Pietism does not have the normative strength in Sørlandet that it used to have a couple of generations ago, it is still an important part of the discourse as far as the region's character is concerned' (Repstad 2009:

⁵¹ Knausgaard, *My Struggle 2: A Man in Love*, p. 369.

⁵² *The Abyss or life is Simple: Reading Knausgaard Writing Religion*, ed. by Courtney Bender and others, p. 8 (see footnote 37).

⁵³ Pål Repstad, 'A softer God and a more positive anthropology: Changes in a religiously strict region in Norway', in *Religion*, 39 (2009), 126-131, (p. 126) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2009.01.001>.

130).

The state church used to be a powerful institution in Norway, although Christianity as a state religion might be said to have been discontinued in 2012,⁵⁴ because many of its secular opponents considered it reactionary. Since then, Norwegian society has become more diverse and multicultural, and there are now many different and significant religions. The Christian church, nevertheless, still holds an important position in Norway, as Article 16 in ‘The Constitution of the Kingdom of Norway’ states:

All inhabitants of the realm shall have the right to free exercise of their religion. *The Church of Norway, an Evangelical-Lutheran church, will remain the Established Church of Norway and will as such be supported by the State.* Detailed provisions as to its system will be laid down by law. All religious and belief communities should be supported on equal terms (my italics).⁵⁵

The respective municipalities have now largely taken over the financial burden of supporting the state church, and though one notes a possible contradiction between the italicised sentence and the final one, around 65 percent of the Norwegian population identified themselves as members of the Church in 2021.⁵⁶ The Church of Norway thereby still holds a ‘special position’ and is given sufficient resources so it can perform duties across the country and provide services for people in all situations of life.⁵⁷

It is therefore possible to argue that being born in the Bible belt is a small part of the explanation and the inspiration behind Knausgaard exploring Christian themes. He most certainly derives, as mentioned in the first chapter, from a modern secular Western democracy, made wealthy in the 1970s by the recent discovery of vast reserves of oil, while still a progressive welfare state. Simultaneously, he must have been aware of the conservative Christian forces that remained – and to this day – still exist in many parts of Agder. The most prominent conservative personification in his childhood was perhaps his father, and according to the *My Struggle* volumes, his childhood was affected by his almost God-fearing relationship to his father. His father did not appear particularly Christian, however, but he

⁵⁴ The discontinuation of the state church was based on a unanimous vote four years prior by the previous government, referred to as the ‘state-church-settlement’. It was then decided by the next government in 2012 to realise the vote and constitutionalise it.

⁵⁵ ‘The Constitution of the Kingdom of Norway’, Lovdata, <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1814-05-17> [accessed 28 March 2023]

⁵⁶ ‘About the Church of Norway’, Church of Norway, <https://www.kirken.no/nb-NO/church-of-norway/about/> [accessed 28 March 2023].

⁵⁷ ‘Den norske kirke’ (‘The Norwegian Church’), Regjeringen <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/tro-og-livssyn/den-norske-kirke/id1217/> [accessed 28 March 2023].

certainly had the authority of a God-like figure to his son, and his all-seeing parental and judgemental associations made him similar to the Old Testament God, in Knausgaard's imagination.

Knausgaard's relationship with formal religion in the *My Struggle* volumes tells of a typical Norwegian who attends church only on occasions such as weddings and funerals. In an interview, he says he do not consider himself a religious person, but had told 'a very young person', most likely one of his children, that he believes in God.⁵⁸ In another interview, he tells of the only time he went to confession after his father had died: '[i]t almost gave me a new understanding of religion, of what it could be.'⁵⁹ In *My Struggle 5* he elaborates on this moment:

it was as though something had let go, as though I was no longer carrying this, what I had been carrying, myself. We had only talked about dad and me, but the fact that he had been there and listened, as he had to be there and listen to countless people who unburdened themselves to him, from the depths of their difficult lives, meant that it hadn't only been dad and me we had talked about but life: this was how this life had turned out. Dad's life, it had turned out like this. (Knausgaard 2019: 627)⁶⁰

This epiphany made him baptise his children, not for God, but for the 'social part' (see footnote 59). We have already established that Knausgaard took an interest in angels after expanding on an old crabbing anecdote, by writing that his father lied to him about seagulls being angels.⁶¹ Another insight is offered by Liane Carlson in her reviews of two novels by Knausgaard's ex-wife, the Swedish author Linda Boström Knausgaard, who Carlson points out is sensitive 'to the weird, violent, hidden desires that draw so many to the study of religion' (Carlson 2021: 182).⁶² It is perhaps for the same reason that Knausgaard himself is lured to religion. Carlson also points out the unambiguous and undeniable presence of religion in Boström Knausgaard's writing, compared to 'religion-qua-community, religion-qua-

⁵⁸ Joshua Rothman, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard Looks Back on "My Struggle"', *The New Yorker*, 11 Nov. 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/karl-ove-knausgaard-the-duty-of-literature-is-to-fight-fiction> [accessed 29 March 2023].

⁵⁹ Tim Adams, Karl Ove Knausgaard: 'I don't know why more people don't read Mein Kampf', *The Guardian*, 16 Sept. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/food/2018/sep/16/karl-ove-knausgaard-i-dont-know-why-more-people-do-not-read-mein-kampf> [accessed 29 March 2023].

⁶⁰ Knausgaard, *My Struggle 5: Some Rain Must Fall*, p. 627.

⁶¹ From *My Struggle 5: Some Rain Must Fall*: 'I described the night as I remembered it with one exception: the seagull Dad shone his flashlight on had a pair of small, thin, armlike growths beneath its wings. They had once been angels, I had him say, and then I knew; this is a novel. Finally, a novel' (p. 622).

⁶² Liane Carlson, 'Review Essay: The Novels of Linda Boström Knausgaard', in *Religious Studies Review*, 47 (2021), 181–183, (p. 182), <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.15201>.

transgression, religion-qua-consumerism, religion-qua-baseball, or any other dozens of ideas those in our profession like to lay claim to as really, at the base, religion, if you squint at them around the right stack of books' (Carlson 2021: 181-182). Carlson argues that anything that brings people together today can be labelled religious, but the Knausgaard interest seems more direct and emotional.

Knausgaard's time at the University of Bergen studying art history and literature might also have shaped his curiosity in exploring the Bible. His writings often describe paintings with religious motifs, as previously discussed when Bellori sees the fresco painting in Padua, or when the narrator meditates on 'Three Archangels with Tobias', by Francesco Botticini, in one of the essays which are interspersed throughout *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*:

Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, three of the archangels, are walking in a landscape, presumably Italian, in the company of a young boy. True to tradition, Michael is clad in armour, in his hand he holds a raised sword, and yet there is nothing mighty or awesome about him, rather the contrary: his face is soft and boyish, his cheeks a trifle fat, his hair long and well groomed and he has chosen red shoes to go with his black armour, a matching gold-embroidered red cape and a red scabbard with a gilded point, giving the impression of a vain young nobleman rather than a victorious warrior with all the angels of heaven under his command. (Knausgaard 2009: 22-23)

In the same painting, Knausgaard writes about Gabriel:

He knows he is being observed, he knows that he looks good, but is indifferent to it all. At the same time there is also sorrow in his eyes. It makes his expression enigmatic. Why is he looking at us like that? He must want something of us. But what? (Knausgaard 2009: 23)

These hints of ambiguity in the painting feed into Knausgaard's perspective for his own characterisations on angelic decline. The way Botticini had portrayed the archangels served as inspiration, but must also have given the author a deeper understanding of what it would be like – an authentic and complex emotional experience, generally so central in Knausgaard's writing – when describing Bellori meeting the angels. One could thereby assume that Knausgaard has an *iconographic* interest, and this interest in discussing the aesthetics of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Catholic iconography, generally can be said to be another of the reasons for his captivation by the Biblical narratives and personalities.

Another thing worth considering is Knausgaard's philological focus on Bellori's

unsuccessful opus *On the Nature of Angels*. Knausgaard is fascinated by Bellori, who was a young and obsessed scholar of the latter half of the 16th century:

perhaps, he more closely resembled the obsessed young men who, in the first decades of the modern age, ensconced themselves in rooms in great cities all round Europe to think, nervous and tormented and constantly on the edge of breakdown, as portrayed by Dostoyevsky and Hamsun, rather than the image we have of those full-blooded, expansive, life-affirming Baroque characters, but the fact remains that it was here, in the transition between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, that this particular type emerged for the first time. (Knausgaard 2009: 26)

Henrik Vankel undoubtedly also fits the description of a Dostoyevsky- or Hamsun-inspired protagonist, as in the final chapter we find him isolated out on the Norwegian coast, on the verge of a breakdown. Knausgaard compares Bellori to some of his more successful Baroque colleagues, such as Bruno, Descartes, Pascal and Newton: ‘For all of them knowledge was indissolubly linked to their individual lives, severed from the general context it had originally been won from, with all the resultant loneliness, religious crisis and megalomania’ (2009: 26). Knausgaard points out how Descartes spent an entire winter indoors completely alone when working on the idea of the self, and refers as well to Newton’s lonely student days at Oxford (Ibid). Knausgaard further draws a parallel to Shakespeare: ‘No-one has captured their state better than Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (1604). Hamlet’s tragedy is knowledge, it’s this that has torn him away from his surroundings, and it is his hopeless attempts to re-connect with them that the play deals with’ (Ibid). He brings up another vital thought some pages later to bring everything together: ‘what if Bellori’s ideas had won through, and Newton’s had sunk into oblivion? We’d now be living in a different world’ (2009: 29). This is somewhat what Knausgaard sets out to do in *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, in order to see what happens – but – as he implies – it all comes back to Hamlet, and how the weight of obsessively seeking out the truth in isolation ultimately proves fatal for both Bellori and Vankel.

