The Gaze of the Other:

Acknowledging Autofiction

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Abstract

Autofiction, an emerging subgenre of contemporary literary fiction, has received attention in the last fifteen years for its depiction of the author's life in a so-called fictional context. There are many viewpoints arguing for what makes something autofiction, but they tend to revolve around the level of factual truth contained in the work. This project argues that the question of how much a work of autofiction resembles an author's life has critics and readers stuck in an unhelpful picture of what autofiction is. Importantly, this picture obscures the type of response these works demand from the reader.

This project argues that we can better understand autofiction by examining the philosophical concepts it brings to life. Through examining the works of two exemplars of autofiction, Rachel Cusk and Karl Ove Knausgaard, this project shows how concepts of subjectivity, acknowledgement, and a rejection of skepticism combine in autofiction to steer away from a way of thinking rooted in narrative and towards something new.

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The question of autofiction

It is no great innovation to write from one's life. So why has autofiction become such a contested area of debate? Autofiction is broadly defined as literature that blurs the boundary between the author's factual life and its fictional representation, but numerous variations on this definition have sprung up, with some insisting that the protagonist or narrator must share the author's name, and others taking the more lenient approach that the author must simply be recognizable—but recognizable to whom and based on what information? Others resist autofiction entirely: Brooke Warner, writing in Publisher's Weekly, states "autofiction is not and has never been a genre" (Warner 2) and Jack Skelley similarly claimed in the L.A. Review of Books that "autofiction is a fiction" (Skelley 1) These writers contend that, since authors have always written with material from their lives, there is nothing different about autofiction. The counter-argument could be made that autofiction writers are doing it in a way that is even more true to life, that blurs the lines more deliberately or explicitly, and that it is a quantitative distinction rather than a qualitative one. Perhaps these authors are deciding that they will tell the truth as best they can, knowing that it will inevitably entail some fictionalizing along the way, but that they will do their best to convey what they have experienced themselves. In an interview, Zadie Smith asks Karl Ove Knausgaard how he so clearly recollected all of the specific details he included in *My Struggle*. He says he didn't—he wrote the books in the same way he writes "fiction."

It may be futile and unnecessary to attempt to define autofiction in terms of a work's relationship to material fact, but it is possible there is something else underlying works of autofiction which could explain the commonalities they seem to share. Rachel Cusk's *Outline*

trilogy and Knausgaard's *My Struggle* are very different works stylistically, but they are often discussed in the same breath when defining autofiction. Cusk wrote *Outline* after receiving backlash following the publication of her memoirs. Knaugaard uses his own name throughout *My Struggle*. I read the commentary about how astonishing it is to read someone using their own name in a supposed work of fiction, and I listened to interviews from Cusk herself speaking about how the memoir "malfunctioned" for her. She describes how the way of writing she developed in the *Outline* trilogy was a way to write what she knew was true about life without being attacked for explicitly writing about *her* life (City Arts & Lectures). I don't doubt that Knausgaard and Cusk are writing from their lives and making interesting formal decisions with how they do it, but that doesn't adequately describe the significance of their work.

When I first read *Outline*, it came after a bout of struggling to get through any work of fiction. I found myself uninterested in plot; it seemed irrelevant to my experience of life. *Outline* was revelatory. Later, reading *My Struggle*, I felt the same—these works were doing something different, but I couldn't readily identify what it was. I began to think the word autofiction meant something more like literature that gets closer to the way we experience life: the auto bringing the reader closer to the author's day-to-day experience of life, with the fiction being a resulting and different type of narrative. There is something new and interesting being done in these works, but it has more to do with how these novels think than with the author's autobiographical material.

In *Reality Hunger*, a work that has been identified as heralding the arrival of autofiction as well as work with similar aims in other genres, David Shields argues for literature that is realistic in the sense that it gets as close to actual experience as possible, not adhering to a plot that unfolds over time, but is splintered into the many interactions and thoughts that make up

one's day. He says, "our lives aren't prepackaged along narrative lines and, therefore, by its very nature, reality-based art—under processed, underproduced—splinters and explodes" (27). Shields uses the metaphor of "letting the tape play" (54)—simply recording what is there—an idea very much alive in Knausgaard's work, which anchors strongly on moment-to-moment observation and description. Shields says that letting the tape play is "a metaphor for the fact that this is all there is, there ain't no more." In a similar spirit, Knausgaard said, in an interview in the New Yorker following the publication of *My Struggle*, "I had felt for many, many years that the form of the novel, as I used it, created a distance from life. When I started to write about myself, that distance disappeared." He says his "writing [gained] a more direct access to the world around me. And then, at some point, I started to look at the main character—myself—as a kind of place where emotions, thoughts, and images passed through." There's a yearning Shields identifies that I think is crucial to Cusk and Knausgaard's work. Cusk and Knausgaard are both committed to undoing what they see as dishonesty and delusion wrought by narrative, not simply as some great modernist experiment in form, but rather as an answer to a philosophical problem that thinking narratively papers over. There is a philosophical need for these books to be written. Once I started thinking about the philosophical ideas alive in the work of these two authors, their commonalities started to come into focus.

Cusk and Knausgaard are both wrestling with the difficulty of knowing another person, of knowing the world, and of knowing oneself. They are dissatisfied with the claims made by narrative—that narrative can explain a person or a life—and they are looking for another way to see and understand. These ideas, which find literary expression in the work of Cusk and Knausgaard, have their philosophical analog in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Toril Moi. Ordinary language philosophy, which was developed by Wittgenstein and

J.L. Austin in response to logical positivism in the mid-twentieth century and has been carried into the twenty-first century by Cavell and Moi, among others, may seem a surprising lens to bring to bear on autofiction, but I argue in this paper that the respective philosophical problems addressed by ordinary language philosophy find a deep kinship in autofiction.

Ordinary language philosophy wrestles with the supposition that there is a one-to-one relationship between language and meaning. Wittgenstein famously and powerful demonstrated in *Philosophical Investigations* an understanding of meaning as use. This leads to a cascade of consequences and further questions, of which the most important for this paper is Wittgenstein's questions about inner and outer and what it means to know and be known.

Wittgenstein begins *Philosophical Investigations* by undoing the Augustinian view of language in which each word has a clearly designated meaning to which it refers (§1). In the picture of language Wittgenstein proposes, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a word and its meaning. But Wittgenstein does not say that language has no meaning, or that we can never be sure what a word means. Questions of context, intention, speaker and listener are key—the meaning is in the use. The implications of these claims are far-reaching. Eventually, Wittgenstein draws a parallel between the problems that arise in knowing what language means and the difficulty of knowing a human being. He says that no, we cannot know beyond a doubt what the sensations are that another human is experiencing; we cannot experience the same things ourselves at the same moment. We can't know the exact thoughts or feelings that are passing through someone's mind. But again, that doesn't mean we have nothing to go on; it doesn't mean we know nothing. Wittgenstein writes "The human body is the best picture of the human soul" (PPF §25). Just as the expression of language shows us through its use what it means, we can look to the actions and expressions of another person to get a view on what

they're experiencing. The skeptic would say that since we cannot know all other minds with complete accuracy, that we can never know any mind at all. In both linguistic skepticism and other minds skepticism, the skeptic insists that bringing together the inner and outer is necessary to discern meaning, and that short that required merging, we cannot identify meaning. As Moi says in Chapter 9 of *Revolution of the Ordinary*, the skeptic holds that "meaning will always be indeterminate and undecidable, the inner life of another human being always inaccessible" (206).

This is a case of "language going on holiday" —as Stanley Cavell identifies, the skeptic is using the words and arguments of epistemology to deal with what is actually a metaphysical problem (*Must We Mean* 262). The metaphysical situation of humans is such that we are separated from one another. We are not minds that can merge with one another so that we can know what is going on in the other. Our bodies and our mortality mean that all we have to go on for understanding another mind is their expressions and actions. Cavell agrees that there we have an inner life that must be given expression in order for it to be made known to another person; however, he does not agree that the outer does not tell us what we need to know. The behavior of another person is "expressive of mind" and "only in rare cases is behavior utterly random or arbitrary" (*Revolution* 262). Cavell proposes the concept of acknowledgement to deal with the fundamental finitude of human beings. We may not know with certainty what another person is thinking or feeling, but based on our relationship with that person and their expressions and actions, we can get close, and in some cases we can say that yes, we do know. Importantly, what we see when we look at another person is revealed in how we acknowledge them.

Moi notes another deficit of the skeptic's view, which is that they fail to recognize that "by intellectualizing and epistemologizing human finitude, the skeptic forgets the most fundamental thing about knowledge of other minds, namely that expressions and behavior *place*

a claim on others" (*Revolution* 207). Actions and expressions are not arbitrary; they are put into the world and require a response (even if that response is no response). Acknowledgement, as described by Moi, is not something we do after acquiring knowledge, and it is not simply a poor substitute for knowledge, but is even more consequential than knowledge, for it reveals both people. The way we acknowledge another person reveals what we see in the situation and the person, which in turn reveals how we view our position in relation to that person. Moi says, in some cases, "our response to another may surprise us, reveal a knowledge we didn't even know we possessed" (*Revolution* 208).

What Cusk and Knausgaard are identifying when they talk about the dishonesty of narrative and purely fictional accounts is that this way of thinking intellectualizes and epistemologizes human finitude. Narratives, with clear beginnings, middles, and ends, and clear cause and effect, insist on knowledge. They ignore the very real gaps that can and do exist between human beings which can lead to a feeling of inexplicability. They ignore how these gaps and how we reckon with them are how we come to know ourselves. I am reading Cusk and Knausgaard's work as texts that question the knowledge narrative claims to give us. Both writers express that they cannot continue to write novels that explain the world in terms of narrative. Their work is an experiment in relating to the world in a different way. Even though the authors do not use the word "acknowledgement" themselves, this concept offers significant explanatory power for understanding their work. Ultimately, I believe what ties Cusk and Knausgaard's work together is a mutual desire to wrestle with the metaphysical problem of finitude—the fact that we are separate from one another and that our lives must eventually end—without allowing finitude to be intellectualized and distanced by a narrative mode of thinking.

