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Should We Believe?

The Fictional, the Virtual and the Real in the Contemporary Novel

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Abstract: Recent work from both novelists and literary critics has suggested that the contemporary novel is sick of fiction and has turned instead to the 'real'. This article questions this understanding of the contemporary novel and, by focusing in particular on the 6-volume *Min Kamp* by Karl Ove Knausgaard, suggests instead that the most important representational model for the contemporary novel is the virtual. In establishing this, the article returns to both a history of the concept of the virtual and to Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief' in order to make visible the role of the virtual as a model for contemporary prose fiction.

Belief, Fiction and Non-existence

After being championed, in much postmodernist theory, as the model for all narrative, the fictional, if we listen to an increasing number of writers, can no longer be believed in. In his admission of his repeated experience of fiction as surplus to requirement, published in an article in the *Guardian* at the beginning of 2013, Ian McEwan writes that, when his 'faith in fiction falters', he no longer believes what 'imaginary Henry said or did to non-existent Sue', and what he wants instead is knowledge of 'reality'.¹ With the time saved by not reading fiction, McEwan suggests, he could catch up on some case law which has the benefit of being about, in his words, 'Real events!'² In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), David Shields, 'bored by out-and-out fabrication', has ceased to believe in fiction too. The fiction writer's burden is one of 'unreality, the nasty fact that *none of this ever really happened*'. Unlike McEwan, what Shields wants instead is not to be told the 'truth' about 'real events', but for fictional writing to itself consist of

‘reality’. The writing he finds most exciting and persuasive is by writers who, rather than making it up, are, in his words, ‘breaking larger and larger chunks of “reality” into their work’.³

This articulation of the rejection of the fictional because of a failure of belief in its burdensome ‘unreality’ can be found too in the six volumes of *Min Kamp (My Struggle)*, by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard (2009-2011; English translation 2013-2016; volume 6 has not yet been published in English). The volumes consist of a non-chronological account of Knausgaard’s life from infancy to, in the last volume, the effects on him of the publication of the earlier ones. In some of the volumes this account is interspersed with essayistic writing on, for example, death, ageing, politics, art and music. Many reviewers of *Min Kamp* have compared Knausgaard to Proust because of the work’s combination of novelistic form and autobiographical content. In the second volume (published as *A Man in Love* in the UK) (2009/2013), Knausgaard accounts for this formal hybridity. He describes the moment in 2006 or 2007 when he realized that, after having written two critically successful novels, *Ute av verden* (1998) (*Out of the World*) and *En tid for alt* (2004) (the English translation was published as *A Time To Every Purpose Under Heaven* in the UK in 2008 and as *A Time for Everything* in the US in 2009), he was sick of fiction: ‘Just the thought of a fabricated character in a fabricated plot made me nauseous, I reacted in a physical way. Had no idea why. But I did’.⁴ Later he admits that he can no longer write conventional fiction because ‘every single sentence was met with the thought: but you’re just making this up. It has no value. Fictional writing has no value....’.⁵ Volume 4, published as *Dancing in the Dark* in the UK (2015), suggests retrospectively that a sense that writing should, rather than make things up, return us to the ‘real’ was already present at the beginning of Knausgaard’s experience as a writer, despite his two works of fiction. He claims that as he began to write, aged 18, what motivated him was the way writing connected him to the reality of his past.

Rather than making things up, his writing at this point instead returned him to the time in childhood when ‘the trees were trees, not “trees”, cars not “cars”, when dad was dad, not “dad”’.⁶ The six volumes of *Min Kamp* purport to be writing which dispenses with fiction’s inverted commas and returns to us what Knausgaard calls in volume 1 the ‘there’ of the world.⁷

What is strange about this eschewal of belief in fiction by novelists because of its fabricated nature, and strange too about the unquestioning approbation that has dominated responses to it from reviewers, readers and critics, is that, according to the critical orthodoxies, no one ever asked them to believe in the first place. Once the novel as fiction was established and authors no longer needed to protest the truth of their work, the critical orthodoxy became that, as Catherine Gallagher has argued, belief did not transfer to the unashamedly fictional but rather the fictional established itself as ‘believable stories that did not solicit belief’.⁸ Rather than believe, critic after critic has asserted that what fiction asks readers to do instead, using Coleridge’s phrase from the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), is to ‘willingly suspend disbelief’. This demand has been glossed by Gallagher in such a way that, for her, it is clear that disbelief crucially remains part of the experience of fiction-reading:

Novels seek to suspend the reader’s disbelief, as an element is suspended in a solution that it thoroughly permeates. Disbelief is thus the condition of fictionality, prompting judgments, not about the story’s reality, but about its *believability*, its plausibility.⁹

Here, disbelief in a story’s reality is a precondition of, or is woven into, its believability. For so many contemporary writers, however, believability, rather than being dependent only on plausibility, is destroyed precisely by disbelief in a story’s ‘reality’. The condition for belief has

become Shields' 'chunks' of reality brought in to narrative through the modes of autofiction, essay and memoir. Belief, it would seem, has become dependent on that which is thought to really exist.