3.2 The Fratricide

In the essayistic prelude to the chapter on Cain and Abel, Knausgaard emphasises the fact that Adam and Eve had experienced the Garden of Eden, while for their children Cain and Abel, this was a hidden mystery: ‘For the next generation, on the other hand, the opposite would

have been true. For them, life in the valley was the real one. If they looked with longing at the forests bordering the Garden of Eden, it was the longing for the unknown that filled them' (Knausgaard 2009: 45). As it says in the Bible, Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden, and the Lord placed Cherubim outside to guard it, and equipped them with 'a flaming sword, which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life' (Genesis 3. 24). Knausgaard's narrator therefore intimates that Cain and Abel must have looked at, and thought about, the Cherubic light with a sense of wonder and yearning, and this is especially true for the younger brother Abel. The narrator assigns further characteristics, such as Abel's curiosity, based on fragments of apocryphal writings found outside the Mesopotamian town of Mari in 1954, where Abel had made camp close by to where the Cherubim guarded the Garden of Eden: 'No more than fifteen lines of the [Mari] narrative remain; it stops dead as if on a precipice with the sentence *And Abel saw the light of the angels*' (Knausgaard 2009: 44). Abel is the curious and vigorous younger brother, handsome and always in good spirits, and according to Cain, favoured by his father. Cain, on the other hand, is more withdrawn, quiet and awkward, and prefers to be left alone. Knausgaard has chosen to let the story pan out over a six-month period where Abel is 16 years old, and Cain is 18 years old.

It is perhaps not insignificant in this regard that Knausgaard's older brother, Yngve, is also two years older than him, something he touches on in an interview with *The Atlantic*:

I wrote my own version of the Cain and Abel story because I wanted to write about brothers. There's a lot of me and my brother in that retelling of the story. I've always been interested in writing about all those mixed feelings brothers have: your jealousy, and hatred, but always a kind of unremitting love. My brother could do anything he wants – but no matter what kind of horrible thing he does, he would still be my brother. And I think it's the same way with him. (Fassler)⁶³

By meditating on the Biblical fratricide through his own experience of brotherhood, he manages to extend and flesh out the Biblical original (which is more or less only a page), giving greater depth to Abel and Cain, and nuance to both of the characters. One can think of this in two ways: Knausgaard is exploring other outlets for autofiction through Biblical narratives; Knausgaard finds that certain Biblical narratives contain universal truths about familial relationships, though this is not necessarily literal: it is not that brothers are

⁶³ Joe Fassler, 'Karl Ove Knausgaard on the Power of Brevity', *The Atlantic*, 28 Apr. 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/04/karl-ove-knausgaard-on-the-power-of-short-stories/391658/> [accessed March 30 2023].

homicidal, but that they can experience extremes of affection and dislike, especially as young adults. Their complex rivalry and love are recognisable, and as the story progresses, one gains a certain sympathy and understanding for Cain and his suppressed sensibilities. Knausgaard is not the first author to re-explore this siblinghood: John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952) also uses The Bible as hypertext, and the novel re-explores the fall of Adam and Eve and two generations of sibling rivalry which evokes that of Cain and Abel. One of the protagonists of the novel, Steinbeck's grandfather, Samuel Hamilton, points out the timeless notion of the fratricide: 'We are Cain's children. And isn't it strange that three grown men, here in a century so many thousands of years away, discuss this crime as though it happened in King City yesterday and hadn't come up for trial?' (Steinbeck 2002: 268).⁶⁴

Knausgaard opens the chapter with Abel looking at the 'glow from the cherubim in the sky' which hints at his fate, as he will eventually seek out the angels, a meeting that will forever change Cain and provide him with a motive for killing his brother (2009: 47). The setting of the Norwegian countryside is established early on as Knausgaard describes Abel's surroundings:

The undulating cornfield with its greyish, dusty surface which, here and there, glimmers almost golden in the sunshine. The lush crowns of the trees that grow between the field and the encircling mountains, on the opposite side of the valley they seem to be one single band of green, on the slope close to him picked out in individual species: *aspen, alder, oak, willow, pine, spruce*. (2009: 46, my italics)

The trees listed here are typical of a Norwegian or Northern European climate, and the scenery described is also recognisably Norwegian.⁶⁵ Cornfields, woods, and mountains make up the landscape. The family residence is a classic Norwegian farm:

They lay on a slope fringed by trees, mainly pines and birches, and at that distance, with their rough timber walls and grass-covered roofs, they were difficult to discern from the

⁶⁴ In Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952) we see a similar dynamic between the half-brothers Adam and Charles, when Adam's birthday present for his father is more appreciated than Charles' more expensive present, which resembles Abel and Cain's respective sacrifices to the Lord (p. 29). Charles' jealousy leads him to try to kill Adam, but Adam survives (p. 30). Adam later settles on a farm in the Salinas Valley in California, trying to create his own Garden of Eden, and he also names his twin boys Cal and Aaron, after Cain and Abel, as Cal grows up with a mysterious darkness within him (p. 132–270). Salinas was Steinbeck's homeplace, and he also – just as Knausgaard – sets his hypertext in a familiar place with familial characters. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, (Penguin Books, 2002).

⁶⁵ For a guide to Norwegian trees, see: Kjersti Bakkebø Fjellstad, 'Trees come to life', in *Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research* <https://www.nibio.no/en/news/trees-come-to-life> [accessed 14 April 2023].

surrounding landscape. Paths criss-crossed the ground between the buildings and behind them lay the arc of a cart-track leading to the barn bridge. (2009: 58)

Their farm is even painted red, a specific trademark of most Norwegian farms: ‘the white-painted window mouldings stood out against the red of the walls’ (Knausgaard 2009: 58). We get a first hint of the brothers’ competitiveness as Abel mocks Cain for not being able to swim, while people stand around laughing, Abel ‘stood there with his arms hanging by his sides, suddenly they seemed grotesquely long and then, as he started to walk, he let out several gruff, inarticulate sounds, and went from being his brother’s living image to a simpleton’ (Knausgaard 2009: 62). Cain starts to cry which makes Abel regret his mockery, and he throws himself crying into Cain’s arms (p. 64).

When the brothers are sent out to look for a missing shepherd, Jared, they find a lamb which has been killed by a bear (p. 71), which is a common problem in Norwegian agriculture, as farmers in certain areas of Norway allow their sheep to graze freely in the mountains for most of the summer months. They find Jared a while later, and he has been brutally attacked by the same bear, but when they start carrying him back it turns out he is still alive (p. 76). Cain wants to kill him to end his suffering, but Abel instead proceeds to stab Jared slowly in his eyes:

The split made by the knife increases as the blade is pushed in, and in a few seconds has divided the eye in two.

‘What are you doing!’ says Cain. ‘Push HARD, for God’s sake, HARD!’

Abel looks up at him and pulls out the knife again, wipes the blade on his trouser leg and presses it with equal care against the other eye. Filled with anger, Cain rushes at him to get him off. But this time Abel is ready. He rises quickly, grabs his charging brother by the chest and throw him to the ground. Then he squares up with his knife pointing towards him.

‘What’s up with you?’ he says. He’ll be dead in a few minutes anyway.’ Cain, who’s lying on his back, sits up, supporting himself with his arms.

‘He’s suffering,’ he says. ‘Please, Abel. Put him out of his misery.’ (Knausgaard 2009: 77)

Abel further ‘puts his hand into the wound in Jared’s side, feels the bowels sliding against his fingers, and tries to push them upwards, to get hold of the heart if possible, while with his other hand he feels the pulse in the neck’ (Knausgaard 2009: 78). We here get the first shocking indication of Abel’s sense of wonder, as his curiosity makes him forget – or perhaps

not know – what is right or wrong. Knausgaard may be suggesting that, as human beings are relatively *new* in this scenario, Abel may just be inquisitive: or he is suggesting that human beings have this capacity to inflict suffering onto each other, right from the beginning. He is performing a kind of autopsy before the fact, as if he is somehow trying to understand how the elements of a body look under close scrutiny. But Jared is alive: Abel's inability to empathise with his victim's suffering suggests a hidden side to certain human beings that corresponds to the idea of original sin, or *innate depravity*.⁶⁶ Human beings are capable of almost causal acts of evil.