In the first part of this paper, I will look at how Cusk identifies narrative as a force that creates distance and delusion. I will explore Cora Diamond's idea of "the difficulty of reality" and how it is reflected in the experience of Faye, the narrator of the *Outline* trilogy. I will then turn to Iris Murdoch to illuminate the question of attention in Cusk's work and how that demonstrates her distrust in narrative. In the second part, I will focus on *Book 1* and *Book 2* of Knausgaard's *My Struggle*. Knausgaard is deeply invested in art as the way of revealing oneself to another. I will describe the relationship between how Knausgaard views art and how Cavell develops the concept of acknowledgement, as well as consider what this means for how we as readers are asked to respond to Knausgaard's work.

Rachel Cusk, Faye, and the Search for the Limits of Objectivity

In "How to Get There," a chapter in Cusk's essay collection *Coventry*, Cusk explores what is really being taught in writing classes. Cusk says that while many students are interested in questions of technique and craft, what is at the root of their drive to write is a desire to express their "true self" (181). Having felt that the initiation into society and mediation of the self through language has led to a false representation, the students want to reclaim a more honest way of asserting themselves through language. Cusk says this is perhaps because "our manner of life is dishonest, that it offers too few opportunities for self-expression, and that, for some people, there is too great a disjuncture between how things seem and how they actually feel" (181). In a writing class, students have the opportunity to examine the limits of their own subjectivity and the way they have unconsciously or consciously been interacting with the social world. Cusk says the problem arises when the writing process seems to reproduce the same familiar forms of the self. The work "begins to seem not true but false, either a recreation of the false self or a failure to externalize the true one. It is a product, your product: in other words, more of the same" (183). Cusk invokes Knausgaard with a quote from *Book 1* of *My Struggle* where he is trying to put into words what writing is about: "Writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows. That is what writing is about. Not what happens there, not what actions are played out there, but the there itself. There, that is writing's location and aim. But how to get there?" (qtd. in Cusk, *Coventry*, 184).

Cusk takes Knausgaard's claim to heart, saying it should be at the core of any attempt to write (184). She wants to resist the ways of thinking and writing that lead to the reproduction of the false self, and that create just another story on the page—she wants, like Knausgaard, to get

"there." This is a difficult place to be in, though. Getting there requires answering questions honestly, and as one of the characters of *Kudos* observes, "two and two did indeed usually equal four: it was when you gave a different answer…that people got upset" (92). In other words, getting "there" can lead to alienation. Cusk experienced this herself in the wake of the publication of her memoirs *A Life's Work* and *Aftermath*, for which she was widely criticized not in regards to the quality of her writing, but for the content of her truth. After this experience, Cusk has said in interviews that she realized the memoir form had malfunctioned. Not wanting to go back to the way she previously approached novel-writing, she needed to turn elsewhere to find a form that could express what seemed worth expressing. It was in this context that Cusk wrote the *Outline* trilogy. Cusk said in an interview with City Arts and Lectures in 2019 that she needed to "experience things in order to know them" and that her work "is documenting…that process." The *Outline* trilogy documents her working through a period of loss—loss of identity, loss of "institutional forms of being," loss of narrative. In the *Outline* trilogy, Cusk is searching for a new mode of expression that allows her to get "there," and over the course of the trilogy we follow her as she gets closer.

At the beginning of *Outline*, Cusk's narrator Faye is in a state of shock. Having left her husband, shattering her vision of family life and herself in the process, Faye finds herself in Greece, where she is due to teach a writing course. She floats through Athens, listening to various friends and acquaintances speak about their life, as she slowly tries to piece together a way she can live in the world that makes sense. She does not name what she is experiencing, but the reader gets the sense that she feels fundamentally alienated from and disoriented by the world. In "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," Cora Diamond introduces language to help us describe such an indescribable feeling. She begins with a poem by Ted

Hughes, “Six Young Men,” in which six young soldiers are seen smiling at the camera, healthy and in the prime of their youth. Six months later, they would all be dead. Hughes’s poem is about the experience of the poet looking at the photograph and confronting the difficulty of the reality of death. The poet looks at the reality of death and cannot find language to express the disconnect between what he sees and knows to be true and what he expects from the world; the poet says that when he looks at the photograph, “language is shouldered out from the game.” Diamond wants a word for the experience of a reality that does not fit within the concepts that govern our day-to-day lives; for this purpose, she designates the phrase “the difficulty of reality,” which she credits to John Updike. The experiences Diamond wants to describe are “experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability” (Diamond 2-3).

Diamond then turns to J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* to give another example of what it looks like to confront a difficulty of reality. *The Lives of Animals* consists of lectures given by Coetzee accompanied by commentary from several academics. The lectures take the form of the story of a writer named Elizabeth Costello who has been invited by a university to present lectures on any topic of her choice. Elizabeth, a well-known novelist, does not use her time to discuss literature, but instead presents a lecture on the cruelty being done to animals on farms and in meat processing plants. Her aim is to confront her audience with the reality that animals are being slaughtered mere miles from the lecture hall and to make them recognize that this cruelty is being quietly condoned by everyone in attendance. The intensity of Elizabeth’s depiction of the slaughter, her emotional distress, and her insistence on expressing her experience all serve to alienate her from her family and fellow academics. There is an

unbridgeable gulf between Elizabeth and everyone else: Elizabeth on one side, staring down the horror of animals being raised for meat, and her family and colleagues on the other, content to stay within the organizing principles of their lives, which dictate that it is perfectly reasonable for animals to be killed for meat. According to her family, if Elizabeth does not approve of the slaughtering of animals, then she should simply not eat meat. They have no problem with her being a vegetarian; it is when she expresses her experience—when she says that in this case two and two does not equal four—that the others get upset.

Cusk's narrator Faye bears striking and surprising similarities to Elizabeth Costello. Faye, like Elizabeth, has become aware of a truth that is impossible to ignore. In *Outline*, Faye is mourning the loss of her marriage and family life; however, the way she describes this loss reveals that it is a loss of something more. She describes marriage as a shared belief in a story that crumbles once one person stops believing in it. She shares how she observed her children playing imaginary games when they were younger which, once one of them stopped believing in the shared story, dissolved into conflict. Without a shared story, there is "only point of view" (83). Like Elizabeth, Faye finds it difficult to convey the loss that has accompanied this moment in her life, because the loss Faye is reckoning with is not simply the loss of marriage and family life itself, but rather the loss of belief in her own view of the world. She has allowed herself to believe in things that were, strictly speaking, not real. The doubt that this awareness produces is disorienting. The difficulty of reality Faye finds herself facing is the power that her belief in narrative has held over her life.

Diamond describes how the essays that accompany Coetzee's lectures *The Lives of Animals* take the central concern of the lectures to be about the treatment of animals. Diamond argues instead that the real issue at the heart of the lectures is Elizabeth's "hauntedness" and

“woundedness,” which is reflected in her struggle to exist and interact with other humans who are blissfully unaware of what she cannot ignore. Elizabeth’s struggle is to find a way to be a human with what Diamond calls “raw” nerves amidst other humans who do not share her experience of rawness. Similarly, it would be easy to say that the *Outline* trilogy is about a woman recovering from divorce, but that would miss the true difficulty at the heart of Faye’s struggle. For both Elizabeth and Faye, the experience is a confusing one. Diamond describes it as an “apparent resistance by reality to one’s ordinary mode of life, including one’s ordinary modes of thinking: to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, how one is apparently supposed to think, or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach” (12-13). Once one confronts the difficulty, the normal way of operating in life no longer functions—this is how we encounter Faye in *Outline*.

Seeing Faye’s struggle in Diamond’s terms, it becomes clear what’s at stake in her conversations. Her interactions serve to juxtapose the different responses that arise from jarring life events, such as those that disrupt the story someone has been living in. One such response is to confront the difficulty of reality that Faye is confronting of a life without a narrative mode of thinking; another is to step from one role or story into another. Some of Faye’s interlocutors are like her, a fellow “wounded” human, while others are shielding themselves with the distance created by narrative. In Chapter V of *Outline*, Cusk juxtaposes two such figures: Paniotis and Angeliki.

Faye’s friend Paniotis, having gone through various failures and difficulties in his life, has relinquished the idea of life as a series of progressions following a narrative that continues forward. He in the same place as Faye, confronting the difficult reality of a life without his previous beliefs about how events unfold and his own power in deciding them. While sitting at a

restaurant with Faye and their mutual acquaintance Angeliki, Paniotis recounts a vacation he took with his children shortly after his divorce.They stayed their first night in a hotel situated next to a half-built apartment complex. The apartment building was surrounded by construction equipment and piles of materials and stood, with "glassless windows," unprotected, facing the sea (116). Cusk's use of structures and construction to illuminate the situations of her characters is most clear in *Transit*, which centers around Faye's own home renovation and is full of stories of homes and shops and the people that live in them, but the beginnings of that motif can be seen here with Paniotis's feeling of incompleteness, of being half-built, reflected in the abandoned apartment building. The hotel was dirty and full of mosquitos; the children didn't seem to mind, but Paniotis could barely sleep and instead spent the night feeling pity for the children, himself, and for the dismal future he felt awaited him as a result of his divorce. The next day, they find themselves marooned at a mountainside inn, having been forced to abandon the road when it became dangerously flooded after a storm. In a moment of weakness and panic, Paniotis succumbed to an urgent need to call his wife at her new apartment, hoping that she might offer him guidance or assistance that would shore up his self-doubt and give him the strength to carry on with the planned holiday. She does no such thing, meeting his yearning to be seen with nothing but silence. In that moment, Paniotis realized that the bond between his wife and himself was severed, and that the story he was living before had definitively ended. Paniotis feels uneasy and unseen, as if he does not exist outside of the story of his marriage.

