

Knowledge and ethics in literature
A perspective on literature through the lenses of
Karl Ove Knausgård and K.E. Løgstrup

Bjørn Rabjerg

This article explores some of the thoughts on literature and its cognitive potential, its revelatory force, found in the philosophy of Danish thinker, philosopher and theologian K.E. Løgstrup. Løgstrup was a professor of ethics and the philosophy of religion at Aarhus University, and he was a very influential person in Danish culture from the 1950's until his death in 1981.

The topic in question here concerns the relation between art and reality – or to put it another way the relation between art and truth. Løgstrup will not be the only stepping stone, however, as we will take our point of departure in contemporary Norwegian novelist, and a philosophical thinker in his own right, Karl Ove Knausgård and the thoughts on literature and art found in his monumental series of six novels, *My Struggle*. In the sixth and final volume he reflects on Hölderlin's aesthetics, especially the statement which Knausgård fully supports, that art seeks the space between language and reality¹ – that this 'space' is actually the nexus of art, because art receives its impetus or energy from the striving for truth, from the gravitational pull from reality.

Now, if we focus on literature, it is especially apparent that the entire endeavour of relating literature to truth is paradoxical. Literature, being a work of art and language, seeks the space between language and reality, but how is this possible when literature is and has to be words and language? How can language hope to transcend language to reach a point between language and reality? To address this problem, Knausgård turns his attention to Hölderlin's call to his reader, "Come on! Into the open, my friend". Hölderlin was a poet, Knausgård reflects, and hence 'the open' must be an existential category. At the

¹ Knausgård, *Min kamp. Sjette bok*, [My Struggle vol. 6], 349. All translations of Knausgård's texts are my own as they have not yet been translated to English.

same time Hölderlin affiliates ‘the open’ with the utopic, “[...] and to a poet the utopic must be a world without language”.² Knausgård continues:

Poetry sought the space between language and the world in order to stand before the world as it is in itself; but when this insight, which might very well be the oldest of all insights, were to be committed or brought on to others, it could only be done through language, and in the same instant, what had been gained was lost. In a world outside language you can only exist in solitude.³

This is the paradox, if you try to connect art and truth. The world is not a piece of art, so how can art be true? Reality is not linguistic, so how can it be found in language? Reality in itself does not have a perspective, so how can it be found in a painting? Futile as it may be, Knausgård reflects on this world outside language:

A world without language was a world without categories, where every single thing, no matter how modest it may be, emerged as it was. It was a world without history, where nothing existed save the moment. A pine in that world wasn’t a ‘pine’, it wasn’t a ‘tree’ either, it was a nameless phenomenon, something which grew from the earth and moved in the wind. If you were standing on top of a slope, you would be able to see how these living growths move back and forth in the wind and to hear their whisper. This sight and this sound were impossible to communicate. And due to this it seemed as though they didn’t exist. But they did, and they do. You only have to take one step to the side, and the world changes. One sidestep, and you’re in the nameless world.⁴

Knausgård connects this nameless world with the religious myth of the original harmony between man and world, the time before the original sin, when man fell out of the world and became alienated. The treachery in the religious myth, however, consists in its historicity, because it implies a before and an after. That the original harmony is lost is a historical occurrence in mythology, a lost natural condition of mankind, but this image betrays the fact that there is only the now:

The divine flame burns now, the Garden of Eden exists now, you only need to take one step to the side and you are there. But this step is impossible for us to take, because we are human, and the place this step leads to is the inhuman.⁵

² Ibid. 349.

³ Ibid. 349f.

⁴ Ibid. 350.

⁵ Ibid. 351.

This quote seems to imply the futility of the ambition of connecting art with truth. Literature might seek the space between language and reality, but this place is unreachable, and hence art is just art, a fabrication of human endeavour, but always already stuck in its place well within human subjectivity and relativity.

