

*“that which is common to us all”:
Karl Ove Knausgaard as Reader of Joyce*

*“aquilo que é comum a todos nós”:
Karl Ove Knausgaard como leitor de Joyce*

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Abstract: *In his monumental autobiographical series of novels My Struggle, acclaimed Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard devotes a considerable number of pages to discuss James Joyce’s fictional works. In the last volume of the series – The End –, practically the entire body of Joyce’s fiction – from early works such as Stephen Hero and Dubliners to the modernist masterpieces Ulysses and Finnegans Wake – is included in a discussion on the Irish novelist’s literature. Only one among Joyce’s major works is not tackled by Knausgaard in The End: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Nonetheless, it is precisely Knausgaard who writes the preface to a celebrated Centennial edition of Joyce’s first novel in which, amidst other topics, he ponders over what he understands to be “the very essence of literature.” The article aims at highlighting some key aspects of Knausgaard’s take on Joyce’s fictional output and provide enough evidence to support the hypothesis that the Norwegian writer’s conceptualization of the literary phenomenon, including Joyce’s work, is based upon questionable essentialist premises.*

Keywords: *Karl Ove Knausgaard; James Joyce; Fictional Writing; Essentialism.*

Resumo: *Em sua monumental série de romances autobiográficos Minha luta, o aclamado romancista norueguês Karl Ove Knausgaard dedica um número considerável de páginas para discutir as obras ficcionais de James Joyce. No último volume da série – O fim –, praticamente toda a ficção de Joyce – de primeiras obras, como Stephen herói e Dublinenses, a obras-primas modernistas, como Ulysses e Finnegans Rivolta – é incluída em uma discussão sobre a literatura do romancista irlandês. Somente uma dentre as maiores obras de Joyce não é abordada por Knausgaard em O fim: Um retrato do artista quando jovem. No entanto, é precisamente Knausgaard quem escreve o prefácio para uma celebrada edição comemorativa pelos cem anos do primeiro romance de Joyce, no qual reflete, entre outros tópicos, sobre o que considera ser “a verdadeira essência da literatura”. O artigo pretende enfocar alguns aspectos-chave do entendimento que*

Knausgaard tem da produção ficcional de Joyce e oferecer evidências suficientes para defender a hipótese de que a concepção do fenômeno literário, inclusive da obra de Joyce, que o escritor norueguês tem é baseada em premissas essencialistas questionáveis.

Palavras-chave: *Karl Ove Knausgaard; James Joyce; Escrita ficcional; Essencialismo.*

Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard is mostly known for being the author of *Min Kamp* – translated into English as *My Struggle*: a monumental autobiographical narrative that was written and originally published in six volumes between 2008 and 2011. The work encompasses Knausgaard’s personal life, the troubled relationship with his family, his affairs and marriages, his development into a writer, as well as themes related to the making of literature, specific authors, and the arts in general.

From Leyla Perrone-Moisés’s perspective, in and with *My Struggle* Knausgaard develops a “new type of realism” (“novo tipo de realism”; my trans.; 216). Perrone-Moisés points out that the literary form Knausgaard makes use of is presented by the author himself as a reaction to the excess of very much alike narratives which abound on TV, newspapers, and books everywhere. Still, according to the Brazilian literary critic, the thousands of pages that make up the series of novels illustrate Knausgaard’s aim to make the reading of the novels last as long as the situations that are narrated, for “the recollected facts and words are transcribed with a minutia that aims at being integral” (Os fatos e as palavras lembradas são transcritos com uma minúcia que se quer integral” my trans.; 217).

Nonetheless, it is not to any previous realist literary work that *My Struggle* is normally related to, but to a modernist one. In fact, a commonly celebrated feature of *My Struggle* is its supposed similarity to Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. According to Swedish philosopher and literary theorist Martin Hägglund, not only is Proust Knausgaard’s predecessor but the French novelist’s “influence is visible already in the basic form of the project. *In Search of Lost Time* devotes seven volumes, stretching over more than three thousand pages, to a man recollecting his life. *My Struggle* apparently follows the same model.” (Hägglund).

However, there’s yet another modernist novelist that may also be linked to Knausgaard and to his work: James Joyce. Besides the autobiographical aspect present in

substantial parts of both writers' works and the fact that Knausgaard was the one chosen to write the foreword to Penguin's centennial edition of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, there are still some revealing pieces of evidence to support such connection.

For instance, in an interview with *The New York Times*,¹ in 2017, Knausgaard puts Joyce on the top of his list of authors he would invite to dinner; in that same year, in a piece published in *Esquire*² magazine, Knausgaard included *Ulysses* among the three books that have changed his life; finally, in 2016, while participating in Flip, the International Literary Festival of Paraty, Knausgaard, alongside other authors who took part in the event, was supposed to read a passage from his favourite bedside book and he read the first lines of "Calypso", the fourth episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*. If all of these pieces of evidence were not enough to acknowledge the connection between the two authors, there are several mentions to Joyce and to his works in Knausgaard's *My Struggle*. Nonetheless, it is the last volume – *The End* –, that brings the greatest number of pages devoted to a discussion on Joyce.

