EXISTENTIAL COMMITMENTS IN KIERKEGAARD AND KNAUSGAARD: ON DEATH, FAITH, AND WRITING[1]

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Abstract: In this contribution I reflect on the works of the Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard and the contemporary Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard to reveal the important existential commitments to questions of faith and death in their writing. The dichotomous view that Knausgaard champions secular faith in opposition to Kierkegaard's championing of religious faith is undermined to show a greater complexity that emerges particularly through consideration of Knausgaard's reading of Kierkegaard in his novel *The Morning Star*. The thought of death palpably permeates the writing of both Kierkegaard and Knausgaard, and questioning the meaning of life and death leads to further questions about the self and writing that will always be greater than the answers one attempts to give in response.

Keywords: existentialism, religious and secular faith, death, literature, self

1. Introduction

Welcome! Thank you all very much for being here. Thank you, Brian Söderquist, for your kind introduction. Thank you, Joe Westfall, for all your efforts in arranging this banquet, what a great location you found! I would also like to thank the other members of the Søren Kierkegaard Society Executive Committee for all their efforts. Thank you, Tom Millay, for organizing the panel that will speak tomorrow morning. Thank you, Amber Bowen, for participating in tomorrow's panel and for also organizing the upcoming APA sessions. Thanks also go out to Elizabeth Li, our SKS secretary who is in Copenhagen

[1] This is a revised version of the presidential address delivered at the annual banquet of the Søren Kierkegaard Society in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. This event was held at the Union Kitchen & Tap Gaslamp in San Diego, CA, on Friday, November 22, 2024. I am grateful to my colleague and friend, Bruce Janz, for his comments on the earliest version of this paper, and to an anonymous reviewer for insightful comments that have led to the further development of this work. I would also like to thank Anna Söderquist and the editorial staff of *IJKR* for their kind support.

and could not be with us tonight, for all her help in sending out all our messages and for updating our website.

I should also say a few words on the occasion of this address. As I think you all know, Professor Gordon Marino was scheduled to be our distinguished speaker tonight, but a little over a month ago now, he had an emergency medical situation that required immediate surgery and thus was unable to make the trip to join us here tonight. While we were all saddened by this event, I am sure that we are even more grateful to know that Gordon is recovering well and that he would love to give his talk to us in Boston next year. After his emergency, Gordon told me that he almost bought the farm when this happened, and I would suspect this leads us to reflect not only on how sometimes, as we say, life can get in the way of things, but also how death is a part of life. This is a thought that Kierkegaard wanted us to take with utmost seriousness. It is likely a thought which lies lurking in the shadows throughout Kierkegaard's writings.

Consequently, a little over a month ago, I was not planning on delivering an address to this esteemed audience. I had, however, for much of the last year been doing research on the questions of death that arise in Kierkegaard and other writers, such as Paul-Louis Landsberg, Albert Camus, and Karl Ove Knausgaard. And thus, you may begin to see how this talk came together in a very short time, as it is related to the research I have been conducting most recently. I am aware that there are several different types of presidential addresses, and that humorous and light is often the kind delivered, especially when the address is given in conjunction with a festive banquet in which the focus is also on fine food and drink. And, of course, there is a great deal of humor in Kierkegaard—one frequently laughs aloud, I find, in reading his texts—but it is seldom of the light or superficial variety, for as we all also know in Kierkegaard's texts there is a most significant weight, a tremendous gravity, that arises in seeking edification through earnestness. We also know that he under the guise of a pseudonym conceived it as his task "to make difficulties everywhere,"[2] which is to say to bring more weight to one's life by reflecting on one's existence as an individual. So, instead of what may be the more common lighthearted address, mine shall deal with what I suppose are heavy topics, although I would like to think that this is not at all inappropriate for an audience of Kierkegaard scholars.

I shall not only be speaking about Kierke-gaard tonight, but also about Knaus-gaard, for I have been playing in both "yards" (*gaard*, *gård*) for the last little while, initially in

[2] SKS 7, 172 / CUP1, 187.

the "cemetery" (*kirkegård*), but now also by the cliff (*knaus*). Perhaps, then, it is fair to say that each writer in his own way leads readers on a perilous venture in thinking by a graveside. Knausgaard is a fascinating contemporary writer who shares a general cultural and linguistic tradition with Kierkegaard, and he provokes insights into and contrasts with Kierkegaard that are not only interesting but deeply significant for thinking about the mysterious meaning of existence. And if we can still speak of existentialism, I would argue that Knausgaard is one of the major existentialist writers today.

Have you read Knausgaard? Not only has Knausgaard taken the literary world by storm, but he has taken it with the force of a category five hurricane (the effects of which, as a long-time resident of central Florida, I am well familiar). Knausgaard earned critical acclaim for his earliest novels, but his massive six-volume series of autofictional works titled *My Struggle* (published as *Min Kamp* in the original Norwegian from 2009 to 2011, 2014 to 2018 in English translation) has not only fascinated readers but also reinvigorated discussions about the genres of autofiction and life writing. While he has been called "the Proust of Norway," readers in his native country were so fascinated by *My Struggle* "that offices [had] to declare 'Knausgaard-free days' during which no employee could hang around the break room arguing about his books."[3] Most recently, readers have been put on edge by his latest series of existential novels starting with *The Morning Star* (2022), which have become the subject of discussions in literary and theological circles in Scandinavia. In fact, it has even been claimed that "Knausgaard is [a] more skilled theologian than most,"[4] which is an argument that I shall not pursue here, although it is clear that

[3] William H. Willimon, "The Proust of Norway," *The Christian Century*, vol. 132, no. 9, April 29, 2015, https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2015-04/proust-norway.