This taken-for-granted relation of belief to existence is problematic, however, but that it is assumed can begin to prompt more probing questions about novelists' eschewal of belief in fiction. Debates about the meaning of belief from at least David Hume have circled around exactly the question of this relation. For Hume in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), what distinguishes belief from fancy is the role in it of 'matters of fact', those things outside of the mind which perceives:

It follows, therefore, that the difference between *fiction* and *belief* lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure. It must be excited by nature, like all other sentiments; and must arise from the particular situation, in which the mind is placed at any particular juncture. Whenever any object is presented to the memory or senses, it immediately, by the force of custom, carries the imagination to conceive that object, which is usually conjoined to it; and this conception is attended with a feeling or sentiment, different from the loose reveries of the fancy. In this consists the whole nature of belief.¹⁰

In his 'The Will to Believe', William James moved the idea of a force which enables belief from its location in sense impressions, from 'matters of fact', to an already existing condition in the mind, to what James' calls 'relations to the individual thinker'.¹¹ Belief depends upon what

James call a ‘pre-existing tendency’ which is not determined by sense impressions, but by the mental whole constituted by a reading of the world based on an imaginative projection precisely beyond matters of fact.¹² For James, ‘fictions’ do not preclude belief but make it possible and his conclusion is to defend ‘the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will’.¹³ What the concept of belief marks then is the meeting of mind and world and the fraught debates around the nature of that meeting. That the concept of belief, rather than the weaker ‘believability’, has returned to debates about fiction suggests a new configuration of the relation between existence and imagination in the contemporary, but a sense of this conflict over the definition of belief and the implications of it is as missing from recent literary critical work on the contemporary novel as it is from the confessions of novelists. Critics have accounted for these problematically shifting relations among reality, belief, believability and plausibility almost entirely through the implicit assumption that belief is linked to empirical experience and that it is this that has led to contemporary anxiety over the value and status of the novel. In so doing, they have asserted the idea of a return to the ‘real’ that accepts the claims of apostate novelists. Peter Boxall, for example, has argued in his *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (2013) that what he sees as the two dominant fascinations of the contemporary novel – temporality and the body – are entwined with its attempt to ‘grasp the texture of the contemporary real’.¹⁴ Moreover, in his *The Value of the Novel* (2015), Boxall sees the pressure put on the novel by the ‘real’ as insistently about physical existence. He notes, using Steven Connor’s phrase, the ‘thingly turn’ at around the turn of the century, the supposed coming to an end of ‘the docility of things’.¹⁵ Pieter Vermeulen too, in his *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (2015), argues that the contemporary novel is thinned and culturally disempowered, is in its ‘afterlife’, in part because it can no longer compete with the pressure of the real.¹⁶ Unusually, though, he does go beyond the binary of the fictional and the real in suggestive ways, but in ways that in fact point beyond his claims. In writing of Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the Document* (2006), he suggests that its conception of

the novel form reveals an ‘analog agency’ which makes possible an engagement between fiction and the ‘real’ of the material world. Spiotta’s novel, he argues, ‘leans on the capacity of phonographs and tape recorders to function as unselective inscription devices, which indiscriminately record intentional as well as unintentional acoustic events’.¹⁷ Analog technology can therefore ‘capture those moments that cannot pass through’, using Friedrich Kittler’s phrase, ‘the bottleneck of the signifier’.¹⁸ For Vermeulen, the claim for ‘analog agency’ is evidence of the contemporary novel’s negotiation of the limits of the fictional and its desire for ‘reality’.¹⁹ His reading of *Eat The Document* shows that the novel clearly thematises the analog as maintaining a ‘desire for reality’ – through a character in the novel’s present in the late 1990s who listens over and over to analog bootleg recordings of the Beach Boys and through others associated with a Seattle bookshop who search out and privilege obsolete technological formats – but the novel is also full of digital technology. Characters rip music onto their laptops, send emails, hack internet sites and talk in chatrooms. The novel demonstrates thematically that the desire for the analog is enmeshed with the lived experience of the digital but implicitly too it suggests that it is the virtual, not the analog, that acts as a model for its forms of representation. Late in the novel a character Josh claims that ‘[i]ncreasingly the world will imitate the Internet in how it processes information’. What he means by this is that, on the internet, ‘one thing leads to another in this non-linear, associative way’ and it is formally, rather than through the ‘analog agency’ of its thematic attention, that *Eat the Document* reproduces this in its non-linear chronology and use of multiple focalisers and narrative positions.²⁰ Unlike the writers whose faith in the fictional is faltering and the critics who agree with them, then, Vermeulen’s work acknowledges the use of a mediator between the fictional and the hungered-for real, but locates it in Spiotta’s thematic use of the analog, whereas in fact behind this, or rather supporting it structurally, is the virtual.

This article will argue that it is the imitation of the virtual, rather than either ‘chunks of “reality”’ or ‘analog agency’, that currently forms the representational basis of many contemporary novels and the legitimacy of their requests for belief. Through an investigation of the history of the idea of the virtual, it will show that this model has produced both the apparent desire for the real noted by so many critics and the eschewal of belief in the fictional confessed by so many writers. If Knausgaard’s *Min Kamp* is the lengthiest articulation of the loss of faith in the fictional, it is no surprise that in it can be found too one of the clearest imitations of the virtual. This article will show that, by in the end reversing Coleridge’s understanding of the relation between existence, the fictional, disbelief and belief, the volumes of *Min Kamp* demonstrate the effects of the model of the virtual on the possibilities of contemporary prose fiction.