Knausgaard complicates the Biblical original, as his version of Abel is no innocent, model child, and Cain is the one who is most capable of compassion and empathy. It is Cain who eventually brings Jared's suffering to an end, and then carries him down and buries him at night, instructing Abel to stay behind and bring the sheep down the following morning (p. 80). When Abel returns,

[h]e was received like a hero, and responded to the accolade by telling a hero's tale. He knew that Cain neither could nor would correct him, and each time he said something that deviated considerably from the actual chain of events, he would glance smilingly over at his brother. (Knausgaard 2009: 82)

Cain's psyche is tested as Abel is given charge of the sheep, and Cain is *actually* happy for him, but his behaviour makes it look like the opposite to the people around him:

he knew that everyone suspected him of the opposite, and this suspicion, which bombarded him from every corner, gave him an exaggerated awareness of himself; it felt as if he was already guilty, and this feeling of guilt eclipsed his radiance. (Knausgaard 2009: 82)

Abel spends the next six months up in the mountain with the sheep, and returns for Midsummer's Eve (p. 83).⁶⁷ Abel and Cain get drunk and Cain saves Abel who attempts to drown himself (p. 98). The following day Abel returns to the mountains without a word and Cain finds himself constantly thinking about his brother:

⁶⁶ 'Total depravity - the doctrine that humankind's nature is totally corrupt as a result of the Fall', *Collins Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/total-depravity> [accessed 14 April 2023].

⁶⁷ Midsummer: 'a holiday celebrating the traditional midpoint of the harvest season and the summer solstice (June 20 or 21), the longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. Midsummer is celebrated in many countries but is synonymous with Scandinavia, where it is observed as a national holiday in Sweden and Finland', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Midsummer-holiday> [accessed 14 September 2023].

Each evening Cain would mount the little hill behind his house and watch the flames that stood out so clearly against the black heavens. The thought of Abel would often come to him then, and he let it. They shared the same fascination with the cherubim, but whereas Abel wanted to go there, for Cain it was enough to watch them from here. (Knausgaard 2009: 109)

Some time later Cain is summoned by his father because Abel has come down from the mountains, but is not himself, and is strapped to a bed because of hysterical fits (p. 117). Cain notices a scar the length of Abel's spine, which looks like a brand (p. 120). We later learn that this is connected to his confrontation with the Cherubim guarding the path to the Garden of Eden. Abel comes round on the day of the harvest festival, and hurries out to fetch the lambs he is sacrificing. Cain watches uneasily as Abel proceeds to cut the throats of one lamb after the other: '[f]rom the even pulsing that pumped the blood out, Cain could see that the first lamb was still alive when the second one was hurled on top of it' (Knausgaard 2009: 125). This scene echoes the killing of Jared, where Abel now instead slaughters his lambs in an unusually chilling way. Abel tells Cain that he has seen the cherubim, which could explain the fits he has been having, and he has found another way into the Garden of Eden, which he plans to explore after the harvest festival (p. 126).

While Abel sacrifices his lambs, Cain brought corn, potatoes, carrots and onions – the fruits, as it were, of his labour, but having less status than Abel's lambs. Abel senses the presence of God, while Cain sees nothing:

No-one had seen God in their lifetime. The tale that he had walked amongst the trees in the Garden of Eden and spoken to mankind belonged to another age: to them God was everywhere and nowhere. God was in animals' eyes, in the flames of the fire, in the earth's darkness. (Knausgaard 2009: 127)

A flame then appears and devours Abel's lambs, and a pain shoots through him, which makes him cry out, while Cain stands there with his sacrifice untouched: 'The fact that God had accepted Abel's offering could only mean that Abel was chosen and elected by God. At the same time there was another connection, that between the brand he must have got from the cherubim and the same sacrifice' (Knausgaard 2009: 128). Again, the narrative aligns itself with the Biblical one, at least outwardly: Abel's sacrifice is preferred by God.⁶⁸ It was Cain's

⁶⁸ 'And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground and offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering' (Genesis 4. 3–4).

understanding that the brand on Abel's spine and God's force shooting through Abel were connected – God may have accepted Abel's sacrifice – but: 'God's reward was also a punishment' (2009: 128). Cain's justification for slaying his brother was based on what Abel had told him after Cain had saved him from drowning. Cain thought Abel knew he would be rescued in time:

He'd put his life in Cain's hands that time. And because he knew Cain better than anyone else, he knew, that Cain, would never ask for the debt to be repaid on his own account. But the reason he must have put it that way was his wish that Cain, at some point, might do so on his, Abel's, account. (Knausgaard 2009: 132)

Just as certain paintings inspired Knausgaard's exploration of Bellori's story, the contents of the Mari scripture have inspired Abel's narrative, thereby legitimating the angelic presence in this story: this also provides Cain with a clear motive for killing his brother. Abel's curiosity is linked with his constant longing to explore the Cherubic light, and when he goes too far and faces the Cherubim, he is permanently scarred by it. Abel spends long periods isolated in the mountains (which again evokes Hamlet and the universal danger of knowledge in solitude); he orchestrates a drowning accident so Cain can rescue him, and then effectively plots how Cain can go on to fulfil Abel's death wish. Add this to Abel's torture of Jared, and Abel constantly outshining Cain (which part Cain did not mind so much, while still sensing the way this is perceived and misinterpreted by others), and Knausgaard's version has a solid foundation for challenging, expanding on, and realising the potential of the ethical complexity of the Biblical original. Even though Abel is sixteen, there is an almost childlike curiosity to him and we thereby sense a moral ambiguity in his actions, as, for example, when he cuts Jared while he is still alive. His age might also indicate a certain ambiguity, as he is the younger brother of Cain, 18, who would today be regarded a man, and thus Abel might still feel caught between childhood and adulthood. This nonetheless makes him cross the boundaries of his own innocence, whether he is fully aware of it or not.

Cain, on the other hand, is given quite the moral overhaul, or a kind of reconsideration by Knausgaard, which makes the whole story even more tragic when we know the final outcome. Cain is humanised, and given more complex motives and traits than the flatter character of the Bible (though the element of bitterness and jealousy are still there). He shows a special tenderness towards Abel (and vice versa), especially when Abel has convulsions; but we also get a fair share of arguments between the two, as well as some reconciliation which put together, provide the story with emotional depth and subtility. Abel's trespassing into

Cherubim territory earned him the glory of God, but it simultaneously marked the beginning of the end for him.⁶⁹

It is also worth mentioning that the search for causes and effects behind an evil act, has become an integral part of Norwegian culture. The crime novel genre, Nordic noir, has a vast and devoted readership in Norway, as well as overseas. Knausgaard's exploration of original sin or innate depravity evokes some of what have made Nordic noir so popular, although *A Time to Every Purpose under Heaven* would overall not fit into the crime novel category, it can partly nod to the Nordic inquisitive focus on crime. There is perhaps something enticing about murder for law-abiding citizens, considering its illegality – both by law and in scripture⁷⁰ – and perhaps because it always has been there ever since the first fratricide.

After concluding the chapter on Cain and Abel, Knausgaard's narrator asks poignantly:

[a]nd what is really meant by *When the Lord saw that man had done much evil on earth?* How were they evil? Cain killed his own brother – is there anything more evil than that? No, there isn't, and so the question arises: if man was capable, right from the start, of killing his own brother, why was it that God waited sixteen hundred long years before exterminating them? (Knausgaard 2009: 140)

This leads to the biggest chapter of the novel, which deals with the years and the days leading up to the Great Flood, where Knausgaard depicts another siblingship – that of Noah and Anna.

⁶⁹ Cain then, as the story goes, goes on to kill Abel, and is marked by God, so whoever harms Cain will be avenged sevenfold, and he is forced to flee and restlessly walk the earth to pay for his sin: 'And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him' (Genesis 5. 15). The narrator then moves on to depict the Genesis flood.

⁷⁰ 'Thou shalt not kill' (Exodus 20. 13).

4 The Great Flood

4.1 Anna

Based on the list of Adam's descendants, the narrator calculates that there is a gap of about 1600 years from Cain killing Abel to the great flood that is not accounted for in the Bible (p. 139). Although the Lord has not revealed himself to people since expelling Cain, the setting of the great flood takes place in the same area where Abel and Cain resided, so that 'one could go to the mound in the field and know that *here* Cain and Abel sacrificed to God, one could go to the end of the field and know that it was *here* Cain killed Abel, one could turn to the pass and know that *that* was the way he fled' (Knausgaard 2009: 144). God was hitherto everywhere and nowhere, just as he was considered in Abel and Cain's time before he showed himself to them. People then multiplied, and the flames of the cherubim continued to glow and guard the Tree of Life, until one day they simply vanished. Instead of Abel and Cain, Knausgaard now looks further at the estranged siblings Anna and Noah.

As the famous scriptural story goes, Noah built an ark to safeguard his family and numerous pairs of animals spared by the Lord, in order to start over, while the rest of civilisation was wiped out.⁷¹ Knausgaard opens the chapter with Anna, 'the middle-aged farmer's wife' who enters a cowshed early in the morning: 'Her name was Anna, and she'd taken over the farm from her brother more than twenty years before' (Knausgaard 2009: 145). We are still in a West-Norwegian agricultural setting, a mixed landscape of farms, villages, fjords, and mountains, as we then learn of the siblings' 30-year estrangement: 'She thought of her brother, who'd left them. Without a word to them he'd slunk off one evening, many years ago. He lived only a few miles away, high in the side valley she looked up at each morning, but she still hadn't visited him' (Knausgaard 2009: 147). Her brother's sudden exit, and the fact that she still had not gone to see him, or vice versa, tells of a steadfast estrangement. In *My Struggle 2: A Man in Love* (2019), Knausgaard describes the inspiration behind Anna:

During my work on *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* it was Ingrid I had in mind when I was writing about Anna, Noah's sister. A woman who was stronger than all of them, a woman who, when the flood came, took the whole family up the mountain, and, when the water reached them, took them higher until they could go no further and all hope was lost.

