

Karl Ove Knausgaard takes his title from the first verse of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, one of the *Ketuvim*, or ‘Writings,’ which make up the final section of the Hebrew Bible. The speaker writes under pseudonym, taking the name *Kohelet*, meaning ‘Teacher,’ and Ecclesiastes is supposed to be his autobiography. “There is a time for everything,” he opens, “and a season for every activity under the heavens.” His tone in this beginning cadence is one of resignation to God’s will – the Biblical sense of life and fate, but it has also a reassuring certainty. For Kohelet, morality is God, and the consistency of the Old Testament God in his wrath and capriciousness is at least that: consistent. His regular shows of might uphold the essential insignificance of Man and Woman, however great their sin. Their burden is eternal and terrible; yet Kohelet’s lament in Ecclesiastes is directed not at his own sin, which might as well be inherent, but at his mortality, his distance from the Divine, and the tragedy of loss and impermanence. “He has made everything beautiful *in its time*.” For Kohelet, as for us, there is not actually time enough for everything.

What is interesting about a novel’s title isn’t so much that it ‘sums up’ the work – it cannot – but that, on account of its elevated status, its presence is always felt. One is always reading “Knausgaard’s *A Time for Everything*.” It is not as though author and title are forgotten, unlike the phrases of the body of a work, which tend to slip moment to moment from our consciousness. Knausgaard begins with a fabricated biography of a fabricated theologian, Antinous Bellori. He then exhaustively rewrites the stories of Cain and Abel, Noah and the Great Flood, Lot and the plight of Sodom and Gomorrah. He revisits Bellori as an old man, in order to revisit the question of the Divine, only to jump to modernity in the Coda – the mid-life crisis of Henrik Vankel – in order to introduce that same question in today’s context.

Knausgaard embraces the task of a conservator restoring an old painting – in his case, the Bible and its theology – except that he puts in his own colors where the originals remain ambiguous; he assumes artistic license, Historian as Artist. He needs the painting to grab us, otherwise, why restore it? As he often suggests, this is the only honesty he can claim: “Everything we know is inextricably linked with loss and oblivion.” To pretend the past can be recovered is to distort it.

How does Knausgaard weave Kohelet’s words through the dimensions of his narrative, and does the title’s meaning change as he ventures further in the plot or closer to the present? What is Knausgaard’s conception of the Biblical world, the lived experience of, for example, Cain or Abel? Why does he retell the Bible in the present tense, and what does his free use of anachronism indicate about his philosophy of history? Do his anachronisms get in the way of his storytelling or make it real to us?

How does Knausgaard personalize these stories, investing in them a more immediate humanity than the Bible lends? (If you've read Knausgaard's autobiographical series, *My Struggle*, what connections might be drawn between that picture of his personal life and the plot of *A Time for Everything*?) His painstaking descriptions of the valleys, mountains, sky and life of the world before the Great Flood—Might these also hint at his own experience, one naturally grounded in the Norwegian landscape of his upbringing? Why should Knausgaard borrow from his own experience? What has he to do with these stories?

Cain, Abel, Anna and Noah understand the world to be the direct, living work of God and, as far as Knausgaard breathes into their consciousness his own intense awareness of the world, so the reader appreciates the blessing of Creation, one so closely felt in Biblical times. Is this one duty of storytelling today, to return us, if for a moment, out of the bustle of modern life to that Biblical consciousness of a divine perfection, or, in secular terms, an awareness of our surroundings and the immediacy of our lives? "The time is past in which time did not matter," the French poet Paul Valéry once wrote. Is this what Knausgaard means to combat?

Has Knausgaard succeeded in his effort of imaginative restoration? What is it that he means to restore? Faith itself? Neglected ideas? An abandoned tradition and past? His own sanity? To what extent has Knausgaard, like Kohelet, written an autobiography?

"There is a time for everything," and the Bible's has passed. "God is dead," or so Bellori finally concludes. The angels, anyway, have become gulls, we learn in Knausgaard's Coda, seen poking around in a scrap heap at the edge of town, which young Henrik and his boyhood friends visit on Saturday mornings, picking them off with saloon rifles, for sport.