The Virtual: Between Non-existence and Existence

The attempt at mimicking the virtual in the contemporary novel in order to secure belief has been misread as a striving for ‘reality’ or ‘analog agency’ because of a shift in the dominant meaning of the virtual over the last few decades. Early uses of the term denoted that which is outside of the category of physical existence. For Aristotle, across the *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *De Anima*, ‘dynamis’ was equivalent to an entity’s potentiality, its not-yet existence, and it was this meaning that dominated medieval accounts following Thomas Aquinas’ translation of Aristotle’s ‘dynamis’ as ‘virtualis’. In the eighteenth century, the dominant use of the term changed. In Kant’s ‘The Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible’ (1770), originally written in Latin, ‘virtualis’ is used to denote something which exists in one order, but can only be actualized in another, rather than denoting a difference within the same order, as in Aristotle. Kant’s use though retains the sense of a cause

outside the physically existent: ‘the cause of the world is a being which exists outside the world, and thus it is not the soul of the world; its presence in the world is not local but virtual’.²¹

In the nineteenth century, significant uses of the term are found in attempts to think, not about causes which transcend space and time, but about that within the existing world which troubles a strictly materialist understanding of the relations of cause and effect. Here the virtual denotes neither Aristotle’s conception of a potential anterior to the physical and actualized within it, nor Kant’s sense of the virtual as that outside the limitations of time and space and of a different order to it, but rather an attempt to conceive of an existence in the same order but radically different from either an understanding of the physical focused on the existence of discrete, material objects or from an idealist conception of the single order of ideas and things. Uses of the virtual from the nineteenth century on tend to do this in one of two ways, and these two have intertwined and alternated in dominance since. In the first the virtual challenges the laws of physical existence, and in the second it mimics them. In the work of C.S. Peirce both of these can be seen. In an essay from 1868, ‘Some Consequences of Four Incapacities’, first published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Peirce set out the virtual nature of thought in a way that challenges orthodox conceptions of physical laws. Thought is virtual because it enacts an undoing of linear understandings of cause and effect; subsequent thoughts are the causes of previous ones rather than their effects:

no present actual thought (which is a mere feeling) has any meaning, any intellectual value; for this lies not in what is actually thought, but in what this thought may be

connected with in representation by subsequent thoughts; so that the meaning of a thought is altogether something virtual.²²

The virtual for Peirce is the ‘real effective force’ behind consciousness, which consists of, but is greater than, the sum total of the ‘continuous stream’ of the ‘inexplicable’ facts of single thoughts.²³ For Peirce here the virtual is neither the potential pre-existing actualization in the existent, nor is it that which exists outside space and time, but nevertheless it is still that which marks a conceptual space beyond the assumed nature and laws of physical existence.

This form of the virtual is fundamental to the thinking of Henri Bergson in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Matter and Memory* (1896), the term – *virtuelle* – is used to mark that which belongs not to matter but to subjectivity; what is virtual is existence that is ‘proper to things of the spirit’.²⁴ This understanding of the virtual also attains to those things usually thought material and unproblematically existent, however, such as bodies, as Bergson argues that the conception of individual bodies in the world necessarily miscomprehends the ‘ultimate elements of matter’, which is continuity, not the discontinuity perceived through our senses.²⁵ Acts of perceptions are for Bergson then inherently virtual in that they mis-see the physical world but make possible conscious existence within it. Perception is ‘virtual action’.²⁶ This means that in the images of perception, ‘[t]here is nothing positive here, nothing added to the image, nothing new. The objects merely abandon something of their real action in order to manifest their virtual action’.²⁷ However, in Bergson’s discussion of memory, the virtual is not much a marker of what is lost as it describes what Keith Ansell-Pearson has called in the context of the virtual ‘the disruptive and creative power’ of memory.²⁸ What makes both perception and memory virtual for Bergson though is that they challenge, as do Peirce’s ‘thoughts’, the universality of physical laws as the limit of the

existent. This sense of the virtual has a clear relation to the ‘fictions’ so important to the act of belief for James, and indeed to fiction itself as second order representation.

The second version of the virtual is also found in Peirce. In his influential entry for ‘virtual’ for the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* in 1902, Peirce’s definition is based on the idea that ‘virtual’ is a synonym for ‘almost’ and as such begins to open up the possibility that the virtual is analogous to, rather than distinct from or a challenge to, assumptions about physical existence. Here, the virtual is something that denotes the same effects as those of its comparable term without the same causes. Peirce gave his authorized definition of the term as follows: ‘A virtual *X* (where *X* is a common noun) is something, not an *X*, which has the efficiency (*virtus*) of an *X*’.²⁹ He explains in his dictionary entry that his ‘efficiency’ is the true meaning of virtual, but that it is often confounded with ‘potential’, which is for him ‘almost its contrary’.³⁰ Peirce’s example clarifies this: ‘A virtual velocity is something *not* a velocity, but a displacement; but equivalent to a velocity in the formula “what is gained in velocity is lost in power”’.³¹ The virtual here begins its shifts in meaning, from potentiality to non-material causes to physical effects which appear as if they have causes in the physical characteristics of the world.

A tension between these conceptions of the virtual can be seen clearly around the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the everyday uses of digital technologies increased. What can be traced is the increasing dominance of the use of the virtual to denote that which mimics the physical world, and it is this that is the context for the eschewal of belief in the fictional among novelists. The term ‘virtual’ had been used through the 1980s and 1990s in poststructuralist theories in a variety of ways which articulated a sense of the power and agency of those things conventionally seen as beyond the existing and the real, often drawing

on the work of Bergson, but late in the 1990s this use came under pressure. In 1999, Mark Poster argued that this use of the term was ‘metaphorical’ and should be resisted. He claimed that the term should be rooted in current technological materialities, that the ‘material basis of the term, the machinic assemblages of cyberspace and helmet-glove apparatuses’ should be kept in mind.³² Poster rejects here the theoretical uses of the term which make it a synonym for the fictional. He particularly targets what he calls ‘literary theorists’ – he cites Derrida and Baudrillard -- who use the virtual to colonise both reality and the technological for their own interests.