⁷¹ 'And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth' (Genesis 6. 13).

A woman who never gave up and who would sacrifice everything for her children and grandchildren. (2019: 480-481)⁷²

Knausgaard pictured his (then) mother-in-law, Ingrid Boström, a Swedish actress and grandmother of Knausgaard's children. She gestalts a matriarchal presence in the Boström-Knausgaard family of *My Struggle*: a cultivated actress who had once worked with Ingmar Bergman, and was a strong, warm, and unifying force in the family, as is the fictional character of Anna. Scripture makes no mention of Noah having a sister named Anna: she is Knausgaard's creation. In *My Struggle 6* (2018), Knausgaard explains the inspiration behind the familiar setting and characters:

It was precisely this countryside I had described in *A Time for Everything* and where I had set the story of Cain and Abel and Noah. The mountains before Ålhus in Jølster and Sørbovåg by Mount Lihesten in Ytre Sogn. My maternal grandparents were in it, and Linda's mother, Ingrid, and Linda and Yngve and I, however all with biblical names I had taken from a family tree and no longer remembered. (Knausgaard 2018: 854)⁷³

Knausgaard and his brother Yngve are closer in terms of character or personality to Cain and Abel, and in the 'Coda' to Henrik and his brother Klaus. His then wife, Linda Boström, is most likely Anna's daughter Rachel, which I will come back to in 'Anna, and the flood'. His grandparents most closely resemble Noah and Anna's parents, Lamech and Milka. In the following passage in *My Struggle 5: Some Rain Must Fall* (2019), Knausgaard, based on what his uncle, Kjartan, had told him, establishes how rooted Knausgaard's grandmother's (Kjartan's mother) was to her kin, the farm and its soil:

Her family was the centre of her existence, and the soil. Kjartan would sometimes say that the soil was her religion, that they were soil-worshippers in Jølster, where she came from, a kind of ancient heathendom they had clad in the language and rites of Christianity. Look at Astrup's pictures,⁷⁴ he would say, all the fires they lit on Midsummer's Eve, that's Jølster

⁷² Knausgaard, *My Struggle 2*, p. 480-481.

⁷³ Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle 6: The End*, (London: Vintage, 2018), p. 854. Apple iBooks.

⁷⁴ Nikolai Astrup (1880-1928) is regarded as one of Norway's most famous painters, known for his paintings of Midsummer's Eve bonfires and other landscapes from his home district of Jølster. For an overview of his paintings, see: < <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/collection/object/NG.M.02188> > [accessed 26 September 2023].

folk for you, they dance around the flames as though they were their gods. (Knausgaard 2019: 187)

It is important to recognise that this is not a *roman à clef* – a novel where the characters and events are based on real people – it is more dynamic: Knausgaard inserts these characters, in a way, to *improve* or expand the Biblical narrative, allowing us to see what those left behind experienced. This can be seen as a critique, a suggestion that the Bible *lacked* this kind of compassion or wider empathy. And it is interesting that the character is female too, so that at a personal level, it allows Knausgaard to explore the position of women in a historical Norwegian setting, where it was the firstborn male who inherited the farm. In this way Knausgaard flips back and forth between settings. Just as with Cain and Abel, we know that only one of the brother and sister will survive and inherit the earth, as the perspective shifts between Anna and Noah, a similar dynamic and fate to that of the fratricide is created – with the cherubim as a backdrop.

In the early morning, Anna notices the departure of the cherubim:

The light from the cherubim was higher and, as she stared at it, she saw that it was moving too. It rose, and slowly separated itself from the ridge. Soon it hung quite discretely in the sky. Then she saw that it wasn't one light, but four. The four lights rose slowly in the western sky, and appeared to move faster the higher they got, twinkling like stars, smaller and smaller, until finally they had vanished completely. (Knausgaard 2009: 148)

She wakes up her husband, Javan, and – without knowing exactly what this departure means – they both agree that it is a 'bad omen' (2009: 148). Throughout their lives, and for all the lives before theirs stretching back 1600 years to Cain and Abel's time, the cherubic light had been an eternal presence outside Eden, and with the angels now seeming to leave, Anna and Javan both fear that it has something to do with the heavy rain. They are right without yet knowing it, as the departure of the cherubim is yet another way of implementing the significance of angelic actions into the narrative of monumental, divine interventions. Javan goes down to the village to hear what other people think of the angels' departure, where someone suggests that it is not necessarily a bad omen, just that the angel's task on earth is simply over, meaning that the Lord finally trusts them (Ibid).

4.2 Noah

Although the angels' task is surely over, it is so for entirely different reasons, and it turns out that the Lord has placed his remaining trust in only one significant person:

His name was Noah, he was the son of Lamech and therefore descended from Seth, but he had relinquished his title to the land. Instead, he had drifted about as a hunter in the forests and mountains for many years, as wary of people as an animal. Finally he settled down, took a wife and had a family, but even this he did in a kind of solitude, as the house he built and the ground he cleared was miles away from the nearest community. (Knausgaard 2009: 151)

God's chosen one is Noah – sparingly, but flatteringly, described in the Bible as a 'just man *and* perfect in his generations, *and* Noah walked with God' (Genesis 6. 9). Knausgaard's Noah lives at a remove from society, and is made a further outsider by his appearance:

Even at his birth it was clear to everyone that Noah had been chosen. His skin was as white as snow, so was his hair, and his eyes were red. When his father, Lamech, saw him for the first time, scripture tells us that he said: *This boy shall bring us relief from our work, and from the hard labour that has come upon us because of the Lord's curse upon the ground.* But he was wrong. Noah was God's chosen, he was right in that, but he hadn't been chosen to comfort them. He'd been chosen to survive them. (Knausgaard 2009: 152)⁷⁵

The Bible, as mentioned, is sparse about the details of Noah's appearance, but Knausgaard has not taken these albino-like characteristics out of thin air. In fact, 'The Book of Enoch',⁷⁶ a part of the *Apocrypha*,⁷⁷ which consists of numerous non-canonical apocryphal writings (whom are included in the Hebrew Bible which in turn makes them *deuterocanonical*), provides a quite detailed description of Noah's albinism:

⁷⁵ 'And he called his name Noah, saying, This *same* shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord hath cursed' (Genesis 5. 29).

⁷⁶ From *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*: 'Some of the texts are so similar to the Bible, and complement it so well, that they might have been cut out of it. This is especially true of parts of the Book of Enoch' (Knausgaard 2009: 408).

⁷⁷ 'Apocrypha, (from Greek *apokryptein*, 'to hide away'), in biblical literature, works outside an accepted canon of scripture. The history of the term's usage indicates that it referred to a body of esoteric writings that were at first prized, later tolerated, and finally excluded. In its broadest sense *apocrypha* has come to mean any writings of dubious authority', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/apocrypha> [accessed September 28 2023].

And his body was white as snow and red as the blooming of a rose, and the hair of his head and his long locks were white as wool, and his eyes beautiful. And when he opened his eyes, he lighted up the whole house like the sun, and the whole house was very bright. (16. 2)⁷⁸

The Book of Enoch also suggests that Noah's father, Lamech, after first seeing his son's unusual appearance, initially feared he had angelic heritage:

And his father Lamech was afraid of him and fled, and came to his father Methuselah. And he said unto him: 'I have begotten a strange son, diverse from and unlike man, and resembling the sons of the God of heaven; and his nature is different and he is not like us, and his eyes are as the rays of the sun, and his countenance is glorious. And it seems to me that he is not sprung from me but from the angels, and I fear that in his days a wonder may be wrought on the earth.' (16. 4-6)

Knausgaard transfers Lamech's fear of Noah in *The Book of Enoch* to the sighting of a dead naphil – a half angel, half man – on display at a market:

The creature was more hideous than he'd expected. It resembled a human being, but was also different somehow. Its skin was pure white, the same as its hair, that was completely white too, and its eyes... well, its eyes...

How was he to explain this to Noah? That this freak that couldn't under any circumstance be afforded the right to live, that this repugnant monstrosity, had the same skin, the same hair and the same eyes as him? (Knausgaard 2009: 222-223)

Lamech leaves out the features Noah has in common with the naphil when describing it to him, and instead focuses on the paradoxical beauty of the creature: 'And that was the most loathsome thing of all, that was what filled everyone who saw it with disgust, that such beauty could be found there, in that grotesque misshapen creature. Do you understand? *It was more beautiful than any human being*' (Knausgaard 2009: 224).