[4] Daniel Wistrand, "Knausgård skickligare teolog än de flesta," *Dagen*, February 3, 2021, https://www.dagen.se/kultur/2021/02/03/knausgard-skickligare-teolog-an-de-flesta/. *Dagen* is a Christen-based news outlet, and Wistrand is writing about a *Dagen* podcast in which the hosts, well-established theologians Patrik Hagman and Joel Halldorf, devote an episode to a discussion of Knausgaard's *The Morning Star*, which they describe on the website as "bursting with theological and religious questions." (*The Reader Podcast*, season 1, episode 51, "'The Morning Star' by Karl Ove Knausgård," *Dagen*, February 1, 2021, 59 min., 55 sec., https://lasarpodden.libsyn.com/avsnitt-51-morgonstjrnan-av-karl-ove-knausgrd [my translation]. My thanks to Ludvig Nyman, a doctoral student in Biblical Studies at Lund University in Sweden, for this helpful information). As already suggested, the reception of Knausgaard's works in his native Norway has been intense, and Willimon also writes in "The Proust of Norway" about how "hip Norwegian Lutherans and Methodists" introduced him to Knausgaard's *My Struggle*. Further, Claus Elholm Andersen (University of Helsinki) has published a comparative study titled "Knausgård/Kierkegaard: The Journey Towards the Ethical in Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*" in *Scandinavica*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2014): 29–52. Andersen argues for a new perspective considering the influence of Kierkegaard's existentialism on Knausgaard, who

Knausgaard's latest novels call us to think about the *mysterium tremendum* far more intensely than most.

The most significant philosophical and religious questions—those concerned with the meanings of life, death, and selfhood—permeate Knausgaard's writing, and he also raises interesting questions about reading Kierkegaard and writing about him, as well as the commitment to write in general. Perhaps surprisingly, however, there is no discussion of Kierkegaard in Knausgaard's voluminous *My Struggle*,[5] a work in which his everyday life is put on display in an exceedingly detailed manner, for one of the details of his life as a late teenager that is left out and appears in a separate essay is that he would quote Kierkegaard's phrase "subjectivity is truth" in letters he wrote. Thus, Kierkegaard's core existential insight became for Knausgaard in his formative years a personal slogan, one that "kind of said it all."[6] This raises several interesting questions. Can Knausgaard's *My Struggle* be interpreted as an expression of Kierkegaard's claim that truth is subjectivity? On the surface, at least, such an interpretation seems plausible. But can one's life ever be fully brought out into the open? Could the omission of this (in)significant detail from *My Struggle* perhaps suggest a secrecy or hiddenness of subjectivity that can never be brought to light? Is this not what the Kierkegaardian slogan can be taken to express? But could it also signify the fact that the meaning of one's life can never fully be understood—or, more pointedly, that the quest to know oneself can never be fulfilled? Is this a point on which we could find agreement in the writings of Knausgaard and Kierkegaard? Let these questions with all their weight remain for us in suspense.

in turn is read as portraying himself as an ethicist in *My Struggle*. In Denmark, if one is to judge by the references available at the University of Copenhagen website, much of the discussion of Knausgaard's works has been within the context of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, but a conference for priests and theologians was held at the Faculty of Theology on "Language for the Sacred—Between the Unspeakable and the Unpredictable" (September 2021), which included separate contributions on Kierkegaard and Knausgaard.

[5] There are a couple mentions of "Kierkegaard" in the last two volumes of *My Struggle*, but these occur within sentences listing a variety of thinkers and without a discussion of his works or philosophical views. See Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, *Book Five*, trans. Don Bartlett (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2015), p. 310, and Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book Six*, trans. Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2018), p. 828.

[6] Karl Ove Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," in *In the Land of the Cyclops*, trans. Martin Aitken (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2021), p. 257.

2. On Faith

While the relationship between the writings of Kierkegaard and Knausgaard stands in need of more focused scholarly attention, especially within philosophical circles, one possible way of thinking about this relationship can be found in an interesting recent study, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* by Martin Hägglund, professor of comparative literature at Yale University. Here Kierkegaard and Knausgaard are read as antipodes, with one proclaiming the height of religious faith in his account of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* and the other championing secular faith in his momentous *My Struggle*. In Hägglund's work, Abraham is viewed as acting recklessly towards his son Isaac and this is seen as a consequence of his religious faith. But this is an easy attack, one which, it seems to me, not only leaves out the "fear and trembling" that must always remain and would have little bothered Johannes de Silentio. For he has the courage to maintain that Abraham was a murderer—for he drew his knife with every intention of ending his son's life—while also maintaining paradoxically that Abraham was a person of faith, a view which is unsurprisingly beyond all mediation.

Let us consider some of the details of Hägglund's account. By "secular faith," Hägglund understands the devotion to a life understood to be finite, and it is the "sense of finitude"[7] that is said to make life meaningful, if not miraculous, and that grounds commitment and responsibility to others. A finite life necessarily involves projects that will break down and ends in death. It is as Kierkegaard writes in his discourse "At a Graveside": "then all is over!"[8] According to Hägglund, "for the question of how I should lead my life to be intelligible *as* a question, I have to believe that I will die."[9] On this view, then, death is productive.

In contrast, religious faith centers its focus on eternity and in doing so devalues our finite lives. Religious faith is pernicious, Hägglund claims, for it views "our finite lives as a lower form of being."[10] This argument echoes Nietzsche's critique of religion, particularly of "the afterworldly" and "the preachers of death" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,[11] although Hägglund will later differentiate himself from Nietzsche's perspective. What is

[7] Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2019), p. 5.
[8] SKS 5, 442 & 444 / TD, 71 & 73.
[9] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 5.
[10] Ibid., p. 6.
[11] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 142–145 and 156–158.

most significant in Hägglund's account, however, is that religious faith is held to prevent us from taking responsibility for our lives and caring for others. This is no doubt surprising, if not paradoxical, when we consider that it is often proponents of religious faith and members of faith-based organizations who are the first to help others in times of crisis and need. John Caputo makes this point when he writes:

> If, on any given day, you go into the worst neighborhoods of the inner cities of most large urban centers, the people you will find there serving the poor and needy . . . will almost certainly be religious people—evangelicals and Pentecostals, social workers with deeply held religious convictions, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, men and women, priests and nuns, black and white.[12]

For Caputo "religious people are lovers; they love God, with whom all things are possible," and "they are down in the trenches, out on the streets, serving the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, while the critics of religion are sleeping in on Sunday mornings."[13] But, of course, it is also the case that religious people often confuse themselves and their beliefs with God and end up sacrificing the love of others for what they take to be the love of God. Such is arguably the case in the story of Abraham, the central paradigm of Western religious faith, and the horrific Akedah. Thus, crucial to Hägglund's account is a careful analysis of the faith of Abraham as portrayed in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous *Fear and Trembling*. So, to help further clarify this sharp distinction between secular and religious faith, we must consider this account.

