



## A Lyrical 'I' Beyond Fiction. Yahya Hassan and Autobiographical Poetry in Denmark After Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*.

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### Abstract

This article focuses on contemporary autobiographical Danish poetry following the publication of Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard's novel *Min kamp* [*My Struggle*], originally published between 2009 and 2011 [*My Struggle* (2012–2018)]. Focusing on the 2013 poetry collection *Yahya Hassan* by the Danish-Palestinian poet Yahya Hassan, this article argues that the lyrical autobiographical voice escapes its narrative construction in fiction, illustrating a lyrical 'I' in contemporary autobiographical poetry that is 'beyond fiction'. Paradoxically, this is due in part to Knausgaard's novel, where moving beyond fiction is about discovering an artistic and authentic way to re-establish a proximity to the world. Through the examination of Hassan's poetry collection and the immediate literary context, this article explores the underlying moral, aesthetic, and mediatized aspects of lyrical self-presentation in contemporary Danish poetry, and more generally. Self-disclosure and the use of private material are therefore not strategies for doing away with the subject but, rather, ways of reclaiming it.

*Keywords:* Autobiographical Poetry, Contemporary Self-Representation, Yahya Hassan, Karl Ove Knausgaard

## Abstrakt

Denne artikel handler om dansk selvbiografisk lyrik efter Karl Ove Knausgaards *Min kamp*. Især fokuseres der paa Yahya Hassans værk *Yahya Hassan*, der udkom i 2013. Artiklen argumenterer for, at vi i den selvbiografiske samtidslyrik i Danmark har med et lyrisk jeg at gøre, som paa en maade befinder sig hinsides fiktion, og som desuden deler mange litterære værdier med Knausgaards roman. Det gælder saaledes forholdet til fiktion, men ogsaa mere overordnet til sproglige konstruktioner samt forholdet mellem sprog og verden. Baade hos Knausgaard og i den danske selvbiografiske poesi handler det om at finde frem til en mere autentisk eller oprigtig maade at være baade forfatter og menneske i verden paa. Gennem læsningen af Hassans bog og denne bogs umiddelbare litterære kontekst diskuterer artiklen, hvilke underlæggende moralske, æstetiske værdier og mediemæssige aspekter, der ligger til grund for en saadan lyrisk selvfremstilling.

*Nøgleord:* selvbiografisk poesi, selvfremstillinger i samtidslitteraturen, Karl Ove Knausgård, Yahya Hassan

## Introduction

This article focuses on contemporary autobiographical Danish poetry following the publication of Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard’s novel *Min kamp* [*My Struggle*] (2009–2011).<sup>1</sup> Knausgaard has shaped the ways in which Danish authors write autobiographical literature, including poetry. To illustrate this, the article uses a case study of the 2013 collection of poems by the Danish-Palestinian poet Yahya Hassan, eponymously titled *Yahya Hassan*. It sold more than 100,000 copies in Denmark and attracted significant attention and much discussion throughout Scandinavia, on subjects ranging from artistic freedom of speech to migration politics. In an examination of Hassan’s work, this article explores the implications of what I am calling a ‘lyrical “I” beyond fiction’. With respect to genre, the autobiographical voice is perceived as more authentic, sincere, and truthful when it is expressed through poetry—the ‘lyrical “I”’— rather than narrative fiction. Thus the lyrical autobiographical voice escapes or surpasses its narrative construction in fiction. Paradoxically, this is due in part to Knausgaard’s novel. In an oft-quoted passage from *My Struggle*, he talks about combating ‘fiction with fiction’ (Knausgaard 2013, 198). In contrast to what we normally associate with fiction in literary circles, Knausgaard’s

concept of fiction is about discovering an artistic and authentic way to delve into matters of the world once again.

To a certain degree, Knausgaard opposes his literary ideas to well-known trends in academia, such as post-structuralism, deconstruction, and constructivism in general, and to these theories’ contribution to new conceptions of identity. Therefore, his project is about how *not* to play a role, how *not* to perform one’s identity, and so forth. We may be forced to do exactly this in a mediatized society where most people have several different social media profiles, but can this performance—this self-presentation—be done without losing ourselves along the way? For instance, can self-presentation stay true to our ethical obligations to others—what one might call ethically responsible self-presentation? And is such self-presentation possible in literature? New Danish autobiographical poetry struggles with these questions, particularly the poetry collection *Yahya Hassan*, which we shall discuss in more detail below.

The article concludes by applying Judith Butler’s arguments from her book *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) to the questions in the paragraph above. When we give an account of ourselves to others, we also employ a constitutive structure of address that underlies all account-giving. Thus, Butler argues that ethics are necessarily social and manifested dialogically in our relation to others, not through self-identity. And this idea serves as a way to understand how the new autobiographical poetry addresses us, as readers. This is not (only) about self-presentation as vanity and (more) self-exposure; it is also about giving an adequate and responsible account of oneself.

