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After Honor¹

From Egil Skallagrimsson to Karl Ove Knausgård²

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ABSTRACT This article presents how Christianity acquired the notion of honor and that internal honor played as important a role as external honor – at least in the culture of Chivalry and the Victorian gentleman culture. The revaluation in Christian cultures of internal honor leads to the individualization of Western cultural values as well as the decline of Western honor culture. Andersen stresses that modern warfare more or less puts an end to honor culture in the West.

KEY WORDS Christianity | (internal/external) honor | individualization | values | decline of Western honor culture

Social norms are decisive for our emotional life, writes Martha Nussbaum in *Upheavals of Thought*. Her point is that social norms vary, and that culturally specific values therefore influence what we feel. Nussbaum asserts, for example, that “...a culture that values honor highly, and attaches a strong negative value to the slighting of honor, will have many occasions for anger that an equality focused culture ... will not have” (Nussbaum 2001, 157). Nussbaum’s example of a culture without anger is the Micronesian Ifaluk culture in the Pacific Ocean. According to Nussbaum, anger among the Ifaluk is associated with shame. At the other end of the scale one could place the old Norse culture. It is well established knowledge that Old Norse society was to a high degree a culture of honor, and that the duty to and readiness to defend honor was among the most important values in these societies. The ability to be aroused to rage and the courage to convert it to

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 2. This article is also published as a chapter in Andersens’ book *Story and Emotion* (2016). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

violence were among the foremost qualities people could have. At least that is what Old Norse literature tells us.

Julian Pitt-Rivers, one of the pioneers in modern research into honor, calls attention to three facets in his definition of honor: “a sentiment, a manifestation of this sentiment in conduct, and the evaluation of this conduct by others...” (Pitt-Rivers 1968, 503). This definition has been emphasized as *communis opinio* within the sociological research tradition (Patterson 1982, 79). All the same, it is usual within this field of research to expand further upon primarily two aspects, external and internal honor. External honor deals with one’s good name and reputation, one’s esteem, prestige, position and value in others’ eyes. Internal honor is more or less identical to personal integrity or character, and consists of venerable human characteristics that produce basic self-respect. This division is what Frank Henderson Stewart calls “the *bipartite theory* [of honor]” (Stewart 1994, 19). The distinction is found among many researchers in slightly different variants. For example, Stewart places great emphasis on Moritz Liepmann who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was occupied with defamation in the German judicial system. Perhaps it is this judicial context that has caused Stewart to view the emotional side of Pitt-River’s definition as unmanageable. It is easy to understand that a subjectively *felt* defamation would not be adequate for conviction in a modern judicial society. Nevertheless, it is evident from most depictions that honor is closely tied to affect and emotion, even if it is not directly regarded as an emotion. Stewart even has a chapter in his book entitled “The *Sense* of Honor” (italics mine). And as we have already seen, honor is also often closely tied to other affects, anger, for example. Many, such as David D. Gilmore, also see honor almost as a counterpart to shame. In all likelihood, Stewart’s effort to tone down the affective aspect is primarily a manifestation of the general discomfort of being occupied with feelings in the context of research. But to consider honor without taking the *feeling* of honor into consideration would seem almost absurd. The “bipartite” theory still makes sense as far as it goes. Stewart found the twopart theory as early as in Liepmann who used the concepts “objectified honor” and “subjectified honor.” Robert L. Oprisko takes the division for granted, and establishes the main outline of his presentation in two sections: “External honor” and “Internal honor”.³

Honor, rage and shame are probably not universal affects, but are tied to social norms as Nussbaum asserted. Honor and a sense of honor are attached to *honor groups* that individuals belong to or identify with.⁴ Disparate honor groups can have different honor codes, and the groups can be far-reaching (for example cultural groups) or smaller, or more specific (for example occupational groups or

similar). There are also sub-groups within larger societal communities where specific and deviant codes of honor are practiced (for example criminal circles within a law-abiding society).

From its Greek and Roman heritage, western culture is an old honor culture. “Homeric man’s highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of *tîmê*, public esteem” writes E. R. Dodds in *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Dodds 1951, 17–18). Still, today the culture of honor is considerably weakened in the West, and not least in Northern Europe. Several researchers mention this deterioration, among them Stewart and Bowman. But they call attention to different factors that have contributed to the weakening. Stewart points out that subjectivism has occurred in the course of history; increasingly, development privileged personal qualities as a basis for a sense of honor, mentioned as “the integrity position” (Stewart 1994, 51). In addition, James Bowman points out that the two world wars discredited established concepts of honor in the western world, something that is reflected in war literature and in the cultural climate after the wars. The late-modern welfare state is an equality oriented and [human] rights-based society, where hero worship and honor play a lesser role. Actually there are many examples that prior dishonorable or embarrassing characteristics and events can create a basis for fame and interest. What appears beyond a doubt is that the cultural meeting between cultures of honor and cultures that have a weakened code of honor emerges as one of our times’ most incendiary areas of conflict. Thus, there is every reason to place a focus on honor and the weakening of a culture of honor in our own society. In this chapter I will examine the weakening of the culture of honor particularly in a Norwegian context. I will do that by means of some chosen historical moments. I will take my point of departure in Old Norse