Through a carefully developed reading of what is arguably Kierkegaard's most perplexing work,[14] Hägglund shows how the abandonment of care and responsibility take place in the story of Abraham. The religious faith of Abraham expresses brutality, carelessness, and irresponsibility towards his son Isaac, for Abraham or any so-called knight of faith is "literally insensitive to the fate of the finite."[15] Hägglund writes:

> But it is easy to see that the consequences of Abraham's religious faith is that he is utterly reckless with regard to Isaac. Abraham *loves* Isaac with all his heart, but because of his religious faith Abraham is deprived of the ability to *care* for Isaac, in the sense of being responsive to what happens to him. He does not try to protect Isaac, feels no remorse for sacrificing him, and

[12] John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 92.
[13] Ibid., p. 92.
[14] See my review of Daniel Conway, ed., *Kierkegaard's* Fear and Trembling*: A Critical Guide*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal* (January 2016), https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/kierkegaard-s-fear-and-trembling-a-critical-guide/.
[15] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 142.

> does not tremble when he draws the knife to kill him, since he has complete faith that Isaac will be restored no matter what happens to him.
>
> Abraham's brutality is a direct effect of giving up secular faith through the double movement of religious faith.[16]

This is a strong indictment against religious faith. Although we might question the ability to understand Abraham's emotional state, especially when Johannes de Silentio repeatedly emphasizes that Abraham cannot be understood, as well as the "fear and trembling" pervading such faith, but these considerations do not themselves invalidate the claim that Abraham is irresponsible with regards to Isaac. Religious faith protects Abraham from despair, but it does so because he is not truly vulnerable to loss. He believes by virtue of the absurd that with God all things are possible, so it really does not matter whether Isaac is killed or not. Either way it is all the same. Whatever happens to the knight of faith "he is just the same," for "he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher, because his remaining in finitude would have no trace of a timorous, anxious routine."[17] Remember that in his work de Silentio is describing movements that he can recognize but not fully understand, and perhaps there is no greater lack of understanding than when considering this expression of the calm acceptance of the goodness of finitude, an acceptance that we will see developed in Knausgaard's writing when he turns to Kierkegaard's *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. But does this acceptance not assume an infinite responsibility for oneself before the (w)hol(l)y Other?

In his important work *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida explores the concept of responsibility and shows how Abraham's responsibility is bound to singularity, secrecy, and silence.[18] Further, Derrida writes: "What the knights of good conscience don't realize, is that 'the sacrifice of Isaac' illustrates . . . the most common and everyday experience of responsibility," which even the "most cursory examination of the concept of responsibility cannot fail to affirm."[19] Derrida explains:

> Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and ties me in my absolute singularity to the other as other. God is the name of the absolute other as other and as unique

[16] Ibid., p. 150.
[17] SKS 4, 135 / FT, 40.
[18] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 60.
[19] Ibid., pp. 67–68.

> (the God of Abraham defined as the one and unique). As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my absolute singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty. I am responsible to the other as other, I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him. But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others. An infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other* [*tout autre est tout autre*], every one else is completely or wholly other.[20]

Hägglund has also written on Derrida, whose work for him is informed by a radical atheism,[21] but notwithstanding this perspective, it is surprising that the argument in *The Gift of Death* is overlooked when interpreting the faith of Abraham brought into focus through Derrida's careful reading of Kierkegaard's text.

In general, religious faith is said to be focused on the "blessedness of infinity,"[22] while secular faith is centered on finitude, and the latter thus involves the unwillingness "to sacrifice the finite for the eternal"[23] even though one recognizes the brutal fact that finite life will end in a senseless death. In *Fear and Trembling* Johannes de Silentio frequently draws readers attention to the paradoxical nature of faith, and although Hägglund does not do so with regards to secular faith, we can see that secular faith is also paradoxical. As Hägglund explains,

> the peril of death is an intrinsic part of why it matters what we do . . . . We have to take care of one another because we can die, we have to fight for what we believe in because it lives only through our sustained effort, and we have to be concerned with what will be passed on to coming generations because the future is not certain. This is the double movement of secular faith. You run ahead into the risk of irrevocable death . . . and yet you are resolved to make the most of the time that is given. . . . You see that death is utter darkness and yet you seek to maintain the light that will be extinguished.
>
> Every time you care for someone who may be lost or leave you behind, every time you devote yourself to a cause whose fate is uncertain, you perform an act of secular faith. Through your passion, you apprehend that death is constitutive of life and yet you do not renounce your

[20] Ibid., p. 68.
[21] See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 1.
[22] SKS 4, 135 / FT, 40.
[23] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 146.

> commitment to living on. You do not give in to death but seek to prolong the life of what you love. You see that death is senseless and yet you seek to make sense of life.[24]

This is one of the clearest statements of secular faith provided by Hägglund, but does it ultimately make sense? Is it compelling? Can meaning be founded on meaninglessness? Why should one choose to maintain "secular faith in the irreplaceable value of a finite life"[25] given the certainty of the bleak outcome that awaits? Granted, while one is still living it is easy enough to fall into patterns of attachment that affirm the value of life, but one can also easily fall into episodes of despair. This is because we cannot actually judge the value of life while we are still living, and thus in the face of death we feel moments of vacillation which contribute to a pervasive mood that cannot be eliminated.[26]

