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The Knausgård Universe

Contextual Narratology and Slow Narrative Dynamics

The current debate on slowness and narrative offers an ideal opportunity to reconsider the structuralist aversion to pragmatics and context. The article argues that a well-constrained approach to context is possible if we revise the concept of narrative dynamics to include transtextual and transactional dimensions; this theoretical contribution to contextual poetics sheds new light on dialogical constellations in narrative fiction, e.g. the interdependencies between Karl Ove Knausgård's 'slow' autofiction and the autobiographical novel *October Child* (2021) by Linda Boström Knausgård.

1. Introduction*

Narratology has always been less homogenous than the singular implies, even in its classical, structuralist phase. In the introduction to *Coming to Terms* (1990a), his influential study of the rhetoric of narrative in fiction and film, Seymour Chatman acknowledges that "different formulas have different strengths" (5): "The house of narratology, like the house of fiction itself, has many mansions." (Ibid.) Thirteen years later, in the preface to the first volume of De Gruyter's influential Narratologia series, titled *What is Narratology?*, the editors point out that the 1990s were a period of "tremendous expansion and diversification" (Kindt / Müller 2003, vi); they also insist that future definitions should be "justified against a complex theoretical and historical background" (ibid., vii). Since then, narratological "paradigm expansion" (Sommer 2017, 603) has continued at full force. Today's narrative theorists are spoilt for choice: When asking "Why narratology?" – the question to which this anniversary issue of *DIEGESIS* is dedicated – one might therefore specify: "What kind of narratology, and for what purpose?"

My purpose in this essay is twofold. First, I wish to make a theoretical contribution to the emerging field of slow poetics, i.e. the theory of the forms, functions, and effects of slowness in narrative fiction. There are many ways in which novels can make for a subjectively slow aesthetic experience, and most novels we perceive as slow – or rather, to emphasize the relative quality of speed: as slower than others – combine several of the following features.[1] Mega-novels (cf. Letzler 2017) expand aesthetic experience through sheer length and a high degree of redundancy and narrative excess; slow novels often present readers with particularly complex, unusual, or experimental narrative designs; they dwell on slow themes or reflect on particularly engaging ethical questions and moral dilemmas; in addition, slow narratives may take the form of novel cycles which establish transtextual relationships, extending slowness beyond a single text. The six autobiographical novels published by Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård between 2009 and 2011, which form the cycle *My Struggle*,[2] tick all these boxes. I will approach them via a more recent autobiographical novel *October Child* (2021 [2019]) by Swedish novelist Linda Boström Knausgård who, among other things, engages with her former husband's work and their failed marriage, adding further to the complexity of the Knausgård universe. From a contextual perspective, these works can be read as a paradigmatic example of 'slow' transtextual and transactional dynamics.

My second goal is historical rather than systematic. The new debate on slowness and narrative offers an ideal opportunity to revisit and revise the old structuralist aversion to pragmatics and context. To this day, "contextualist narratology" belongs to those approaches that Ansgar Nünning (2003) has called "undertheorized" (256); they are "not really 'narratologies,'" he argues, "in that they are merely applications of narratological models and categories to specific texts, genres, or periods" (251).[3] While I agree with John Pier (2011) that "[t]he single most decisive factor in the rise of the new paradigms for the study of narrative is the integration of *context* into narrative theory and analysis" (338; italics in the original), I think Nünning's diagnosis still holds, by and large: despite several systematic attempts to introduce contextual perspectives into classical narratology (cf. Shen 2005, 2017; Sommer 2007, 2012) and a few pioneering proposals to think beyond the text (see section two), a robust theory of context has not yet been developed. That the term is missing both in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (cf. Herman et al. 2005) and in the *Living Handbook of Narratology* (cf. Hühn et al. 2014) fits the picture.

The kind of theory I envisage, then, is a contextual narratology,[4] i.e. a theory of narrative based on the assumption that the full scope of narrative, and hence narrativity, is only realized when we consider not only textual features, but also all salient transtextual and transactional characteristics of storytelling. Such a contextual approach is a key element of a cultural narratology (cf. Nünning 2004), a research paradigm that situates narrative in culture, as the title of a recent volume has it (cf. Erll / Sommer 2019); it calls for cross-disciplinary collaboration among phenomenological, cognitive, formal, contextual, and historical approaches to narrative and links narratological analysis with discourse analysis and other forms of ideology critique.[5] Most importantly, however, the contextual approach advocated here encourages us to think outside the box called *text* (i.e. a single text) without abandoning the narratological focus on *form*.

My argument proceeds in three steps. Section one revisits Chatman's (1990b) critique of "contextualism," which defines the structuralist position on context. Section two briefly introduces four influential proposals by Ansgar Nünning (2004), Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2006), Peter Brooks (2006), and James Phelan (2008) to integrate the study of text-context relationships in narrative theory. The essay then proposes a revised conception of narrative dynamics to account for interactions between the novels by Karl Ove Knausgård and Linda Boström

Knausgård. The expanding Knausgård universe, characterized by an unusual blend of introspection and extroversion, is no doubt a special case – a growing corpus of narratives which generates its own, idiosyncratic form of contextual multiperspectivity. Studying the former couple's narratives in interaction yields important insights which, one may conclude, can account for a wide range of transtextual and transactional phenomena observable in narrative ecosystems.