Like secular society's relation to the Bible, to what might be considered a mythical and sensationalized text—the existence of angels, the wrath of a God—have the Ecclesiastic teachings lost resonance, no longer pertinent to the concerns and biases of today? Can we see the struggle of Henrik Vankel as a commentary on that question?

Is it Knausgaard's intent to endow the Bible with new meaning as a text whose ancestral weight might, not so much rescue our waning spirituality as *return us to the earth*, undo the illusion of our material constructs and place our humanity in perspective—a text whose true history is the history of our relation to it and thus to the Divine, a history that speaks to the delusions of our condition today? Or do Bellori's apocalypse of the Divine and Vankel's despondency prevail, and Knausgaard can only attempt to document an "oblivion" whose meaning cannot be resurrected?

The figure of Antinous Bellori, whom Knausgaard meticulously constructs, defies history not because he exists in the imagination but because his worldview defies modern historical understanding. Bellori represents a contradiction, and Knausgaard, as if to justify the invention of such a character, explains Bellori's dilemma by way of a figure very real to modernity, the physicist Sir Isaac Newton, a near-contemporary of (the fictional) Bellori's:

[Newton] had shown in *Principia* that gravity affects all bodies, and that it operates at a distance. But he wrote nothing about how it operates. During the final years of his life, Newton worked intensively on this question, but since the explanation he arrived at then, that the ether through which gravity works consists of Christ's spiritual, immaterial body, wasn't provable, he didn't publicize this theory either. The distinction between verifiable and nonverifiable was reinforced by Newton's descendants, who for more than two centuries concealed the speculative part of his research, presumably out of the conviction that the authority of his scientific theories would be weakened if it became known that they were merely a by-product of his tireless search for corroboration of the divine presence in the universe. Their strategy was successful. During the eighteenth century the verifiable became sovereign within science, and has remained so to this day. But the method developed for distinguishing between true and false is based, as we well know, on replication — in order for an observation or experiment to be valid, it must be repeatable, and the results must be the same each time — which naturally condemns things that happen only once, and the unique and exceptional, to fall outside its parameters. And therefore it's as if they don't exist. Wonders, miracles, supernatural events — all are swept away in the name of the verifiable. The first consequence of this new method of seeing the world was that divine manifestations began to be regarded as historical.

Bellori was interested precisely in what couldn't be replicated. He documented every angelic sighting in recorded history. He spent his life wandering the hills in search of the same. Nothing was more important to him. These manifestations were not replicable events, each was unique; they couldn't be made to fit to a logic. These were divine beings and the language of this world could not adequately describe them. Bellori's great conclusion reverses the usual parallel: the Divine is not immutable but changing, and in relation to humanity: whereas the human condition is inescapable and its burden permanent. No one read Bellori's work, and no one remembered him, because his findings didn't fit their worldview or otherwise serve their interests. In the Coda Knausgaard returns to this idea, if obliquely, from Vankel's perspective. "Everything happens through necessity," he describes. "The question is simply which necessity." Bellori's work *had* to pass unnoticed, for it threatened the survival of the prevailing ideology and institutions of power. Bellori was moving against the current, and who can tell why the water runs this way? It might just as easily have carried his ideas to fame and influence; but a river does not turn over on itself to run opposite. The ideological current simply flows on: like blood from the heart, Knausgaard maintains, it beats on through "necessity."

How does Bellori's presence in the novel free Knausgaard to interrogate our methods of historical thinking? Is our view of the past as distorted as Knausgaard suggests? (*Can we answer that question objectively?*) Is it wrong to assume that our condition today is anything like that of our ancestors? Can we know what Cain and Abel believed? Who is Noah to us? Could he exist in our world? Is it as Knausgaard writes, that every trace of mankind before the Great Flood was wiped out or lost, that we can never know or see that past – only the story remains, and we cannot comprehend the humanity it once spoke to? If so, what does this suggest about the potency of language and storytelling, what we like to call our 'universal humanity'?