Although Kierkegaard's "ultimate aim is to defend a version of religious faith," Hägglund explains how Kierkegaard's "own work provides insights into the dynamic of secular faith that he seeks to overcome."[27] These insights include understanding faith as a risk involving "necessary uncertainty, existential commitment, [and] motivational force,"[28] such that according to Hägglund, "Kierkegaard can . . . be seen to have a deep grasp of the dynamic of secular faith."[29] This account thus raises the question of whether religious faith includes secular faith, which presents itself as a possibility in contrast to a binary view that the two "faiths" are strictly antithetical. Consider that Hägglund refers to Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside," which he calls a "remarkable text" that shows how "the thought of death is the source of any 'earnest' engagement with life."[30] Kierkegaard writes: "The thought of death gives the earnest person the right momentum in life and the right goal toward which he directs his momentum."[31] This of course raises the all-important question: What is the right goal? The answer to this question is no doubt something that all persons must find for themselves, for as Kierkegaard writes in a well-

[24] Ibid., p. 168.
[25] Ibid., p. 170.
[26] For a further development of this argument see Michael Strawser, "Between Mood and Spirit: Kierkegaard's Conception of Death as the Teacher of Earnestness," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, eds. Peter Šajda, Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter Brill, 2023), pp. 143–160.
[27] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 128.
[28] Ibid., p. 129.
[29] Ibid., p. 131.
[30] Ibid., p. 133.
[31] SKS 5, 453 / TD, 83. It is worth noting that this text speaks of a common person of faith who could be seen as unifying both secular and religious faith, although readers will find some ambivalence here as discussed in my "Between Mood and Spirit."

known early journal entry, "the thing is to find a truth that is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*."[32] A few lines later Kierkegaard adds an important clarification that "to find *the idea*" is more correctly put as "to find [one]self."[33] But what if one can never truly accomplish this feat? What if uncanniness forever reigns supreme? The answers to these questions do not come easily, if they come at all, and they mark a restlessness that can be found in the writings of both Kierkegaard and Knausgaard.

Further, is it certain that Knausgaard is best viewed as a champion of secular faith, as Hägglund maintains? Is Knausgaard's work to be read as first and foremost a work that is not only based on the distinction between religious and secular faith, but one that also provides an implicit argument for the affirmation of the latter as opposed to the former? To be fair, Hägglund's study focuses on Knausgaard's *My Struggle* and appears before the publication of *The Morning Star* series of novels, which open more religious dimensions. But there are, of course, other possibilities when reading Knausgaard. Perhaps his work is entirely beyond the discussion of faith altogether and borders on nihilism, or perhaps it implies a form of faith that is at once both secular and religious (after all, Abraham's faith was for this life, and as we know, Kierkegaard lamented that if he had had faith, he would have stayed with Regine), in which case the binary distinction breaks down, for it is faith within the world and yet for a presence of life that cannot be reduced to the world. Or perhaps it is best read as a question of how the secular and the religious ultimately hang together. Perhaps, then, we do best to promote a hermeneutic in favor of the unknown or undecidable, such as I have argued previously regarding Kierkegaard,[34] for is this not most appropriate when considering writings about life, literatures of life, that continually expose the failure of our ideas to capture and hold fast to any meaning of life?

3. On Death

Central to each writer, Kierkegaard and Knausgaard, is a preoccupation with death,[35] which is frequently, if not paradoxically, viewed as the condition of a valuable or

[32] SKS 17, 24 / KJN 1, 19.
[33] SKS 17, 25 / KJN 1, 20.
[34] See Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), especially "Conclusion: Rereading Kierkegaard as a Postmodern Philosopher," pp. 227–245.
[35] In their introduction to *Kierkegaard and Death*, Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben write that Kierkegaard had a "remarkable, lifelong preoccupation with death." See Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben,

meaningful life. In "At a Graveside," Kierkegaard writes that "death in earnest gives life force as nothing else does; it makes one alert as nothing else does."[36] And as I have argued in a recent article, "the conception of death as the teacher of earnestness emphasizes earnestness for this life, such that a reflection on one's own death is transformed into a reflection on one's life, and it changes the emphasis of earnestness to focus on meaningful actions that produce the good to be experienced by others as well as oneself in our finite conscious lives."[37]

Death is literally everywhere in Knausgaard's writings, from the beginning to the end of *My Struggle* to his latest series of novels to his book on Edvard Munch's art and even his book on "the beautiful game" of soccer. In Book Six of *My Struggle* Knausgaard directly addresses the relationship between life and death when he writes: "Death is the background from which life emerges. Had death not existed, we would never have known what life is."[38] This passage is quoted by Hägglund, who argues that such a view of death is also a condition of secular faith, which, as we have seen, he takes to be central to Knausgaard's work. While Augustine's *Confessions* and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* stand as monumental works of religious faith for Hägglund, Knausgaard's *My Struggle* is a testament to secular faith. Instead of struggling with one's absolute duty to God, one should struggle to attach oneself to one's own life, which calls to mind the search for existential authenticity and lucidity. In Book Two of *My Struggle* Knausgaard writes: "The life around me was not meaningful. I always longed to be away from it. So the life I led was not my own. I tried to make it mine, this was my struggle."[39] Thus, contrary to the effort to detach oneself from one's worldly life in turning towards God, "the animating principle of Knausgaard's writing is . . . one of *attachment*," and as Hägglund further explains, the existential imperative of *My Struggle* is to "attach yourself to what you see, focus your gaze by attaching yourself to what you see."[40] But just how does one perform this attachment—how does one focus one's reflective gaze in order that one becomes attached to one's own life? The language here is worrisome, and perhaps one could just

"Introduction," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2011), p. 1.

[36] SKS 5, 452 / TD, 83.

[37] Strawser, "Between Mood and Spirit," p. 158.

[38] Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book Six*, p. 624.

[39] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book Two: A Man in Love*, trans. Don Bartlett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 67.

[40] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 95.

as well wonder how one could not be attached to one's own life. But either way, is this a clear and strong enough basis to support secular faith? While there is much to value in Hägglund's study, as I have argued above, his reading of Knausgaard as a champion of secular faith is limited and ultimately fails to convince. And the same holds for his critical perspective on Kierkegaard's perhaps impenetrable *Fear and Trembling*.