## Poetry and the Autobiographical

Autobiographical lyric poetry may be defined as either lyric poetry in which the author’s name and that of the speaker converge, or as lyric poetry that, given its paratext, must be defined as autobiographical (cf. Kjerkegaard 2014). This first way of defining the autobiographical poem is the simplest and could also be considered ‘autofictional’, as Serge Doubrovsky (1993), and later Gérard Genette (1993, 77) understood the term, although their versions restricted the definition to prose. The second definition of an autobiographical poem is more complex and demands a more detailed examination, which may involve reading paratextual signals, and, sometimes, more profound argumentation.

The interplay between autobiography and poetry has a long and complicated history, which Ovid already summarized more than two millennia ago:

I assure you, my character differs from my verse (my life is moral, my muse is gay), and most of my work, unreal and fictitious, has allowed itself more license than its author has had. A book is not an evidence of one’s soul, but an honourable impulse that presents very many things suited to charm the ear. (Ovid 1924, 81 [354–358])

From Ovid we learn that in lyric poems, including autobiographical ones, details such as enjambment, rhyme, or wordplay also contribute to the narrative, and the rhetorical question of a relationship between sender and audience (whether the departure is autobiographical or not) is, to some degree, subordinate to the self-reflexive focus of the message itself. Frequently, this self-reflexive focus also suspends the question of fiction versus non-fiction, and whether or not poems convey a narrative. The question of fictionality may simply be irrelevant to certain kinds of poetry.

Autobiographical lyric poems and lyric poems more generally might be said to treat language as a medium fairly differently than prose narratives do. The narrative of lyric poems often takes place in the reader’s experience, so to speak, not in the poem itself; this is due to the fact that lyric poems foreground formal elements of language to such an extent that these mold the potential narrative that must be experienced and interpreted by the reader. Therefore, autobiographical lyric poems seem to present some interesting but difficult questions concerning the balance between authorial attachment and the materiality of language. Lyricity situates the autobiographical material differently. Perhaps it is incorrect to speak of a balance between authorial attachment and the materiality of language; instead, we should speak of authorial attachment *in* the materiality of language.

When we talk about autobiography and literature, we often unknowingly pre-conceptualize our reading with ‘narrative’ expectations, presumably owing to the strong link between narrativity and identity, a link that has always been there but which has been well established theoretically in recent years by theorists such as Jerome Bruner, Paul Ricœur, Paul Eakin, Michael Bamberg, and others. However, if authorial attachment is situated in the materiality of language, we may have to adjust our approach.

When I talk about the autobiographical in literature as such, my approach is very pragmatic. This is not just a matter of turning a particular switch on or off, nor is it a question of determining whether or not the speaker is the real author; that is, it is not an attempt to know *more* about the author’s life. It is an attempt to improve our literary readings in the best possible way by not ignoring one of the main aesthetic devices of these kinds of works—the autobiographical material. Therefore, for both fiction and nonfiction, I prefer to use Susan S. Lanser’s idea of attachment and detachment (2005).

Her premise is that a number of theories have failed to describe the differences between fiction and autobiographical literature. An essentialist view that categorically uses an either/or distinction – either it is referential or it is not – simply does not hold. She then proposes a convention-based reading. The question is not whether there is unauthorized traffic between a fictional discourse and an autobiographical referential discourse, but under which circumstances it takes place – that is, *when* such traffic actually happens. As I see it, her starting point is simply communicative; that is, it happens most of the time when we read literature. Even in texts that are undoubtedly fictional throughout, we assume certain statements to be autobiographical. Her proposal for a more sufficient and pragmatic method of description uses a continuous scale between attachment from, and detachment to, the author. Some genres are typically read as attached more often than others. Lanser takes into account that literature is always, among other things, a communication from a particular sender to many particular receivers.

Lanser proposes five more or less genre-independent criteria for attachment: singularity, anonymity, identity, reliability, and non-narrativity. Together, these criteria produce a normative path that helps us understand why poetry is the genre that is most attached, whereas drama is the most detached. By attending to degrees of attachment and detachment, instead of to the author’s name, for example, as is done in the autofictional approach, Lanser’s theory focuses not only on the relationship between author and text from a reading perspective, but also on referentiality. With regard to attachment and detachment, she considers narratives the most ambiguous of the criteria. Here, however, I focus on her comments about lyric poetry:

Lyric poetry, with its conventional singularity, its commonplace anonymity, its almost axiomatic reliability, its likelihood of evoking aspects of its author’s identity, and its relatively low narrativity, is primed for authorial attachment. (Lanser 2005, 213)

Using Lanser’s theory, it is possible to concretize what Paul de Man long ago called, with reference to autobiography, a ‘figure of reading’ (de Man 1979, 921)—a rhetorical figure that partially occurs in all texts. It helps explain why some genres are primed for certain kinds of (autobiographical) readings. However, it does not explain why and how autobiographical material works in a text—in other words, the reason(s) an author chooses to provide her or his text with autobiographical traits. Furthermore, even if she is right to state that lyricality prepares authorial attachment, we must not forget that lyric poetry is different to prose and fiction. The form of a poem also

informs us; it tells us something. In short, the world in lyric poetry is not defined by, and confined by a narrative, but rather by the rhetorical act that the articulation of the poem instantiates.