2. Context: What's Wrong With It?

Context is, according to Gerald Prince (2003, 17), "one of the fundamental constituents of any act of (verbal) communication." If we further assume that "narrative is essentially a mode of verbal presentation" (ibid., 58),[6] context should be considered a core concept in narratology, the systematic study of the forms, functions, uses, and effects of narrative. And yet, when Seymour Chatman raised the question "What Can We Learn from Contextualist Narratology?" in an eponymous essay published in *Poetics Today* in 1990, his answer was, in a nutshell: not much.

The position Chatman seeks to defend against leading sociolinguists and speech act theorists of the 1970s is "a narratology which views narrative as an immanent object containing its own strategy of context (as well as many other strategies)" (1990b, 310). He dismisses the pragmatic argument that literary texts constitute acts as well as structures as a "truism" which "not even the most hard-bitten formalist could deny," and claims that "[c]ontextualist emphasis on the priority of the act leads to a questioning of, if not an assault on, various hard-earned distinctions in narratology" (ibid.).

These distinctions, which seek to differentiate narrative from other text-types (cf. ibid., 313) in order to decide "what makes a narrative a narrative" (ibid., 315), include, first, the "convenient heuristic" (ibid., 312) of the double chrono-logic of narrative which "presupposes no ur-text in which 'story' exists autonomously" (ibid., 311), second, narratology's key concept of narrative discourse (cf. ibid., 313), third, the separation of author and narrator (cf. ibid., 316), fourth, the programmatic exclusion of the "intentions, motivations, interests, and social circumstances of real authors and audiences" (ibid., 314) from narratological inquiry, and, ultimately, the "hard-won distinction between literary theory and literary criticism" (ibid., 324). One consequence of a pragmatic turn in narrative theory, Chatman warns, is that "subjective judgement once again becomes not only the basis for evaluations of works but for definitions of literary concepts and terms" (ibid., 324f.).

For Chatman, then, the notion of context stands for an almost ideological conflict between pragmatic "contextualists" (he himself acknowledges that this is not a homogenous group or position) and a narrative poetics modeled on syntax and semantics. How can this contradiction – context as a key element of narrative (Prince), yet irrelevant for structuralist poetics (Chatman) – be resolved? I will try to reconstruct the context of Chatman's argument, especially the influence of linguistics which had, since the early days of Russian Formalism, served as a pilot science for literary theory, and later narratology.[7] What is more, the systematic project of language theory promised a sense of progress which those literary theorists who embraced structuralism found particularly appealing. Their preference for theoretical linguistics inevitably led to a conflict with socio-linguistics. As I will argue at the end of this section, Chatman's article allows us to glimpse a future narratology which would transcend form in a constrained manner. Yet in the late 1980s the time was not yet ripe for such extensions: narratologists were still busy charting, and defending, the claim they had staked out for themselves.

Why linguistics? In the preface to *The Poetics of Plot* (1985), Thomas Pavel's narratological study of Renaissance drama, Wlad Godzich argues that Russian Formalists were fascinated with linguistics mainly because of its scientific aura, "a set of respectable and verifiable procedures that did not depend upon the idiosyncratic qualities of their performer for their successful execution" (xi). Quality standards and a clear methodology ensured a high degree of conformity and continuity which didn't appear to be particularly difficult, at least not to the initiated few: "it may be unorthodox to say so, but anyone who has read a great deal of Formalist analysis cannot fail to be struck by how commonsensical and easy it really is" (Ibid., x). Pavel himself then argues that poetics, the theory and analysis of structural regularities, involves two complementary types of structural descriptions; he calls them "well-constrained" and "programmatic":

> Well-constrained structural descriptions start with an explicit set of theoretical and methodological assumptions. One of the major interests of classical linguistic structuralism has been how to constrain in an optimal fashion the assumptions underlying the description. In contrast, programmatic structural descriptions replace the theoretical and methodological constraints with a general statement of purpose. The analysis itself proceeds with a minimal structural orientation. (Pavel 1985, 4)

How are well-constrained and programmatic descriptions, key components of paradigmatic work in literary scholarship, related to each other? Pavel implies that narrative poetics moves from programmatic to well-constrained descriptions: "Programmatic structural descriptions are presented as pioneering work, to be followed by stricter regimentation." (Ibid.) This may indeed be the case if the narratologist's corpus is as closed and comparatively limited as Pavel's domain, Renaissance tragedy. But the sense of progress underlying a goal-oriented, linear conception of scientific research fails to account for the cyclical movements characteristic of scholarly work, which not only revisits old problems, suggesting new perspectives rather than solutions, but also draws on the conceptual history of the discipline to approach new challenges (this essay being a case in point). Unlike the natural sciences, where old usually means out-dated, flawed, or even wrong, the humanities tend to move back and forth between periods, schools, and traditions. The insights produced by yesterday's pioneers may well inform tomorrow's champions, even if they are out of fashion today.