Hence for these literary interpreters, virtual reality is not a new technology that has general cultural significance that would put reality into question. Here reality is ‘always already’ virtual, while the helmet-glove technology is a mere machine. In the hands of certain literary theorists the virtual becomes transcendental and founds the real in its own image. Thus novels are just as much virtual realities as computer-generated immersive environments. And since novels are more ‘real’ than experience, fiction more true than facts, a new disciplinary foundation for Literature is constructed.³³

Since Poster’s challenge, it has been within debates around the theory of computer games that this injunction to assert the alignment of the virtual with the real and the existent by distinguishing it from the fictional has been particularly taken up.³⁴ As Marie-Laure Ryan has recently suggested, computer games combine the older helmet-and-glove sense of the virtual with the more recent sense of everyday ‘applications of digital technology that affect our lives much more directly’, but what is key is that both of these are about a certain understanding of the existent.³⁵ In considering the representational and ontological status of the worlds created

in computer games, theorists of computer games work at precisely the point where the virtual has always been situated – negotiating the terms of existence -- but their work makes visible the extent to which the virtual as ‘almost’ is now constructed through its opposition to the fictional and the supposed non-existent in order to assert its analogy with the ‘real’, the existent. Grant Tavinor, in 2012, suggested an origin for the claiming of the virtual for the existent asserted by Poster. He claims that the use of the term virtual in relation to information technology began in early computing with the idea of ‘virtual computers’ where, paradoxically, the material stood in for the abstractions of the electronic. He explains that a ‘virtual computer’ described what happens when a ‘computational program is carried out in a non-electronic medium, typically through pen and paper calculations’.³⁶ If pen and paper are a ‘virtual computer’, what continues from this formulation into more recent uses of the term in the theory of computer games is that the designation of virtual, unlike its use in the Peirce of 1868, in Bergson, or in poststructuralism, asserts a relation to material existence and as such is the opposite of the fictional.

An article by Espen Aarseth, given in 2005 as a conference paper at the 6th Digital Arts and Culture Conference and published in *Intermédialités* in 2007, seems to have begun the most recent debate in the theory of computer games on the relation between the fictional and the virtual. In the article, Aarseth contests the use of the term ‘fiction’ to describe the characters, events and objects represented in computer games. As he states explicitly, Aarseth is content to use very basic definitions of both fiction and reality in his delimiting exercise, but on the basis of them he goes on to claim that, while they may contain elements of fiction, games also contain content that is ‘ontologically different’ from the fictional.³⁷ What is crucial about Aarseth’s argument is that the distinction between the virtual and the fictional for him is about the extent to which second-order creations can be experienced through the senses and can be

interacted with in some physical way. Aarseth claims, in establishing this, that the labyrinth in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) is fictional, whereas a labyrinth in a computer game is not 'since it can be navigated by the same rules as the one at Hampton Court'. While he says that, if Kubrick had used the maze at Hampton Court for his labyrinth, rather than constructing it from a number of different sources edited together, then it would have been 'real even if the film as such was a fiction', actually the question of reference as such is not really key in Aarseth's distinction between existence and non-existence, the virtual and the fictional.³⁸ The non-existence of Kubrick's labyrinth is not really a result of its non-existence in the world, but rather it is the result of the fact that it cannot be interacted with by the viewer. Aarseth concludes from these distinctions that games occupy a place 'between fiction and our world: the virtual'.³⁹

Aarseth's brief paper struggles with the distinctions that are its focus, in part because of its inadequate conceptualization of either the real or the fictional. However, its strongest claim – and the claim that has provoked the most response and debate within games theory -- is that while the objects of the virtual are not real, the experience of engaging with them is. As Aarseth puts it in his chapter in the collection *The Novel* (2006), playing a computer game is more like 'writing than reading'. Simulated games do not work with the 'preset orders and endings' of narrative, he says: '[t]he emotions and gestures are direct and immediate, produced for the moment (and not for the page or the stage)'.⁴⁰ For Aarseth, then, following the Peirce of the dictionary entry, the virtual defines effects which can be conceptualised in the same way as those things that unquestionably have physical existence.

That there is a clear line between existence and non-existence, and that the line places on one side the sensual and physical existence and on the other fiction, remains unquestioned

throughout the debate in computer games theory, even among writers who contest elements of Aarseth's argument. John Richard Sageng, in his 'In-Game Action', goes so far as to question the need for the category of the virtual at all, so firm for him is the distinction between what he calls representation and action.⁴¹ While, for him, the same player actions can be actions proper and representations of actions (the player is actually manipulating shapes on the screen as well as pretending to shoot enemies with a gun), the distinction between the actual as interaction and the represented is still his conceptual bedrock. Rune Klevjer, while disagreeing with Sageng's claim and arguing that computer games do indeed occupy a place between reality and fiction (the latter he glosses as 'stories, novels, films'), still asserts the central element of existence in digital technologies, arguing that: 'the simulation of physical reality in computer games, unlike the abstract and concrete models of non-computerised mimetic play, is able to constitute its own irreducible ground of perception and action'. He concludes that computer technology has produced a 'truly paradoxical space for interaction and expression, in which action and simulated action cannot be separated' because '[t]he digital computer has the unique capacity to turn algorithmic models into objects of *tangible* interaction'. While the games are second-order models, the player of computer games interacts with them as first-order things, 'as though they are concrete rather than informational objects and environments.... Information is made nature'.⁴²