Many of the foregoing ideas are touched upon in an essay by Ian Patterson called ‘No man is an I. Recent developments in the lyric’ (Patterson 2013). Patterson writes about ‘the complicated quest for “personhood”’, and its implications for the search for ‘one’s own voice’ in lyric poetry’ (Patterson 2013, 221) and concludes:

On one hand, ‘to dismiss the materiality of language is to dismiss the emotionally charged history that made us who we are – subjects in language, which is the subject of the lyric’ [Patterson quotes Blasing 2006, 6]. If the lyric ‘I’ is a shifter, a positional relation (in both senses of ‘relate’), it is not the same as the autobiographical self that, as we’ve seen, is the implied guarantor of much conventional lyric writing. But even where lyric is fragmented into verse pulses or affective splinters, it entails the struggle of a person to make the poem work, a struggle encoded in the gestures, cadences, and syntax of the verse as the stylistic signature of its author, a lyric identity that is always being re-forged in the language on the page. (Patterson 2013, 233, my addition)

In Patterson’s commentary, autobiographical material situates itself differently in autobiographically informed poetry than in prose. Often, language and identity are not two different things, and language is seldom just a tool when it is used for writing poetry. That this also makes a difference when reading poetry is an argument not very far removed from what Serge Doubrovsky claims about autofiction. In his essay on autofiction (Doubrovsky 1993), Doubrovsky asserts that autobiography, understood in the Lejeunian sense of ‘a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality’ (Lejeune 1982, 193), does not sufficiently cover the nature of the self. Therefore, he believes that fictionalized content—or artistic presentation—may actually be a more adequate way of presenting a person’s real life and identity precisely because this kind of presentation is artistic, and language shaped by and with artistic freedom is truer than language that is merely representative, desperately trying to reproduce reality one-to-one. Therefore, Doubrovsky claims that traditional autobiography is deceitful, whereas autofiction at least is truer, as it demonstrates an awareness that this project—the presentation of a person’s life in words—is full of flaws.

### *Yahya Hassan*

Following the conjectures discussed above, I wish to turn to the poetry collection *Yahya Hassan* by the Danish-Palestinian poet Yahya Hassan. The publication of Hassan’s poems must also be understood as a media event that has revealed the possibilities, and sometimes even the limits, of literary discussions across cultural institutions. It shows how the reciprocity between news media in general and social media specifically is a criterion that must be met, if literature today wishes to have a cultural impact. Hassan’s poetry prompted discussions across the borders of the Scandinavian countries and revealed that even if Sweden and Denmark seem (very) similar from the outside, they have inherently different discursive climates and values. This is the case when it comes to literary and artistic values, particularly freedom of speech, which, among other things, led to the so-called ‘debate on whiteness’ in 2014 (‘hvidhedsdebatten’).

After these debates, many were eager to see how Hassan’s poetry would be received outside Scandinavia. *The New York Times* offered a glimpse of this when it ran an article on Hassan’s visit to Leipzig to promote the translation of his poems into German. Under the title, ‘Lashing Out in Verse’, *The New York Times* presented ‘Mr. Hassan’ like this:

Like many teenagers, Yahya Hassan does not lack for bravado. But his way of expressing it stands in stark contrast to that of most of his peers: At just 18, the Danish-Palestinian Mr. Hassan has emblazoned himself on Denmark’s consciousness with a poetry collection that appeared with a first print run of 800 last fall and has since sold more than 100,000 copies.

(Smale 2014, n. pag.)

The article continues:

The collection, which criticizes the Danish welfare state, his family and Danish Muslims at large for hypocrisy, cheating and failure to adapt, has won him death threats as well as a dubious embrace by right-wing politicians. But his commercial success is reaching far beyond Denmark’s population of 5.5 million.

(Smale 2014, n. pag.)

Hassan’s book begins with the poem ‘CHILDHOOD’. It clearly belongs to the more lyrical part of the collection, and although the events narrated in these collected poems

are supposedly specific experiences from Hassan’s life, this poem programmatically and very powerfully sets the scene for the rest of the collection—and for Yahya Hassan’s forceful intrusion into the Scandinavian cultural landscape. The poem addresses the main themes of his work, exploring the problems and experiences the author shares with other Danish citizens who have a foreign background.

As a reader, one definitely senses a kind of lyrical breakthrough in Hassan’s work; this is a poet who actually finds his voice despite the silence and violence of his peers. And Hassan stands in contrast to Denmark’s other major breakthrough poet of 2013, Asta Olivia Nordenhof. His ‘affective splinters’, to use one of Patterson’s phrases, are scattered throughout the pages. For instance, Hassan uses capital letters only, a simple but effective trick that matches the voice of his poems very well. In Denmark, such capitalization has very specific connotations, and two other poetry collections come to mind when reading these: the avant-garde poet and later art critic Rudolf Broby-Johansen’s censored work *Blod* [*Blood*] from 1922, and neo-romantic and visionary poet Michael Strunge’s work *Skrigerne* [*The Screamers*] from 1980. Strunge committed suicide in 1986, due to his bipolar disorder.<sup>2</sup>

TV Yahya Hassan fremsiger digtet 'Barndom'



Fig 1. Yahya Hassan recites his poem ‘CHILDHOOD’. Frame grab from *Politiken*’s website.