There are relatively few references to Kierkegaard throughout Knausgaard's writings, but in *The Morning Star*, the turn to Kierkegaard is particularly significant and opens up new interpretive possibilities. Although we do not find a detailed discussion or presentation of Kierkegaard's ideas, they nevertheless appear to influence the novel's characters in decisive ways. One of the main characters, Egil, is introduced at the beginning of the "Second Day" after the mysterious morning star appears, and we learn right away of his biblical knowledge when he wakes up thinking that "the Morning Star" is strangely used to refer to both Jesus and the Devil in the Bible.[41] We learn that Egil had been spending much of his time thinking about the role of Christianity and whether it was "mainly a social phenomenon" or instead "turned away from the social domain"[42]—a distinction related to the persistent research question for Kierkegaard Studies on the individual's relation to society—and in Egil's mind, Jesus and death were connected.

> Jesus had been a loner, he had all the features. He rejected his mother and brother, didn't want to know about them. The disciples he attracted were no substitute family—the relationship was one way only: Jesus spoke, the disciples listened; Jesus dictated, the disciples obeyed. Weeks in the wilderness. A clear longing for death.[43]

Such was the thinking of Egil, who had left "the Church of Norway at the age of sixteen," an act that the young Syvert, a central character in the follow-up novel *The Wolves of Eternity*, also wants to perform. Egil "felt nothing but contempt for Christianity—and all other religions too, for that matter—but [he] was still interested in faith as a phenomenon," for it "gave meaning to life . . . and meaning interested [him]."[44] He was well familiar

[41] It is worth noting that Knausgaard served as a consultant for the Norwegian Bible Society and their publication of a new Norwegian translation of the Bible in 2011. While this translation became a bestseller, the recent attempt at another translation has not been met with the same enthusiasm. See Ken Chitwood, "For Norwegians So Loved the Bible, a New Translation Made Many Mad," *Christianity Today*, January 5, 2023, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/01/norway-bible-translation-controversy/.
[42] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*, trans. Martin Aitken (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2021), p. 386.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., p. 387.

with Nietzsche's attack on Christianity and thought of faith as something "for the feeble of mind, those lacking independence, the submissive, who gladly allowed themselves to be led."[45] It is within the context of these musings on Christian faith that the first reference to Kierkegaard appears, for Egil had "read Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and realized there was another way of believing, and a Christianity other than the one Nietzsche had attacked."[46] *Fear and Trembling* is often the first work one reads by Kierkegaard, and although it is not exactly known when Egil had read this work, we gather it was during his late teenage years and after he had left the Church of Norway at sixteen. As Egil understands, the way of faith illuminated in Kierkegaard's work leads away from the social realm, away from the world. Here is the brief synopsis of *Fear and Trembling* given in Egil's self-reflection:

> Kierkegaard's book contains a number of strange vignettes concerning the weaning of a child from a mother's breast, that first relationship in a child's life, the symbiosis, warmth and security it was suddenly denied, and one could almost see the desire for what no longer was there, and the turning outwards towards everything else, which to the child as yet barely existed. Other people, the social world, society. Faith was thus a turning away from the realm of the social, again toward something that as yet barely existed. This was where Abraham went when he climbed the mount to sacrifice his son to God. He was filled with a father's love, and his faith directed him toward an abyss. Perhaps what awaited him there was simply emptiness, the terrible void. His faith surmounted his fear, which made faith inhuman, for what person can kill is son with intent and leave the human realm to face the unknown that perhaps indeed was the terrible void?[47]

Now, the case can easily be made that *Fear and Trembling* is Kierkegaard's most difficult work to interpret, as a glance at the voluminous secondary literature readily shows, and the weaning passages in "The Attunement" are among the most challenging to decipher, so it is interesting that Egil is drawn to these passages as well as to the act that is central to Abraham's faith. For both of these are connected with death, which is perhaps just another word for the ultimate unknown, the (perhaps) terrible void. Although relatively few scholars have attended to the weaning passages in Kierkegaard's work, Vanessa Rumble suggests that they represent a covert theme that is literary, philosophical, psychological, and biographical all in one, much like the portrayal of various themes in

[45] Ibid., p. 388.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

Knausgaard's writings. On this reading, weaning represents the profound suffering of individuation and the traumatic loss of the other.[48] As we know, Kierkegaard was all too well acquainted with the experience of loss,[49] so it is reasonable to believe that he learned at a youthful age "the desire for what no longer was there."

The second connection involves the more obvious movement to death made by Abraham. Although Egil found Abraham's willingness to "leave the human realm to face the unknown" compelling, "it meant nothing to [him], it was without consequence, there was no way [he] could absorb it into [his] own life."[50] Nevertheless, "something must have happened," for Egil "had become converted." The experience of conversion was "an indescribable moment of joy," which he took to be an insight from his soul. This insight faded with time, however, perhaps in conjunction with the thorny theological questions that led to doubts about his faith. Although he tried to maintain the insight, he worried that it may have been the cause of his coming to live a "hermit-like existence" in which he had only himself to think about.[51] He remembered how reading *Fear and Trembling* had initially produced an impulsive enthusiasm for "Kierkegaard's thinking and the style of his writing,"[52] which led him to order the collected works in Danish. But oddly, his enthusiasm waned almost immediately, and he surprisingly never opened even one of the more than fifty volumes that comprised Kierkegaard's collected works until a day in which he surprised himself by asking God for a sign, and then, by chance, a bird appeared. Upon returning to his house, Egil scanned the volumes in his bookcase and his eyes fell on *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*, and because "bird" stood out to him in the title he took the book and read the sermon it contained. Unlike *Fear and Trembling*, which he had read so long ago, the effect of reading this sermon was immediate, as Egil "was filled with an emotion so immense [he] hardly knew what to do with it. Thoughts were suddenly nothing, nada, nichts."[53] And yet as he tended the wood burner on a cold winter

[48] Vanessa Rumble develops this reading in "Why Moriah?: Weaning and the Trauma of Transcendence in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 247–262.

[49] The youngest of seven siblings, Kierkegaard was outlived by only one member of his immediate family, having lost his three sisters, two brothers, and his mother when he was twenty-one, and his father when he was twenty-five. Only his brother Peter Christian survived him.