On the last day of their holiday, Paniotis and his children made an unplanned stop to walk down a gorge and visit a monastery. On their return ascent, they spontaneously decided to swim in a cold pool of water beneath a waterfall, struck by a certain feeling of unrepressed freedom, brought on by their survival of an unpredictable and, at times, treacherous holiday. Paniotis

found out many years later that this swim was the only part of the trip his daughter remembered—not the terrible hotel, nor the treacherous rain, nor even the desperate stop at the mountainside inn. He tells Faye he can also remember the swim vividly, “for those were moments so intense that in a way we will be living them always, while other things are completely forgotten. Yet there is no particular story attached to them” (123). Paniotis explains that the experience stood in stark contrast with experiences from the previous period of his life, saying it was “only itself in a way that nothing in our life before as a family was ever itself, because it was always leading to the next thing and the next, was always contributing to our story of who we were.” Paniotis says he changed on that trip: he began to see things for what they were and not as part of a story he was living. This was a departure from how he lived with his wife, in which every choice and action was taken for the sake of progress, improvement, and self-creation. He realized that the stories he and his wife clung to allowed them to hold themselves at an “unbreachable distance” from their reality. It was “a distance that constituted a kind of safety but also created a space for illusion.” They felt they were safe and unaffected by anything outside of their story, but this illusion meant they could not see the truth of what was before them. During the holiday with his children, Paniotis was jolted out of this mode of being and was forced to confront reality. He says he tried to stitch together a story after his divorce, but it never made sense: “there was no sequel to that time in the pool, nor ever will be” (123). Paniotis released his belief in what he thought should come next and began to see what was really there without the contextualizing force of expectation.

Angeliki also describes a time she was confronted with the dissolution of her own identity and shares how she reacted to it, and the result differs in important ways from Paniotis’s response. A few years prior, having returned from living with her family in Berlin, Angeliki was

forced to take to bed for six months due to extreme exhaustion. When Angeliki emerged from bedrest, she expected to step back into the role she previously had in her family, one in which she was completely dedicated to removing all obstacles from her son's life. To her surprise, her husband and son had learned to function without her and had developed their own routines and rituals that seemed foreign to Angeliki. Before her illness, she had felt stifled by her role of supportive wife and mother, tethered to the demands of her husband's career. The change in the family brought on by her illness presented Angeliki with an opportunity for change. She recognized that this was her moment of escape; it was her opportunity for rebirth into being a different kind of person in the world. She dedicated herself to reviving her femininity and creativity, becoming a woman who wore delicate shoes, wrote feminist novels, and no longer derived her creative satisfaction from her family life. Following the publication of her novel, Angeliki began traveling across Europe to speak to women who were suffering as she used to suffer.

On a trip to Poland, Angeliki met a reporter named Olga whose honesty and commitment Angeliki admired. Olga had an arrangement with her husband in which they alternated working and taking care of their children for six month periods of time. Sometimes her husband complained even to the point of once leaving the family, but he returned having fully accepted the arrangement of his marriage. Olga told Angeliki that she and her husband "are completely honest with each other" (127), and Angeliki was attracted to the "hardness" of Olga's life and the way she looked unflinchingly at her own reality (126). That is, until Olga proudly shared that when she traveled for work, her children slept with a picture of her under their pillows. Olga said she could never have left her children the way her husband did (128). Angeliki, dismayed by these details, saw them as deficits in Olga's feminism that betrayed a level of romanticism that

Olga could not relinquish. As a result, she doesn't fully believe in the story of Olga because to her, it does not add up. Instead of acknowledging Olga's complicated reality, Angeliki greets it with skepticism.

Despite her outward transformation, Angeliki struggles to live honestly. She is unable to tell her mother that she only wants one child and instead claims it is infertility that keeps her from having more children. She expects, even in the new shape of her marriage, for there to be promises, flowers, special meals, and extravagant holidays to "help you get over your problems" (127), and she cannot imagine how she could live any other way. Angeliki emerged not into a more honest way of living with an awareness of the stories and identities that constrained her; instead, her rebirth is simply from one identity into another. It is not complete in that it does not result in the openness required to understand a life full of seeming contradictions, in which one's love for one's child can exist alongside dedication to one's work. Angeliki is like the protagonist of her novel, who Angeliki describes as "compromised by her desire to be free on the one hand and her guilt about her children on the other. All she wishes is for her life to be integrated, to be one thing, rather than an eternal series of oppositions that confound her whichever way she looks" (129). The protagonist, like Angeliki, wants a different story, a different goal to reach towards. Unlike Paniotis, she is not interested in giving up narrative or a sense of progression—she wants the progression, just in a different direction. Angeliki is a person who still believes in the importance of a coherent self, one rooted in a consistent narrative. Contrary to her desire for freedom, the result of Angeliki's dedication to her story results in a feeling of unease. She cannot tolerate contradiction and her inability to fully believe in Olga's description of her life is a symptom of the skepticism that arises from her allegiance to story.

Cusk uses the stories of Paniotis and Angeliki to illustrate the different ways in which one can respond to the realization that one's former role no longer exists or has no meaning. This is something Faye has experienced, and, like Paniotis, her reaction has been to confront the hold that a narrative mode of thinking had over her life. In a certain light, this may seem pessimistic, but for Faye, Cusk, and Paniotis, this represents a more honest way of living wherein one is less likely to feel the floor fall out from beneath them upon the realization that the stories they have been telling themselves are not true. This is a way of resisting the urge to know that arises from skepticism, and it sets the stage for Faye to be able to acknowledge the reality she is in, without overlaying it with the structure of narrative.

Crucially, this is the motivation for how Cusk is writing in *Outline*. She wants to get close to her characters and to observe with clarity the stories they tell themselves—she wants to be, like Paniotis, a glassless window looking directly at the sea. Paniotis says that his experience showed him that he no longer wanted to live a life dedicated to progression and improvement, which he describes as a kind of addiction and a "personal fantasy" (99). In a remark that is particularly revealing of what Cusk is doing in the *Outline* trilogy, he says that this notion of progress has "infected the novel, though perhaps now the novel is infecting us back again, so that we expect of our lives what we've come to expect of our books." This is similar to a belief expressed by Knausgaard, that the narratives that govern our day-to-day lives, such as news stories, televisions programs, and celebrity gossip, have led us to believe that our own lives follow a certain narrative pattern, and that we are living a story rather than a life. Paniotis wonders if there is any way to know if one is not existing in a state of self-delusion.

The ethics of narrative

Paniotis's awareness of the dangers of self-delusion is echoed later in the book in Faye's own words. Her experience of self-delusion and the "artificiality" of forcing events to go in one direction instead of another had led her "to believe more and more in the virtues of passivity, and of living a life as unmarked by self-will as possible" (170). Like Elizabeth Costello, the old way of being does not work for Faye. The trajectory of the *Outline* trilogy, as much as it can be said to have a trajectory, is that of Faye discovering a new way of living. Faye in *Outline* is reckoning with the reality she faces, one in which she can no longer subscribe to a narrative mode of thinking, because she has become aware of the distance it has created from her life and the resulting delusions. Faye also senses that there is an ethical component to her new reality, that narrative serves not only to delude the narrator but also to enact cruelty on other people in one's life as they are viewed as characters. She posits that one way forward is to adopt a more open lens of attention that questions her role as narrator—in other words, examining what details are being left out to serve the end goal of the person telling the story. This opening up of attention and furthermore the ethical implications of limiting one's attention are explored by Iris Murdoch.

In "Vision and Choice in Morality," published in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Murdoch argues for an expansive understanding of ethical content, one that moves beyond the questions typical of the field of ethics. Murdoch says that even the identification of moral content is a moral action in and of itself. She rejects the notion that moral problems can be isolated from their context and calls on us to hold ourselves accountable for our own vision or lack thereof. This is an ethics that requires imagination and a faith in one's curiosity as a pathway to a more discerning view of moral choice, rather than a reliance on

logical frameworks alone. In language that evokes Wittgenstein's ethos of looking and seeing, Murdoch says we can get closer to an ethical life through continuous expansion of our attention.

In "Vision and Choice in Morality," Murdoch identifies a limitation of moral thought that leaves out much of one's inner life. She says that "the concepts which we use to comprehend and describe the mind depend almost entirely on overt criteria" (79). The problem with this, as Murdoch sees it, is that it allows moral philosophers to ignore the vision that must have preceded the identification of the available moral choices. Murdoch does not deny the importance of "overt criteria," such as actions and choices, but instead holds that we are missing something if we take behavior as our only evidence of moral reasoning. What we stand to miss is the vision of one's world—the choices must be *seen* first before they can be made. The moral philosopher who only examines behavior is reducing the human condition to a series of acts and their consequences, a long chain of cause and effect that, as Murdoch says, "leave[s] no place for commerce with 'the transcendent'" (80). For Murdoch, our moral concepts are revealed not simply in the choices we make, but rather in how we see the world. Moral differences are "differences of vision," and "we differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds" (82).