Knausgaard engages in such discussion amid his considerations on what *New York* magazine editor Ryu Spaeth refers to as "an intellectual history of Western Europe in a search for the conditions that led to Nazism" (Spaeth), i.e. "The Name and the Number", an essay of more than four hundred pages that lies at the heart of *The End*. Arguably detached from the main autobiographical narrative of *My Struggle*, the essay, besides addressing a myriad of other themes, mostly provides Knausgaard with the opportunity to speculate about a central issue in the last instalment of Knausgaard's series of novels: the importance of names. It is Joyce's inventive and unorthodox use of words – and consequently of names – that establishes the links between the Irish novelist's fictional works and the discussion led by Knausgaard in "The Name and the Number".

From *Stephen Hero* to *Finnegans Wake*, and then going through *Ulysses* and "The Dead" from *Dubliners*, Knausgaard tackles Joyce's fictional prose in almost its entirety. The only notable exception is *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, that is never mentioned in any of the six volumes of *My Struggle*. However, in 2016, Knausgaard made up for this significant absence by writing the foreword to the abovementioned centennial edition of Joyce's first novel. Thus, it is genuinely possible to have an overview of Knausgaard's reading of Joyce's fiction, for the Norwegian author has, in fact, written on all of Joyce's novels and on at least one of the short stories from *Dubliners*. Having this in mind, this article aims at arguing that, in contrast to Joyce's anti-essentialist aesthetics, Knausgaard's conceptualization of the literary phenomenon, including Joyce's work, is fundamentally based upon essentialist premises. In order to do so I shall

lay out some of the main ideas about Joyce found in *The End*, the sixth volume of *My Struggle*. Afterwards, I'll focus on some of the key concepts of Knausgaard's foreword to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

In *The End*, the discussion on Joyce's work is triggered by a quotation taken from "Scylla and Charybdis", the ninth episode of *Ulysses*, in which Stephen Dedalus is at the National Library of Ireland expounding his theory on Shakespeare. At a given moment, Stephen thinks the following: "Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past." (238) From Knausgaard's viewpoint, these are "words that contain at once a philosophy of life and a poetics" (pos. 7134), a poetics that investigates "how ideas and the immaterial manifest themselves in the material, proceeding from the idea that they are found only there, in the now, in the bodies and objects that exist here at this moment" (pos. 7136). Knausgaard argues that, according to this poetics, "nothing is overriding and everything is dissolved in the now. This is true of history, it is true of mythology, true of the dead, true of philosophy, true of religion, and especially, perhaps primarily, true of identity." (pos. 7145). Knausgaard believes that, as an outcome of such poetics, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance, the characters "get bigger in a way, embracing both history and the stream of events of contemporary existence, but they also get smaller insofar as what is unique and unexampled about them . . ., the person they *are*, becomes dissolved in it." (pos. 7181, *italic in the original*).

On the other hand, while commenting on *Finnegans Wake*, Knausgaard argues that the language used by Joyce in his last novel generates

a gigantic we extending in all directions, for every single word has part in another, all words are open towards one another, and all that they contain in the way of history and culture and centuries of meaning flows through them. . . meaning departs the language, which accordingly becomes mysterious.
But what is the mysterious? It is that which cannot be understood (pos. 8078).

A little bit further into the narrative, Knausgaard turns to *Stephen Hero* and to the concept of the epiphany presented by Joyce. According to the Norwegian novelist, ever since he formulated his conceptualization of epiphany Joyce developed an aesthetic of his own. Knausgaard asserts the following about such an aesthetic:

There is something almost anti-essentialist about his aesthetic, so unconcerned with the authentic and indeed the transcendental, seeking all meaning and significance in the river of movement and language that flows through our lives each and every day. The language in which he captures this is itself a river, and

like all rivers it has a surface, that part of it that first catches our eye, and below the surface its depth, words beneath the words, sentences beneath the sentences, movements beneath the movements, characters beneath the characters. Everything . . . is moreover always something else, not because the world is relative, but because the language by which we see it is (pos. 10885-10894).

