Intellect is everything

Corn flakes, The Clash, one work by Leonardo: stations in the life and art of Karl Ove Knausgaard

THOMAS MEANEY

Karl Ove Knausgaard

BOYHOOD ISLAND

My Struggle.3


Translated by Don Bartlett

978 1 8465 1 572 2 4

18.03.2014

Rome

“Leocares made an eagle, which is aware of just what it is abducting in Ganymede and for whom it carries him . . . ” Thus Pliny the Elder on the Greek original of the sculpture, of which this version, from the Vatican, is a Roman copy. The statue is one of 120 exhibits, including sculpture, frescoes and writing instruments, assembled for an exhibition, La Biblioteca infinita: I luoghi del sapere nel mondo antico (“The Infinite Library: Sites of knowledge in the ancient world”), in the Colosseum. The exhibition traces the development of books and reading in the Greco-Roman world from the Hellenistic age to late antiquity. Quite how the abducted shepherd boy, stolen away to be cupbearer to the gods, fits the theme is not explained. But the show is certainly an impressive way to present the results of two major Roman archaeological excavations, the discovery of the Athenaean of Hadrian in the Piazza Madonna di Loreto, in 2008, and the results of a dig at Vespuccius’s Templum Pacis. The exhibition runs until October 5.
Knausgaard cannot say for certain: he hazards it has to do with a “certain objectiveity, by which I mean a distance between reality and the portrayal of reality, and it was doubtless in this interlarding space where it ‘happened,’ where it appeared, whatever it was I saw, when the world seemed to step forward from the world!”. After this clawing towards the sublime, the author unleashes a cascade of thought about contemporary art: “The situation we have arrived at now whereby the props of art no longer have any significance, all the emphasis is placed on what the art expresses, in other words, not what it is but what it thinks, what ideas it accrues, such that the last demands of objectivity, the final remnants of something outside the human world have been abandoned. Art has come to be an unmade bed, a couple of photocopiers in a room, a motorbike in the attic. And art has come to be a spectator of itself, the way it reacts, what newspapers write about it; the artist is a performer. Those in this situation who call for more intellectual depth, more spiritual depth, there is understood nothing, for the problem is that the intellect has taken over everything. Everything has become intellect, even our bodies, they aren’t bodies anymore, but ideas of bodies, something that is situated in our own heaven of images and conceptions within us and above us, where an increasing large part of our lives is lived. The limits of that which cannot speak to us – the unfathomable – no longer exist. We understand everything, and we do so because we have turned everything into ourselves.”

“Everything has become intellect” – it could be Hegel we’re reading. And this diatribe comes close to the view Hegel put forward in his own lectures on aesthetics, in 1828: once upon a time, Hegel argued, art was about saints and heroes. After the Reformation, artists became interested in the fact that most people are not saints and that lives are determined by externally imposed constraints. It is here, under the regime of the market, that, Hegel says, “everything that is called the prose of life belongs.” It is impossible to invest subjects in such an age with the complete harmony of content and form required for beauty because of the finite nature of everyday life. But if the moderns cannot rival the ancients in terms of beauty, Hegel still thought they had “liveliness” and “absorption” on their side. The Dutch masters might no longer be able to paint beatific Madonnas, but they could paint a woman knitting socks or receiving a letter, provided they concentrated sufficient power on heightening her vitality. They could, as it were, force meaning into her features with the sheer virtuosity of their brush.

Knausgaard’s project is similar but also crucially different. Both Bartleby and the most ardent of the American existentialists were among the first to make a home in the disen-chanted world. He wants to push his way towards the sublime moments of our earthly existence, but he believes it can be done without virtuosity. I was reading through a Constable book for almost an hour. I kept flicking back to the picture of the greenclouds, every time it called for the same emotions in me. It was as if two different forms of reflection rose and fell in my consciousness, one with its thoughts and reasoning, the other with its feeling and impression, even though they were juxtaposed, expelled each other’s insights. It was a fantastic picture, it filled me with all the feeling that fantastic pictures do, but when I had to explain why, what concrete transitions were at a loss to do so . . . But the moment I focused my gaze on the painting again all my reasoning vanished in the surge of energy and beauty that arose in me. Yes, yes, I heard. That’s where it is. That’s where I have to go. And, somehow, finds the sublime in the everyday: he also finds it in classic pieces of art. He shows us these realms, as well as the realm of love, cannot be fully intellectualized. But unlike Joyce or Woolf, who required a renovation of language to communicate this, Knausgaard prefers to show his narrator bumping up against his own limits of expression. This may be less satisfying to read on the level of the sentence, but it captures something about our reality, and our relationship with art, which seldom moves us in the ways we expect, and whose effects are no less strong for the clichés we use to describe them, just as our passions are no less genuine for our use of borrowed language. “You cannot chase the Holy Grail with a pram”, said Karen Blixen. But Knausgaard shows that, with enough intensity, you can. In My Struggle he turns the居者 into a seasoned oil purveyor, and Knausgaard dramatized the story of art as described by Hegel, and he took it a step further, by telling the story of angels in Western art: at first the angels were depicted as the rare, austere messengers from God; then they gradually became pudgier, decadent cherubim of Caravaggio; then they were near-ly exiled from our consciousness altogether. In Knausgaard’s telling they became seagulls on the Norwegian coast, where only a few residents deign remember their former glory. As they were, there was a chaos. He goes on to mention the Old Testament back down to earth and treat its parables as pitiless reductions of his much richer tapestry. But in My Struggle, the aim is the reverse: to lay out his whole profane existence for sacred inspection. When the writer and his most mundane we feel faint biblical echoes in the background.