Hassan’s recital of ‘CHILDHOOD’ was a very important feature of his breakthrough. His distinctive lyrical voice was first found on the Danish daily newspaper *Politiken*’s website on 4 October 2013 about three weeks before the collection was published. The day after releasing the poem, *Politiken* published a debate article containing an interview with Hassan, entitled ‘Poet: I’m fucking angry with my parent’s generation.’ This article is one of *Politiken*’s most circulated texts on social media to date and, besides the interview, it also embedded a video of Hassan reciting his poem



‘CHILDHOOD’, his eyes aimed directly at the camera, full of incitement. In translation, the poem reads:

FIVE CHILDREN IN A ROW AND A FATHER WITH A CLUB  
 POLYCRYING AND A PUDDLE OF PISS  
 IN TURN WE PUT OUT THE HAND  
 FOR THE SAKE OF PREDICTABILITY  
 THAT SOUND WHEN THE BLOWS STRIKE  
 SISTER JUMPING SO FAST  
 FROM ONE FOOT TO THE OTHER  
 THE PISS IS A WATERFALL DOWN HER LEGS  
 ONE HAND UP THEN THE NEXT  
 IF IT TAKES TOO MUCH TIME BLOWS STRIKE RANDOMLY  
 A BLOW A SCREAM A FIGURE 30 OR 40 AT TIMES 50  
 AND A FINAL SLAP ON THE ASS OUT THE DOOR  
 HE GRABS BROTHER BY THE SHOULDERS STRAIGHTENS HIM UP  
 CONTINUES HITTING AND COUNTING  
 I LOOK DOWN AND AWAIT MY TURN  
 MOTHER BREAKS PLATES IN THE STAIRWAY  
 WHILE AL JAZEERA TV-TRANSMITS  
 HYPERACTIVE BULLDOZERS AND ANGERED BODY PARTS  
 THE GAZA STRIP IN SUNSHINE  
 FLAGS ARE BURNED  
 IF A ZIONIST DOES NOT ACKNOWLEDGE OUR EXISTENCE  
 IF WE EXIST AT ALL  
 WHEN WE SOB ANXIETY AND PAIN  
 WHEN WE GASP FOR BREATH OR MEANING  
 IN SCHOOL WE MUST NOT SPEAK ARABIC  
 AT HOME WE MUST NOT SPEAK DANISH  
 A BLOW A SCREAM A FIGURE

This indeed demonstrates one of the lyric poem’s main features: memorable language.

There is no punctuation, and the capital letters give the poem a flat but still noisy expression, and therefore his verses heavily rely on enjambment and rhythm. However, a literary assessment here works in conjunction with a number of other contexts. For example, it hardly makes sense to ignore the author’s ethos; and furthermore, the poem is recited in a tone that evokes connotations to both some of

the more deliberately monotone readings by the celebrated Danish poet Søren Ulrik Thomsen, and perhaps also to Islamic chants (or at least Western notions of these chants). We also see Hassan’s body language and gestures, which derive from hip-hop culture rather than any ordinary literary context (cf. Pedersen 2015). Still, the combination of video and text probably should not be underestimated in regard to the article’s circulation on social media. In this sense, as noted above, Yahya Hassan’s recitation was as much a media event as it was a literary one.

When we look specifically at the text of ‘CHILDHOOD’, a distinctive feature is the shift in perspective: through a glance at the television, one is moved from an ‘I’ to a ‘We’-perspective in the latter part of the poem. This shift is typical of Hassan’s entire collection of poems. It is simultaneously specific and general. The ‘I’ speaks of his childhood, but also of all the other Danish citizens with a foreign background; that is what it means to grow up among multiple languages, and a ‘HOME’ where one must not speak Danish. This is all condensed into the fragmented last verse, which is also a repetition of line eleven ‘A BLOW A SCREAM A FIGURE 30 OR 40 AT TIMES 50’. This repetition connects the very specific events to a more general statement, thereby emphasizing the lyrical and autobiographical, simultaneously implying that this is something that happens repeatedly and not only in the uncanny and homeless ‘HOME’ of the lyrical I, but also in the other supposed ‘HOMES’ where the Palestinians live. Homelessness seems to be a condition, both at home and abroad.

The actual experience of violence is presented in a straightforward and expressive language that is characterized by alliteration (in Danish FEM, FAR, PØL, PIS) and also contains a subtle play on the word ‘polygamy’ in the neologism ‘FLERGRÆDERI’ (translated in English to ‘polycrying’). This evokes grotesque, almost comical associations with a game between the likelihood of violence and a child’s attempt to control the traumatic events, either through a transformation of the situation into numbers and figures, or into a singing game – perhaps an allusion to the Danish game, ‘Først den ene vej...’ [‘firstly one way then the other way’].

