STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXV, 3, 2020, p. 365 - 367
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)

BOOKS

Karl Ove Knausgaard, *Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring*, *Summer* [*Om høsten*, *Om vinteren*, *Om våren*, *Om sommeren*], London, Harvill Secker, 2017 & 2018, 1.057 p.

How does one measure a life and how to make sense of it? Is it chronological age, or rather the sum of our days morphed into experience?

A constant reminder of the passage of time and the cyclic patterns of our existence, the four seasons have, throughout the ages, been a recurring allegory for countless writers, artists and the like. One of these is Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard, whose *Seasons Quartet* was greeted with wide international acclaim, although the six-volume autobiographical novel, *My Struggle*, seems to be the 'magnum opus' of his career so far.

Exquisitely translated from the Norwegian by Ingvild Burkey, whose thoughtful and penetrating approach to the text exudes empathy and lends it a fresh new voice, the four volumes in Knausgaard's *Seasons* series are beautifully illustrated by Vanessa Baird, Lars Lerin, Anna Bjerger and Anselm Kiefer. I became acquainted with his writing through Autumn, the first volume, which was gifted to me right after its release in English translation and of which I then read only a few pages. But books know better when to find you and so, back home after a long enough period living abroad, the four hardbacks – three of which I had ordered at a later date – seemed to be the best companions on this quest.

Tired of introspection after the publication of his monumental memoir, the Norwegian author turned his focus to the outside world and so, starting from a letter written to his unborn daughter, he embarked on a new editorial venture - the *Seasons Quartet*. In a 2016 interview with Christian Lund, he revealed the motivation behind this series: "I have a feeling that the world is disappearing. The sensuous, physical, material world is disappearing into pictures somehow. It's an attempt to investigate this tiny world, and you see all the layers." The resulting volumes, followed by a novel that interrupts the narrative sequence unexpectedly (*Spring,* the third volume), make up his very own encyclopedic index of everyday objects, beings, body parts or abstract notions, presented in the most candid and yet most poetic of ways.

He writes about such diverse and unexpected subjects as plastic bags, frames (with our "longing for authenticity" and the search for "a world unframed" - *Autumn*, p. 32), bees, loneliness, war (poignantly describing it as "the simple shape of the arrowhead and the complicated life that it annihilates" - *Autumn*, p. 65), forgiveness, drums, the migration of birds (and, with it, the terrible realization that our world isn't "boundless but limited" - Autumn, p. 95), buttons (used to "train ourselves in self-restraint" - *Autumn*, p.125), the willow tree, the nose, atoms ("Now we live in atomic reality, and we are alone in the world" - *Winter*, p. 155), habits (a way of framing the unforeseeable), windows ("the weak points of houses" – *Winter*, p. 251), lawn sprinklers, short trousers (and their apparently odd association with age and freedom), fullness ("perhaps fullness is the guiding principle from which art springs" – *Summer*, p. 382) or ladybirds. In each of these cases, a thorough elemental description is followed by a chronicle of these objects' use and meaning in the world, where we are summoned to shift our perspective from the material to the cultural and social dimension. It is as if learning to look at things for the first time, while searching for "depth in surfaces".

In *Autumn* and *Winter*, the first two installments in the series, Knausgaard addresses his then unborn fourth child, gradually unpacking the symbolism of existence in small everyday items that constitute a world in themselves, while confessing his own need for meaning: "These astounding things, which you will soon encounter and see for yourself, are so easy to lose sight of, and there are almost as many ways of doing that as there are people. That is why I am writing this book for you. I want to show you the world, as it is, all around us, all the time. Only by doing so will I myself be able to glimpse it. […] showing you the world, little one, makes my life worth living." (*Autumn*, p. 4) For how else can we live in the present moment and be fully aware of our surroundings if not by recording it all – in his case through writing? What makes Knausgaard's writing so real, so unpretentious and revelatory, is this very present moment he shares with us, his readers. As novelist Zadie Smith noted, it feels "as if the writing and the living are happening simultaneously."

Drifting away from the epistolary and essayistic form, the third volume - *Spring* - comes as a complete surprise. Here, Knausgaard opts for the novel as literary genre, since the story he is about to tell is much too daunting for an essay to do it justice. A deeply intimate account and a heartrending portrait of a family plagued by trauma, the book examines, down to the minutest details, a day in the author's life. The wife's severe depression and the flashbacks setting the scene for his hospital visit, together with his daughter, are like stones that, thrown into the water, create a ripple effect that hovers over the father's struggle to create a normal life for his four children. Just as tears purify our hearts and minds, this particular piece of writing struck me as profoundly cathartic. It's almost as if the guilt and shame the author experiences evaporate with the concluding words of the volume, in which he is looking back on a memory of Walpurgis Night: "I stood there for a long time, looking at all the people standing about in the dusk, talking and laughing, the children scampering between them, the orange flames of the bonfire stretching into the darkness. When I bent down over you, tears were running down my cheeks. You smiled as you saw my face

approaching, because you didn't know what tears were either." (*Spring*, p. 177)

Finishing this towards the end of an unprecedented spring, I didn't know what to expect of the ensuing *Summer* – for 2020 seemed to hold many surprises. The fourth and last book in Knausgaard's seasonal quartet proved to be the lengthiest of them all and the hardest to pin down. Apparently built around the same narrative structure as the first two in the series, comprising a selection of personal essays that testify, yet again, to the author's keen sense of observation and the alluring poetic landscapes of his language, the volume marks a shift in style. A major difference is the addition of ample diary entries for the months of June and July, in which we are to find a writer whose musings on personal identity seem to take centre stage. His main concern, it seems, is finding a way of telling his story without using himself, which prompts exploratory discussions with his editor: "Something we have talked a lot about lately is how one can tell a story about something one has experienced personally without giving one's own version of it, as happens when it isn't the 'I' that is the main thing but the experience." (*Summer*, p. 125) This might explain why the diary entries are interspersed with fragments of fiction set during the Second World War, in which Knausgaard chose to adopt the persona of an old woman who recalls a catastrophic love affair: "The woman I am writing about knows what she has done and reflects upon it; while she has forgiven herself, she has not been able to prevent it from ruining her life." (*Summer*, p. 296) Through her, we can conclude, the author is coming to terms with his past and present, trying to make sense of his own actions.

In a reality muffled by masks and pretence, Karl Ove Knausgaard has restored my faith in authenticity and the simplicity that is yet to be claimed for ourselves when all else seems too complicated. His commitment to show the world to his daughter in the most truthful manner turns him into an acute observer, lending urgency and substance to his writing. "Our small lives are traversed by momentuous movements, avalanches in the depths of the everyday" (*Summer*, p. 282), he notes in his last volume, and this piercing rendition of life's bitter and sweltering seasons, which reminds me of a superb piece of ballet by Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite - 'The Seasons' Canon' -, leaves me pondering on the weather conditions to come.

GABRIELA MOCAN
gabriela.mocan@econ.ubbcluj.ro