Simply on the basis of My Struggle’s length, it seems, critics have compared Knausgaard with Proust. There are some similarities between the two writers: both make a living by writing pieces of brilliance, and both construct fascinating worlds of other people’s thoughts. But in Proust there exists a sense of the picturesque and taste formation: just as Proust goes through the apprenticeships of Bergotte, Elstir and Berna, so Knausgaard worships at the altars of Queen, The Clash and the poet Olav Hauge. (Unlike nearly every contemporary art critic and artist, Knausgaard makes all the movements between so-called high and low culture appear seamless and natural, not so much a joy ride between registries, strenuously exhibited, as a matter-of-fact reflection of his tastes.) But the major difference with Proust is in the way My Struggle is engineered to operate with the reader: Proust carefully curates his effect, while Knausgaard leaves it to the reader to distinguish between the meaningful and meaningless.

Boyhood Island tevisits much of the same territory as the previous two volumes but in a much more sustained fashion. Here Knausgaard looks back on his difficult childhood, while only very rarely returning to the perspective of the writer and father he has now become. This volume contains the longest stretch of total recall that Knausgaard has yet allowed himself, undermining the course of the work. It begins with the narrator claiming that he can’t remember anything of “this ghetto-like state of incompleteness that is what I call my childhood”. He wishes we could assign different Christian names to ourselves during our different stages of life – to fit the story of our childhood, the young adult, the man, the old man. The idea that all these selves are presumed to form some kind of coherent being is absurd to the author. But then comes the plunge where, after saying he remembers nothing of his childhood, Knausgaard suddenly remembers everything: “It is hard to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child.”

Boyhood Island terviberates with the joys and anxieties of early youth, and Knausgaard brilliantly recreates their exaggerated feel. Here he is on his boys’ fixation with construction workers: “What fascinated us most apart from the change in the landscape they wrought were the manifestations of their private lives that came with them. When they produced a comb from their orange overalls or baggy, almost shapeless, blue trousers and combed their hair”. He communicates everything from the loud sound a toothbrush makes in his head to the minute discoveries of childhood that have the force of major revelations: “I came to the conclusion that corrollakes were best when eaten within a week of being purchased, keeping them at room temperature, which Knausgaard dramatized the story of art as described by Hegel, and he took it a step further, by telling the story of angels in Western art: at first the angels were depicted as the rare, austere messengers from God; then they gradually became pudgier, decadent cherubim of Caravaggio; then they were near-ly exiled from our consciousness altogether. In Knausgaard’s telling they became seagulls on the Norwegian coast, where only a few residents deign remember their former glory. As they were, there was a chaos. He goes on to mention the Old Testament back down to earth and treat its parables as pitiless reductions of his much richer tapestry. But in My Struggle, the aim is the reverse: to lay out his whole profane existence for sacred inspection. When the writer and his most mundane we feel faint biblical echoes in the background.

Simply on the basis of My Struggle’s length, it seems, critics have compared Knausgaard with Proust. There are some similarities between the two writers: both make a living by writing pieces of brilliance, and both construct fascinating worlds of other people’s thoughts. But in Proust there exists a sense of the picturesque and taste formation: just as Proust goes through the apprenticeships of Bergotte, Elstir and Berna, so Knausgaard worships at the altars of Queen, The Clash and the poet Olav Hauge. (Unlike nearly every contemporary art critic and artist, Knausgaard makes all the movements between so-called high and low culture appear seamless and natural, not so much a joy ride between registries, strenuously exhibited, as a matter-of-fact reflection of his tastes.) But the major difference with Proust is in the way My Struggle is engineered to operate with the reader: Proust carefully curates his effect, while Knausgaard leaves it to the reader to distinguish between the meaningful and meaningless.