[50] Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*, p. 388.

[51] Ibid., pp. 388–389.

[52] Ibid., p. 396.

[53] Ibid.

day there was one thought that presented itself repeatedly to his mind, and it was as immense as the emotion that burned within him: "God's kingdom was here."[54]

When Egil later in his life read *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* he found it "hard to understand exactly what had made such an impression on [him] the first time around,"[55] as he could not attribute the immense emotion he had felt to any particular passage from the text. He reflects on how common it is to think that "thoughts are isolated units, apart not only from our emotions, but also from the surroundings in which they are conceived" when in fact they "cannot get by on their own."[56] Egil then directs his attention to the following passage from Kierkegaard's text:

> Would that in the silence you might forget yourself, forget what you yourself are called, your own name, the famous name, the lowly name, the insignificant name, in order in silence to pray to God, "Hallowed be your name!" Would that in silence you might forget yourself, your plans, the great, all-encompassing plans, or the limited plans concerning your life and its future, in order in silence to pray to God, "Your kingdom come!" Would that you might in silence forget your will, your willfulness, in order in silence to pray to God, "Your will be done!"[57]

In Kierkegaard's words Egil recognizes something different from the common religious call to abandon oneself to God, something that he identifies with as he finds himself in the midst of a world of nature that speaks in silence. This paradox can perhaps be understood in various ways, but what Egil realizes is not that nature is silent, for that would falsify the soundscapes with a richness equal to visual landscapes. No, the external sounds of nature reverberate boldly, but they come from a place of silence. They lack the inner turmoil that rages inside us as human beings. Egil reflects on his reading of Kierkegaard:

> The silence in which one might forget oneself was like the silence of the forest and the silence of the sea. Even when the sea rages loudly, he wrote, it is nonetheless silent . . . . The forest keeps silent; even when it whispers, he wrote, and I listened to the forest as it whispered, and to the silence in its whispering, and I knew that silence, for the clamor of my own inner life resounded so clearly against it. When I was with others, I never heard it, the clamor then being

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., p. 407.
[56] Ibid.
[57] SKS 11, 24 / LB, 34–35.

> everywhere, generated by our every will, our every plan, our every ambition, our every quest for pleasure, but when I was out walking here, in the silence that is here, I heard it.[58]

Reading the passage from Kierkegaard's sermon leads Egil to conceive that "God's kingdom was the moment."[59] For "the trees, the forest, the sea, the lily, the bird, all existed in the moment. To them, there was no such thing as future or past. Nor any fear or terror."[60] This he understands as "the first turning point," but it should not go unobserved that the deep insight Egil experiences comes from an inner self longing, if not raging, to be free.

Then Egil comes to his second turning point, when he reads this sentence from Kierkegaard's text: "*What happens to the bird does not concern it*."[61] This strikes him as "the most radical thought [he] had ever known," one that "would free [him] from all pain, all suffering."[62] Egil realizes:

> This required absolute faith and absolute abandonment to God, as the lily of the field and the bird of the sky exemplified. Even in deepest sorrow, with so frightful a tomorrow, the bird was unconditionally joyful. Sorrow and tomorrow did not concern it, but were given over to God.[63]

In this moment in the summer house with the powerful storm raging outside Egil puts his inner self at peace through the reading of Kierkegaard's text. For Egil now knows that he exists for God and "God's kingdom [is] here."[64] In an interview, Knausgaard explains:

> Kierkegaard writes about how if a bird's nest is destroyed, the next day he's happily rebuilding it. The future just doesn't exist if you're a bird. And I read this with, you know, such an incredible desire. A friend of mine has wood pigeons who build a nest, lay eggs, have chicks, and there's a hawk that comes and takes them. That's happened four years in a row. But the pigeons still go to the same place because, for them, the future doesn't exist. Maybe they're in what Kierkegaard would say is the kingdom of God.[65]

[58] Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*, pp. 408–409.
[59] Ibid., p. 409.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid. In Kierkegaard's *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* the passage reads: "everything of this sort that happens to [the bird] does not really concern it" (SKS 11, 34 / LB, 57; emphasis in original).
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Quoted in Jeffrey Howard, "Kierkegaard, Knausgaard, and the 'Kingdom of God'," *Erraticus*, December 9, 2018, https://erraticus.co/2018/12/09/kierkegaard-knausgaard-kingdom-god/.

He will always remember these insights, although they will require a struggle to maintain, for how can one ever fully and continuously realize the calm acceptance of the knight of faith as described by Kierkegaard's de Silentio and illustrated by Knausgaard's Egil?

The final part of *The Morning Star* is a separate essay titled "On Death and the Dead" by Egil Stray. Thus, here in Knausgaard we also find an author within an author. This begins as a quasi-academic reflection on the subject named in the title, and it is here that Knausgaard has Egil return to Kierkegaard. The reflection again concerns the second momentous passage from the text discussed above. Let me read the entire passage:

> Søren Kierkegaard, that singular and inconceivably original Danish writer, sought God in the Divine in the moment, which to him was the very gateway into the kingdom of God. In one of his sermons, he takes as his point of departure a discourse given by Jesus concerning the birds of heaven and the lilies of the field, holding up their existence, so completely and fully obtaining in the moment, as an ideal. Certainly, Kierkegaard's treatise is not without irony, yet it seems quite as clear to the reader that he is indeed in search of paradise, considering that it may be found only in the event that we relinquish awareness of the self and all that belongs to it—a matter that requires insight into both past and future in order to be sustained—and give ourselves blindly up to the moment. Our every worry, our every trouble, our every anxiety will then fall away—*what happens to the bird does not concern it*, he wrote. Our burdens are given up to God. Such innocence, which is the innocence still of the animals and the smallest children, was torn from us by the awareness of death, which made us and our godless world.[66]

In Egil's interpretation we find expressed not only the longing but also the Kierkegaardian method for attaining paradisal eternity, which is given in the moment. Is it possible to regain such innocence, especially when it does not seem possible to remove our awareness of death, as much as philosophers like the Stoics and Spinoza might encourage us to do so. "A free person thinks least of all of death," writes Spinoza in his *Ethics*,[67] but is this view not very far from Kierkegaard, who in the discourse "At a Graveside" emphasizes the thought of death and encourages us to derive earnestness from it? Indeed, is it not because of the awareness of death that Kierkegaard gently urges us to become like the bird? The irony emerges, then, in the absence of concern that may appear problematic when conjoined with an understanding of death's decisiveness.