In ways that are similar to the 16th and 17th scholars who are discussed throughout the novel, Noah has an urge to understand and categorise the metaphysical order of things. He classifies 'living things, dead things, the sun/fire, and God' (2009: 200). A problem arises, however, when he tries to categorise the cherubim: 'Angels had links to the sun, dead things,

⁷⁸ *The Book of Enoch* (Charles River Editors, 2018), 16. 2., EbscoHost eBook.

living things, and to God, but didn't belong with any of them' (2009: 229). Noah's peculiar curiosity is linked to his sensitivity and secluded lifestyle, perhaps as a result of his albinism:

His parents assumed that Noah's strange behaviour was the result of his being inside all day long, and simply not having enough to do or think about, so that all his attention was focused on individual events and people. If only he'd been able to go outside like other children, they thought, his attention would have spread naturally, and he wouldn't have needed to cry each time someone raised their voice in his vicinity or gave him a reproachful look. (Knausgaard 2009: 183)

He is also unable to show enough love and affection towards his sister: 'for his over-developed sensibility towards others did not extend to his peers, least of all Anna, whom he always behaved coldly towards when they were small' (Knausgaard 2009: 184). Anna, on the other hand, shows Noah affection, as when she grabs his hand before going off to meet Javan: 'Anna looked at Noah and smiled. When his look met hers there were tears in his eyes' (Knausgaard 2009: 194). After his rare display of affection, Noah retreats to his room feeling contempt: '*What a poor creature I am*, he thought. *What a poor, miserable creature*' (Knausgaard 2009: 195).

Noah's isolation and inability to show affection correspond with some of the characteristics of autism, including an 'inability to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations' (Benaron 2009: 4).⁷⁹ Knausgaard has provided Noah – originally an archaic character – with modern traits. One could further claim that the Biblical narrative overlaps with modern, medical, understandings of behavioural traits in people with Asperger's. As a specialist on Asperger's, Robin Holloway puts it like this:

The Asperger's child usually very much *wants* social interaction with peers, but seems completely *ignorant* of the social skills necessary to bring friendships about. Over time, the Asperger's child develops an awareness of being different from his peers, and he experiences a significant degree of *pain* if he is not accepted by them. This at times eventually leads to comorbid mood and depressive disorders. (2016: 147, my italics)⁸⁰

This is shown in Noah's confused emotional response to his sister's display of tenderness, as he realises his own social shortcomings, although his emotions do signal a certain *want* for

⁷⁹ Lisa D. Benaron, *Autism*, (Greenwood, 2009), p. 4. EbscoHost eBook.

⁸⁰ Robin Holloway, *Asperger's Children: Psychodynamics, Aetiology, Diagnosis, and Treatment* (Routledge, 2016), p. 147. EbscoHost eBook.

love and interaction. The point again is that Knausgaard invests his characters with modern sensibilities.

As elsewhere in the novel, Knausgaard introduces an element of sibling rivalry: When Noah and Anna's younger brother, Barak, is born, it is described as a blessing, for 'everyone realised that his happiness was due in no small part to the fact that this time the child was perfectly normal. No chalky-white skin, no red eyes. The baby was hale, healthy, and whole: Lamech had at last got a son who could take over from him' (Knausgaard 2009: 184). Even though Noah was the oldest, his condition did not allow him to run the farm, and even though he would inherit the farm, it was implied that Barak would run it. A tragedy, however, occurs before this is set in motion.

Barak, an active child, loved to climb trees: 'Up, up, up, was the motto of his young life. Up wooded ridges and hillocks, great rocks and trees, and sometimes even roofs, although this wasn't allowed. He would balance on the trunks of fallen trees, the tops of stone walls and precipitous rock faces' (Knausgaard 2009: 185-186). One day, Lamech finds Barak lying next to a tree, having fallen down from it, and his injuries are so serious that he dies some days later. Noah realises his father's contempt will not go away, and this is when he decides to leave:

From now on, every time his father looked at him he would think of what hadn't been. Of what he'd lost, of what hadn't happened. Grief over Barak and disappointment in Noah would sooner or later turn into two sides of the same coin. [...] [H]e would go away. It was the best thing for them, it was the best thing for him. He would leave his old life behind him, and start a new one.

A life in solitude was what he decided on out there in the hall. A life unloved, and unloving, was what he would live. (Knausgaard 2009: 253)

Just as with Cain, we see that the death of a much-loved son leads to a kind of self-exile, a wandering on the face of the earth as eternal punishment. While Cain was outlawed in the more literal sense of the word,⁸¹ Noah did not kill Barak, and his exile was self-imposed: it is

⁸¹ 'Outlaw, (formerly) a person excluded from the law and deprived of its protection', *Collins Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/outlaw> [accessed 30 September 2023]. Being exiled, or outlawed, was a severe form of punishment as shown by Cain's fate in The Bible. It was a common form of punishment in the Viking Age and Middle Ages, in England and Scandinavia. In an essay entitled 'Fate', Knausgaard discusses the case of being outlawed in the 13th century saga *Njals Saga*: 'In the saga, a person is nothing outside his or her family relationships; these constitute the essential part of his or her identity, and the strongest punishment this society knew was therefore not the death penalty but condemning a person to live as an outlaw, without contact with others. Being exiled must have been like being nothing, a kind of living death', In *In the Land of the Cyclops*, 'Fate', trans. by Damion Searls (Vintage, 2023), p. 57.

the knowledge that he would never please his father that made him leave. We perhaps get a hint here of the father complex that Knausgaard would become famous for in *My Struggle*, and which he explores more closely in ‘Coda’.

4.3 Anna, and the Flood

With both sons gone, Lamech instructs Anna to find a husband, so that they can eventually inherit the farm,⁸² and she is courted by Javan in ways that were typical of Norwegian farmers in rural areas in the 19th century and earlier:

Most of the holdings had summer farms in the mountains, and in the summer boys would always be roaming. Anna knew that they sometimes went in to the girls at night, but it had never happened to her, she was Lamech’s daughter, she was left in peace, until one night her door opened too. (Knausgaard 2009: 258)

Similar situations are described in canonical works of Norwegian literature such as Olav Duun’s anthology *The People of Juvik* (1918-23) and Sigrid Undset’s *Kristin Lavrandsdatter*,⁸³ in the former when Odin pays Karen-Anna a visit,⁸⁴ or in the latter when Erlend knocks on Kristin’s loft at night.⁸⁵ Anna leaves home and settles with Javan, and she gives birth to twin boys. She finds herself thinking about Noah:

He was the only one of them she really missed. They’d grown up together, and although their characters were very different, there had always been a special intimacy between

In *Njals Saga*, Gunnar is sentenced to exile from Iceland for three years, but he falls off his horse as he is about to leave, melancholically looks back from the hill towards his farm and family, and decides to stay, effectively adopting an outlaw status which eventually leads to his death. Anonymous, *Njal’s Saga (The Story of Burnt Njal)*, 2012, (Overland Park: Digireads.com Publishing), p. 148-149. Apple iBooks.

⁸² But when Anna tells Lamech that she wants to marry Javan he does not accept it. Noah overhears this before he leaves, and tells his father to accept Javan unless he wants to lose another child (p. 255).

⁸³ Duun was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature numerous times, and lost by a single vote to George Bernard Shaw in 1925, while Undset was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1928. List of Nobel Prize winners: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes-in-literature/> [accessed 30 September 2023].

⁸⁴ ‘His heart was beating, up the barn bridge and into the barn [...] She lay there alone sleeping. He sat down next to her. She was frightened at first, she did not recognise him. Finally she made room for him.’ Translated from the Norwegian version: ‘Hjartebankinga syg han med seg, låvebrua opp og inn på lemman [...] Ho låg der åleine og sov. Han sette seg attmed henne. Ho vart redd med det same, ho kjente ikkje att han. Endelig gjorde ho rom til han.’ Olav Duun, *Juvikfolke* (Tanum-Norli, 1987), p. 285.

⁸⁵ ‘It was dark outside when she heard the slow steps outside. He knocked on the door with his cloak over his fists and Kristin got up, and let Erlend inside.’ Translated from the Norwegian version: ‘Det var helt mørkt ute da hun hørte de sakte trin på svalen. Han banket på døren med kappen omkring knokene og Kristin stod op, drog låsen ifra og lukket Erlend inn til sig.’ Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavrandsdotter* (H. Aschehoug & Co., 1991), p. 123.

them. She hadn't felt the intimacy when she lived within it, it was only now, when it was no longer there, that she saw it. (Knausgaard 2009: 293)

They decide to move back and run her father's farm, and they have another child, Rachel, who reminds Anna of Noah, as she was

quite different to her brothers, wary as a bird and every bit as thin. But pretty. There was a lot of Noah in her [...] From a tender age she'd had a penchant for being on her own, but Lamech had her trust. There must have been something in him that she recognised, Anna sometimes thought, that Noah, too, had known. (2009: 297)

Knausgaard describes the first time he saw Linda, in similar terms in *My Struggle 2: A Man in Love*: 'She was thin and beautiful. She had an aura which was dark, wild, erotic and destructive. I dropped everything I was holding' (Knausgaard 2019: 197).