In light of this argument, the relationship between the different kinds of structural description follows the rules and procedures of hermeneutic understanding rather than the notion of reductionist problem-solving which informs, for instance, Thomas S. Kuhn's (2012 [1962]) take on philosophy of science. Narratological analysis moves not only from programmatic to well-constrained, but also from well-constrained to programmatic descriptions, designing and refining theoretical models *en passant*. Moreover, the distinction between description and interpretation is itself a matter of degree or perspective, as Pavel (1985, 9) notes: "What appears to be mere description at one level may function as daring interpretation at another." Reading structure, and structuring reading by means of abstraction, is a potentially endless activity.

This doesn't mean that there can be no progress in narrative poetics; as I have argued elsewhere (cf. Sommer 2017), narratology is characterized by a high degree of backward and forward compatibility. But progress should be viewed both as an individual learning process and a collective move forward. Every generation of narrative scholars inherits old problems and encounters new challenges: engaging with the heritage of the discipline – which in the case of narratology means structuralist poetics, semiotics, and the rhetorical tradition – is part of the grand tour of conceptual history. This intellectual journey from text to context and back, oscillating between structuralism and contextualism, doesn't mean we're merely reinventing the wheel; "it is not possible, in moving beyond a period denominated by the critical paradigm," François Dosse reminds us in the introduction to his two-volume *History of Structuralism* (1997), "to simply return to what preceded" (xxiv).

You can't step into the same river twice. When Chatman surveyed pragmatics, he mostly saw dangerous rapids. Today, we can engage with sociolinguistics or speech act theory without fearing that contextualists will harm our robust theories of narrative. There is no denying that sociolinguistic concepts like tellability and co-narration have had a major impact on narrative theory in the early twenty-first century. Current narrative theory, furthermore, links narrative to cognition, ideology, communities, health and well-being, or mass harm; and even new narratological work on predominantly formal issues like we-narration (cf. Bekhta 2020) or the present-tense novel (cf. Gebauer 2021) emphasizes the variable functions and wide-ranging effects of such narrative strategies.

It is somewhat ironic, given the contextual logic of most current approaches to narrative, that context still remains undertheorized: we may not fear it anymore, but we still haven't found a proper place for it in our systematics. Is 'context' really too simple to be useful, as Jonathan Culler once claimed, in the preface to *Framing the Sign* (1988)?[8] The next section will demonstrate that it is indeed possible to move from programmatic to well-constrained descriptions of context, if we don't stray too far from narratology's base. If we focus on those contexts of narrative that are narratives themselves, as suggested in the introduction, then contextual poetics is, in its most basic form, an intertextual, or internarrative, project. It is no coincidence that Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, who helped establish narratology as we know it, also advanced the theory of transtextuality; the playful versatility of the former and the irony of the latter should encourage us to consider French structuralism as a liberating force encouraging experiments and original thinking, rather than a conceptual straight-jacket.[9]

3. Context as Contest: Narrative Dynamics Revisited

Moving from text to context requires an extension of narrative dynamics, a concept which exists in a more restrictive, narratological form (cf. Richardson 2002, 2005, 2019), limited to the internal structure of novels, and a rhetorical variant which further distinguishes textual and readerly dynamics (cf. Phelan 2005, 217f.; Phelan / Rabinowitz 2012, 57f.; Phelan 2017, 10f.). In contrast to conventional notions of story as a succession of narrated events, a dynamic perspective views narrative as "a progressively unfolding, interconnected system of elements" (Richardson 2005, 353). As literary discourse offers countless possibilities for moving from a narrative's beginning to its ending, Richardson refrains from proposing a general theory of narrative dynamics, as he states most clearly in *A Poetics of Plot in the Twenty-First Century* (2019).[10]

This is a *textual* perspective on narrative dynamics, and one restricted to literary fiction.[11] One might argue, however, that the innovative potential of unreliable, antimimetic or experimental narration, which Richardson's impressive survey uncovers, can only be appreciated as a counterpoint to conventional storytelling, calling for a *transtextual* perspective. "Many components of narrative can be reasonably autonomous," Richardson himself maintains (ibid., 5). Indeed, structuralist narratology has demonstrated convincingly that one can get quite far without ever considering narrative uses and effects. But Richardson's careful wording ("many," "can be," "reasonably") betrays some unease with the idea of autonomy, and with good reason, because at the heart of his project lies the antagonistic relationship between experimental literature and mainstream fiction (and theory). The former challenges the notions of temporality and causality inherent in most definitions of plot: "there are far too many other important kinds of narratives that fail to conform to this pattern – as we have already seen, *many of them are deliberately designed to elude, resist, or transcend it*" (ibid., 7, my emphasis).