As English academic philosopher Simon Blackburn points out, essentialism is a doctrine according to which “it is correct to distinguish between those properties of a thing, or kind of thing, that are essential to it, and those that are merely accidental. Essential properties are ones that it cannot lose without ceasing to exist” (125). By arguing that “there’s something almost anti-essentialist” in Joyce’s aesthetics and by relating Joyce’s use of language to a river, Knausgaard presents a reading of Joyce’s poetics and of how it applies to his works which is quite accurate and productive, in the sense that Joyce certainly destabilizes essentialist systems of meaning, including the ones conveyed through and/ with names. Moreover, Knausgaard touches on two long-established tenets of Joycean criticism: the “principle of a palimpsest” American literary critic Edmund Wilson writes about in his classic study *Axel’s Castle*, according to which, in Joyce’s literature, “one meaning, one set of images, is written over another” (235); and the concept of the “river-novel” (“romance-río”, my trans.; 27) used by Brazilian poet and translator Haroldo de Campos to describe *Finnegans Wake* and its language.

The following passage about Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom may illustrate what Knausgaard sees as the “almost anti-essentialist” quality of Joyce’s aesthetics:

Stephen is Hamlet. But Stephen is also Telemachus . . . And Leopold Bloom is besides Odysseus also Virgil when in the night he walks side by side with Stephen, which is to say Dante, . . . and he is the writer Henry Flower . . . But he is moreover the father of a son who died, which in this universe makes him Shakespeare, father of Hamnet” (pos. 7118-7127).

One could add that Stephen is also Saint Stephen, Dedalus, Joyce, and none of them. The alter ego created by Joyce encompasses various other names and identities within him. All of them are parts of Stephen, but Stephen is none of them, nor is he the sum of them all. He is and he isn’t all of them at the same time. Bearing such ideas in mind, it is possible to argue that Donald Schüler and Caetano Galindo, awarded Brazilian writers and translators of Joyce, reinforce such statements: according to Schüler, Joyce indeed both “ambiguates the scope of names” (“imprecisa a abrangência dos nomes”; my trans.; 120) and “affronts sacralities” (“afronta sacralidades”; my trans; 221) in his

anti-essentialist approach to words/names; Galindo, on the other hand, asserts that Joyce “managed to create a first person all made up of fragments from other voices. He created an I of multitudes” (“conseguiu criar uma primeira pessoa toda ela feita de fragmentos de outras vozes. Criou um eu de multidões”; my trans.; 357).

For the sake of the present discussion, among Joyce’s main characters, Stephen does seem to be one of the most emblematic cases, for being and not being Hamlet, Dante, Telemachus, Saint Stephen, and Dedalus, but also, and most importantly, for being and not being Joyce himself. If we consider Knausgaard’s take on how our names define who we are – he defends that “I ‘am’ my name, my name ‘is’ me” (pos. 6963) –, who would Stephen be? Who would Joyce be? What’s the status of an autobiographical novel such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*?

At this point it seems opportune to look at Knausgaard’s foreword to the centennial edition of Joyce’s first novel. Let us not forget that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the only major work by Joyce not mentioned in Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*. I intend to argue that this omission wasn’t fortuitous.

Right at the beginning of his foreword – whose title is “The Long Way Home” –, Knausgaard affirms that the vitality which he believes to be still present in Joyce’s first novel is due to the fact that “the author so forcefully strived toward an idiosyncratic form of expression, a language intrinsic to the story he wanted to tell . . . in which uniqueness was the very point, and the question of what constitutes the individual was the issue posed.” (ix). That is, from the very start, the Norwegian author makes it clear that the great merit of Joyce’s debut novel lies in a deliberate achievement of a unique form of expression that was inherent to the story told. More than that, Knausgaard places the issue of identity at the centre of Joyce’s novel.

From Knausgaard’s viewpoint, the most important scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the one in which Stephen Dedalus, while talking to his friend Cranly, says he had an “unpleasant” argument with his mother about religion. Stephen claims that his mother wanted him to make his “easter duty.” Cranly asks him whether he would make it or not. To which Stephen replies with the sentence that, in Knausgaard’s opinion, represents the climax of the “key scene in the book” (xii): “I will not serve” (211).

Why wouldn’t Stephen serve? According to Knausgaard, this is “the novel’s most important question” (xii) and he answers it the following manner:

We are not merely the age in which we live, not merely our language, or the family to which we belong, our religion, our country, our culture. We are this and more, insofar as each of us is an individual encountering and relating to all

of these categories. But what exactly does this individual comprise? What is its nature, and how do we go about capturing and describing it? How do we even see it, when the tools and the instruments at our disposal are precisely of our age, our language, our religion, our culture? (xii).

It is interesting to notice how Knausgaard directs his questionings toward the possibility of perceiving, capturing, and expressing what he refers to as the “nature” of the individual, even if it is a fictional one, such as Stephen Dedalus. Let us continue to explore Knausgaard’s response to his own questioning. According to the author of *My Struggle*,

In order to reach into the essence of the individual, we must break away from that which is common to us all, and this is what Joyce does in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He ventures inside that part of our identity for which no language yet exists, probing into the space between what belongs to the individual alone and what is ours together (xii).