The strength of this assumption in the theory of computer games can be seen even among those who attempt a more nuanced analysis of the fictional. Grant Tavinor has criticized Aarseth as having 'an awful analysis of fiction' and his final position is that fictionality and virtuality overlap rather than standing in opposition to each other.⁴³ Nevertheless, despite his disagreements with Aarseth, what they do agree on is the link between fictionality and non-existence. In response to Aarseth's claims about mazes, Tavinor argues the maze in Pac Man

contains the real, the virtual and the fictional, the latter being the ghosts in the maze, as these do not exist.⁴⁴

The Return to and of Belief

What the debate about the virtual within the theorization of computer games suggests is that the assertion of the importance of any current form of representation circles around its claim for existence. This suggests that the recent eschewal of belief in the fictional by novelists, when (or perhaps because) such belief has never been demanded, is in fact about a desire for belief and despair over the supposed non-existence of the fictional. If it is the *existence* of the virtual that is now key to its definition, it would make sense, then, that this desire for belief among novelists is manifested in the mimicking, not of the analog nor of the real, but of the virtual. Such a mimicking of the virtual is indeed traceable in Knausgaard's *Min Kamp*. In considering where the volumes locate a justifiable belief in the existent, and the relation between this and their eschewal of belief in the 'fabricated' nature of the fictional, a return to Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief' is timely. Such a return will finally be suggestive in thinking about the possibilities for prose fiction of this use of the virtual as existence as a model.

Min Kamp has been extraordinarily successful, critically and commercially. By 2012 the volumes had sold over half a million copies in Norway alone, and they have been translated into twenty-two languages. Anglophone critics and writers have been almost entirely full of praise, in particular for the work's eschewal of the fictional. Rachel Cusk, writing in the *Guardian* in 2013, called *Min Kamp* 'perhaps the most significant literary enterprise of our time' for its making visible the separation between time and narrative and between life and

meaning. This, she argued, results in ‘at last, authenticity’.⁴⁵ Sheila Heti, who has in an interview in *The Believer* admitted her own inability to make things up any more,⁴⁶ in her review of Knausgaard’s second volume in the *London Review of Books* in 2014 praised him for constructing a form of writing which rejects the fakery of fiction in order to represent the world in a way she calls ‘really real’.⁴⁷ Knausgaard’s volumes are indeed dominated by straightforward description of events from his past, reproduced with extraordinary attention to the minutiae of physical detail and without the principle of selection-as-significance which is usually implicit in fiction. In contrast to Vermeulen’s claims about Spiotta’s novel, though, the physical in Knausgaard is not recreated through analog inscription, but through the intense sensual perception of the author-protagonist. However, in Knausgaard’s work, despite his claims, and those of his reviewers, the ‘real’ is not that of the ‘there’ of the world or of the ‘really real’. It is the ‘real’ of the contemporary virtual.

In his first volume, recounting a New Year’s eve during his teenage years, Knausgaard describes retrieving plastic bags containing beer from their hiding place among some trees. He tells us that: ‘The bags were where I had left them, covered with a thin layer of snow which slid down the smooth plastic when I picked them up’.⁴⁸ The detail of the description, against readerly expectation, is not a proleptic indication of their future importance. The bags produce no plot; they do not appear again. The hyperbolic nature of this description – its intense focus on tiny physical detail -- suggests instead an attempt to swerve the question of representation entirely, to remain within a fantasy of immediacy, but this is complicated by the description in volume 4 already discussed of the 18-year-old Knausgaard’s early attempts at writing. Volume 4 is an account of the year Knausgaard spent teaching in a school in northern Norway in order to allow himself time to write. Towards the end of the volume, Karl Ove is in the classroom,

teaching his pupils, and begins to think about the weekend ahead, and how he will spend it writing. He has spent his time so far in northern Norway writing short stories and the content of these is familiar to readers of volume 3 of *Min Kamp, Boyhood Island*, which recounts Knausgaard's childhood in Tybakken, on the island of Tromøya, southern Norway:

This weekend I would definitely have to write. No trip to Finnsnes during the day, no party in the evening, just sit in front of the computer from the moment I got up to the moment I went to bed.

I had five short stories now, apart from the two stories based on dreams. All of them had the same protagonist, Gabriel, and the same cast of characters. The action took place in Tybakken. What was strange was how close the place was to me. Sitting in front of the typewriter was like opening a door to it. The scene rose inside me in its entirety and repressed everything around me.... If anyone rang my doorbell now...I would jump out of my skin. It didn't feel as though my childhood surroundings were intruding on the present but vice versa: I was really back in my childhood, and it was the present that was intruding....⁴⁹

What follows this is the passage quoted earlier about trees and cars rather than 'trees' and 'cars'. It is the typewriter which is the door to the past, but it is a door which returns him to the objects of the past as if that return were not in writing, as if the typewriter produced those objects themselves rather than the words which denote them. Friedrich Kittler, however, influentially argued that, in the context of the first technological revolution at the end of the nineteenth century, '[t]he typewriter cannot conjure up anything imaginary, as can cinema; it

cannot simulate the real, as can sound recording'.⁵⁰ Knausgaard, writing in the midst of the digital revolution, looking back to the years just before its beginnings, retrospectively converts the only-metaphorical possibilities of the typewriter into the virtual creations of the computer. In the English translation which is quoted above, the first paragraph uses the word 'computer', the second uses the word 'typewriter'. In the Norwegian edition, the same word – 'skrivemaskinen' (the typewriter) – is used in both paragraphs. In the translation Knausgaard's invisible substitution of computer for typewriter has been made visible.