The importance of vision in morality is very much alive in Cusk's *Outline* trilogy, particularly in regards to how Faye challenges the moral stories presented to her by many of her interlocutors. The primary relationship that runs through the first book in the trilogy is that between Cusk and the man she refers to as her "neighbor," who was seated next to her on the plane to Athens. Faye reluctantly enters into conversation with her neighbor, but she is eventually drawn into the stories he tells about his previous marriages and family life. It is not the stories themselves that most interest Faye, but rather the structure of the telling, the details

her neighbor includes and excludes, and the way his own point of view creates a truth that Faye suspects is not shared by the other people in the stories. This is most evident in the way he speaks about his second wife. Describing her as a crude but beautiful woman who "had never read a book in her life" and refused to believe Venezuela existed because she had never heard of it, Faye's neighbor brings a woman into view who is more a caricature than a real person. Early on in their relationship, he says, he became aware that his second wife had mistaken him to be wealthier than he really was. He had lost most of his wealth in the aftermath of his first divorce; however, he still maintained a yacht in Greece, despite having lost everything else. This yacht, a signifier of wealth and extravagance, lured his second wife and convinced her of his financial worth. Having established the relationship on such unsteady terms, Faye's neighbor was determined to continue the fantasy: he explains that "he was, in effect, manufacturing an illusion: no matter what he did, the gap between illusion and reality could never be closed" (22). But worse than his second wife's materialism and expectation of luxury, according to Faye's neighbor, was her treatment of his children from his first marriage. She was obsessively jealous, and once shut his eldest son in the cellar of their house, where Faye's neighbor found his son shaking in terror. The end of their marriage was catalyzed by the events of one summer. The second wife's parents were staying with them on the island where Faye's neighbor grew up; the island was quiet, and the second wife decided she had had enough and needed to return to her lively social life in Athens. She ordered her husband to leave the children with the housekeeper and accompany her and her parents back to the mainland. He refused—it was his only time with his children—and she issued an ultimatum: "if he didn't come, she said, he could quite simply consider their marriage to be over" (27).

Faye listens attentively, but she is dissatisfied with this story. Her neighbor, the narrator of the story, had chosen certain moral problems, abstracted from their context, with which he strove to paint a particular picture of his second wife. He plucked moments and circumstances—his second wife's worship of wealth, her supposed ignorance, the cruelty she showed his eldest son, and, ultimately, the unreasonable demand she made of him to choose her over his children—to illustrate his own aims. In the neighbor's telling, these are moments that seem blindingly clear in terms of moral choice, but Faye disputes the objectivity her neighbor's claims. She notes that the story of her neighbor's marriage "relied too heavily on extremes" and "invariably showed certain people—the narrator and his children—in a good light, while the wife was brought in only when it was required of her to damn herself further" (30). It was not wrong, Faye insists, for her neighbor's second wife to value the wealth her husband had presented as being truthful, nor was it morally wrong to not know about Venezuela. Her insecurity, which was presented as "an incomprehensible crime" was probably justified, in light of a detail the neighbor later shared about how he tried to initiate contact with his first wife during a turbulent time in his second marriage. Faye challenges her neighbor, saying that in the story he shared she "sensed the truth was being sacrificed to the narrator's desire to win;" her neighbor, according to Faye, had not acknowledged the limits of his own vision. Her neighbor concedes: it is possible that his second wife did not shut his son in the cellar; "she always denied it," he says. In fact, even the moment of dissolution of their marriage, presented as a shocking ultimatum, was actually more complicated. His mother-in-law, it turns out, had taken ill and needed to be admitted to a hospital on the mainland. Faye's neighbor had created what Murdoch might call a personal or moral fable—a story that serves to illustrate a universalizable moral teaching, but that does not take into account the potentially narrow vision that identified the moral problems at hand.

The responsibility of subjectivity

In an interview with City Arts and Lectures, Cusk describes her starting point with *Outline* as being an experiment in writing a novel with no prior knowledge, which presents the story solely through the speakers. She wanted to demonstrate that a person can be revealed through what they notice. When she came to writing *Transit* and *Kudos*, her motivation shifted to exploring "the question of whether objectivity is ultimately attainable, whether it is possible really to free yourself from a sort of personalized story of reality." She says the answer is no. Ultimately, Cusk arrives at the hard-earned conclusion of embracing subjectivity through the exercise of attempting to be objective. Where she gets to is a point of accepting and embracing that her own viewpoint will always be flawed and deficient in some way, but that she must take responsibility nonetheless for what she sees; in fact, she must be honest about what she sees, lest she disappear herself.

In *Transit*, Faye begins this process by again investigating the cruelty that arises from stories that we create. In *Transit*, many of the characters are undergoing renovations of the spaces they live in, or they speak to Faye about previous renovations they have undertaken. Other characters are simply revealed by the structures they inhabit. In *Transit,* the process of renovation is the embodiment of an individual exerting their own will to change their story into one they want to live, including the inevitable destruction caused by such a renovation. Faye believes that her life has been largely dictated by the will of other people. Where she previously thought that fate was controlling the course of events, she now believes these moments to be driven by the will of others. Determined to take back some of her power, Faye embarks on her own renovation of a newly-bought flat in London. The flat is in disrepair and she is advised

against the project, which is seen by the estate agent and various contractors to be likely to incur more expense than it is worth. Faye pushes on regardless. In the course of her renovation, she awakens what she calls an evil from below. Faye's downstairs neighbors, Paula and John, are not happy about her arrival or the noise created by the renovation. Faye introduces herself to them and tries to apologize for the noise; they respond by calling her names, threatening to spit on her and to call the local government to complain. In one conversation, Faye describes Paula has having an "unmistakable core of violence" that was evident not only in her treatment of Faye but also of her dog, who she hits and scolds harshly (45). In another encounter, Paula refuses to listen to Faye and grows increasingly angry at Faye's presence, her body writhing "as though something inside her was rising and unfolding, wanting to be born" (159). There is constant conflict between Faye and her neighbors, with the builders playing the role of enacting Faye's desires in the renovation of her flat while also being responsible for the disruption caused by their work. One day, the foreman, Tony, decides to take the situation into his own hands. He goes downstairs to speak to the neighbors and is gone for a long time. When he returns, he admits to Faye that he got her neighbors on his side, but not by inspiring them to have compassion for Faye's situation. Instead, he agreed with them. He describes himself as a politician, playing into the neighbors' fantasies of Faye's wrongdoings by saying that they were all "victim" of Faye's whims, himself included, and that "if they would only let him finish the job quickly he would be free" (186). He insists that he does not believe what he told them; he was only trying to play them at their own game.

That evening, Faye meets an acquaintance for dinner and recounts the day's events, including Tony's betrayal. In the conversation, Faye describes her neighbors as "a force, a power of elemental negativity that seemed somehow related to the power to create" (195). This force

"took the form of two people" but seemed like something much more powerful. Her sons called them "the trolls," and Faye attributes this designation to the fact that her sons "were still young enough to see morality in terms of character…they were still willing to give evil an identity" (195-6). Faye, on the other hand, saw evil as "a product..of surrender…the relinquishing of effort, the abandonment of self-discipline in the face of desire." In other words, evil was what arose if one did not resist it. Tony's betrayal, then, could be read as his own failure to act. This is a turning point for Faye. She describes how her feelings of powerlessness had caused her to adopt a fatalistic attitude, resigned to the unfolding of events. Her beliefs have changed, though, because she has become aware that the idea of fate is "seductive, until you realized that it reduced other people to the moral status of characters and camouflaged their capacity to destroy" (198). Describing people as characters in a story that has already been written lets them off the hook; it allows them to ignore their active part in cruelty and evil. This goes hand-in-hand with Faye's disillusionment with the stories that have governed her life. She sees that actions can only be accurately ascribed to an individual when they are seen as consequences of their agency. For Faye, this realization has resulted in anger. She has become aware that what she had called fate was actually the "reverberation" of other people's power and will, "a tale scripted not by some universal storyteller but by people who would elude justice for as long as their actions were met with resignation rather than outrage" (198). To call the neighbors "trolls" was to make the evil part of their nature and not the result of their personal vision and choices. To ascribe an outcome to a narrative driven by character is to evade one's own responsibility.

If in *Transit* Faye is trying to find her own ability to affect events in her life, in *Kudos*, Faye is reckoning with the consequences of choice and will, of speaking honestly and the demands it makes on others, and the concept of justice itself. Again, we find characters who are

like Faye in their relationship to the world and in their desire to close the distance between themselves and reality, as well as characters who serve to show the reverberations of not approaching life honestly. A core piece of this dilemma is the compulsion to speak honestly, and the suffering that often comes in its wake. The first person she speaks to, another seat neighbor on a plane, describes how his own daughter would run out of the room when she would hear adults speaking untruthfully. The man says that what his daughter called lying was simply "the normal conventions and speech patterns of adult conversation" (18). But after awhile, he and his wife start noticing what his daughter notices. They started inspecting their own conversations in the evening, picking up on their own lies. He noticed that his wife had become quieter, and blamed this on his daughter for making communication such a "minefield" (19). The daughter figure is an example of a third party creating a triangulated relationship in which the other two parties can be viewed objectively, a theme that recurs throughout the novel. In another encounter, a fellow writer describes to Faye how she was unable to write a story about the dynamic between herself and her husband without inserting the presence of a third object, a hamster, the result of which was to suddenly make clear the reality of their situation. In another conversation, Hermann, a teenage boy who describes himself as unable to tolerate made-up stories, says that the third point in a triangle serves to fix the other two points in space—it allows the points to be seen; otherwise, the two points shift according to their own subjectivity. Cusk's stated goal throughout the *Outline* trilogy is to describe reality as truthfully as possible, all the while being cognizant of the limitation of one's own subjectivity. It seems possible that Faye is the third object, the point put into place in order to illuminate her interlocutor and whatever subject has mystified them in its unknowableness.