This, however, need not be the case, and not according to Knausgård either. If we focus on the literary work of art, it may not step into reality, or the nameless world, what Hölderlin called “into the open”, but it may stand on the border to the open and look into it – in much the same way as religion doesn’t stand inside the holy, but at the edge of it, looking towards it. This is what the work of art does, according to Knausgård, and it is quite plain to see that this is also what Knausgård himself tries to do in the quoted passages: to look into the open while he is standing within language trying to transcend it. While doing this he discovers what he finds to be the truth of both human beings and art:

When I saw a real work of art or read real literature, all the brutality was pushed aside, for there was another dimension within the human realm, something quite different, of a completely different magnitude, dignity and significance. As an effect, it had caused people in the Middle Ages to build the enormous cathedrals, and in front of their splendour they became what they really were: little insignificant wretches. Yes, like little shits. But they were the ones who built them! They were both creators of the most spectacular and unearthly beauty, and little shits. That was the truth of the human being. Some things were significant, and other things were insignificant. Weakness was significant, and greatness was significant, but not what lies in-between.⁶

This causes Knausgård to liken the truth of art to an epiphany, namely that something in the world appears, through and in spite of our image of it, and reveals itself as it is, in an instant.⁷ And the urge, which is to be understood as the driving force in art, is to accomplish this.

The idea, that art and reality is related, or to put it in another way, that the true and the beautiful is somehow related, is of course not a new one. In ancient Greek philosophy, beauty and truth is closely connected – not just with each other but also with goodness. Together they form the classical triad, *the good, the beautiful and the true*.

⁶ Ibid. 348.

⁷ Ibid. 634.

In an article from 1979 with the very unpoetical title *Art and Knowledge II*, K.E. Løgstrup reflects on the change of events in art history, which came about with Immanuel Kant at the end of the 18th century. Until then it had been accepted almost without discussion that art was connected with truth and ethics, but in a way where art was to be understood as standing *in the service of* truth and ethics. Art's main purpose was to promote moral and cognitive truths, thus it served its purpose as an instrument of morality and knowledge.

This changed with Kant, who insisted on the autonomy of the aesthetical experience. Art is beauty, but the experience of beauty is its own, it is autonomous, and that means that art cannot be subjugated under the censorship of ethics and knowledge, according to Kant. Instead, art should be seen as the cause of a certain kind of feeling, namely a disinterested feeling of pleasure, and as such the aesthetic feeling has nothing to do with the true or the good, i.e. with knowledge (or cognition) and ethics, but it is just a feeling in its own right.

What Løgstrup proposes is to reinvestigate the ties between art, knowledge and ethics, but without reintroducing the *external* connection between them, where art is seen as being in their service. Kant's insight here should not be forgotten, he insists. However, instead of seeking an external connection, we might be able to discover an *internal* connection, which Kant had overlooked. Here Løgstrup raises his central question: *Is there a common ground within the nature of art, truth and goodness, and if so does this entail that art can never be in opposition to the true and the good?* – without ceasing to be art in the strict sense, we might add (and yes, we do sense a familiar problem here). Løgstrup puts it like this:

Hardly anyone dreams of once again bringing art under the yoke of knowledge and morality, of depriving the work of art of its autonomy in order to give it a pedagogical task. But this does not preclude the fact that our historical existence is enlightened by the aesthetic suspension, whether we want it or not.⁸

The term *aesthetic suspension*, which Løgstrup introduces here, is central. He uses it to characterize the aesthetical experience in order to separate it from the

⁸ Løgstrup, *Kunst og erkendelse* [Art and Knowledge], 73/328 (page numbers refer to Danish and English texts respectively).

experience of our historical, or everyday, life. Here, it is vital to Løgstrup that we do not completely sever the connection between the two. This, however, only underlines the importance of a philosophical investigation of their differences. Were we to cut their connection off completely then the aesthetic experience would become esoteric, belonging only to its own aesthetic world. It would imply that the aesthetic experience had nothing to do with our historical life; this was Kant's error. On the contrary, according to Løgstrup, the emotions are fundamentally the same in art and in our everyday life, but their *mode of being there* is different from the feelings stemming from our historical lives.

But I believe that emotion in the aesthetic experiences comes into existence by the same contending factors as emotion in real life. It is in our own hope for the character in a drama or novel that our mind is moved, when hope continues, is annihilated or fulfilled by what happens. In the aesthetic experience, however, emotion does not exist as a disturbance of the mind. Thus, it must be there somehow in a suspended way. By suspended, I do not believe it to be removed, but that the mind is moved in sort of a hovering way.⁹

It is important for Løgstrup to emphasize that this 'suspension' does not imply a loss of intensity. On the contrary, our feelings may often be far more intense in the aesthetic experience than they are in our ordinary life. What is then to be understood by the metaphor, that the mind is moved in a 'hovering way'? He explains this through another metaphor, namely that "[t]he emotion's centre of gravity is different in real life than in the aesthetic experience".¹⁰