In terms of content, there are two locations in Hassan’s poem ‘CHILDHOOD’ between which the lyrical ‘I’ is stretched and between which it struggles: ‘GAZA’ and the place where ‘CHILDHOOD’ takes place. The ‘WE’, as expressed in the last part of the poem, relates to both places, but does not belong to either of them. It is, and is not, a Palestinian ‘WE’; it is a homeless ‘we’, foreign in all its surroundings and contexts. This labile membership is emphasized throughout the book, for example in the poem ‘HOLIDAY MEMORIES III’, in which the lyrical ‘I’ belongs to the group called ‘DANISH DOGS’ (44), because its members are guests in a refugee camp in the Middle East. Therefore, in Palestine you are Danish, and in Denmark you are Palestinian. The

text on the back cover of *Yahya Hassan* confirms this feeling, as it simply states: ‘Yahya Hassan, born 1995. Stateless Palestinian with a Danish passport’.

In Hassan’s case, the lyrical breakthrough seems to emerge from a three-layered struggle, each layer supporting the others, making the entire struggle seem even more sincere. There is the lyrical struggle on the page, the struggle with identity as a person who is neither a Palestinian nor a Dane, and the struggle against the hypocrisy of one’s own people. All these struggles resonate through the name of the author and the title of the collection. In relation to this, it is interesting that the editor of the collection was the one who proposed the title, so accordingly, they changed it from *Ghetto Poems* to the author’s name, *Yahya Hassan* (Lyngsø 2013). This may seem like an ingenuous maneuver, but nevertheless it reinforces the way that the specific becomes universal, and thus, how the poet also becomes a discourse. In other words, the unpronounceable name becomes poetry. This is something about which the poet seems aware when he writes: ‘IF THE NAME CANNOT BE PRONOUNCED THEN IT IS NOT A NAME/ IT IS POETRY’ (109). In conjunction with each other, these attributes create an extremely powerful place of articulation. Therefore, if we shift our perspective from content to form, the repetition at the end of the opening poem also anticipates, and with every re-reading emphasizes, the individual as something universal. This is also the case with the title of the collection. It bears a specific Danish citizen’s name, namely, *Yahya Hassan*, but although he is very specific, the title also *entitles* this specific name, thereby implying that Yahya Hassan is only one of many who are alike. In Denmark there is even a saying from the romantic poet Adam Oehlenschläger’s famous play, *Aladdin*. Danes talk about ‘hver sin Hassan’ [‘to each their own Hassan’] and ‘little Hassan (with the crooked legs)’, that is, a child whose welfare is of great concern to us. So, this collection has tremendous idiomatic power. It speaks a language that we simultaneously know and do not know, thereby affirming and disrupting Danish idioculture. ‘Yahya’ is the name Danish people cannot pronounce, the literary work’s *differentia specifica*; however, ‘Hassan’ is a familiar name, and the one we all know and care about. In this respect, the literary work, *Yahya Hassan*, shows us, as Mutlu Konuk Blasing says, that ‘[l]yric language is a radically public language, but it will not submit to treatment as a social document [...] because there is no “individual” in the lyric in any ordinary sense of the term. The lyric makes audible a virtual subjectivity in the shape of a given language, a mother tongue’ (Blasing 2006, 4).

If lyric poetry is understood to be something that produces subjectivity rather than the self-expression of some prior, private, or constitutive subject, as Blasing posits, how are we to understand the relationship between autobiography and poetry? I

would venture to say that compared to the use of autobiographical discourse in other genres, especially the novel and most autobiographies, the autobiographical expression of a lyric poem has other and sometimes stronger rhetorical possibilities – and *Yahya Hassan* demonstrates this. Autobiographical lyric poetry can create an interchange between the singular and the universal without adhering to fiction, or even narration. The features of lyric poetry such as rhyme, rhythm, repetition and enjambment support this process. With these features, the poem can universalize its message and present its material in daring artistic (and daring autobiographical) ways. Nevertheless, one of the main forces behind Yahya Hassan’s lyric poems seems to be their narrative; not necessarily the narratives from one poem to the other, though several poems have one, but the narrative of the poems in their entirety, in connection with the author and his context—their more discursively formed narratives. As such, their power derives not only from the strength of the compelling lyrical expression behind each poem, but also from the way the poems convey the context and the author’s ethos.

As a literary work *Yahya Hassan* is extremely precise in its intentionally awkward discursive positioning in the literary landscape. Most literature we have seen in Scandinavia by authors of non-Scandinavian ethnic origins could be said to be—speaking in unfair and far-too generalizing terms—‘politically correct’ in one sense or the other, endorses the consensus view concerning the integration of foreign citizens. Not so in *Yahya Hassan*. Any kind of political correctness is omitted, and no place and person are safe. This includes the position of the ‘lyrical “I”’. The readership is presented with its possible/presumed prejudices towards subgroups, while the very prejudices of the ‘lyrical “I”’ towards precisely these subgroups are put ironically on display in the text. For instance, Hassan calls himself a ‘wog’ [‘perker’] but also disparagingly attributes this term to other persons in the poems. In this sense, the ‘lyrical “I”’ becomes a vector, not of Yahya Hassan, but of hate and hypocrisy, and perhaps even of a certain Danish-produced subjectivity.