"*What happens to the bird does not concern it*." Egil shows us the emotional effect of reading Kierkegaard, but also how it may vary depending upon one's situation, and thus it is

[66] Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*, p. 622.

[67] This is proposition 67 in Part IV of Spinoza's *Ethics*, as translated in Steven Nadler's *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 175.

possible to experience different emotional responses at different times, if not also sometimes simultaneously, due to the complexities of human situatedness. Clearly Egil is now compelled by such a view, which leads him to look beyond death, although he will find surprisingly that this does lead to the relinquishing of relatedness and an awareness of selfhood. We find that his relationship with his son is very important, and perhaps even more important is his relation to his mother, which continues after her death and becomes prominent at the close of the book. So, as readers we may continue to question the validity of the position of those unconcerned with what happens to them in their lives. Egil, of course, is just one ambivalent character in a vast series of novels that seems far from completed, and I await with great interest to find out if and how he returns in a future novel. The author within an author who leaves us with an essay on "Death and Dying" at the close of the first novel must return,[68] and when he does let us hope that he takes up the question posed by Kierkegaard's philosophy of the individual alone before God who is at the same time also related to and concerned for others in the world as well as for the natural world itself.[69]

At first glance, I did not think that very much could be made from a handful of references to Kierkegaard in an otherwise vast novel. However, telling the story of these

[68] Egil Stray does reappear very briefly at the end of Part Three of *The School of Night* (originally published in Norwegian as *Nattskolen* [2023] with the English translation scheduled to be released in January 2026), but this is only when his home on a Norwegian island is inhabited by the main character of this novel, Christian Hadeland. Thus, while a deeply profound contrast between these two characters begins to emerge, this mention is without greater significance for the present study, and must await a future one.

[69] In a recent study that also brings together Kierkegaard and Knausgaard, Marius Timmann Mjaaland focuses on the question of the relationship between the individual and nature in Kierkegaard's *The Lily in the Field* and Knausgaard's *The Morning Star*. Significantly, Mjaaland emphasizes the ambivalence towards nature expressed in Kierkegaard's writings as well as the ambivalence expressed by the character Egil Stray, who is not only a reader of Kierkegaard but also of Nietzsche. Nevertheless, Mjaaland projects a path from despair to "the singing joy of the bird" when he writes: "Reading *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) in dialogue with *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849) or rather, reading the latter as response to the former, opens up radically new perspectives on human despair. When the human being, the human as Spirit, is cut off from its natural surroundings, from the conditions of life and death embedded in our natural conditions, it can hardly avoid the vicious circle of despair" (p. 349). This is an important argument, and one that Mjaaland writes is "only the starting point for a more comprehensive re-reading of later works in Kierkegaard's authorship" (p. 348), but through perhaps an earnest reflection on the starting point of ambivalence one cannot help but wonder about the natural conditions of life and death, which of themselves contribute to the mood of despair. After all, it seems far from clear that birds share in the understanding of their own deaths. See Marius Timmann Mjaaland, "Ecophilosophy and the Ambivalence of Nature: Kierkegaard and Knausgård on Lilies, Birds and Being," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, eds. Peter Šajda, Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 325–350.

passages shows us how Knausgaard manages to capture the immense power and challenges that come from reading Kierkegaard. This is no doubt the underlying cause that brings us together as a community of Kierkegaard scholars, that brings us together here tonight.

4. On Writing

The commitments to death and faith are obvious in our authors, at least insofar as they entail a deep inquiry into the meanings of these notions, and so too is the means through which these commitments manifest themselves, namely, writing. In his essay titled "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," which appears in the collection of essays *In the Land of the Cyclops* (2021), Knausgaard writes that "a few weeks earlier [he] had committed [himself] to writing about Kierkegaard."[70] Why would one commit oneself to write and why would one commit oneself to write about Kierkegaard, that indirect author of the ecstatic either/or that may come to haunt the careful reader when confronted with a decision. Here the advice of A would be: If you write about Kierkegaard, you will regret it, if you do not write about Kierkegaard you will regret it, if you write about Kierkegaard or do not write about Kierkegaard you will regret it, whether you write about Kierkegaard or do not write about Kierkegaard you will regret both.

Knausgaard comes late to reading Kierkegaard, which he admits is strange, "given that [Kierkegaard] is one of the few major writers [he] can read with full benefit in the original language."[71] But "coming from Kierkegaard's own cultural and linguistic sphere," he writes, he "always felt as if he had read him" and "known what [he] needed to know about him and his writings," from the pseudonyms to the stages, the broken engagement to the ridiculous affair with the Danish press, to his loathing of philosophical systems, and assistant professors. And, as we have seen above, Knausgaard even remembers using the slogan "subjectivity is truth" as a teenager in his letters.[72]

Regarding the strength of the commitment to write for both of our authors we have the greatest amount of evidence. This commitment is so great in Kierkegaard that it perhaps passes into compulsion, and it has led Joakim Garff to diagnose Kierkegaard "as a

[70] Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," p. 256.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., p. 257.