The novel then fast forward to the days leading up to the flood, where Anna moves her family further up the valley as the water is rising (p. 311). We embark on their journey, and once again – as with Cain and Abel – we know its tragic outcome. Anna decides to go over and warn Noah, whom she has not seen for thirty years, but only finds his wife, and the wives of his three sons there, and they do not tell her of his mission (p. 315). The water continues to rise, to Anna's concern:

Yard by yard it worked its way upwards. It was almost as if it were alive, thought Anna. As if it had a will of its own. It slipped in between the trees, as if exploring, only to rise steadily once the ground was covered, until one day the crowns of the trees showed above the grey surface. Then they, too, disappeared. (Knausgaard 2009: 318)

In the midst of their climb to higher ground, Rachel gives birth to a son, and Anna dreads to tell her that the water does not seem to be stopping (p. 331). They notice the ark, which seems to float past them without a crew, like a ghost ship:

They had stared at it for several hours, but as yet had seen no sign of life aboard. The deck was enclosed so it could be that the crew was simply keeping out of sight, but it didn't look as if anyone was steering it, so they assumed it was deserted. The aura of death that clung to it strengthened the assumption. (Knausgaard 2009: 341)

Although the great flood is Biblical and epic, floods are not that uncommon in Norway. The biggest one to date, 'Storofsen', killed 72 people and destroyed around 1000 farms in 1789,

while ‘Vesleofsen’ of 1995, killed one person and damaged 1800 farms, demonstrating that 300-year floods are possible phenomena in Norway.⁸⁶ Farming areas were especially affected, and flooding as an agricultural disaster is therefore not unheard of in Norway. These floods laid vast areas to waste for years to come, as houses, fields and meadows were washed away and many people lost everything they had, including their crops and livestock. A folk song from that time described the apocalyptic notion of the flood: ‘House and farm torn away, with such noise, that it was as if Judgement Day was coming.’⁸⁷ The fact that Noah looks after his own and his animals, is also ultimately very Norwegian – especially from a farmer’s perspective. Although Knausgaard seems aware of historical floodings in Norway, his own flood seems to be a device to show and explore sibling and family relations at times of crisis. Floods, either as a divine action or a force of nature, are equally incomprehensible for an unprepared archaic society, but it is not so much the material destruction that interests Knausgaard, so much as the strains that such catastrophic events – as well as the years and days leading up to it – can have on our relationships and inner lives. He touches on this in *My Struggle 2*:

There are many kinds of wind that blow through man, and there are other entities inside him apart from depth of soul. The authors of the books in the Old Testament knew that better than anyone. The richest conceivable portrayal of the possible manifestations of humanness is to be found there, where all possible forms of life are represented, apart from one, for us the only relevant one, namely our *inner life*. (2019: 169, my italics)

Anna eventually realises that Noah must be aboard. She calls for him several times, and he sits below deck with his head in his hands, before deciding to come out: ‘[h]e just stared at them. Anna took the baby from Rachel and raised it above her head so that he could see. [...] They were going to die. And Noah would live on with the memory of what he had done’ (Knausgaard 2009: 347). The ship sails by, as the chapter tragically concludes with Rachel looking into Anna’s eyes, whilst having to drown her own baby.

The narrator discusses Noah’s destiny and psyche after the flood: again, this is a departure from the Bible, where he is only mentioned once after this: ‘Noah, a man of the soil,

⁸⁶ From a Norwegian article published on the national weather forecast webpage ‘Yr’, entitled ‘The biggest floods in Norway’: Asle Hella, ‘De største flommene i Norge’, *Yr*, (2008) <https://www.yr.no/artikkel/de-storste-flommene-i-norge-1.6233304>. [accessed 25 September 2023].

⁸⁷ Translated from the original Norwegian lyrics: ‘Huus og Gaard bortrive, Med saadant Brag, at Dommedag man ventet skulde blive’, <https://snl.no/Storofsen> [accessed 13 November 2023].

began the planting of the vineyards. He drank some of the wine, became drunk and lay naked inside his tent' (Knausgaard 2009: 349).⁸⁸ One of Noah's sons, Ham, finds him and tells his brothers, and they cover him with a garment. When Noah finds out, he curses Ham's son Canaan.⁸⁹ The narrator implies that Noah's anger is 'the best evidence of Noah's degeneration during these years' (Knausgaard 2009: p. 350). He curses Canaan instead of Ham, and thereby lets Ham's son suffer for his father's sins. The narrator suggests that Noah lives to regret what he has done: 'For Noah, conditions in this new world must have been the very worst imaginable. He must have viewed the burning sun and the scorched, sandy landscape as a punishment' (Knausgaard 2009: 349-350). This is where the foreign sandy desert-like vegetation that Scripture describes fits into the Northern narrator's pseudo-theory: The flood had wiped everything else away. As Noah and his family were the only ones left to tell the tales as keepers of the archive:

Thus Cain and Abel became nomad-like figures who lived and operated in a flat, burning-hot, sand-filled world of olive and fig trees, oases, camels, asses, robes, tents and little whitewashed stone houses. Gone were all the pine trees, all the fjords and mountains all the snow and rain, all the lynxes and bears, wolves and elk. In addition, all the infinitely delicate nuances in the relationship between the brothers were lost over time, such that only the bare details remained: Abel was good, Cain bad, Abel was a shepherd, Cain a tiller of the soil. (Knausgaard 2009: 352)

And Noah thus became a 'just man *and* perfect in his generations, who walked with God.' The narrator suggests that it was too painful for Noah to live with what he had done, hence the sparse details, and his final appearance – drunk and naked in his tent – thereby becomes a significant tell of his psyche, with a fate, quite ironically, similar to that of Cain's, who was marked by God so he would not be killed, and settled in the east of Eden with a wife and children, while Noah's covenant with God assured he lived 350 years after the flood.⁹⁰ The fates of Cain and Noah are in many ways tragedies, underlined by their inner struggles that Knausgaard so excruciatingly amplifies. In the 'Coda', the final chapter of the novel, we finally meet the narrator Henrik Vankel, in his *own* state of seclusion and tragedy, on a remote island on the Norwegian coast.

⁸⁸ 'And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent' (Genesis 9. 21).

⁸⁹ 'And he said, Cursed *be* Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren' (Genesis 9. 25).

⁹⁰ 'And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years' (Genesis 9. 28).

5 Henrik's Struggle

The final chapter fasts forward to the present day and to the narrator, Henrik Vankel, a year into his existence on a small remote island, where he lives a rather ascetical life, reading, taking walks, and fishing (p. 498). Henrik's solitary existence on the island and his reason for being there was a way to escape the shame and consequences of his relationship to his underaged pupil Miriam, and this is straining on his psyche:

events the previous year had forced me to break with the life I'd been living. I'd done something terrible, and the terribleness had become a part of me; sombre and shady, it always lurked in my consciousness, every glance I met, every conversation I had, even if it was only with a supermarket assistant, led my thoughts back to what I'd done, and aroused the same feelings each time: baseness, sordidness, blackness. (Knausgaard 2009: 499)

Henrik's self-imposed exile is similar to Noah's, but his reasons are his own, and in that regard similar to Cain's. Henrik's Nod is a small island on the coast of Norway: 'A place that lay beyond everything, a place that lacked all relevance, a place society would never turn its attention towards. A place with no future, that was what I'd longed for. And now I was there' (Knausgaard 2009: 503). Everything leading up to this has been a kind of *mise-en-abîme*, a story within a story, and this is where Knausgaard intends that his alter-ego Henrik Vankel pens the essays, the pseudo-theory, and the whole novel, evoking the loneliness of some of the scholars he discusses in-between the Biblical stories. Genette (1983) used the term *metalepsis* to refer to 'any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by the diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse',⁹¹ and Henrik the narrator similarly makes this intrusion in the novel's final chapter. The angel discourse reaches its conclusion as the angels' regression have led them to turn into seagulls, and this is linked to the seagulls beginning to appear on the Norwegian coast in the eighteenth century. The divine thereby manifests itself a final time through something typically provincial and Norwegian: seagulls along the coast. It all comes together in an anecdote from Henrik's childhood, when his dad asks him and his brother to go fishing for crabs with him:

This was an unusual event in itself, normally my father never did anything with us, preferring to stay in his office in the basement, silent and sombre and tormented. When he

⁹¹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 234-235.

did come up, he often flew into rages, so that our relationship with him was one of fear and apprehension rather than love. But occasionally he would become mild and amiable, as on this evening, when he came in to us and asked if we wanted to go for a trip on the boat. (2009: 473)

As the three of them sit by a fire later that evening, Henrik notices a dead seagull on the beach, and his dad suggests they go look at it: ““Did you know that seagulls were angels once?” he said. He lied about everything, but his lies were various; this one fortunately was only meant to tease us’ (Knausgaard 2009: 481). They look at it more closely, and Henrik notices some of its human and angelic qualities:

I bent forward. And then I saw it. A tiny little arm, no longer than the tip of my finger, thin as a piece of wire, lay against its breast under the wing [...]

‘They don’t need them anymore. So they’ll disappear eventually. It’s the same as our little toes. They’ll get smaller and smaller, and eventually disappear too.’ [...] Dad got up and took the torch from me. But he made no move to go. Even though he stood in the dark, and I couldn’t see his face properly, I knew he was staring at me. Neither of us spoke. Slowly he turned the torch beam on my face.