Elude, *resist*, *transcend*: for me, such terms don't signal autonomy but various forms of interdependence and interaction. Systemic perspectives like contextual poetics or cultural narratology encourage us to view novels not in insolation, but in relation to one another, and to all sorts of semiotic environments, discursive ecosystems, or narrative markets. A transtextual approach to narrative dynamics can draw on Gérard Genette's account of hypertextuality or transtextuality, i.e. a systematic change of perspective: "it is true that *for the moment* the text interests me (only) in its *textual transcendence* – namely, everything that brings it into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts" (Genette 1992, 81; italics in the original).

As my brief analysis of the novels *October Child* (2021) by Linda Boström Knausgård, and *A Man in Love* (2009) by her former husband, Karl Ove Knausgård, will show (see section 4), many components of narrative are clearly *not* autonomous but depend on other narratives to unfold their full power and potential. Some narratives rely on hypotextual hosts to increase tellability, Boström Knausgård's novel being a prime example of such narrative symbiosis. What is more, as Inge van de Ven (2018, 322) has argued, Karl Ove Knausgård's novels challenge the culture of speed in the attention economy, by employing a digressive mode of writing and turning "lagging behind life" into a subversive aesthetic principle: "His works pose an alternative to the ideals of instantaneity and immediacy underlying trends of the quantified self and big data." (Ibid.) Textual and transtextual structural analysis not only complement each other nicely, then, but need each other crucially.

Similar lines of argument have been proposed by several scholars working on narrative. Ansgar Nünning (2004, 356) proposes an applied cultural narratology, i.e. "an integrated approach that puts the analytical tools provided by narratology to the service of a cultural analysis of narrative fictions": cultural narratology, Nünning explains, "explores the ways in which the formal properties of novels reflect, and influence, the unspoken mental assumptions and cultural issues of a given period" (ibid., 358). Focusing on oral storytelling, Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2006, 239) highlights the "fluidity, plasticity, open-ended-ness [sic] and dynamic character" of stories; she suggests viewing conversations as "narratives-in-interaction" and emphasizes the dialogical qualities of stories, "their occasioning in ongoing social interaction." And Peter Brooks (2006, 20) explores the role of what he calls "narrative transactions" in a legal discourse which "wishes to see itself as complete, autonomous, and hermetic," yet relies heavily on stories. Indeed, stories that build on "doxa" – Roland Barthes' term for "that set of unexamined cultural beliefs that structure our understanding of everyday happenings" – provide "narrative glue" to align and combine represented incidents (ibid., 11) and have the power "to mislead, even to mis-convict" (ibid., 4).

Sharing the view that "narratives often compete with one another in certain contexts," James Phelan (2008, 166) claims that "the potential for such contests is built into the nature of narrative" and that "we can improve our analyses of a wide range of narratives by attending to that contest." Phelan argues that this observation may have an impact on the evolution of narrative theory, which has thus far been grounded in what one might call a single-text methodology: "Until now, the field has developed by treating individual narratives as either freestanding formal structures (as in classical narratology) or historically and culturally situated entities (as in feminist narratology)." (Ibid., 167) While the focus on narrative contest is complementary to existing approaches, rather than a conceptual alternative, it has far-reaching implications for narratological analyses of both conversational and literary narratives:

> Recognizing that every narrative is contestable entails also recognizing that tellers are likely to construct their tales at least partly in response to or anticipation of one or more possible alternatives. By the same logic, analysts can offer fuller readings of individual narratives by attending to the role of those alternatives in a

> narrative's construction and, where relevant, to the cultural power of both the given narrative and its alternatives. (Ibid., 168)

This shift from textual to transtextual perspectives allows us to reconsider narrative dynamics as a spectrum of options or possibilities. In its most restrictive sense, narrative dynamics may refer to textual phenomena only. In a rhetorical framework, narrative dynamics or progression is defined as a synthesis of textual and readerly dynamics (cf. Phelan 2005, 217f.; Phelan / Rabinowitz 2012, 57f.; Phelan 2017, 10f.).[12] To these established notions of textual and readerly perspectives on progression, we can now add a third and fourth subtype of narrative dynamics, transtextual and transactional dynamics. The latter draws on Brooks's notion of a transactional narratology, the former has its roots in Genette (1992, 82), whose work on imitation, transformation, and transtextuality in general paves the way for connecting contextual narratology within theories of intertextuality.

At this point it makes sense to recall Chatman's observation, in *Coming to Terms* (1990), that different text types or discourse modes, like narrative, description, and argument, "routinely operate at each other's service" (10). The notion of service may also extend beyond a single text's boundary if one narrative "serves" another, for instance by confirming it through various forms of narrative alignment. Of course, transtextual "services" also include critical correction and complication; service turns into challenge when counter-narratives contradict the original narrative premise.

While the focus of transtextual narrative dynamics remains predominantly on formal issues of text-context relationships (or rather: narrative-narrative relationships), the wider context of "narrative transactions" (Brooks 2006, 25) requires a systematic integration of narrative uses and effects. A narrative transactions perspective, Brooks argues, means "stories in the situation of their telling and listening, asking not only how these stories are constructed and told, but also how they are listened to, received, reacted to, how they ask to be acted upon and how they in fact become operative" (ibid.). Narrative transactions are not restricted to orally performed courtroom narratives and legal discourse, but inform all kinds of narrative "contests" (Phelan) or "counter-narratives" (Lueg /Lundholt 2021) in all sorts of settings and scenarios. Thus revised and expanded, narrative dynamics can serve as the nucleus for a contextual poetics: i.e. a holistic theory of narrative fiction that links transtextual and transactional perspectives in a narratological framework originally designed for, and restricted to, textual analysis.