Faye herself wonders if all of this truth-telling and suffering is worth it. She had believed all along that the suffering led to some sort of reward, some kudos, but now she seems unsure. In the first half of the book, Faye speaks to a journalist at the literary festival she is attending. Faye and the journalist had met years ago, and Faye remembered the way the journalist had described her life, which consisted of a measured order, marked and contained by the passing of time, in a way that seemed happily structured and secure. The life described by the journalist seemed to "lack a quality that drove other people's lives into extremity, whether of pleasure or of pain" (63). Faye says this quality she refers to is a feeling of "suspense," which grows out of a belief that our lives are "governed by mystery" (64). This suspense had led Faye to shatter her own life through divorce, all the while knowing that this journalist, whose life resembled Faye's in certain ways, was humming along with no such disturbance. In the wake of her divorce, Faye realized she wasn't sure if she had destroyed her life "as an act of violence or simply by mistake." She goes on to say, "suffering had always appeared to me as an opportunity…and I wasn't sure I would ever discover whether this was true and if so why it was…all I knew was that it carried a kind of honour, if you survived it, and left you in a relationship to the truth that seemed closer, but that in fact might have been identical to the truthfulness of staying in one place" (64-5). Is the turn to face reality, in all its difficulty, worth it? Cusk writes about how she suffered when she attempted this in her memoirs, and of the bleak times that followed her own divorce, and in *Kudos* she is searching for any meaning this may have led her to.

As her conversation with the journalist continues, the journalist reveals that the way she had presented her life to Faye previously had been a carefully arranged story produced for the purpose of eliciting envy. She has maintained a quiet and regulated life and strategically avoided making mistakes and the unhappiness that would follow. She describes watching her older sister

fail and vowing to not repeat her mistakes. Eventually, her older sister, who had a marriage and family life the journalist desperately envied, went through a contentious divorce, from which the journalist derived perverse pleasure. She felt her sister was being punished for her extremity, while she was being rewarded for her discipline. Eventually the journalist recognized how unhappy she was in her own marriage and became aware of the secrets she and her husband concealed in order to keep their family intact. Meanwhile, her sister remarried, was living a happy life, and had drifted out of the journalist's day-to-day life. The journalist confesses that she realized that her sister "would never have known this happiness had she not gone through the unhappiness that preceded it, in precisely the way that she did" (75). When the sister's marriage first ruptured, her family had seen her as irrational and had blamed her for the divorce. In retrospect, it was clear that reaching the extremity she reached allowed her to find happiness, and led to her present life in which she and her children are thriving. The journalist finishes her story by saying to Faye that she knows justice "is to be feared, feared in every part of you, even as it fells your enemies and crowns you the winner" (84). In this way, Cusk seems to be reiterating that it is a responsibility to be attuned to the stories one is creating and living, because they are not simply narratives on par with the latest news story of the day, but rather have actual consequences in our own lives. In an interview with City Arts and Lectures, Cusk referenced Knausgaard's idea that we have become "infected" by "a century of narrative" causing the story to interfere "with our sense of reality." The story of the journalist and her fraught relationship with her sister serves to show that shattering the mirror of one's life is worth it when it is in service of living honestly.

Beyond one's own individual choices, Cusk also makes a case for how literature should deal with the delusion of narrative. When Faye arrives at the literary festival in *Kudos*, she has a

conversation with her publisher in which her own attitudes and beliefs about the value of literature are revealed in stark contrast with those of her publisher. Her publisher has been credited with turning his company around financially, leading to one of its most profitable years. He reveals to Faye that their biggest success, other than Sudoku, has come from a type of fiction that "performed well in the market while maintaining a connection to the values of literature; in other words, …books that people could actually enjoy without feeling in the least demeaned by being seen reading them" (37). He says that he is certain that most people do not want to be challenged by literature, but that they are drawn to an idealized version of it, one that gives them a sense of "authority and reality" but that does not make them uncomfortable or impose any difficulty—literature, in other words, that does not demand a response from the reader and that does not require the reader to acknowledge the text. In reading online reviews of books, he notices that people often lose their supposed reverence for literature quite quickly, and he finds himself amused by reviews that give Dante's *Divine Comedy* one star. Many of his colleagues believe literature and literary values are something to be defended, but he disagrees. Instead, he believes that Dante can stand on his own with no defense, and that there is no moral value in literature that begs defending. Faye disagrees. She describes her feeling that there is a mystery and opaqueness to justice that requires us to fear it. She says that if art were to proceed with no sense of justice, "the temptation to abandon personal morality might arise in exactly the moment when personal morality is most significant" (42). She urges her publisher to defend Dante even if he doesn't think Dante needs it. On first read, this appears to be arguing for a moralistic literature, but I believe what Faye is saying here is that literature must take responsibility for itself. Literature that speaks without assuming responsibility and which does not demand a response from the reader loses its ethical core. This is a change in Faye from the beginning of

Outline when she says, “I had no desire to prove that one book was better than another…what I knew personally to be true had come to seem unrelated to the process of persuading others. I did not, any longer, want to persuade anyone of anything” (19). Matters of taste aside, Faye now seems to have an opinion, at least on the ethical responsibility of writing and reading. Cusk is making a case for literature that not only recognizes its own situation in relationship to the world, but acknowledges its ethical implications. She is arguing for literature that demands that the reader see the world from the gaze of the author and that the reader is pushed into some kind of response as a result. Ultimately Cusk wants art and literature that requires the reader to examine their own vision of the world.

Separation and Finitude in *My Struggle*

One of the strongest impulses guiding Knausgaard's work is his desire to "recapture the world" (*Book 2* 550). Throughout *My Struggle*, Knausgaard describes a deep alienation from the world and the people around him; he views himself as an outsider, never quite finding his place. From when he was a young adolescent struggling to conform to the ideals of masculinity, and his move to Stockholm and the acute sense of displacement he felt as a Norwegian, to poignant realizations that, unlike his brother Yngve, he was not the type to be invited to a lutefisk lunch with friends (*Book 1* 377), separateness defines Knausgaard's life. He is an astute observer of the social behaviors people adopt to eliminate the friction from social interactions and to avoid the sense of separateness Knausgaard is so keenly aware of. Towards the end of *Book 1*, we find out that when Knausgaard was in school in Kristiansand, his own grandparents had asked his mother to tell him not to come visit quite so often—his presence was "uncongenial" (419). Unable to adapt in the easy way Yngve could, his way of being "made demands on them" (420). Knausgaard could "play a role," could not slough off his actual concerns and obsessions, and thus his outward behavior, his actions and expressions, reflected his inner state in a way that tragically created more distance between himself and the people he cared about. In another scene, near the beginning of *Book 2*, Knausgaard and his wife Linda are at a child's birthday party with their two young daughters Vanja and Heidi. From the moment Knausgaard enters the apartment where the party is being held and says a cheerful "Hello!" to the birthday girl's father, who does not turn around to acknowledge him, he is painfully aware of the perceptions of other people and his sense of being on the outside looking in (*Book 2* 25). He sees the same tendency in Vanja. Vanja had spent the entire previous week looking forward to showing off her new golden shoes at the party, but when she announces to her classmates that she has golden shoes

and takes one off to hold it up in the air "in case anyone wanted to see," not a single classmate responds. Knausgaard spends the party either tending to Vanja and Heidi's needs or sitting with the other parents in the kitchen, struggling to stay engaged in the conversation (26). When the topic turns to the cost of plane tickets, Knausgaard writes "I could definitely have offered an opinion about that, but I didn't, small talk is one of the infinite number of talents I don't master, so I sat nodding at what was said, as usual, smiling when others smiled, while ardently wishing myself miles away" (27). And so it goes for the duration of the party.

His distance is a defensive behavior that Knausgaard is ashamed of. He notes that it is a way of coping and of dealing with the possibility of rejection: "I become so incredibly close to others in my thoughts and feelings, of course, they only have to look away dismissively for a storm to break inside me" (41). Unfortunately, his response to the distance he feels from others only creates more distance, and Knausgaard recognizes that ultimately his way of coping is disingenuous. He compares his social behavior to that of his friend Anders, who seems to always know the right thing to say to flatter his conversation partner for the purpose of eventually getting what he wants out of the relationship. While their behavior comes from different impulses, Knausgaard identifies a similarity between himself and Anders in that Knausgaard's social behavior of "saying nothing at all or playing up to others" (310) creates unease and increased distance, because his behavior is recognized on some level as untruthful.

In a seeming contradiction, Knausgaard's sense of separation and distance grow out of his desire to get closer to the world. What he felt as a child and adolescent was that, when his outer expression matched his inner experience, he was faced with rejection—he was "uncongenial." As an adult, he has adapted, but not in a way that makes him feel any less set apart than he did before. When he looks at the world, he sees that most people are operating with

a distance between themselves and life, comfortably staying within the confines of a story that may not be true, but Knausgaard does not want to use the structures of narrative to navigate his social relationships. Similarly to Faye, he is confronting the difficulty of reality that presents itself when looking at life without the filters of narrative and character.

In a long passage reflecting on Dostoyevsky's work, Knausgaard describes the separation from the world that he wants to avoid, which he links with meaninglessness. He traces the loss of meaning beginning with the nineteenth-century loss of god due to advances in science. He says that, at that point, humans had to become their own god, and in Dostoyevsky's work he sees that human ideals had replaced Christian ones. Dostoyevsky's novels were concerned with the what lies "hidden behind" the "deeds and events," what Knausgaard calls "a drama of the soul" (96-97). While humans used to be bound to the world and to god, Knausgaard says that in the nineteenth century the emergence of the inner life of man led to a separation from the world. Following the loss of god and the ensuing separation, "man, perhaps out of need, perhaps out of desire, became his own heaven" (98), which in turn led to a loss of meaning, because no meaning could be rationally assigned to any individual's life when viewed through "the context of the universe." It is then up to us to assign meaning.