‘Are you scared of me?’ he said. (Knausgaard 2009: 482-483)

The encounter with the dead seagull is a profound moment, not only for the way it fits in with the angelic and divine elements in the text, or how this passage started as a framework for the entire novel, but also as a moment of ambivalence between father and son, a complex dynamic, not yet fully explored, but exhaustively treated in the later *My Struggle*. The first-person narration creates an intimacy with the reader, as well as an authenticity, since the anecdotes feel personal, even private, as we gradually get a sense of Henrik’s life – and mental state – on the island. Several of the scenes from ‘Coda’ are reexplored in *My Struggle*, and this seagull scene is referred to in *My Struggle 1: A Death in the Family* (2012):

there is one special occasion that sticks in my memory, one night by Torungen lighthouse under the bluish-black August sky, when the gulls launched themselves at us as we were leaving the boat to make our way across the islet, and afterwards, with two buckets full of crabs, we lit a fire in a hollow. The flames licked at the sky. The sea around us was massive. Dad’s face shone. (Knausgaard 2013: 680)⁹²

⁹² Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle 1: A Death in the Family* (Vintage: 2013), p. 680. Apple eBook. In addition to this passage, in *My Struggle 5: Some Rain must Fall* (2019), Knausgaard describes folding the

Henrik then goes on to mention the death of his father,⁹³ and the effect his dramatic death drive would have, although *what* exactly happened is not mentioned and it thereby casts an ambiguous veil over the final chapter and Henrik's misery:

Fifteen years later he was dead. And so violent were the circumstances surrounding his death that it not only altered our future, but also our past. If he'd died in a car accident or slowly succumbed to illness, everything would have remained as it was, but the wildness of what he finally did had retrospective force, and now in some strange way is present in the whole of our childhood. A kind of coldness has spread through it, something solemn that happened, even the most trivial and humdrum of the things we did. And it's a disquieting thought that not even the past is done with, even that continues to change, as if in reality there is only one time, for everything, one time to every purpose under heaven. (p. 483)⁹⁴

The pondering over his father's death leads to a kind of punchline, and a nod to the novel's title, *A Time to Every purpose Under Heaven*. It is a monumental death that has left a vacuum, something undone, and the past becomes mixed up with the present.

Another passage in 'Coda' that also recurs somewhat in *My Struggle*, is a moment when Henrik sees his father sitting alone at home crying while listening to music:

I wouldn't have done it if I'd known he was there. But now I cupped my hands and bent down. His head was only eighteen inches away from me. He was swaying backwards and forwards to the music, his eyes were closed, tears streamed down his cheeks. Shocked, I

story into the novel: 'I had Yngve, dad and me taking a boat to Torungen one summer's night. I described the night as I remembered it with one exception: the seagull dad shone his torch on had a pair of small thin arm-like growths beneath its wings. They had once been angels, I had him say, and then I knew: this is a novel. Finally, a novel' (2019: 661).

⁹³ In *My Struggle 5: Some Rain Must Fall* (2019), Knausgaard sums up his father's fate: 'He was tormented. He was a tormented soul. I can see that now. He didn't want to live the life we lived. He forced himself. Then he got divorced and wanted to do what he really wanted, and it was even worse, he started drinking and at some point he lost his grip. He simply didn't give a damn then. At the end he was living with his mother. That was where he died. He drank. Actually it was suicide. He wanted to die, of that I'm sure' (2019: 626).

⁹⁴ 'To every *thing there* is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up *that which* is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace' (Ecclesiastes 3. 1–11).

jerked my head back. [...] But it didn't make me feel sorry for him; on the contrary, I only felt even more scared. It made his fists of temper seem even more sinister (2009: 476).⁹⁵

The moment allows a glimpse into another of his father's many sides: additionally, his lack of affection for his family is brought into starker relief by his ability – alone and unseen – to be moved by music. Whether it was a pure reaction to the music, or an outlet for something more personal, is ambiguous, which makes the character of the father, even when dead, such a vital part of Knausgaard's oeuvre.

Henrik goes on to describe all the compulsive thoughts he has developed while living on the island, as he *has* to watch his neighbour get into his boat and drive away, as well as other complexes he develops when taking walks:

Each time I saw him get into his boat, I had to watch everything until he'd disappeared out of sight. I'd developed several similar traits out here: for instance, I had to keep my shoulder moving the whole time when I was walking, it was as if my jacket never sat properly, just as my eyes sometimes began to blink in short bursts, and on my daily trips to the north end of the island, which were always at the same time each day, I had to follow particular routes and perform particular ceremonies on the way, although these compulsive acts didn't trouble me greatly. As long as I obeyed them, they didn't create problems. And why shouldn't I obey them? (Knausgaard 2009: 490)

When he tries to disrupt these compulsions, a feeling of nausea arises, and he often vomits (p. 491). Although he is aware and ashamed of these compulsions, they have a hold on him, as he has surrendered to, and surrounded himself with this sense of shame:

It was ridiculous, I knew it was ridiculous, but there was no avoiding it, my willpower was too weak, and I pressed my hand against the wall of the lighthouse, touched every other fencepost on my way down as I blushed with shame and anger, waited until three waves had risen out by the submerged rock before continuing across the slabs [...] until I reached the headland and was finally outside the alien will's jurisdiction. (2009: 491)

Henrik succumbs to this shame, embraces it, incorporates it, and from there it takes over his life: 'This is the only way I can explain the shameful self-idolisation that occurred during

⁹⁵ From *My Struggle 1: A Death in the Family*: 'Music streamed out of the living room. He was playing it loud, the whole house was full of it. It was Arja Saijonmaa singing the Swedish version of *Gracias a la vida*. [...] He was sitting on the sofa with his eyes closed, his head moving to and fro in time with the music. His cheeks were wet with tears' (Knausgaard 2013: 289).

these years. I was a miserable human being, but precisely by insisting on this wretchedness I gave myself and my life some meaning. That powerful sense of shame must be seen in this light' (2009: 503).⁹⁶ Making meaning out of one's own existence through pure shame is a paradox, and as he briefly contemplates suicide, he finds it pointless: 'shall I take my own life to prove to myself that my despair is genuine? What sort of ludicrous suicide would that be?' (2009: 506). This mirrors another Norwegian contemporary author, Stig Sæterbakken, whose one of many reflections on the same subject point to suicide as 'the wasted act per definition' (2012: 43).⁹⁷ The shame eventually builds up, becomes self-reinforcing, and culminates in a climactic moment of self-harm, where Henrik starts cutting himself systematically with a piece of glass:

I felt a rush of anticipation in my breast, a kind of nervousness. I raised the glass to my lips and emptied the contents in one draught. Then rose and smashed it in one short blow against the work surface. I took the biggest shard up to the bathroom, where I pulled off my T-shirt and stood in front of the mirror. I could have used a knife, but there is something repugnant about that, the edge slips into the skin without resistance, that pain is sharp, as if something is set in motion inside me, impossible to reach, impossible to get hold of. But glass demands force, and its pain is evener, more obvious. (Knausgaard 2009: 514)

In *My Struggle 2: A Man in Love* (2019), a similar moment occurs, when Knausgaard attends a writer's course where he first fell in love with Linda Boström Knausgaard, and he gets drunk at a party thinking she feels the same about him, but she breaks his heart and tells him that she is more interested in his friend. He then goes back to his room, where a similar monumental moment of self-harm is described:

I [...] went into the bathroom, grabbed the glass on the sink and hurled it at the wall with all the strength I could muster. I waited to hear if there was any reaction. Then I took the biggest shard I could find and started cutting my face. I did it methodically, making the cuts as deep as I could, and covered my whole face. The chin, cheeks, forehead, nose, underneath the chin. At regular intervals I wiped away the blood with a towel. Kept

⁹⁶ He repeats this idea of meaning through wretchedness a couple of pages later: 'I was filled with hate for myself and everything about me, but what was this hate, though, other than a new way of embracing myself?' (2009: 505).

⁹⁷ Stig Sæterbakken, 'Umuligheten av å leve', in *Der jeg tenker er det alltid mørkt* (Flamme Forlag, 2012), p. 28-44. Translated from Norwegian: 'Selvmordet er sånn sett den bortkastede handling per definisjon' (2012: 43).

cutting. Wiped the blood away. By the time I was satisfied with my handiwork there was hardly room for one more cut, and I went to bed. (2019: 222)

He describes this kind of procedure once again in *My Struggle 5: Some rain Must Fall* (2019), but this time the scene is set years before in his student days in Bergen, as he sits drunk in a bar with his brother and what later would be Knausgaard's first wife, Tonje, and in Karl Ove's head his brother and Tonje seem to be getting along a bit too well:

He was better than me. She knew that now. Why should she have me when she could have him? [...] I got up and went upstairs to the toilet. I rested my head against the wall. I saw a smashed beer glass on the floor. I bent down, took a shard, looked at myself in the mirror. I ran the shard down my cheek. A red stripe appeared, some blood trickled off my chin. I wiped away the blood, no more came. I ran the shard down the other cheek, this time as hard as I could. I wiped the blood away with paper, threw it in the toilet, flushed, put the shard behind the waste bin on the floor, went out, sat down at their table. (2019: 548)

After both instances, he describes his own shame afterwards after sobering up, as well as the reactions he got to his appearance, as both Linda and Tonje in both instances started crying. The self-harm, which was a means to divert the pain, essentially only leads to more shame. Whether both instances actually happened, or whether he is using a past moment of jealousy and shame in order to describe another – because the moments are similar both in motive and in his state of mind – is impossible to know, and perhaps not the point. *My Struggle* is filled with these moments of shame, as Knausgaard's best friend Geir poignantly says during a dinner party in *My Struggle 2: A Man in Love*: “Cut the man a bit of slack,” Geir said. “He’s made a career of telling people what a failure he is. One wretched tragic episode after another. Shame and remorse all down the line” (Knausgaard 2019: 331). Although he is describing his life and his peers, it is done through autofiction and hyperrealism, and *My Struggle* must therefore be regarded as a series of novels, first and foremost, but the novels attempt to try to stay as true to life as possible.