4. Knausgård and Boström Knausgård: A Narrative Dynamics Perspective

The most obvious context of narrative is narrative. This is especially true when the narrative in question is part of a cycle of autofictional novels: Karl Ove

Knausgård's *A Man in Love* (2019 [2013]) is the second book in his six-volume autobiographical project *Min Kamp* (2009–2011), published in translation (*My Struggle*) by Harvill Secker (2013) and Vintage (2014, 2019).[13] *A Man in Love* is related to the remaining five novels, chronologically and causally, through analepses and prolepses, thematic continuities and the character constellation, which is organized around Karl Ove, protagonist and homodiegetic narrator. Chronologically, *Book 2* (starting a family) follows *Book 1* (death of the narrator's father), most of it anyway, but also *Book 3* (early childhood). It is not easy to decide whether Knausgård's choice of emplotment is significant or not, but occasional foreshadowing and frequent references to past events, in some cases recounted in greater detail only later in the series, leave no doubt that the individual novels are designed to form part of a coherent whole, a transtextual continuum.

Knausgård's six novels thus allow us to observe how narrative dynamics transcends the boundaries of the single text; studying progression in *My Struggle* requires a careful reconstruction of story arcs, motifs, and themes that develop slowly as the narrative unfolds. One example is the difficult relationship between Knausgård and his father, whose fatal alcoholism defines the plot of the first novel, *A Death in the Family* (2019 [2013]); the apparent unease felt by Karl Ove when clearing out the dead father's house can only be grasped fully once we've been introduced to the complex, and often cruel, personality of the protagonist's father in the third book, *Boyhood Island* (2019 [2014]).

The necessity of viewing progression as a transtextual phenomenon would suffice to explain why Knausgård's cycle is such a particularly rich resource for a contextual poetics interested in slow narrative dynamics. As if this were not enough, the narrative complexity of the Knausgård universe has recently been increased even further by the publication of *October Child* (2021), by Linda Boström Knausgård.[14] The bestselling Swedish writer, Karl Ove's ex-wife and the subject of *A Man in Love*, recounts her fight against mental illness, offering a harsh critique of the electroconvulsive therapy she was subjected to against her will. On several occasions she explicitly addresses her former husband, one of the novel's narratees; although implicit criticism encourages reading between the lines, her perspective remains somewhat analytical and detached from what must have happened in the not too distant past. Should we read this as a gendered contrast between male and female ways of world modeling and self-fashioning?

In an interview with Lisa O'Kelly (2020), Boström Knausgård recalls her anger about the way she was portrayed in *My Struggle*, but says that she has now made her peace with the books.[15] Indeed, *October Child* is not a counter-narrative, written to challenge its hypotexts and to retaliate by rendering Karl Ove as a reckless and egotistical story-peddler who appropriates and commodifies the lives of those around him (his own work offers sufficient evidence to back up such a reading). Instead, Boström Knausgård tells the story of her own struggle, in which Karl Ove is granted a rather nuanced treatment. From a narratological perspective, *October Child* fuels the debate on the well-documented uncertainties concerning *My Struggle*, the confusion caused by complex unreliability effects and conflicting truth claims.[16] Through its contradictory generic framing and a dialogical approach to narrative mediation involving several narratees, *October Child* contributes to the slow epistemological puzzle of *My Struggle*, a progression in circles, as it were: both writers excel at denying their readers closure.

Knausgård vs. Boström Knausgård: this dialogical constellation produces a complex dialectics between second-order observations of contemporary family life, personal anxieties, and professional ambitions from two gifted writers, which offers plenty food for thought both to narratologists and scholars interested in genre theory and fictionality, and to experts on memoir and life writing. For one, transtextual dynamics turns transactional, as Boström Knausgård engages directly and indirectly with Knausgård's work. Co-narration, a ubiquitous practice in conversational storytelling, enters autofiction in an intertextual and metanarrative game, which turns the shared family name into a metonym of narrative transaction in autofiction: *October Child* introduces what one might call contextual or transtextual multiperspectivity to a one-dimensional cycle characterized by at times almost obsessive introspection, especially when it comes to writing about writing.