Knausgaard says the meaning we can derive from life springs largely from our awareness of death. Death, Knausgaard says, is what makes life meaningless and gives it meaning at the same time, for all of our accomplishments will mean nothing after we die, and yet it is the knowledge of the finitude of our lives that gives life meaning. Acknowledging this truth requires a closeness to the world that can be intolerable, and this is where narrative has come in to create distance and delusion. Death is represented repeatedly in TV, newspapers, and film—we are exposed to death endlessly, but it is always the death of others. Through this repetition, death

loses its weight. Death, Knausgaard explains, no longer "mark[s] the end of a process, discontinuity, but, on account of daily repetition, represent[s], on the contrary, an extension of the process, continuity, and in this way, oddly enough, ha[s] become a source of our security and our anchor" (98). Plane crashes, wars, famines, and natural disasters become ritualized experiences that distance us from death.

We come to experience death as part of a story, not the thing that gives our life meaning, with the result that the meaning in life is eroded. We imagine the anguish the passengers on a plane felt in the moments before it crashed, and through that, we place ourselves in their lives, rather than recognizing that eventually that same fate will, in some form, come for us. This is the insidious consequence of the distance narrative creates from life—we begin to live other people's lives, not our own. As Knausgaard says, "everything we didn't have and were not experiencing, we had and were experiencing even so, because we saw it and we took part in it without being there ourselves" (*Book 2* 99). The view that Knausgaard is expressing—that narrative distance prevents us from acknowledging the difficult reality of being human—is related to the skepticism Cavell resists when he stakes out acknowledgement as a way of relating to other human beings. We cannot know with certainty what, if any, meaning our lives have, but as with the problem of other minds, this is not an epistemological problem as much as it is a metaphysical one. It is an expression of skepticism to fall back on narratives to remove ourselves from the metaphysical problems of our existence. To use Cora Diamond's language, the application of narrative is way of "deflecting" the difficult reality of being a finite human. Diamond uses the term deflect to describe a philosophical response that intellectualizes and distances a difficulty of reality. She writes, "the issue becomes deflected, as the philosopher

thinks it or rethinks it in the language of philosophical skepticism." This is the response Knausgaard is resisting in *My Struggle*.

The response Knausgaard describes aligns with the skeptic's view of other minds: since we cannot know all minds with complete accuracy, why should we pretend we can know them at all? Stories, narratives, and fiction are a way of dealing with this—they put in place structures for navigating life in the absence of knowledge of other minds. But Knausgaard wants something different. He does not want to ignore the finitude of being human—he very clearly wants to think about death, for example—and he wants to act and express in a way that reflects his inner state, rather than giving in to a cynical way of relating, even though he knows that his actions and expressions will create demands on other people that may be uncomfortable, as he did with his grandparents. The discomfort may reveal truths, sometimes painful, sometimes happy, about the relationship between him and another person. Similarly, Faye in *Outline* describes her marriage and family life as predicated on a story everyone agreed to believe in until they no longer could, and while it would have been less disruptive to continue believing, Faye could no longer live in a way she saw as dishonest. Knausgaard and Faye are powerfully aligned here in their refusal to adopt a narrative-based way of thinking and relating to the world.

"There is more to art than thoughts."

Knausgaard is determined to find a different way of relating to the world, and he eventually finds that through art. However, even art poses problems. Knausgaard describes in great detail the conflict he perceives between different modes of relating to art and how that affects his experience. We see this most clearly in his descriptions of criticism and what he calls "critical thinking." In reflecting on his education and training in art criticism, he concludes that

the way of thinking he has been trained in creates distance from the world and from art and in the end robs him of the chance to think independently. He can no longer trust his own experience. Throughout his writing he investigates the difference between the experience of art from what I would call a stance of acknowledgement and the analysis of art held at arm's length. He writes, "I had studied history of art and was used to describing and analyzing art. But what I never wrote about, and this is all that matters, was the experience of it" (*Book 1* 207). Looking through a book of John Constable's paintings, he contrasts two forms of thought, one dominated by "thoughts and reasoning, the other with its feelings and impressions, which, even though they were juxtaposed, excluded each other's insights" (208). These two modes of understanding art seem irreconcilable to Knausgaard. Similarly, in his essay "Inexhaustible Precision," Knausgaard identifies the tendency towards a critical approach to art as rooted in a Protestant ethic that believes nothing can come easily, that the true value of art can come only through the arduous work of breaking the work down and viewing it through various theories and schools of thought. If the work offers itself up for enjoyment immediately, that must mean it is not a good work of art (*Cyclops* 45-47). For Knausgaard, this way of thinking robs him of something important in the experience of art. While he does not want to abandon criticism entirely ("dear voice of criticism, I will not abandon you"), Knausgaard asserts that "there is more to art than thoughts."

Knausgaard finds that the language of art criticism does not adequately describe this experience of art, and that the words he would use to describe his experience—words like "fantastic"—do not align with the standards of academic criticism he has been taught to abide by. And yet, he knows that it is this second type of response, the one that defies full knowing, the one that is rooted in a stance of acknowledgement, that is important to him. The tension Knausgaard notes here recalls Moi's writing on a Wittgensteinian view of criticism. To begin,

Moi describes the "hermeneutics of suspicion" as a way of reading that is "fundamentally suspicious of anything that appears to be ordinary and commonsensical, and anything that presents itself as 'established fact'" (*Revolution* 175). Reading suspiciously is a way of imposing one's own theories or political orientations on the text rather than allowing the concepts and concerns of the text to present themselves—similar to Knausgaard's description of viewing art solely through the lens of criticism. Moi contrasts this with a way of reading called "surface reading," which does not seek to uncover any hidden meanings or power structures within the text. They both have their pitfalls: the suspicious mode of reading can fail to see what the text is actually asking us to see, while so-called surface reading has been accused of putting forth conservative readings of texts. Moi sees a different issue, though, namely that both views "share the same picture of the text, namely as a thing or object with surfaces and depths" (*Revolution* 177).

Moi presents a line of reasoning that emerges from Wittgenstein's vision of language to argue that we should let go of the idea that a text may have a surface and a corresponding depth. The picture of a text which Moi takes issue with is analogous to the Augustinian picture of language that opens the *Philosophical Investigations* and was solidified through Ferdinand de Saussure's insistence on language as a system of signifieds and signifiers: the idea that a text may have a surface presentation (signifier) that is undergirded by it's true meaning (signified) is made possible by a vision of language that believes a word must have a meaning that cannot be grasped by simply paying attention to how it is used. Moi insists that the opposition of surface versus depth does nothing for the practice of literary criticism and that abandoning this conflict would open up liberating possibilities for how to approach reading. She offers an alternative: look and see what is present in the text. This seems deceptively simple, but in fact requires an

astute awareness of one's own position to the text—it is a practice of acknowledging the text which in turn reveals the reader. This does not mean that what a particular person may want to focus on in the text will be obvious, but that through paying close attention to the text and our experience of reading it, we may find something worth sharing with others. For Moi, this means we should not think about a particular method that we apply to a text, but rather we should begin "with our own sense of confusion" (*Revolution* 182). If nothing presents itself as being worthy of our carefully applied time and attention, then maybe it is not a text for which we can offer anything particularly illuminating, or as Moi says, "if the critic doesn't have a problem, if nothing really puzzles her about the text, she really has no reason to investigate it." We should be reading to get clear on what puzzles us, and getting clear involves a great deal of looking at the text. When we look at the text, we inevitably view it within the context of our own knowledge and experience, including training in literary criticism.

Moi's way of reading and practicing literary criticism offers a solution for the painful dichotomy Knausgaard describes in his experience of art. Instead of solely relying on his critical faculties and believing that no art can be appreciated without difficulty or, on the other hand, responding solely with emotion, there is a third option: pay attention to the art. This is the position Knausgaard ultimately arrives at. When pressed by his internal "voice of criticism" to describe what exactly it is that art provides other than the opportunity to think, Knausgaard stumbles his way through an attempt to defend the value of feelings, ultimately landing his argument by invoking Rilke: "Rilke writes somewhere that music lifts him up….he writes that music lifts him up and puts him down again somewhere else. It's this, putting you down again somewhere else, that art does," and this is what sets art apart from other pleasurable activities, like watching a football match or driving a car (*Cyclops* 47). He is describing a way of

responding to art that changes the viewer—the criticism the viewer might offer is a description of what she sees from her new vantage point, having been relocated, in a sense, by the experience of the art. The point of relocation is the point from which we can offer something worth sharing. The viewer cannot know what to share, though, unless she is paying attention to her experience. As Moi makes clear, reading and responding in this way involves a keen understanding of our own position in relationship to the text.