In an essay on self-harm in literary fiction, the renowned Norwegian psychiatrist Finn Skårderud describes it as ‘paradoxical in its nature. The paradoxical quality of pain is that it can be pain-relieving’ (Skårderud 2009: 775).⁹⁸ In all instances, whether it is Karl Ove

⁹⁸ ‘Translated from the Norwegian quotation: ‘Selvskaden er paradoksal i sitt vesen. Smertens paradoksale kvalitet er at den kan være smertelindrende.’ Finn Skårderud, ‘Self-harm in fiction literature’, in *Tidsskrift for Den norske legeförening*, 8 (2009), 773–775 (p. 775).

the character or Henrik, they replace an inner pain with a concrete physical one, as when Karl Ove escapes to the toilet in the bar in Bergen after seeing his brother and Tonje getting along so well: ‘I felt heavy, I could barely move, I was all black inside. Every glance they exchanged was a stab in my chest’ (Knausgaard 2019: 548). And for Henrik, it is perhaps a compulsion which has been slowly building, having been a year on the island immersed in his suffering. Henrik first cuts his chest, before he continues to harm himself after waiting a few hours until the evening:

after reading for a few hours, I cut up my face as well. I don’t know why exactly. There was something alluring about it. Very alluring about it. But I’d done it before, and knew that the shame that followed would be almost impossible to bear, it was a case of putting as much time as possible between the event and the shame. (2009: 515)

When reading this passage in light of the similar passages from *My Struggle*, one cannot help to think that what he is referring to are these passages that he subsequently would describe in *My Struggle* (2 and 5), and it strengthens the fact that one can read *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* and *My Struggle* as a kind of hypotext and hypertext. As the ‘Knausgaard Reading and Writing Collective’ puts it after reading *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*: ‘We were stunned to observe it conclude with an episode that might as well have been included in *My Struggle* – almost as if *My Struggle* might be imagined as having emerged as a new world from Knausgaard’s biblical meditations in *A Time for Everything*’ (Bender 2022: 14).⁹⁹

As a way to maintain the pain after cutting himself up, Vankel gets into his hot tub, and from there he watches his neighbour carve up a log which has drifted in from the shore, and the novel ends, leaving Henrik in a state of limbo.

⁹⁹ *The Abyss or life is Simple: Reading Knausgaard Writing Religion*, ed. by Courtney Bender and others, p. 14.

6 Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to show Knausgaard's Anglophone significance, and how his obscure novel anticipated his later success: this is especially marked by his use of Biblical narratives, which he re-explores in a familiar Norwegian countryside, with characters injected with modern sensibilities, given internal conflicts and complex familial relationships, influenced by himself or members of his family.

A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven's domestic success ensured it gained Anglophone attention and received more or less positive reviews by some esteemed periodicals overseas.¹⁰⁰ His later success with *My Struggle*, ensured an Anglophone attention towards his authorship as shown in numerous interviews and reviews,¹⁰¹ and the demand for his literary contributions in both *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*.¹⁰² The novel's slow way of unravelling evokes what Sommer, in chapter 1, referred to as slow poetics, or slow fiction. Its narrative design alters between Bellori's angel hunt, the narrator's essay, Abel and Cain, Noah and the Flood, and Henrik's island life. Some of the slow themes which are first introduced here include the angel's deeper meaning and mysterious fate, as Bellori's exhausted search for them is the first sign of subsequent hypertexts: a deep dive into this obscure Italian pseudo-scholar's life, based on his own alleged discoveries in *On the Nature of Angels*. Although using the Bible as a hypotext is not especially original per se, the idea of bringing out the characters' inner lives certainly are, whether it is providing more depth and complexity to certain characters and injecting them with modern sensibilities, as with Cain's conflicted emotional life, or inventing the character of Anna, in order to explore a female perspective in a traditionally male-dominated agricultural society where the oldest male inherits the farm. Depicting Bellori and his ideas are another original idea, and his *raison d'être* is his epiphany about the divine being something changeable, giving way to the angel's decline. The angels play an ambivalent role throughout the novel, trapped between the earthly and the divine, a kind of crossfire, and their fall provides the main plot of structure of the novel beginning with the cherubic light outside Eden in the story of Cain and Abel, which Abel seeks out and is permanently scarred by; moving onward to our encounter with Anna, who realises the light has stopped shining, thus indicating the beginning of the flood; to their final mention in Henrik's modern and secular time, as seagulls along the Norwegian coast.

¹⁰⁰ See chapter 1.3.

¹⁰¹ See chapter 1.2.

¹⁰² See footnote 18 & 20.

Their regression, filtered through the narrator's insights into their mutability, is ultimately bizarre, but also a poignant reflection on modern science and secularism.

Although Knausgaard comes from what can be regarded as the Norwegian Bible belt, an underlying Christian belief does not seem to have been the main motivation behind this project. He is not especially religious, but has a certain fascination for the exploratory power of its narratives, the dramatic quality, in the same way that he is fascinated and moved by literature and art, and it is therefore religion's many dramatic stories about families and relationships, that explain this fascination. There is a universality to Scripture in the sense that it deals with fundamental and often dark aspects of human experience. For all its talk of divinity, it dramatises something basic and recognisable about relationships. This gives Knausgaard a kind of distance, a filter, with which to explore his own, as well as his family's history. Exploring Cain and Abel originated from this: the idea of writing about brotherhood would allow him to recognise himself and his brother in the story. When revisiting the fratricide, it became clear for Knausgaard that its original foreign setting would be too difficult to relate to. His reenactment of the Bible in the Norwegian West coast, in the surroundings of his grandparents' old farm, might partly be a disguised form of autofiction, but perhaps more so a recognition that the selected Biblical narratives tell universal truths about familial relationships: moreover, the rivalry and love between brothers and how these conflicting feelings affect the relationship when growing up. Knausgaard's own brotherhood with his older brother Yngve would be a subject matter throughout *My Struggle*. By seeing things from Cain's perspective, the killer, into whose mind we are given powerful insight, and understand how he lives in the shadow of his younger brother, one cannot help but sympathise with him. Abel, on the other hand, shows worrying sides to his character, sides that one could also claim humanises him, but also antagonises him, demonstrated by his overly inquisitive behaviour towards the dying shepherd Jared, which suggests the idea of original sin. The original, brief Biblical story is complicated by this side to Abel's character. Abel chillingly slaughters his lambs, echoing his treatment of Jared, and we thereby see the famous sacrifice in a new way as well. As a result, Knausgaard achieves a new spin on the fratricide, and though it still retains elements of the jealousy and rivalry of the original, the result is far more nuanced and morally ambiguous.

In Knausgaard's similar treatment of another Genesis story, 'Noah and the flood', he introduces Noah's sister Anna, who manages the farm Noah left behind. Yet again, a tense siblinghood is the essence of the narrative, as they have been estranged for 30 years. Anna, an invention of Knausgaard's, is *inspired* by Knausgaard's then mother-in-law; the pregnant

daughter, Rachel, resembles Knausgaard's then wife, Linda Boström Knausgaard; Noah and Anna's parents resemble his Jølster grandparents, and together they offer a perspective on the ones left behind to die in the flood, although, interestingly, they still die: Knausgaard does not rewrite history in order to let them escape.

The expanded versions of the Biblical stories could be regarded as a critique of the Bible, or an improved version, which at times lacked compassionate insight into Cain or the ones left behind by the flood. Another improvement is the introspective dimension that in our time has become essential in literature. The invention of Anna provides a female perspective, as she inherits the farm that Noah, the oldest male, and their deceased younger brother Barak, was supposed to run. In order to justify or explain Noah's behaviour and decision to enter a covenant with the Lord, he is given modern medical traits, an autism resembling Asperger's, and made even further more sensitive by his albinism.

A devastating final confrontation with the siblings, Noah safe in his ark, with Anna left to die in the mountainside, concludes the nuanced and expanded version of another famous Biblical work.

When reaching the novel's end, the 'Coda' brings the story up to the present and to Henrik Vankel. Knausgaard points out in *My Struggle* that it all started with that crabbing story, a specific moment from his childhood – an anecdote – that with some artistic modifications became a hypotext in *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, and was – as with many other moments of the novel – later referenced in *My Struggle*. This moment in many ways anticipates *My Struggle* as well, which began as a project on writing honestly about his father's death, and it is these small hints touching on his father that – along with Henrik's rising shame and compulsions – make up the final chapter, and tie this obscure novel together.

In conclusion, *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* provides a new avenue into Knausgaard's oeuvre as it anticipates his later success by showcasing his interest in family dynamics. The divine backdrop offers a motive to explore these themes in a fictional, albeit universal and modern light, nodding towards the autofiction of his next project and magnum opus. Knowing more about this lesser-studied text in the light of his later works, gives valuable insights into both.

As a Norwegian studying English literature at a department of English in a Norwegian University, I'm acutely aware of cultural allegiances and influences that are local, national and international. Knausgaard seems especially relevant, then, as a Norwegian writer whose books have received a huge amount of attention in their English-language versions abroad. I

hope to have offered English-language students, teachers and readers multiple insights into Knausgaard's early work and writings overall, from the perspective of a Norwegian whose own culture is in permanent dialogue with Anglophone cultures, at home but from abroad.

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