Second, the use of several distinctive narratees creates a complex dynamic between multiple versions of you (corresponding with multiple versions of the I as author, patient, mother, wife, daughter, child, and adult). Early in the novel, the narrator explicitly addresses her father: "Have I been too harsh with you, Dad?" (Boström Knausgård 2021, 75) Then, a generalizing you ("You are your own ethics. You are doomed to freedom" [ibid., 137]) introduces a programmatic statement. 'You' may also refer to the narrator, who uses it as a way of speaking to herself: "Is there nothing you enjoy remembering?" (Ibid., 154) Sometimes different addressees seem to morph into one another (cf. ibid., 151f.). There are cases where we can assume that Karl Ove must be the narratee, when the narrator says, for instance, "You know how many different moods I can harbour at any given time" (ibid., 26). At times, Karl Ove is also addressed explicitly: "You arrived in Sweden with a library in your luggage, three times the size of mine." (Ibid., 59) Or: "You wrote and wrote, spent time with the children, wrote and wrote." (Ibid., 167)

Third, the transactional perspective on narrative dynamics invites us to review, once again, the problematic balance between memoir and fiction. The author herself calls the book a novel, and the paratext underscores this, with the conventional disclaimer: "This is a work of fiction." Fictionality is a broad church, and if you choose, with Richard Walsh (2007, 45), to regard it as a form of rhetoric rather than a discourse type or genre, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction "rests upon the rhetorical use to which a narrative is put, which is to say, the kind of interpretative response it invites in being presented as one or the other."

In the Knausgård universe (this equally applies to both authors) there is quite a bit of confusion over the exact kind of invitation offered to readers, and thus the kind of metaphorical contract that prefigures the aesthetic experience: a "willing suspension of disbelief," constituting "poetic faith" (Coleridge 2019

[1817]), or Philip Lejeune's autobiographical pact? The cover of the German translation of *Min Kamp: Andre Bok* (2009), *Lieben* (2012), designates the work a novel; the English translation, *A Man in Love* (2019 [2013]), doesn't. The paratextual framing is confusing: "Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events," a conventional disclaimer states, "is purely coincidental." The cover text further claims that "the narrator was periodically interned in a psychiatric ward where she was subjected to electroconvulsive therapy." The narrator, not the author? From a narratological perspective, this constitutes a category error (given that we are supposed to think of *October Child* as a work of fiction), as nothing ever *really* happens to a fictive narrator.

What is more, on the verso of the title page Boström Knausgård, the author, shares her feelings: "I had a lot of anger inside me about the electroshock treatments I had undergone in a psychiatric ward." Thus, the distinction between author, character and narrator is blurred; whether this happens incidentally or is intended to be part of an intricate metatextual game, continued in the front matter, is impossible to ascertain: "The opinions expressed therein," we learn, "are those of the characters and should not be confused with those of the author." The "kernel paradox" of autofiction which, Hansen (2017) suggests, characterizes Karl Ove Knausgård's work, resurfaces here: "he claims that what he tells is true, thus opening up the possibility of negotiation, while at the same time claiming that what he says is fiction, authorizing the truth value of the told." (55) Of course, author and narrator are never identical, even if, like in this case, they share the same name; and the author's textual stage persona, in a memoir, will never be as complex as, and yet sometimes appear more complex than, the historical person who conceived it. This epistemological puzzle can only be described, but not resolved in theory; from a pragmatic perspective, it is merely a question of relevance: what difference does it make whether we consider these texts as autofiction, nonfiction novels, memoir, or hybrids? As Walsh (2007, 46) says, fictionality "depends on the concrete evidence of the several kinds of ancillary text, proximate and remote, that mediate between a narrative and its cultural context"; and that evidence, he concludes, is subject to interpretation.

A fifth important issue, which the focus on transtextual and transactional narrative dynamics reveals, is what in our given context one might call the teller's dilemma. Self-writing, whether in the form of autofiction or autobiography, has to navigate through the vast expanses of possibility space (a mathematical metaphor which refers to all potential solutions to a given problem): all the people, objects, actions, events, stories, memories, hopes, and promises which constitute lived experience and might claim a role in the tragedy, comedy, melodrama, or farce which, in the act of writing, revisits, reinvents, and reclaims the self. Narrating means, metaphorically speaking, reducing possibility space through acts of casting and curation: authors have to choose who they want to see on stage, in the audience, or not at all. Likewise, they have to make decisions about what should be represented for all to see, and what not. All possible narratives finally yield one.

Writers are, however, not completely free in the ways they restrict or constrain possibility space; on the one hand, they need to find a narrative form that suits their aspirations; on the other hand, they have to bear in mind pragmatic aspects like expectations and conventions. Inspired by sociolinguistics in the Labovian tradition (cf. Norrick 2005), narrative theory has adopted and developed the concept of tellability to define the minimum conditions of newsworthiness and the taboos which limit, in a given context, what can be told without boring or alienating one's audience.[17]

Tellability privileges social contexts of reception over the creative context of narrative design. In many scenarios, however, there is a conflict between what audiences deem tellable and what writers feel compelled to share. In order to describe that conflict, the concept of the tellable may be expanded by introducing the term *narrandum*, Latin for what needs to be told. The notion of *narrandum* accentuates the intrinsic motivation for sharing experiences, the urge to bear testimony, the need to speak out, and the decision to go public.