In real life, the centre of gravity lies in the cause. In sorrow, the individual is affected by the one who is lost; in joy by the one who is given. In the aesthetic experience, the centre of gravity is shifted to what is revealed by the emotion. Therefore, we do not grieve when we aesthetically witness sorrow. It is due not solely to the fact that we know it is a fiction we see and hear. It is also due to something else that we do not grieve from the sorrow we see but from the actual loss. [...] In real life, the one who sorrows has himself no thought of what the sorrow reveals about the fundamental conditions on which we live our lives. His thoughts are entirely on his loss. The sorrow comes from loss and goes to loss. On the other hand, what captures the mind of the spectator or reader is sorrow itself, its expression, and therefore he does not grieve but

⁹ Ibid. 59/312.

¹⁰ Ibid. 60/313.

his mind is drawn to what sorrow shows about the fundamental conditions of our lives.¹¹

So, the emotion (in this case sorrow) is the same in real life and in the aesthetic experience, but because we as readers do not actually grieve we are able to perceive or understand sorrow and what sorrow reveals, when we encounter literature dealing with sorrow. In *My Struggle* book 6, Knausgård uses Hermann Broch's famous novel *The Death of Virgil* to illustrate the same point as the one Løgstrup tries to make. In a passage, highly valued by Knausgård as the best prose sentence written in Europe in the last couple of centuries, Broch uses the words "loneliness with a hint of death" to describe the sea:

The loneliness of the sea, shone upon by the sun, but yet mixed with a hint of death – I had never thought of the sea in this way, but I must have felt it, because when I read it something inside me recognizes it, vaguely, as if from a great distance. A recognition of something which I didn't know what really was. And a recognition of the unknown, the mighty, the non-human, what death is about.¹²

Broch uses this sentence to describe the movement from the solitude on the sea towards the peaceful human activity on the docks in Brindisi. Why is Broch's description so powerful – or we might generalize the question: why are powerful literary descriptions so powerful? Knausgård provides an answer:

[Broch's paragraph] directs all of our attention to a *fundamental condition* [please observe the exact same use of words as we find in Løgstrup's article, Knausgård just understands this to silently imply that the conditions are conditions of *our lives*] that we disregard more and more. That it does this in such a simple way [i.e. brings this condition into focus, BR], by connecting it to a concrete landscape in the world, a concrete moment in time, an early evening outside the harbour in Brindisi, the elements, the steel blue of the ocean shone upon by the sun, the pink glow of the sky, the whitewashed coast, the houses glinting in the sun which draws forth similar moments from the reader's memories, all this turns the moment and what it contains of potential knowledge into an experience.¹³

So, Broch's description draws our attention to something which *is there*, it *reveals* something. What does it reveal? Certainly nothing esoteric or not of this world. On the contrary, it reveals the world, our world. To use two of

¹¹ Ibid. 60/313f.

¹² Knausgård, *Min kamp. Sjette bok*, 615.

¹³ Ibid. 616.

Løgstrup's phrases: Broch reveals "the fundamental conditions of our lives", or: "our historical existence is enlightened by the aesthetic suspension". How does this come about? First of all it has to do with the concreteness of Broch's literary description. This is a work of art, not of science or philosophy. We are not offered scientific proof of something or a philosophical and reasonable argument appealing to our logic and rationality. We are handed an experience, and Knausgård defines experience as "that which is seen, coloured by emotion". And he elaborates:

A chain of reasoning ignores emotion, it addresses our thoughts and reason exclusively, but to thoughts and reason the fact that an infinity of human beings have lived and died before us and that we who live now are also going to die is a banal insight, something we have known since the age of five. Only when you experience it, feel the abyss opening in even the most trivial of surroundings, do you *understand* it. Only then is it insight.¹⁴

Løgstrup puts it like this:

Philosophy can – at best – make an understanding clear.

Poetry can make it [what is understood, BR] present.¹⁵

To make an understanding present is to make it *felt*; to make the reasonable and philosophical understanding *present to the mind* of the reader; to make the reader *attentive*.

This leads to a second reason for how literature (and art in general) can create experience and thus insight. To understand this we have to go into Løgstrup's analysis of perception, art, and the relation between sensation and understanding.

In what is a distinctly anti-Kantian statement Løgstrup claims that "[s]ensation gives us access in an immediate way to the world and in such an immediate way that we do not give a thought to how it occurs".¹⁶ In perception, however, sensation is not the only cognitive operator. Much more in line with Kant, Løgstrup points to the other major factor, namely *understanding*. Sensation and understanding constitute perception in co-operation. In fact, they are so

¹⁴ Ibid. 616.