The desire for the 'door' of the typewriter to produce trees and not 'trees' is of course a nostalgic and romantic desire for the identity of thing and representation. However, while undoubtedly Knausgaard's writing again and again expresses the aim of achieving this identity – in volume 5 he yearns not to write about '[m]ist, heart, blood, trees' but to 'make my writing *be* them' – it does it through the conception of the virtual we have seen in the work of the theorists of computer games.⁵¹ The strength of any perception and its effect on the perceiver in establishing existence – as in the claims of computer games theorists that the virtual has an existence not shared by the fictional – is key throughout the volumes. For him writing is about the 'there' of the world – 'There, that is writing's location and aim' -- and the 'there' that Knausgaard most values is dominated by the visual.⁵² For him, he says in volume 2, *A Man in Love*, 'the visual always came first' and is that which connects him most directly to what he calls 'physical, concrete reality'.⁵³ This reconnection with the world is of primary importance to Knausgaard and he describes his most significant experiences as being when, often through visual art, 'for a few seconds you catch sight of another world from the one you were in only a moment earlier, where the world seems to step forward and show itself for a brief glimpse before reverting and leaving everything as before...'.⁵⁴ The alternative world is in the details

of the usually visible world, so transformed that they are not the usual world but yet can be perceived and interacted with. The alternative world is the virtual world.

The extent to which this investment in the perception of the detail of the physical world is linked to belief and existence is demonstrated in Heti's review of Knausgaard's second volume. The review begins with her account of meeting Knausgaard while she was reading the first volume. She asked him if a scene near the beginning, rendered in much detail, during a New Year's eve when Knausgaard was about 15 and comes across his mother in the kitchen scrubbing potatoes, was a 'real memory...or did you make it up?' Knausgaard replied: 'No, no, I made it up.' Heti admits that '[a]fter that disappointing and confusing admission, I was unable to pick up his books for another year'. Knausgaard's admission undoes for a while Heti's ability to believe:

His many readers believe that what he's writing is the truth. But if the scrubbing of the potatoes was made up, are the books true, in the way we understand true to be? If they don't have a faithful relationship with 'what happened', does it matter? Might they even in some ways be better?⁵⁵

By the end of the review, she has answered her final question in the affirmative. Knausgaard's writing is the 'realism of the really real' because its gaze is, not that of 'the novel' nor of 'art' but rather, using Knausgaard's own words, 'at the same height as our own gaze'.⁵⁶

Knausgaard's writing then is believable despite being made up because it produces the experiential from our own perceiving position. As in recent theorisations of computer games, the perception of sensual experience *is* the experience of the real and the existent, and this is more important than whether the potato scene is a real memory or a fiction. Both Heti's

eventual affirmation of Knausgaard's writerly practice, and Knausgaard's apparent willingness to admit that the 'memory' was made up, suggest then that, as in Aarseth, the persuasiveness of representation for the reader is not linked to an assumption about its referential status, but rather it is the careful rendering of physical detail, such that the scene can be 'seen', that is at stake. Heti's 'really real' is produced in Knausgaard through a 'seeming', a virtuality which produces the perception of existence while vanishing its use of the fictional to do so.

Should We Believe? Returning to Coleridge and the 'willing suspension of disbelief'

The virtual, then, or virtualised writing, allows belief because it is connected to the physically existent. The fictional, in contrast, only allows a 'willing suspension of disbelief' which, according to Gallagher, describes an evacuation of belief and a replacement of it with 'believability'. If Knausgaard remains romantic in his desire for the identity of representation and things, his use of the virtual seems to undo Coleridge's description of the demands of the fictional. As I have suggested, the literary critical orthodoxy has long been, based on Coleridge's phrase, that fiction does not demand the operation of belief. However, a return to the context of Coleridge's claim suggests a different way of thinking about belief, the fictional and the virtual, and indeed about Knausgaard's representation of the 'really real'.

Coleridge's much repeated phrase comes in the context of his retelling of the genesis of the *Lyrical Ballads*. He and Wordsworth, he says, talked often of the way that pleasure in poetry comes from the combination of the representation of the existent – its 'faithful adherence to the truth of nature' – with the non-existent -- 'the interest of novelty [given] by the modifying colours of imagination'.⁵⁷ Prompted by this, Coleridge says that he and Wordsworth planned a

collection of poems where one half dealt with supernatural subjects and the other with 'ordinary life'.⁵⁸ It is the former that Coleridge says make necessary 'the willing suspension of disbelief'. The inference is that this suspension, which 'constitutes poetic faith',⁵⁹ is unproblematic for those works that present ordinary life, but that the challenge for the writer of poems whose subject was the supernatural (and these were to be Coleridge's) was to produce in the reader the same belief that would be unproblematically given to poems on more quotidian subjects. However, their aim was not quite this straightforward. For Coleridge goes on to say that the challenge for Wordsworth, who was to write the poems on 'things of every day', was to produce in the reader a reaction to the presentation of the everyday as if what was presented was novel and unexpected, the result of the 'modifying colours of imagination'. Wordsworth's poems of the everyday were to 'excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom'.⁶⁰ While the *Lyrical Ballads* did not in the end really follow this plan, in setting it out, Coleridge makes clear his aims in writing of the supernatural in a way that undermines most subsequent understandings of his phrase 'the willing suspension of disbelief'. He explains that 'the excellence aimed at' in writing poems on supernatural topics:

was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in *this* sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.⁶¹