In *Book 2*, we see an example of Knausgaard practicing this way of engaging with art. Knausgaard recounts a time he, his friend Geir, and his soon-to-be-wife Linda saw Ingmar Bergman's production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. After the first act, he notes his experience and reaction—it had failed to impress him (206). He calls it "terrible, truly wretched," but notes that he sensed "an anticipation of something else, as if it were lying there and waiting." In the second act, his expectations are surpassed. He describes how the intensity increased and produced a "kind of boundlessness…something wild and reckless." He has a genuine experience of being taken aback and surprised by the performance to the point that the details "disappeared into the state they evoked, which was one of total presence." The experience of the second act would not have been possible without two things: the atmosphere created in the first act, and Knausgaard's openness to the experience itself. He notes that the first act was critical to the success of the second, but more importantly, it is the experience of the first act—the feeling that it wasn't good enough, and the sense of anticipation—that set him up for the experience of the second act. Knausgaard must first be attentive to the play and its effect on him in the first act in order to appreciate what followed in the second. Then, in the second act, he says, "if you hadn't allowed yourself to be transported everything that happened would have appeared exaggerated, perhaps even banal or kitschy." Being transported in the way described by Rilke is what allows

Knausgaard to see the art and to offer it a suitable response. From that new position, he can then ask questions about how the production worked the way it did and why Bergman made certain choices, but none of this would have been possible without being transported by the art and recognizing the new place one finds oneself in.

Knausgaard's experience of seeing *Ghosts* is also important for another reason: it prompts a moment in which he recognizes what he is trying to accomplish with his own writing. Following the performance, he thinks "that was where I had to go, to what I had seen that evening...to the essence, to the inner core of human existence" (207). He wants to make the kind of art that transports the viewer or reader to another place and allows her to see something new. When I read Knausgaard's quotation from Rilke, that art picks you up and puts you down somewhere else, I can't help but go back to Cavell and acknowledgement. To be picked up and put down somewhere else is to view the world with new eyes; it is to acknowledge the work of art and through that experience, to change. Knausgaard says that fiction does not give us the meaning we crave because, since it can be anything, it does not come from one distinct viewpoint. The only thing that makes art valuable is the gaze it reveals. He says, "the only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet. What is a work of art if not the gaze of another person?" (*Book 2* 562). For Knausgaard, art is how we reveal ourselves and it is the closest we can come to dealing with the finitude of being human. Art necessarily is expressed from the point of view of one person—it is the expression of what they see in the world. As Moi describes in *Revolution of the Ordinary*, the way we acknowledge or fail to acknowledge another person "reveals our judgment of the situation, the other, and our own responsibilities" (208).

Writing is a way for Knausgaard to communicate his “sense of the world” (*Cyclops* 18). Or, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “there is no literature if there is not a voice, and therefore a language that carries the mark of someone” (Beauvoir 200). For Beauvoir, literature emerges when the author “imposes his presence” upon the reader, and at the same time, “imposes his world.” In the next section, I’ll examine how Knausgaard accomplishes this in *My Struggle.*

The gaze of another person

When Knausgaard sits down to start writing *My Struggle*, at the end of *Book 2*, after returning from a trip to give a lecture and visit Kristiansand, he knows that he cannot make anything up, at least not in the way he had in his previous novels. He says he has “lost faith in literature” (561), which he says could have been catalyzed by the pervasiveness of story and fiction in everyday life. He continues, “I felt in every fiber of my body, something saturating was spreading through my consciousness like lard, not the least because the nucleus of all this fiction, whether true or not, was verisimilitude and the distance it held to reality was constant. In other words, it saw the same.” Books that maintain an equal distance from reality are books that don’t come from a speaker. Knausgaard wants his art to be a reflection of how he sees the world, and he insists on creating something that demands a response. Knausgaard’s project is, to use Cavell’s language, to acknowledge the world, and in doing so, to reveal where he is in relationship to what he sees. In order to do that, it must be as true an expression of himself as possible, and he does not believe in that moment that this can be accomplished through previously conceived notions of fiction. He says that “living like this, with the certainty that everything could equally well have been different, drove you to despair.”

How to do this, though, is not immediately clear. For instance, throughout his writing, Knausgaard struggles with what he sees as his own weakness for the sublime. He derides himself for falling victim to romantic notions of the world and of art, namely that art is transformational by the virtue of allowing us to reach the sublime. He says "my notion that art was the place where the flames of truth and beauty burned, the last remaining place where life could show its true face, was crazy. But now and then this notion broke through, not as a thought, for it could be argued out of existence, but as a feeling" (145). The thought of finding salvation through art, of art being the balm for his longing for the divine, is seductive, but Knausgaard knows that that is not exactly what he is looking for. For he is not looking to transcend reality, but to give it meaning. He is looking to get closer to reality, to see it as clearly as possible. In his essay "All That Is in Heaven," published in *In the Land of the Cyclops*, he describes a time when he was sixteen and experienced a new feeling. It was the last time he experienced a new feeling, he says—all later feelings were just variations on the old. This new feeling was brought about by his view from an airplane when he was on his way to visit his grandparents. Looking out the window at the clouds and ground below him, he was overcome by what he calls "an intense feeling of the world" (18). The feeling was one that combined the intensity of being present in the moment with a separateness that allowed him to see the world anew. This new feeling created an openness and sense of possibility, one that he yearns for as he sits down to write *My Struggle.*

How can one explain the feeling Knausgaard is describing if not as an encounter with the sublime? Looking closely at what Knausgaard is saying, we can see that what he yearns for is actually not art that transcends the world, but art that gets as close to the world as possible; he "wanted to evoke everything the world had bestowed upon us" (*Book 2* 354). He wants to look

closely at what is there. It is fitting, then, that he begins writing *My Struggle* by looking—looking intensely at his own reflection in the window of his office. It is worth quoting this short passage in full.

> *"In the window before me I can vaguely see the image of my face. Apart from the eyes, which are shining, and the part directly beneath, which dimly reflects light, the whole of the left side lies in shade. Two deep furrows run down the forehead, one deep furrow runs down each cheek, all filled as it were with darkness, and when the eyes are staring and serious, and the mouth turned down at the corners it is impossible not to think of this face as somber.*
>
> *What is it that has etched itself into you?"*
>
> *(Book 2, 582)*

In this passage, Knausgaard's approach to *My Struggle* is in clear view, along with its relationship to ordinary language philosophy. Knausgaard does not see his face as hiding something; his reflection is not a metaphor or a hidden symbol. He notices the light and the "furrows," and the last question deliberately asks about the physical presentation of his face — what has etched itself there. Looking closely at what he sees is the key to understanding it. Importantly, someone else would have described Knausgaard's face differently because what they would see would be different—what Knausgaard sees is a result of where he is and who he is. It is the position he occupies in relationship to his own reflection that gives us what he sees. This distinction is important. Knausgaard does not seek to present an objective reality, but rather the very specific reality as seen from where he sits. In "Inexhaustible Precision," Knausgaard writes "what the novel can do, in its best moments, is to simplify without reduction, by seeking not toward reality, the documentable abundance of people and events, whose totality is unreachable and whose individual parts are not representative, but toward the picture of reality,

more exactly that which combines two phenomena, the concrete and the inexhaustible" (*Cyclops* 70). Just as Wittgenstein says that no word can ever be exhaustively defined, its meaning only graspable through its use, Knausgaard says that reality can never be fully described in all of its permutations. The novel should not reach towards all-encompassing objective perspective, since it is impossible and, perhaps most importantly, does not create good art. The novel should show the reader what the author is seeing and how it is connected to something beyond that moment; in short, it should imbue the ordinary with the meaning that can only be achieved by disclosing the position of the author. The novel can only do this by slowing down and getting close to the world. This is the opposite of the usual relationship to knowing things, as Knausgaard describes near the beginning of *Book 1*. He is thinking back on his childhood perception of his father, and he recognizes how differently his father was experiencing the world as compared to himself as an eight-year-old. As a child, Knausgaard's days were full of meaning and possibility, but his father's world had largely solidified and become knowable. Knausgaard notes that there is a "price to pay" for the feeling of mastery his father seemed to have over his world. He says, "understanding the world requires you to take a certain distance from it. …At length we bring [phenomena] within the scope of our senses and we stabilize it with fixer. When it has been fixed we call it knowledge" (11). We spend many years calibrating ourselves to find the correct distance from the world, without realizing that it is this distance that robs us of meaning. Knausgaard writes, "meaning requires content, content requires time, time requires resistance. Knowledge is distance, knowledge is static and the enemy of meaning." Knausgaard wants to undo this distance, to undo the reliance on knowledge and replace it with acknowledgement.

Later in *Book 1*, in a prelude to what he will explore in *Book 2* when he writes about Dostoyevsky, Knausgaard examines why he is drawn to 19th century paintings and why his

response to them differs from his response to 20th century art. He says the older paintings "always retained some reference to visible reality" (223). Knausgaard observes that there is always a distance between reality and the way it is portrayed by the artist, and it is in the attempt by the artist to represent reality that their own view comes into focus. This space between reality and the artist's gaze is where, for Knausgaard, "the world seemed to step forward from the world." These paintings situated the human as within reality rather than outside of it. Knausgaard contrasts this with Edvard Munch's work, in which "humans swallow up everything, make everything theirs" (224), coloring the world with "human feelings and inner life." Knausgaard says that in modernist works, both man and the world are abstracted, removed from their ordinary context, as a result "there is no longer any dynamism between the outer and the inner, just a division." They physical has become "gestalted" and has lost its form; even the body has been replaced by the idea of the body (225). Knausgaard eventually arrives back at death, saying that death without a body is an "intellectual concept" detached from its physical manifestation, uninstantiated (226). For Knausgaard, it is not only philosophical problems that arise, but artistic ones, when, as Wittgenstein says, "language goes on holiday" (*Philosophical Investigations,* §38).