¹⁵ Løgstrup, *Den etiske fordring* [The Ethical Demand], 230/205 (my modified translation).

¹⁶ Løgstrup, *Kunst og erkendelse*, 9/291.

interwoven that we are unable to separate them: “We cannot hear the whistling without hearing that it belongs to the starlings”, Løgstrup claims. To the perceiver unfamiliar with ornithology we might add that we cannot hear the whistle without understanding it as that of a bird, and even when confronted with a completely unfamiliar sound the understanding would try to categorize it in familiar terms. In this way, perception is constituted by (1) immediate sensation, where *reality* or *the world we live in* imposes itself on us, and by (2) understanding, where we try to categorize and conceptualize the world we live in. So Løgstrup does not follow *Kant’s Copernican Turn* completely; he does so with regard to understanding (the categories) but not with regard to sensation (intuition): We are formed by sense impressions (as Hume proposed), but we, in turn, form what impresses itself on us in our attempt to understand it (more along the lines of Kant).

To understand the work of art and its connection to reality we have to understand an important implication of this view on sensation. Sticking to the perception of a starling’s whistle, it is clear that the sensation of the whistle, in strictly physiological terms, excites the sense of hearing. As Løgstrup stated even in his pre-neuroscience day and age, the effect of this physiological exciting of the senses can be measured. But then he adds a point of vital importance to his analysis:

But the sound does not excite the sense of hearing without altering the mind to which the sense of hearing belongs, and this attunement has quality.¹⁷

This implies that every sense impression holds both physiologically measurable impact *and* emotional impact. We are physiologically and emotionally *attuned* by the sensation. The Danish term is “stemthed” originating from ‘stemning’, a parallel to the German term “Stimmung”, and it holds the double meaning of referring to an atmosphere or a mood, and to the act of tuning something, for example an instrument. So the impression affects us as a *tuning* of us, both our emotions (mood, atmosphere) and our measurable physiological perception. Here it is crucial to observe that Løgstrup does not mean this as merely an emotional or psychological *reaction to* the perceived

¹⁷ Ibid. 9/292.

impression, but rather that the reality attunes us through sensation! The emotional attunement is not a psychological reaction but an emotional perception.

Obviously much of this happens on a subconscious level. It only rises to a conscious level when the attuned impression is very strong, when we see or hear something that moves us to a certain degree. But even the subconscious attunement can be brought to our conscious attention, according to Løgstrup. This can happen in retrospect, when we hear a sound or smell something, perhaps a specific perfume, reminding us of something concrete. In this recollection of memory, the mood we were in or the general atmosphere of the time, is reinvoked. We may have been completely ignorant of this at the time, because we were too close to it, or perhaps too hung up with other things to notice, but in retrospect it becomes clear.

Consequently, every sense impression moves us to some degree, and here we find the key to Løgstrup's inner connection between art and knowledge, and to Knausgård's view (inspired by Hölderlin) that art receives its impetus or energy from the striving for truth, from the gravitational pull from reality. What does this effect on our feelings, caused by sensation, have to do with cognition and knowledge, Løgstrup asks, and he replies: "The attuned impression holds a cognitive content, a content which wants to be articulated".¹⁸ And this is exactly what the work of art accomplishes; it articulates the attuned impression in such a way that the attunement, the emotional cognitive content, is preserved so that it can be carried over, or communicated, to the reader, listener, beholder etc. This isn't necessarily possible in art exclusively, as the borders between art and language (or other forms of communication) isn't clear; but Løgstrup would maintain that art, primarily because of its use of and sense for form, has a privileged function here.

This doesn't necessarily imply that the work of art is a conduit to truth. The artists are just as much in the wrong as everybody else, Løgstrup emphasizes. Impressions may be interpreted and used to say any number of things. But it does mean that in a work of art there is an urge towards explicating

¹⁸ Ibid. 10/293.

the concrete, just as Knausgård stated with Hermann Broch and his description of the concrete moment and landscape. This explication of a concrete sensation, the urge to unfold it, dwell upon it, communicate it, is an attempt at reaching knowledge or cognition – even though it might be flawed or misinterpreted. But the real work of art can communicate this impression to anyone who appreciates it. Art can reveal the emotional content of sensation and impression, things we sense mostly on a subconscious level, but which can be brought forward to our attention by the successful work of art; like the loneliness of the sea with a hint of death, to use Broch as an example. And here Knausgård sounds almost exactly like Løgstrup. In the paragraph following his connection between making an experience *felt* and the understanding and insight this leads to, he writes:

This insight is almost impossible to articulate, because it contains so much. Because it is so fundamental, so central, Broch could have written pages and pages on this matter, of course, carefully elaborated on all possible aspects of both death in nature and our safeguards from it. But Broch wrote this when he was at the peak of his authorship and knew that what the text expresses [its subject matter, BR] and what it awakens are two completely different things.¹⁹

As mentioned, the work of art is not just a direct conduit to truth. It involves interpretation by not only the person appreciating it but also by the artist. Both the subject matter of the work of art and the aesthetic means of expression used are closely connected to the artist's world-view or understanding of life, as Løgstrup calls it. The artist chooses a subject matter which enables him to evoke his view of life. The topic of the work of art is not just an anecdote without any perspective of relevance for the work of art, Løgstrup claims. And the aesthetic means of expression are also intentional, chosen by the artist – and the intention guiding the choice is exactly to help advance the view or understanding of life which the artist wants to promote or to bring into perspective. Be it colour and composition in a painting or choice of words and use of rhythm in poetry or prose. Of course, this need not be a fully conscious and deliberate act, but it guides the artistic process, on a conscious or subconscious level.

¹⁹ Knausgård, *Min kamp. Sjette bok*, 616f.

So far, we have only gone into the relation between art and truth, i.e. art and reality, but Løgstrup also promised to offer an account of the connection to *the good*, to ethics. In fact, the connection to the good is very close to the connection to truth.

As we have seen, art holds revelatory force, enabling us to see and feel portions of reality which we ignore, overlook or are mostly blind to in our everyday life. We live in an abstraction, Løgstrup says, reducing the world to practical surroundings. We see this in language, and here Løgstrup points towards the difference between two functions of language.

Firstly, language serves our practical life, our actions. Here we define things, give them names and use these names, so that we may handle them. “I need a chair; you are in my seat” are examples. In our everyday life we tend to think of this as the only function of language, because it corresponds to the way we live most of the time. Here language and meaning is somehow closed-up. Whenever I ask for something’s name and purpose and then learn it, I can handle it, and my attention can move on to other things.

This is completely different from the second language function, which Løgstrup calls *the clarification of the impression*. It is, however, just as original a contribution of language as that of name giving. This function of language is concerned with expressing the impressions we sense or receive, and this has a perpetual openness as a necessary precondition. To clarify an impression, you have to dwell upon it, explicate it, unfold it, express it. Løgstrup’s ties to the phenomenological tradition are plain to see. Here art comes into the picture in its attempt to express and articulate the world in a way which is not just name-giving.

And what does this have to do with ethics? The short answer is that a consequence of the closed-up, name-giving language function of our practical lives is not just a reduction of our appreciation of the sea, the sunset, or the smile on Mona Lisa’s lips on the painting in *The Louvre*. The consequence is also a reduction of people in general. We don’t just disregard aesthetic value, but also ethical value. The person in the lobby becomes the receptionist, a practical function. The person standing guard in Auschwitz becomes a Nazi, a

representative of evil. What can art do? It can open our closed-up, name-giving way of life and offer a perspective where our surroundings are revealed. Here we see the inspiration from the central Greek concept of *Aletheia* (ἀλήθεια), which was taken up again by Martin Heidegger. Aletheia means ‘disclosure’, ‘truth’, ‘unclosedness’ or unconcealedness’ and refers to the uncovering of something, or of its becoming evident, or its coming into the open (we could recall Hölderlin and ad, “my friend”). Correspondingly, It is Løgstrup’s clear understanding that the human being is a reductive life form; we encounter the world, but keep shutting it down and closing it up in order to handle it, achieve our goals, and just to get by. This falsifying life form can be countered by art, be it prose, poetry, painting or even music, because art has the potential to reveal existence. Knausgård expresses this in his very resent *personal encyclopedia*, *Om høsten* (*During Autumn*), where he writes a *Letter to an unborn daughter*:

This wonder that you will soon meet and get to see is so easy to lose sight of, and there are almost as many ways in which to do that, as there are people. That is why I write this book to you. I want to show you the world as it is all around us all the time. Only by doing so am I able to see it myself.²⁰

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²⁰ Knausgård, *Om høsten* [During Autumn], 16f.