'graphomaniac' suffering from 'hypergraphia,'"[73] and it is not unlikely that a similar case could at some point be made for Knausgaard, who has also expressed a dizzying level of productivity, and who also calls forth the question of why one would write about Kierkegaard, a question that goes hand in hand with why one would read Kierkegaard. "In other words," Knausgaard writes, "what [does] this middle-class philosopher, living and thinking in a minor European province a hundred and seventy years before, have to say to people in our day and age?"[74] It is a good question, and I'm sure that over the next few days we will hear many good responses to this question. Knausgaard knows what Kierkegaard teaches. Namely, it is up to each individual alone to find their way. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, we learn from Kierkegaard that each individual loses their innocence and becomes guilty on their own, "uniquely, [not collectively,] in exactly the same way as Adam did."[75] As Kierkegaard writes, "innocence is always lost only by the qualitative leap of the individual."[76] Such is also the case with faith, as we know from *Fear and Trembling*. Past generations cannot help us to find that higher immediacy, which comes into the world, if it does so at all, through the individual's relational activity before the absolute. "We are alone," Knausgaard writes following Kierkegaard, "but we are alone in the same way."[77]

But perhaps writing—that paradoxical activity in which we can "express our individuality only in what is common to all"[78]—is different. And we can perhaps learn to write, or better, become compelled to write, through our reading of authors such as Kierkegaard and Knausgaard. Naturally, they illuminate their own lives, but they also produce in readers the desire to find themselves, and they show the way through writing about one's life. Whether it is done indirectly and without authority or more directly through autofiction, our authors both affirm the strange responsibility to write in the search for oneself. "Such as responsibility keeps its secret, it cannot and need not present itself," Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death*, for "it declines the autobiography that is always auto-justification,

[73] See Eric Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. 21, where he quotes Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 458.
[74] Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," p. 258.
[75] Ibid., p. 259.
[76] SKS 4, 344 / CA 37.
[77] Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," p. 259.
[78] Ibid.

égodicée."[79] That this is because the self in question must always tremble with its own uncertain identity, it may very well be, as Derrida's text suggests.[80] And whether this commitment expresses religious or secular faith, I do not know for sure.[81] If forced to answer I would likely want to say that it is both/and, just as writing is both a solitary and a profoundly relational act, an action that both distances oneself from the world while also attempting to communicate with the world. So, the existential commitment to writing is something we do learn from reading these great writers, as they compel us to want to write about our very existence, our relationships with others and to a world conditioned by absurdity, ambivalence, and uncanniness.

Both our authors are acutely aware of the ironic question of distance that the existentialist writer must face. In *Home and Away: Writing the Beautiful Game*, Knausgaard writes:

> This often happens to me, I write something which sounds good enough, only to realise, after an hour to several years later, that it is never like that, never so simple, never one thing or the other. This is actually a question of distance and is a fundamental literary issue, I think: writing establishes a distance to what you are writing, and distance simplifies. Form simplifies even further. If you consider literature an autonomous entity it is no problem, then it has no responsibility for what it represents. If, however, you want to write about life, simplification is a great danger, which you must constantly guard against. You do that by going as close as you can to where all the broad sweeps, all the higher-level generalizations, no longer apply and are nowhere apparent. For me, the way I see it, this is the task of literature. Not necessarily in the

[79] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 62.

[80] In *The Gift of Death* Derrida writes: "The question of the self: 'who am I?' not in the sense of 'who am I' but 'who is this "I"' that can say 'who'? What is the 'I,' and what becomes of responsibility once the identity of the 'I' trembles *in secret*?" (p. 92).

[81] Although perhaps not surprising, it may be interesting to note in this context that the challenges and ambiguities of Derrida's text have led to very divergent readings. One the one hand, in *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Hägglund suggests that "a radical atheism informs Derrida's work from beginning to end" (p. 1), while in *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson suggest that in Derrida's work, especially *The Gift of Death*, one reads Derrida "sliding from a radicalized phenomenology to a determinate theology" (p. 130). Although I do not have the space to analyze the relevant passages in detail, this conflict of interpretations seems to support the alternative claim that Derrida expresses neither definitive position, but rather playfully expresses both the possibility of a secret God-relationship while also questioning whether "what I call God in me" is not also perhaps calling myself God (p. 108), and he goes on to write that "God is in me, he is the absolute 'me' or 'self,' he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard's sense, subjectivity" (p. 109). At its best, Derrida's work expresses the significance of the question—"As often happens, the call of or for the question, and the request that echoes through it, takes us further than the response"—which begins the final paragraph of his text, and the final sentence expresses sheer ambivalence: "Nietzsche must indeed believe he knows what believing means, unless he means it is all make-believe" (p. 115).

> form of realism and description of reality, but as a stubborn, tireless insistence on, and search for, the disintegration of the structure of that which we know.[82]

When Kierkegaard reflects on why he writes in "A First and Last Explanation" appended to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, we find that it is not because he wants to make "any new proposal, some unheard-of discovery, or [to found] a new party . . . but precisely the opposite," for he wants "to have no importance, [but . . .] at a remove that is the distance of double-reflection, once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships."[83] In this case, Kierkegaard does precisely what he says he wants to do, and this leads us to find ourselves desiring to follow suit, wanting to read through the original texts of our lives in a deeper way, whether we put pen to paper (which is surprisingly now a mostly metaphorical expression) or not. This is precisely what Knausgaard does, and he does it very well, and because of this I think we can say that Knausgaard is a Kierkegaardian. For reading Kierkegaard leads him to see, as he writes, that "my life is surface, depth my yearning. The feeling that the essential is possible, the authentic a reality, is strong." "This is the question of meaning," Knausgaard continues, "and meaning is in life. The more life is threatened, the greater its meaning becomes, and it becomes greatest in death."[84] Here Knausgaard reflects again on his dead father, which he had written about at great lengths in *My Struggle*, and he leaves us with these questions, which I will end with tonight: "Is it merely alertness to the circumstances of life? Not as thoughts, for thoughts are remoteness, but as feelings? And is this why Kierkegaard ventures so far toward the edgelands of our human existence, where everything is acute, precarious, shimmering with life and meaning?"[85] Such a precarious venture might be likened to a walk along a steep cliff overlooking a cemetery.

Thank you all very much for your generous attention. Now to add more weight to the evening let us "eat [our] food and be happy, drink [our] wine and be cheerful."[86]

[82] Karl Ove Knausgaard and Fredrik Ekelund, *Home and Away: Writing the Beautiful Game*, trans. Don Bartlett and Séan Kinsella (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), p. 17.
[83] SKS 7, 573 / CUP1, 629–630.
[84] Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," p. 272.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ecclesiastes 9:7.