We may speak of a teller's dilemma when narrandum and tellability – what needs to be told and what can be told, the "upper boundary of tellability" (Norrick 2005) – are not in sync; when tellers refrain from telling all they could tell in order to protect others or themselves, for instance out of a sense of decency, to avoid negative narrative effects like triggering trauma, or out of shame, out of fear of legal prosecution or, more generally, because they wish to retain narrative authority and thus control over their public image. This dilemma affects whistleblowers like Edward Snowden and Julian Assange, whose decisions may have dramatic, and unforeseen, at times even unforeseeable, consequences for others and themselves. It also affects writers of autofiction, as self-fashioning in writing, intentionally or not, also fashions others.

In Knausgård's case, the dilemma may be less existential, compared to famous whistleblowers, but is nevertheless essential, and typical of literary self-writing which usually involves relating the self to significant others, unless you live a hermit's life. Blowing the whistle on yourself, and on those close to you, raises fundamental ethical questions concerning the relationship between the freedom of art and personality rights: how much private information can be made public without violating ethical principles or being taken to court? This question troubles even the seven-year old Karl Ove, who tells his teacher in *Boyhood Island* (2019 [2014]) that Leif Tore, a boy from the neighborhood, won't attend school because his mother ran away from her drunkard husband, taking the children with her. "We must not always tell everything we know about others," the teacher warns him, "There is something we call privacy" (203). Did Karl Ove learn his lesson? *A Man in Love* (2019 [2013]) tells us about the night in Stockholm when he decided to go, in his writing, "to the essence, to the inner core of human existence" (233): "If it took forty years, so be it, it took forty years. But I should never lose sight of it, never forget it, that was where I was going." (Ibid.) Few writers can be bothered to travel to that inner core of human existence all by themselves. Most, Karl Ove included, take some company with them. Did he protect his fellow travelers' privacy sufficiently?

This question – a matter of great concern for his critics (Boström Knausgård included) – directly affects narrative dynamics, in particular the ways *October Child* references, and engages with, *A Man in Love*. In the latter book, Knausgård recounts how Linda once told him about her suicide attempt: she had tried to jump out of a window of her flat, and her mother held her back (cf. 2019 [2013], 258). This scene is remembered, seven years later, by Boström Knausgård herself (2021, 171-174); she describes the event in a slightly more detailed manner which, however, is fully compatible with Knausgård's account: she seems to retell, for a public audience, the same story she once told Karl Ove, and in a similar manner.

In more abstract terms, one could say that both narratives align quite seamlessly. No backlash, no counter-story, no writing back: Boström Knausgård's narrative largely confirms what readers already know (although there are subtly diverging versions of the divorce, but that's hardly surprising or unusual). At the same time, her narratorial comment on the Knausgård universe is far more than an ancillary narrative offering corroborating evidence. The same events can yield very different stories, as Brooks demonstrates in his analysis of narrative transactions in court, just as the same life can be experienced differently by those involved. One life, two struggles, and a sobering conclusion: when people are too preoccupied with themselves, whatever the reason may be, their relationship may eventually become dysfunctional.

For narrative theorists interested in exploring narrative in the wild, the Knausgård universe, that continuously expanding "fiction room" (Knausgård 2016, n.p.), has a lot more to offer than such a confirmation of conventional wisdom. The combination of transtextuality and multiperspectivity developed here is a first step towards the conceptual foundation of a future contextual poetics exploring narrative dynamics beyond the text, a poetics which considers the how-questions of classical discourse narratology and the why-questions driving a cultural narratology not only as equally relevant, but as two sides of the same coin: What stories *are*, and how they work, largely depends on why we *tell* them, and to whom – and on the kind of competition they encounter, the coalitions they form, and the resonance they elicit in the narrative ecosystems out there.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to propose a twenty-first century answer to Chatman's question, "What can we learn from Contextual Narratology?" The answer is far older than structuralism. "No man is an island, entire of itself," John Donne famously holds in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (2019 [1624], here 717). Likewise, narratives don't exist in isolation. As both the first generation of pragmatic contextualists and their successors have taught us, narratives are ways of worldmaking, interacting with one another in numerous ways.

As I have tried to show, analyzing such interdependencies doesn't force us to abandon the hard-earned distinctions and well-constrained descriptions of classical narratology. On the contrary, the structuralist approach enables us to describe how literary narratives address multiple audiences, raise complex questions concerning the truth value of literary propositions, and reflect on the dilemmas involved in representing lived experience, making for a truly slow aesthetic experience. What is more, the revised notion of narrative dynamics proposed here allows us to explore transtextual and transactional features of narratives in contest, a vital part of the large discursive system we call culture.

Like Rubik's cube, which produces seemingly endless variations through an inbuilt mechanism, narrative structures and forms can be rearranged and recombined in innovative ways that never cease to amaze the form-loving theorist. Unlike nerdy combination puzzles offering a limited number of possible solutions, however, narrative grammars are never complete. The act of narration restricts or constrains possibility space, as argued above; but narratives also keep expanding it, through continuous interaction, benign or hostile, adversarial or collective, backward or forward looking. Grounded in the insights of classical narratology and rhetoric but taking them further one step at a time, contextual narratology seeks to appreciate narrative in its full complexity, an amorphous paradox: a self-contained box, but one that is open on all sides.