The positioning of *Yahya Hassan* in the cultural Scandinavian landscape is rhetorically comparable to Philip Roth’s breakthrough novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). Roth used some of the most common stereotypes about Jews in his story but turned them inward toward the Jews themselves, at the same time acknowledging that he, the author, was one of them—a Jew telling Jewish jokes about Jews. Yahya Hassan does something similar, for example, when he uses a particular Danish sociolect of the ghettos in the suburbs of Aarhus. The aim is not to hurt one’s own kind but to confront all kinds of hypocrisy, even linguistic hypocrisy. In Yahya Hassan’s case one might speak about idiomaticity. His verses carve themselves into some of the

deepest layers of Danishness and Danish language, being both the same and different, for instance by using various well-known Danish singing games and children’s songs. By doing so, the issue becomes, in Judith Butler’s words, not a question of ‘what it is that one will be able to say, but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which one begins to speak at all.’ (Butler 1997, 133). *Yahya Hassan* is an ‘outrageous’ example of a ‘wog’ mastering the Danish language better than most Danes.

### Autobiographically-informed literature in Denmark after Knausgaard

How does *Yahya Hassan* situate itself in contemporary Danish literature? To answer this question, one must bear in mind that exactly ten years before *Yahya Hassan*, the author Claus Beck-Nielsen published an influential book called *Claus Beck-Nielsen (1963–2001) – A biography* (2003). This book made Nielsen one of the most discussed Danish authors in the noughties, at least in academia. As one may conclude from the title, the author’s breakthrough came, remarkably, with his presumed death. Here we have an author – or perhaps his work – who incarnates, if that may be said, Roland Barthes’ famous dictum about ‘The Death of The Author’. However, it turned out that it was not that easy to get rid of the author. On the contrary, the death of the author only magnified Nielsen’s place in the work, and also overshadowed all its political aims. Both journalists and literary scholars kept returning to the black hole that the author left in 2003, often neglecting the political aims in favor of the personal cause.

Several literary scholars have tried to connect Nielsen’s use of autobiographical material with similar uses in the work of contemporary Danish literature in the twenty-tens. But even though some aspects are comparable, many are not. In the work of new authors such as Yahya Hassan, we are in fact very far from Barthes’ ‘The Death of The Author’, or from Michel Foucault’s idea that it is ‘a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator’ (Foucault 1984, 118), expressed in his famous lecture, ‘What is an Author?’.

Depriving the subject or its substitute, in this case the author, of its role as originator, leads not to demise but its opposite. It does not help us to shift our focus from author to text, if that was the intention: on the contrary. And if this general project is a political one, it fails. Nielsen’s resistance to what one could call ‘having an authorship’ tells us this in many significant ways, and perhaps this is his most valuable contribution, politically and aesthetically: he unintentionally shows us how authorship works in a mediatized age.

Informed by Nielsen’s resistance to authorship and identity as such, I believe autobiographically-informed, contemporary Danish literature in the twenty-tens is

actually about a restoration of the subject (and hence, the author). Self-disclosure and the use of private material are not strategies for doing away with the subject—but ways of reclaiming it.

With the autobiographical trend in Denmark, much attention has been given to the concept of ‘autofiction’, which seems to be divided into a more popular version, which the media loves—and hates—and a more scholarly version, about which only a few care.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, of the many things we can learn from autofiction, one is that telling the truth does not mean telling it without literary means. Serge Doubrovsky talked about entrusting the language of adventure to the adventure of language. For instance, this happens in Bjørn Rasmussen’s *The Skin Is the Elastic Covering That Encases the Entire Body* [*Huden er det elastiske hylster der omgiver hele legemet*] (2011, translated into English in 2019), where the narrator and, usually, also the protagonist ‘tells it like it sounds’, and gives us this piece of advice: ‘write with your asshole’. This may sound odd, but it is about escaping certain predetermined roles, and, in fact, the asshole is *not* gendered. Apparently, like Nielsen’s, Rasmussen’s text is also about emancipation, but the emancipation does not express itself in new guises. Transformation does not seem to be the answer to the challenges of escaping a certain identity.

In contrast to Nielsen’s, Rasmussen’s prose is not ironic. Instead, it seeks some kind of expression beyond irony, even if this is to be found in the breaking down of language. It may be that there is no escaping the performativity of our identity, but instead of affirming this state through new transformations, and hence keeping up appearances, Rasmussen’s prose seeks new possibilities, new ways of addressing these concerns, and also new ways of addressing other people. Resistance is not found in new guises, but in a kind of literary introspection concerning private material. This is especially salient in Rasmussen’s much-praised collection of autobiographical poetry from 2016, entitled *Ming*, where he writes about his destroyed relationship to his now-deceased father, and also about being both a newly married homosexual man and a psychiatric patient.

Rasmussen’s work tells us that we may be forced to fashion ourselves, but can this fashioning, this self-presentation, be done in such a way that we do not lose ourselves along the way? Can an account of oneself, for instance, be done in a way that supports our ethical obligations to other people? Can it be done in a way that is not merely play-acting? Or done in a way that is not only about ‘me, me, me’, but also about you?

One could counter the foregoing questions with the claim that these new works of literature are characterized by the way in which they incorporate autobiographical material as a kind of auto-stigma. That is, in their expression they very intentionally leave a ‘human stain’ (Kjerkegaard 2017), to use Philip Roth’s term—a spot or stain

that shows us that this is written by a human being with all its flaws and weaknesses. So, when a work is autobiographical, it does not mean that it is flawless, or an attempt to create a perfect picture of oneself. Quite the opposite. The human stain is a sign of openness and insufficiency, a sign of vulnerability and human precariousness—in short, that the text needs a response in order to be responsible.