Here, the experiencing of the fictional as real and the consequent ability to believe in it are central to Coleridge's plan and suggests that the 'willing suspension of disbelief' does not, as Gallagher argues along with many others through the twentieth century, imply the retaining of

a skepticism, a disbelief ‘suspended’ in and ‘thoroughly’ permeating the fictional,⁶² but rather it implies that the experience of the reader of fiction is the belief that they are experiencing something as existing. In this, Coleridge’s sense of the experience of the made up is much closer to that of the conception of the virtual in the theory of computer games. However, unlike the idea of the virtual here and in Knausgaard, the perception of something in Coleridge is not dependent on its existence as the ‘there’ of the world. What is important about the hallucinated nature of a supernatural experience, for Coleridge, is both that it is experienced as real *and* its ‘actual’ status as not real. What produces belief in poetry for Coleridge is the reproduction of an experience in ‘real life’ which itself makes ambiguous the boundaries between experience and imagination, between the real and the made up. Coleridge’s ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ was to be created in these poems through a belief in something non-existent (the experience of supernatural agency) in the same way that such a belief exists for the experiencer, that is, a belief produced by the sense that those things producing the experience exist. The suspension of disbelief should not produce straightforward belief then – in the ‘there’ of the world, the ‘really real’ of the physical world – but neither should it preclude belief.

What the experience of the made up produces for Coleridge is a belief which troubles the grounds of belief and of existence per se. A belief in the existence of something which does not straightforwardly exist cautions us against a direct and obvious relation between seeing and believing in a way that skepticism and lack of belief do not. Non-existence then is not the whole story when it comes to fiction. For Coleridge, belief in the existence of those things produced through poetic writing is the grounding of a more complex and mobile sense of the relation between mind and world. Coleridge’s sense of the fictional assumes existence rather than non-existence, making it more akin to current definitions of the virtual, but what

distinguishes it from current definitions of the virtual is the positioning of belief in the fictional precisely at the point where the existence of existence is most troubling.

Coleridge's aims for the poems he planned to write for the *Lyrical Ballads* – the creation of belief in the existence of something that does not exist -- has had surprisingly little afterlife in subsequent literary critical considerations of the fictional.⁶³ Adam Roberts' introduction to the latest edition of the *Biographia Literaria*, from 2014, gives little space to the 'willing suspension of disbelief' and does not go beyond the accumulated orthodoxy around its meaning.⁶⁴ However, as I have suggested, what is at stake in Coleridge's account is precisely the effects of the virtual as claimed by the theorists of computer games – that representations are experienced as real and something to be believed in. What is different is Coleridge's awareness that this challenges rather than confirms – as does the experience of the supernatural – our understanding of belief, lack of belief, existence and non-existence. Coleridge's aims for the work of poetry are Bergson's sense of the virtual, or Peirce's in 1868. What they make possible, in contrast to the virtual of the theorists of computer games and to apostasy of so many novelists, is belief in the non-existent.

In Knausgaard visuality is conflated with 'thereness', such that existence and belief are the properties only of the 'real'. Knausgaard wants to believe, and he wants us to believe. He says he wants to do this by a return to the 'there' of the world. Actually what he wants to return to is a Coleridgean idea of belief and existence as inherent in the fictional, but he thinks that in fact this is inherent not in the fictional but in contemporary understandings of the virtual. The problem with this is that Coleridge's formula asserts that fiction's power is that it produces belief in its existence despite the fact that it does not exist, whereas for Knausgaard belief is

restricted to the virtual's assertion of its overlap with the real to the extent that it produces interaction dependent on 'real' acts of perception. Coleridge focuses on the experience of the reader in order to challenge and undo it; Knausgaard wants to return to a moment of the supposed union of perception and meaning.

¹ Ian McEwan, 'When Faith in Fiction Falts – And How It Is Restored', *The Guardian* (16 February 2013). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/16/ian-mcewan-faith-fiction-falters> [Last accessed: 16 June 2016].

² For an argument about the faltering of this belief and its relation to contemporary historical fiction, see Leigh Wilson, 'Reality Effects: the historical novel and the crisis of fictionality in the first decade of the twenty-first century', in Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson (eds), *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 145-71.

³ David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), pp. 175, 26, 3; emphasis in original.

⁴ Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 2, A Man In Love*, trans. by Don Bartlett (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 446.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

⁶ Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 4, Dancing in the Dark*, trans. by Don Bartlett (London: Vintage, 2015), p. 409.

⁷ Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 1, A Death in the Family*, trans. by Don Bartlett (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 172.

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- ⁸ Catherin Gallagher, 'The Rise of Fictionality', in Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel, Volume 1, History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 340.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 346; emphasis in original.
- ¹⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), §11, p. 40.
- ¹¹ William James, *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897), pp. 2-3.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ¹⁴ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-first Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 10.
- ¹⁵ Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 76.
- ¹⁶ Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), p. 78.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- ²⁰ Dana Spiotta, *Eat the Document* (London: Picador, [2006] 2008), p. 257.
- ²¹ Immanuel Kant, 'The Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible', *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, translated and edited by David Walford in collaboration with Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1992] 2003), §19, pp. 402-3.
- ²² C.S. Peirce, 'Some Consequences of Four Incapacities' (1868), *Collected Papers*, Volume 5, edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1934), §289, p. 173.