Near the end of his foreword, Knausgaard argues that “the true essence of literature” (xii-xiii), that is supposedly present in Joyce’s first novel, is “the conquest of what belongs to the individual alone, what is special and characteristic, and to Joyce’s mind unique, is also what belongs, and is unique, to us” (xiii). That is, for Knausgaard, the “true essence of literature” would be the “conquest of what belongs to the individual alone” followed by its expression through a unique voice and an equally unique language that paradoxically manifests that which exists in all of us. Knausgaard believes that Joyce managed to do so in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. That being the case, it is possible to infer that Knausgaard’s argument is based on at least two key concepts that clearly disclose an essentialist approach to (Joyce’s) literature: “the essence of the individual” and “the true essence of literature.”

But why would the “novel’s key scene” be the one in which Stephen affirms that he won’t serve? Why would this scene in particular be so relevant? Probably because it conveys Stephen’s intention of resisting that which he refers to as his “pack of enmities” (212) in the 1904 autobiographical text *Portrait of the Artist*, i.e. his historical reality. As it seems, by mentioning “the age in which we live,” “our language,” family, religion, country, and culture, Knausgaard shows every sign of arguing that, as the young Joyce would put it in the essays *Drama and Life* and *James Clarence Mangan* respectively, the poetry of “the true artist” (29) is indeed “at war with its age” (59). In other words, in order to find their artistic singularity, it would be up to the writer to resist all of these elements, detect his/her “essence,” and express it through a singular voice.

Knausgaard’s “Portrait of the Artist” seems to be one in which it is possible to identify a search for an essential(ist) identity amid historical reality. More than that, it should express a quest for an ability of expressing such identity in a way that is not only unique but also capable of relating to other people, to everyone. Whether or not Joyce’s and Knausgaard’s writings manage to achieve such a goal is up for debate, due at least to two factors. Firstly, it is difficult to conceive what exactly is this thing that Knausgaard refers to as “that which is common to us all.” Secondly, a novel is not only made of its author’s “unique” voice, but it is, as Mikhail Bakhtin has taught us, polyphonic *par excellence*.

More than arguing in favour of the presence of a supposed “essence of literature” in Joyce’s first work, what Knausgaard actually does with his foreword is to let us know what are the lenses through which he looks not only at Joyce’s fictional works but at the making of literature in general. Essentialist concepts such as “the true essence of literature” and the “essence of the individual” seem to guide the Norwegian author’s approach to the literary phenomenon. Within Knausgaard’s line of thought, such notions are also linked to a conception of identity susceptible to apprehension and representation. And this is most likely why he sees Joyce’s aesthetic as a whole as “almost anti-essentialist.” The exception to this rule would be *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the only work in fictional prose written by Joyce that is not included in the abovementioned discussion in *My Struggle*.

Joyce’s fictional work is not “almost anti-essentialist,” as Knausgaard puts it. It is completely anti-essentialist, including *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the novel in which we get to follow the development of Stephen Telemachus Hamlet Dante Dedalus Joyce. And if it is true that this multi-layered character that is present in Joyce’s first novel – and in *Ulysses* – defies any idea of having a supposed “essence,” it is also true, as Knausgaard himself points out, that such anti-essentialist layering gets intensified throughout Joyce’s work – having its apex in and with *Finnegans Wake*, for, as Campos argues, “each ‘verbivocovisual’ entity that he creates is a kind of instant-mirror of the work as a whole” (“*Cada entidade ‘verbivocovisual’ que ele cria é uma espécie de espelho-instante da obra toda*”; my trans.; 27).

If, on the one hand, in *My Struggle*, Knausgaard argues that he writes looking for meaning – “What was I even looking for? Meaning. Most likely it was that simple” (pos. 10849) – ; on the other hand, Joyce looks for destabilizing meanings. Knausgaard searches for essences – “the essence of the individual;” “the true essence of literature” –, Joyce abolishes them. As Knausgaard himself has indicated, Joyce wants us to know that there are “words beneath the words, sentences beneath the sentences, movements beneath the movements, characters beneath the characters. Everything . . . is moreover always

something else, not because the world is relative, but because the language by which we see it is” (pos. 10885-10894). Contrastingly, Knausgaard believes he “is” his name: “I ‘am’ my name, my name ‘is’ me” (pos. 6963).

Ultimately, Knausgaard ends his monumental six-volume *Struggle* claiming the following: “I will revel in, truly revel in, the thought that I am no longer a writer” (pos. 19558). That is, after having struggled to find and express essences through thousands of pages, the Norwegian writer feels like abandoning writing. I’d rather stick to the Joyce’s endless “commodius vicus of recirculation” (3).

Notes

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/books/review/karl-ove-knausgaard-by-the-book.html>, access in 15/09/2022.

² <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a56608/karl-ove-knausgaard-books-that-changed-my-life/>, access in 15/09/2022.

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