A major inspiration for conceiving of autobiography in literature as a human stain are Judith Butler’s ideas on self-presentation and giving an account of oneself. She initially postulates that to some extent all autobiography is subject to invention. This is also the case when constructing or narrating our identity autobiographically. Yet, this does not necessarily constitute ethical and moral freewheeling. The opposite could also be argued: self-presentation is in fact accountable and imbued with an ethical obligation, which is based on a dialogical approach to reality. To give an account of oneself to another exposes a constitutive form of address that underlies all account-giving. Thus, Butler argues that ethics are necessarily social, and manifested dialogically in our exposure to others, not through self-identity. In other words, awareness of our incompleteness rather than a coherent understanding of identity, constitutes the grounds for ethical self-construction. Butler explains that autonomy of the self is possible only as a ‘dispossession’ of ourselves in relation to the other (Butler 2005, 8).

Being responsible in one’s account-giving – and this also goes for literature – rests on the idea that one’s account includes what Butler calls ‘the original referent’ (Butler 2005, 37), even though this referent destroys, or at least contaminates, one’s narrative about oneself. If we transfer this thought to literature, one might say that in order to write responsible literature, literature must include a human stain. However, this might come at the expense of coherence, if we understand coherence as a prior or constitutive subject that creates some kind of expression. Again, lyric poetry, where subjectivity and expression seem to coincide, holds other, and perhaps better possibilities for voicing this kind of understanding of one’s self.

In more general terms, I see the use of autobiographical and private material not as an aesthetic weakness in literature, but as a very deliberate aesthetic and human choice that may signal both responsibility for and resistance to the idea that it is possible to transform our identities, and narrate them coherently. The idea that identity is narratable may be convenient for most of us, and probably also convenient for ideologies of growth, but it is not necessarily true.

## A concerned and sincere generation

Yahya Hassan and Bjørn Rasmussen are members of a generation of writers in Denmark who share a number of features. The Danish daily newspaper *Dagbladet Information* termed these authors ‘the ethical generation’, but I would rather speak of ‘the anxious or the concerned generation’, a generation that is concerned about the state of the world, and with this concern in mind, seeks new aesthetic categories that matter.

A concern for the state of the world may be related to the concern that the French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist of science Bruno Latour mentions in his 2004 article, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’. Latour asks why criticism of humanities has run out of steam. He is concerned with the type of social criticism to which he himself has contributed, which is closely linked to post-structuralism and deconstructive literary criticism. He argues that this kind of thinking has paved the way for perspectives that close their eyes to the real threats and risks to the future, for example, climate concerns and global warming. More specifically, these concerns may be explained rhetorically, as matters of discourse. However, the initial idea behind this critical linguistic-based mindset was never to distance oneself from facts but rather to get closer to them. Instead of a critical barbarism that splits things apart, Latour therefore calls for a critical edification that seeks gathering. Therefore, Latour’s article is part of a break with his own earlier thoughts, and he urges critical thinkers to follow this kind of general reassessment.

Karl Ove Knausgaard describes a similar reexamination of earlier thoughts in his novel, *My Struggle*, where he writes:

Our world has enclosed around itself, enclosed around us, and there is no way out of it. Those in this situation who call for more intellectual depth, more spirituality, have understood nothing, for the problem is that the intellect has taken over everything. Everything has become intellect, even our bodies, they aren’t bodies any more, but ideas of bodies [...]. (Knausgaard 2013, 201)

Knausgaard’s by now famous formulation ‘to combat fiction with fiction’ (idem, 198) is about precisely this. In continuation of the passage above, he writes, ‘What I ought to do was to affirm what existed, affirm the state of things as they are, revel in the world outside instead of searching for a way out’ (ibidem).

In contrast to what we normally associate with fiction in literary circles, Knausgaard’s concept of fiction is about finding a way back into the world. To a



certain extent, he also has post-structuralist, deconstructionist, and constructivist ideas in mind as declared enemies. These ideas are all enemies of penetrating further into the world and what one might call a rhetorical grip on reality. Such a firm grip is a fiction. For this reason, Knausgaard’s project is very idiosyncratic, for it cannot be achieved with more words (even if we are aware of how long his novel is). Instead, one must act. Consequently, this may be why he finishes the novel by claiming that he no longer wants to be an author. Instead he will leave his authorship and join his family, and, not least, become a father for the fourth time.

I believe that both Latour’s and Knausgaard’s turning to the world—trying to join matters of fact with matters of concern—speak for our time. Their turns may be seen as paving the way for many of those tendencies we see in contemporary Danish literature right now. One example is this Facebook update by Asta Olivia Nordenhof, which may be read as a kind of poetic strategy. She writes about her feelings as she wrote her highly praised collection of poetry, *det nemme og det ensomme* [‘the simple and the lonely’]:

i had for the first time in my life, i think, a sense of being able to speak devotedly and truthfully. i also have a feeling that many people other than me are dying of fiction. or it is not only a feeling, it's a reality. just take a look at the deadly fictions [drabelige fiktioner] such as money, race, gender. as such, as a fight back against the fiction that removes us from one another, i want literature to be comforting and available to those who are being hounded, and telling-off those who are interested in hounding and imprisoning others. and therefore i also want it to be present as much as possible. present as a possible place to go for those who lack places to go. (Nordenhof 2014).