As an answer to the problems he has posed, Knausgaard follows this passage with a description of his own experience seeing death for the first time. His combination of physical details paired with the inexhaustible meaning brought forward by Knausgaard's response brings the world close and gives meaning to his observations. When the scene opens, Knausgaard is in the chapel of a funeral home with his brother Yngve, viewing his father's dead body. He describes the room they are in, the light, the sounds filtering in from outside, and the clothes his father's body is dressed in. Knausgaard wants to stare at his father's face, which for the first

time, presents itself for “unhindered” viewing (226). Knausgaard, whose experience of life has been overseen by the specter of his father’s face, finds himself with an insatiable urge to continue looking at his father’s face, searching for some meaning. But what he finds is that he was “familiar with the features, but not the expression they had assumed” (227). Without his father’s ability to respond, the face has become meaningless, and the “woodenness” of his features “forbade any feelings of intimacy” (227). Knausgaard turns his attention to the world outside the chapel, where there is movement and action full of meaning—a gardener mows the lawn, three people walk in solemn meditation, cars speed by. Knausgaard observes the blades of grass that whirl in the air and the red cloak worn by one of the mourners, “resplendent against the green grass and the gray sky.” There is a sudden “roar” from the lawn-mower, and the outer world collides with the world inside the chapel: Knausgaard startles with the expectation that his father will open his eyes. When his father remains still, Knausgaard finally understands that his father is gone, and we readers understand that Knausgaard had not grasped that fact before. As that moment passes, Knausgaard describes “the feeling of freedom” that rises through his body like a wave, eventually finding expression in a sob. Knausgaard regains his composure by letting his attention drifts again to the sounds of life outside the chapel. When he looks back down at his father’s face, he is struck by the fact that he had never been able to look at his father’s face without trying to understand it, to scrutinize it, to read it like a book—but now his father’s face is “closed” (228), no longer available for interpretation. Knausgaard must confront the finitude of his and his father’s lives and the separation that would never be narrowed. It is by looking closely at the world, not by abstracting it or reaching for the sublime, that Knausgaard is able to achieve meaning. Art is not in the sublime but in the ordinary, it is only by getting close that we can see it, and this is what opens up possibility, freedom, and the inexhaustible.

Acknowledging Knausgaard

In one of the first passages in *Book 1* of *My Struggle*, Knausgaard tells of a time he saw a newscast about a missing fishing boat. In footage shown of the sea where the boat was lost, young Karl Ove could see the image of a face. He is taken aback by this and must tell someone immediately. He runs out to the garden, slowing his pace to a walk as he approaches his father. His father dismisses him, telling eight-year-old Karl Ove to not think anymore about the face. As Karl Ove returns the house, his father tells him not to run. He is confused—how could his father have known he was running? The question runs through his mind until he finally realizes that his father could hear from his footsteps on the tiles that he was running—he had been seen, in a way, when he didn't want to be seen. When his brother gets home, Karl Ove tells him about the face in the sea, only to again be met with disbelief. Yngve makes fun of him until he cries, but Karl Ove turns away so that Yngve does not witness his tears. The evening proceeds, with Karl Ove mindful of his father's every movement, adjusting his own decisions and actions based on the slightest changes in his father's mood. After dinner, he mentions the face again to his father, saying that it would likely be shown again on television that night; he is again dismissed, but he comes up with a plan to sneak downstairs when he knows his parents will be watching the late-night news. Knausgaard writes, "I just wanted to find out if they could see what I had seen" (22). He tiptoes down the landing and cracks open the door to the living room. The news program has just come on, and the reporter starts talking about the fishing boat, but this time, the images shown are different and they do not include the image of the calm sea in which Karl Ove had seen the image of a face earlier that day. When the report is over, his father laughs. Knausgaard writes, "the shame that suffused my body was so strong that I was unable to think" and from that shame he had the sense that he himself "was being erased" (24). He realizes that his father could

not see what he saw, and that meant that his could not see him. As he returns to his room, Karl Ove sees nothing—the experience of being unseen has taken away his own vision.

Knausgaard expresses that he feels isolated, separated from his fellow human beings. Art is the thing that can come close to bridging this divide. *My Struggle* is Knausgaard's act of acknowledging the world; as readers, we are asked to acknowledge Knausgaard through his art. This is not to say we have to understand Knausgaard or that we should think we know him in the way the skeptic demands, but rather it is an act of seeing how it is with him. Furthermore, I think Knausgaard wants us to witness and acknowledge his becoming. *My Struggle* is not a memoir wherein the finished self is presented as a product with the book existing to show us how that self was created. On the contrary, much of what Knausgaard is reaching for is a sense of possibility, of open-endedness, and of being unfinished. The nature of an unfinished person is that they cannot be fully known, but only acknowledged. Moi asserts in an article published on the website for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that "Knausgaard writes at once to create something authentic and to become authentic himself." Knausgaard, Moi says, is bringing himself out into the open, refusing to conceal himself in shame. As readers, we must witness this from a place of acknowledgement.

Ultimately, Knausgaard says that his motivation to write comes from his desire to communicate his "sense of the world" (*Cyclops* 18). He wants to show us what he sees and ask if we see it, too. If we don't see it, then at least we are now attuned to what we do see, and in that, we are revealing ourselves. Knausgaard asks his readers to look at the world closely just as he has done, to see the ordinary and examine what it means, to see ourselves in a mirror and know that if someone else were viewing our reflection that they would see someone else entirely. In "Inexhaustible precision," Knausgaard says, "when I started writing at the age of eighteen, I

quickly arrived at the place where all sense of self dissolved, where not thoughts, but something else prevailed, something emotional and dreamlike. I knew that place, it was where I used to go when I read" (*Cyclops* 51). He says that reading lets you lose yourself and see the world through the author's eyes. This has echoes of Beauvoir, who wrote in her essay "What can Literature Do?" that the point of literature is to show what the author sees from the author's situation in relationship to the world. For the reader, she says, "what is important is to be fascinated by a singular world that intersects with mine and yet is other…I must identify with someone: the author. I must enter into his world and his world must become mine" (201). When reading *My Struggle*, we are invited into Knausgaard's process of bringing himself out into the open, of revealing what he sees through his own process of discovering it.

Conclusion: "All literary works are essentially a search"

In her interview with City Arts and Lectures, Cusk was asked if the similarities between herself and Faye were intentional and if this was the mark of autofiction. She responds by saying that yes, the similarity was a "completely deliberate aspect of the books." There is no denying that Cusk and Knausgaard are using their own lives as material for their books, but Cusk goes on to say that she believes autofiction is "a very misunderstood genre." The use of oneself, she says, is seen as "narcissistic," when in fact the point is to use oneself as a way of seeing the world. Cusk says she thinks what autofiction is doing is "verifying" the world through this use of self. It is a process of revealing some truth about the world through the interrogation of the self. When she was writing the *Outline* trilogy, Cusk, like Knausgaard, had become "sickened by…the lengths writer and reader go to convince each other and themselves that there is no link between the book and the person who wrote it"; Cusk found this effort "dishonest" (City Arts and Lectures).

Despite this reliance on the self, I think it is misguided to focus on the autobiographical components of autofiction as the thing that sets this genre apart. Beauvoir, when writing about the relationship between writer and reality, wrote "I find that the question [of which writers best represent reality] is posed very poorly; put this way it does not allow for a response because reality is not a fixed being; it is a becoming….it is impossible for a writer to reduce reality to a fixed and completed spectacle that he might show in its totality" (200). Asking if something is autofiction by looking at whether or not it is autobiographical is also a poorly formulated question. For Cusk and Knausgaard, the goal is to represent the world not objectively, but from, to use Beauvoir's language, their own particular "situation" in relationship to the world. Cusk began from a place of rejecting point-of-view entirely and went in search of objectivity. Through

this search, which we follow across the *Outline* trilogy, she reckons with the ethical implications of narrative and eventually concludes that the world as she sees it is the only way to morally represent anything. She cannot get out of her own situation; she can only take responsibility for it. Beauvoir says, "if we speak of situations, we can again take up the idea of this singularity of the world proposed to every writer, and by every writer. He obviously manifests the world such as he envelops it, such as he implicitly typifies it; his world" (201). We can only hope to grasp a "partial truth" and communicate it to the reader. Cusk's work asks us to question the limitations of our own reality and to take responsibility for the ethical implications of what we see, and more existentially, Cusk wants to verify her own existence by showing what she sees. Cusks says the *Outline* trilogy was "a life process as much as a sort of intellectual decision," and that her process is to write what she sees in the hopes that someone else sees it, too, For Knausgaard, too, the goal is to confront separateness by revealing himself through what he sees. As with the *Outline* trilogy, *My Struggle* demonstrates that this separateness can only be dealt with by confronting it rather than distancing it through narrative. For both Cusk and Knausgaard, it is the communication of the partial truth that defines their work. Literature, Beauvoir says, "surpass[es] separation by affirming it." Through the separateness of the author, the reader finds identification.

Key to this formulation is that the reality as presented by the author is not a static object. The writer is becoming and transforming through the writing; they are not, as Beauvoir says, "a being," but rather "an existant," or, someone who is existing in the present tense, is becoming and changing. The author "lives in time." The truth of the author is embraced by the reader, even while remaining separate. I think what autofiction, at least in its manifestation in Cusk and Knausgaard's work, is doing is searching for a way to acknowledge the world and the finitude of

human beings. The exhaustion these authors express in relation to fictionally-derived narratives speaks to a desire to reveal the self, but to reveal the self in a way that is just autobiography called by a different name is to claim the self as static. The fictional and autobiographical mode both make a claim on the reader to believe what is being written, to take it as fact. The claim autofiction makes is different: it is to see what the author sees, but as Beauvoir says, "in this world that is not given, facing a man who is not given, the relationship is obviously not given either" (202). The relationship between writer and reader must be discovered through mutual revelation. This is the claim autofiction makes on its reader: to allow oneself to be moved, to recognize this new place, to see what the author sees, and to in turn see oneself.

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