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[1] My forthcoming book *The Slow Novel* will offer a more comprehensive definition of slow narrative dynamics.
[2] For details concerning the publication and translation of these novels, see the beginning of section four.
[3] David Herman (1999, 221) comes to a similar conclusion, claiming that in the structuralist research program "the systematically describable properties of the narrative message remained underexplored." In order to address this shortcoming, Herman argues, "these (structuralist) models need to be enriched – synthesized – with ideas advanced by language theorists working outside the Saussurean paradigm" (ibid.).
[4] I prefer the term *contextual narratology* to Chatman's (1990b) "contextualism," a term used to reject pragmatics.
[5] I will develop this comprehensive framework in my forthcoming book *The Slow Novel*; in this essay, phenomenological and cognitive issues cannot be addressed.
[6] I should clarify that Prince seems somewhat reluctant to adopt this position himself. The full quote reads: "With tradition on their side, some narratologists (e.g., Genette) have argued that narrative is essentially a mode of verbal representation and involves the linguistic recounting or telling of events rather than, say, their performance or enactment on stage." (Prince 2003, 17)
[7] John Pier (2003, 73) observes that paradigm evolution may lead to "the congealing of tentative syntheses into standardized procedures and methodologies"; this also affects, as Pier argues, Chatman's distinction of story and discourse: "In a way, Chatman's definition of the story / discourse theory of narrative comes as a summary of more than ten years of narratological research at a time when the waning of structuralist linguistics, the so-called 'pilot science' of narrative theory, had already sparked off a 'crisis,' resulting in the significant shift in the parameters of narratological research." (Ibid., 74) Like the story / discourse distinction, grounded in an increasingly contested "pan-narrator theory" (Patron 2020), the focus on text seems too restrictive, maybe even dogmatic, today.
[8] Cf. Culler (1988, ix): "But the notion of context frequently oversimplifies rather than enriches discussion, since the opposition between an act and its context seems to presume that the context is given and determines the meaning of the act. We know, of course, that things are not so simple: context is not fundamentally different from what it contextualises; context is not given but produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by events. Yet when we use the term context we slip back into the simple model it proposes."
[9] Cf. Barthes, in *S/Z* (1974): "The text, in its mass, is comparable to a sky, at once flat and smooth, deep, without edges and without landmarks." (14)
[10] Cf. Richardson (2005, 5): "I try to resist the temptation to produce a general theory of narrative dynamics that takes us firmly from beginning through the main aspects of the middle to the definitive ending, with appropriate nods to fabula construction, temporality, and syuzhet arrangement."
[11] As I have argued elsewhere (cf. Sommer forthcoming), narrative dynamics can, and should, be extended to include all kinds of storytelling and storysharing, in fiction and nonfiction.
[12] The difference between rhetorical and unnatural approaches is established most clearly in the contributions to *Narrative Theory*, an excellent survey of cognitive, rhetorical, feminist, and unnatural narratologies (cf. Herman et al. 2012). Phelan and Rabinowitz (2012) distinguish progression from event-based notions of plot: "Our concept of progression arises from a different way of thinking about the larger principle of organization of a narrative, one grounded in the link between the logic of the text's movement from beginning to middle through ending (what we call textual dynamics) and the audience's temporal experience (readerly dynamics) of that movement." (57f.) Richardson (2012), in contrast, restricts narrative dynamics to textual phenomena: "I wish to clarify that I am primarily interested here in what they [i.e. Phelan and Rabinowitz] call 'textual dynamics,' that is, the principles of movement underlying the sjuzhet (and distinct from what they call 'readerly dynamics')." (78)
[13] In the Norwegian original, the six books are simply numbered, whereas the English translation of the cycle by Don Bartlett adds individual titles: *A Death in the Family: My Struggle Book 1*, *A Man in Love: My Struggle Book 2*, *Boyhood Island: My Struggle Book 3*, *Dancing in the Dark: My Struggle Book 4*, *Some Rain Must Fall: My Struggle Book 5*, and *The End: My Struggle Book 6*.
[14] The Swedish original, *Oktoberbarn*, was published in 2019.
[15] Cf. Boström Knausgård, qtd. in O'Kelly (2020, n.p.): "As a writer, I respect his right to use his own life as material and, objectively, I thought the books were very good. But on a personal level I was really angry about the way he looked at me. His view of me was so limited, he saw only what he wanted to see. It was as if he didn't know me at all. Reading it felt like suffering a loss. Now I just wonder if maybe he's one of these male writers that can't really write about women."

[16] The narrative design of Karl Ove Knausgård's novels, which oscillate between a self-confessed lack of memory and extremely detailed descriptions of past events, calls into question the traditional roles of authors and narrators in autobiographical writing. Per Krogh Hansen (2017) explores the unreliable game with conflicting truth claims: "When Knausgård claims that he tells the truth, but does it within the framework of fiction, he suspends the negotiable nature of factual truth." (55)

[17] Chatman's (1990b) reservations against Labovian linguistics in general and the concept of tellability have thus proven unfounded.