The phrase ‘deadly fictions’ [‘drabelige fiktioner’] is taken from another contemporary Danish poet Lars Skinnebach, a poet of great influence on this young generation of writers in Denmark, particularly because he was a teacher at the The Danish Academy of Creative Writing in Copenhagen [Forfatterskolen], which both Rasmussen and Nordenhof have attended. Skinnebach uses this phrase on the back cover of his book *Øvelser og rituelle tekster* [‘Exercises and Ritual Texts’] from 2011. Both Nordenhof and Skinnebach are politically and generally concerned about the condition of the world, but Skinnebach expresses his worries in a typically modernistic style, whereas Nordenhof try to speak from another set of aesthetic categories, rather influenced by the poetry of the 1970s, for example. This ambition may correlate with what have been named the ‘new sincerity’ (cf. Kelly 2016).

Although some of the political aims of the different generations of Danish authors after the turn of the millennium are the same, the literary means are very different. The most recent generation neither revels in, nor resists a focus on identity in their literary texts. Thus, for this generation of writers, the important thing is to accept matters of fact by acknowledging that you, as an author, actually are responsible for writing the literary text and, to cite the subtitle of Latour’s famous essay (2004), join this to matters of concern with an implicit disclaimer saying: ‘I actually have a message for you, dear reader.’

In conclusion, in accordance with the logic that initially derives from self-expression, the use of autobiographical material in contemporary Danish poetry has shifted to a kind of self-restriction. But, regardless, we cannot choose to *not* fashion ourselves. In this sense, self-presentation or self-fashioning must be conceived of as a kind of interpellation.<sup>4</sup> This seems also to be the case in Judith Butler’s thoughts, as she writes “[w]e start to give an account only because we are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable” (Butler 2005, 10). The mediatization of our society seems to strengthen this accountability and also to link the accountability with what connects interpellation and ethics from the very beginning (Butler 2005, 89).

Vulnerability and precariousness may be the price ‘of whatever identities we take on in the shifting spheres of private and public online life, subject as they are to prying eyes as well as to the social network’s ever-shifting dynamics of power and prestige’ (McNeill and Zuern 2015: x), as Laurie McNeill and John Zuern write in their introduction to their special issue of *Biography* dedicated to ‘Online Lives 2.0’. So, self-presentation and giving an account of ourselves may be something the logic of media (outside of mediatized environments as well) may demand of us, but, at the same time, something of which we must also be very critical. One way of being critical is by actually using autobiographical material in a way that resists the usual norms and standards.

With reference to antiquity, the German-born, American political thinker Hannah Arendt once equated privacy with deprivation and idiocy (cf. Arendt 1989). But what if this logic is reversed in our time, when the public deprives us of something as individuals? Then, one way of protecting ourselves is by becoming even more private, perhaps even embracing more ‘idiocy’.

The thought experiment of such a reversal of Arendt’s thoughts may tell us that using private details in public, and also in literature, is not just a matter of an increasingly extreme (media) culture of self-disclosure. In some cases, perhaps, but in others it is also a matter of trying to gain agency as a subject. In this respect, the private is political today. The use of private material in literary texts may seem deprived and

idiotic, but behind this use is a drive for agency, an attempt to empower the author-subject with humanity in a world of too much inhumanity.

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## Notes

In memory of Yahya Hassan 1995-2020. All translations are mine except the translations of Knausgaard and Ovid. The translation of ‘CHILDHOOD’ is a revised version of an unofficial translation of an excerpt of *Yahya Hassan* by Al and Kuku Agami.

<sup>1</sup> I am citing from the Vintage 2013 edition. See “Works cited” section for further details. *Min kamp* [My Struggle] was initially published in six volumes from 2009 to 2011 by Forlaget Oktober (Oslo) and later translated into English by Don Bartlett, beginning with volume one in 2012 and finishing with volume six in 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Very sadly, Yahya Hassan died in April 2020, aged only 24. This article was being prepared for publication at the time. Hassan published *Yahya Hassan 2* in November 2019, which received some attention, much more than other poetry collections usually do in Denmark. Still it was not received as spectacularly and sensationally as his debut. *Yahya Hassan 2* deals with the time after he published his first book. It was a very tumultuous time where Hassan experienced huge literary success but also a life under protection by secret service because of several death threats. It also included a failed political career and a prison sentence for shooting a menacing colleague in the foot. The progress up to and after the prison stay was documented by Hassan himself on social media and testifies to a young, very gifted man, but also with significant mental health problems.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the reception of the term autofiction in and outside of France, see Hywel Dix (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Interpellation is an important concept in Marxist theory and ideological criticism. It is mainly associated with the French philosopher Louis Althusser, but also used by Judith Butler and others.