²³ Ibid., §289, p. 174 and §289, p. 173.

²⁴ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896), trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin; New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 322.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 266.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 309.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁸ Keith Ansell-Pearson, 'The Reality of the Virtual: Bergson and Deleuze', *MLN*, 120/5 (2005), p. 1119.

²⁹ C.S. Peirce, 'Virtual', *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, Volume 2, edited by James M. Baldwin (New York: Macmillan, 1902), p. 763; emphasis in original.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.; emphasis in original.

³² Mark Poster, 'Theorizing Virtual Reality: Baudrillard and Derrida', in Marie-Laure Ryan (ed.), *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 44.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Work in the relatively new area of the theory of computer games comes out of analytic philosophy. My aim here is not so much to engage with it on its own terms, but to use it to indicate the shifting meaning of the 'virtual'. Analytic philosophy – as acknowledged by Gallagher (336) -- has long been one of the few places in which the nature of the fictional per se is discussed. The discipline has in many and various ways used and debated the notion of fictionalism – drawing in the main on the work of Jeremy Bentham and Hans Vaihinger – to allow for discourses which can say something true through the assertion of fictions (see, for example, and among many others, the work of Gideon Rosen, Arthur Fine and Mark Eli Kalderon) and prose fiction is often seen in this work as an important analogy for fictionalism.

However, in the theory of computer games, it is not this aspect of analytic philosophy that is being drawn on, but rather work attempting to account for ‘non-rational’ responses to fiction – crying, being afraid, and so on. This problem, known as ‘the paradox of fiction’, is glossed by David Suits as the question: ‘How do we come to have emotional responses appropriate to some event, when we believe that there is no such event?’ (‘Really Believing in Fiction’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2006), pp. 371). In debates about the ‘paradox of fiction’, where questions of belief are at stake, the conceptual flexibility allowed by fictionalism seems not to be possible.

Working from a different starting point and toward a different end from the theory of computer games, much recent work both critical and artistic has undermined as ideological the attempts to de-materialise the central mode of production of the virtual, the internet. Lori Emerson’s work has as its aim the exposing of the dream of immediacy inherent in the ‘sophisticated sleights of hand that take place at the level of interface’ (*Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. xi) in recent technologies. Trevor Paglen’s photographs of undersea internet cables undermine the mystifying metaphors used to describe the internet. My focus is rather on the way that the experiential effects of digital technologies, rather than their material origins, is the basis for recent realignments of fiction and non-fiction, the non-existent and the existent.

³⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, 2nd edn (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 1.

³⁶ Grant Tavinor, 'Videogames and Fictionalism', in John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim and Tarjei Mandt Larsen (eds), *The Philosophy of Computer Games* (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer, 2012), p. 195.

³⁷ Espen Aarseth, 'Doors and Perception: Fiction vs Simulation in Games', *Intermedialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, 9 (Spring 2007), p. 36.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Espen Aarseth, 'Narrative Literature in the Turing Universe', in Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel, Volume 2, Forms and Themes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 856.

⁴¹ John Richard Sageng, 'In-game Action', in John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim and Tarjei Mandt Larsen (eds), *The Philosophy of Computer Games* (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer, 2012), p. 222.

⁴² Rune Klevjer, 'Representation and Virtuality in Computer Games', paper given at the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Bergen, 2013, n.p.; available at https://runeklevjer.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/klevjer_representationandvirtuality.pdf [Last accessed 15 June 2016]; emphasis in original.

⁴³ Tavinor, 'Videogames and Fictionalism', pp. 191, 195.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁴⁵ Rachel Cusk, Review of Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Man In Love*, *Guardian* (12 April 2013), n.p. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/12/man-in-love-knausgaard-review> [Last accessed 14 July 2016].

⁴⁶ Sheila Heti, Interview with Dave Hickey, *The Believer* (November/December 2007), n.p. http://www.believermag.com/issues/200711/?read=interview_hickey [Last accessed 14 July 2016].

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- ⁴⁷ Sheila Heti, 'So Frank', *London Review of Books*, 9 January (2014), p. 22.
- ⁴⁸ Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 1, A Death in the Family*, p. 98.
- ⁴⁹ Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 4, Dancing in the Dark*, pp. 408-9.
- ⁵⁰ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, translated and with an introduction by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 183.
- ⁵¹ Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 5, Some Rain Must Fall*, trans. by Don Bartlett (London: Harvill Secker, 2016), p. 583; emphasis in original.
- ⁵² Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 1, A Death in the Family*, p. 172; emphasis in original.
- ⁵³ Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 2, A Man In Love*, p. 383.
- ⁵⁴ Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Volume 1, A Death in the Family*, p. 198.
- ⁵⁵ Heti, 'So Frank', p. 21.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ⁵⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*. 2 vols (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), vol. 2, p. 1.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.
- ⁶² Gallagher, 'The Rise of Fictionality', p. 346.
- ⁶³ One exception to this is Lee Konstantinou's interesting, although brief, discussion of Coleridge's account in the *Biographia Literaria*. In the context of his assertion that fiction does demand belief, Konstantinou points out the lack of clarity in Coleridge's account around the relation between the voluntary nature of the suspension of disbelief and the continued need for a 'sufficient semblance of truth' in order to persuade belief. My own reading of Coleridge

which focuses on the experience of the supernatural as a model goes some way to explaining this. See Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 171, 334 n. 26.

⁶⁴ Adam Roberts, 'Introduction', Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).