Does Knausgaard's idea of necessity suggest that our consciousness is so limited as to be deterministic? That we see a certain world because it is the only one we can safely understand, that even our thought is oriented towards a kind of survival, that of sustaining its own beliefs? Similarly, how does Knausgaard challenge modern structures of belief, which place reason and empiricism over passion, intuition, the miraculous and revelatory, the ideals and truth of science over those of theology and faith? In what ways have we constructed our modern, capitalist, secular societies around the concept of free will? In what ways does that concept, and its embodiment in our culture, inform our sense of individuality and meaning, and what would we be without this truth to cling to?

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The seventeenth-century French theologian, Blaise Pascal, whose life overlapped with Sir Isaac Newton's, may also have believed in angels, as Antinous Bellori did, and as Newton likely did. He mentions them in his writings once or twice and certainly believed in the redeeming light of God: his intention in the *Pensées* is to persuade his readers that their only hope is faith. Pascal's faith was inextricable from his belief in the wretchedness of human existence, and Kohelet, the voice of Ecclesiastes, shares this view: humanity is *hevel*, Hebrew for 'futile,' 'vain;' literally, 'breath,' a sheer mortality Knausgaard himself regularly returns to. "The heart beats, the lungs breathe, the blood flows. But for whom?" "It's clear you are a system you can't control." *Is this notion, which seems to equate human nature with the human biology, tenable? Or is it simply attractive because it seems to free us from responsibility for our faults and misdeeds, and in that way reductive?*

"Ecclesiastes shows that man without God is totally ignorant and inescapably unhappy, for anyone is unhappy who wills but cannot do," Pascal writes. "Now he wants to be happy and assured of some truth, and yet he is equally incapable of knowing and not desiring to know. He cannot even doubt." *Might this fragment from the *Pensées* elucidate precisely the struggle of Henrik Vankel?* Having secluded himself on a remote Norwegian island, Vankel lives in his torment, unable to reach any conclusions about the ruin of his life and equally unable to give up the need to solve his condition ("Nothing like 'freedom of thought' has ever existed")

(“Reason made no impression on fear”). Vankel has no God to guide him, and no God to punish him. He answers to himself, and all that is left of him is his mortality: a body. He cuts and bloodies his chest and face and sits in a tub burning in pain, dead to time, staring through the tiniest of windows at the sky and water. Kohelet ends the third chapter of his autobiography much where Knausgaard leaves Vankel, that is, with the most elementary of nihilisms: “Everything is meaningless.” Except he doesn’t, and perhaps Knausgaard, by implication, doesn’t quite either. Kohelet gives two more verses. The important one reads: “So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot.” It should be read as a cry of affirmation. In the hour of our toil, however burdensome, there is joy, the joy that comes in the midst of accomplishment, and there is accomplishment itself, the enjoyment of its fruits. “That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil – this is the gift of God,” Kohelet declares, and here his tone is not resigned but expressive of that “passion for life” the absurdist philosopher Albert Camus extols in his *Mythe de Sisyphe*, an apt modern counterpart to Kohelet’s conclusion.

Can we say, implicitly, that this is Knausgaard’s message, too – that he finds a satisfaction in writing his novel, enough to overcome his fear? That as Henrik Vankel lies in a tub in a kind of meaningless stupor, Knausgaard simultaneously finishes Henrik’s story, and in that fold of time the two meet, the tormented, unfeeling body and the author at his desk affirming life by writing it, creating in a world where there is no God left to create?

All of this begs the question: Is meaning an act of faith?

Knausgaard does, eventually, give an answer – The Coda of this novel serves to preface his subsequent, explicitly autobiographical series, and in Book One of *My Struggle* he puts it this way: “The only thing I have learned from life is to endure it, never to question it, and to burn up the longing generated by this in writing. Where this ideal has come from I have no idea, and as I now see it before me, in black and white, it almost seems perverse.”