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3. James Bowman, who treats honor historically, also works with “The Two Kinds of Honor,” but for him it appears to concern, on the one side, conceptions of honor that he believes are universal, and on the other side, culturally specific conceptions of honor. Bowman calls the universal conceptions of honor “reflexive honor” and the culturally specific ones “cultural honor.” “Reflexive honor” is a rather unfortunately chosen designation, since it is also used by Stewart, but there with an entirely different meaning. With Stewart, “reflexive honor” is the term for the phenomenon that within certain (honor) groups, every challenge to honor can be potentially undermining, that is, everyone must at all times be ready to defend his honor — even if the challenge should be unwarranted or even laughable. (Stewart gives the following example: At the beginning of the twentieth century a general in the Austro-Hungarian army had to show up for a duel if he was challenged by a subordinate private even if the challenge was due to a trifle. If not, the general’s honor would be impugned.)
 4. Stewart employs this concept (Stewart 1994, 54) with reference to Gabriele Taylor 1985. *Pride, Shame and Guilt. Emotions of Self-Assessment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

culture, and use *Egil Skallagrimsson's Saga* as an example of an extreme culture of honor in our past.

Then I will scrutinize the changes that the two world wars represented in the western world. Finally I will dwell on contemporary culture, and use Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* as an example of the anti-honor culture of late modernity.

I. OLD NORSE CULTURE OF HONOR

Scandinavian society has traveled the long path from a quite extreme culture of honor to a culture that cultivates equality to a greater extent than most other modern societies. As a reminder of our cultural roots I will tell the sweet childhood story about Egil Skallagrimsson playing ball in *Egils Saga Skallagrimssonar*. It was said about Egil that as a seven year old he took part in a ball game together with other children, among them a ten year-old named Grim. Egil lost to Grim in a test of strength. Egil lost his temper and hit Grim with a bat. But Grim was bigger. He lifted Egil up and threw him to the ground. Egil could not tolerate this. He sought out an adult and borrowed an axe. "Egil ran up to Grim and drove the axe into his head, right through to the brain" (*Egil's Saga* 1997, 77). Egil was not taken in hand by child protection services. But the murder led to hostilities that ended with seven men killed in battle. His father, old Skallagrim, didn't like what had happened, but Bera, Egil's mother, said that "he had the makings of a true Viking and would clearly be put in command of warships when he was old enough" (*ibid.*). Subsequently there is just more of the same. Much more. The modern reader has to remind himself that this is not a story about a problem child, but a tale about a hero. An excess of wrath, a violent temper and hypersensitivity to loss of honor sets the precedence for celebrity in Old Norse culture. The sense of honor and readiness for rage were so prominent that it could make any situation into a life-threatening incident. Outside of "play," in social life, the sense of honor and offences to honor were driving forces that set the gravest events in motion. The events followed fixed *scripts*: a sense of honor – defamation – rage – violence/ revenge – retaliation – re-retaliation (a spiral of violence). On home ground the Scandinavian societies cultivated excessive rage and a volition for violence as the highest guarantor of honor. As a by-product of this domestic policy focus, a general culture of violence sprang forth that made Viking raids and harrying a part of the European politics of the age. The well-off Scandinavians of that time did not make a killing in the stock market. They went on Viking raids for a couple of summers, slaughtering people and stealing their property.

In Old Norse culture honor was more important than life itself. Of foremost importance was a good reputation after death and in order to obtain that, there was merit in dying an honorable death. In his book *Fortælling og ære. Studier i islændingesagaerne* (1993), Preben Meulengracht Sørensen writes that “in the Icelandic sagas, honor and the shape of society are two sides of the same matter” (Sørensen 1993, 187). However in the research literature, social esteem, as mentioned, is only one aspect of the concept of honor. External honor corresponds to internal honor. The internal aspect concerns personal integrity, a more individualized concept of honor that deals with noble traits of character. James Bowman believes that one finds the embryonic development of such an inner concept of honor as early as in the culture of the Greeks. The same tendency can be found in Old Norse culture. Christian culture took over the concepts of honor later on. The honor of the clan was replaced by the honor of God.

The connection between outer and inner interpretations of honor have been variable throughout history. Two of the most well-known representations of Western cultures of honor, the culture of Chivalry and the Victorian Christian Code of Honor, appear as variants in which both inner and outer aspects play an important role. One can generally say that the culture of honor continued, but the honor was to God on high. And yet, a considerable amount of honor trickled down through the ecclesiastical hierarchy also. Popes and priests took possession of property and fortune by other methods than those of the Vikings, but if one inspects the manifestations of “God’s” honor round about in the Cathedrals of Europe, it appears that their methods were just as effective as the raids of the Vikings. Even if you take into account the Christian influence on an old honor culture in this way, it is important to remember that a phenomenon such as dueling, where men settled offences to their honor at the risk of their lives, continued in Europe throughout most of the nineteenth century and in some cases even into the twentieth. Side by side with the Christian culture’s notions of humility and forgiveness, the primitive dueling culture survived and progressed through hundreds of years. A clear change slowly takes place within what one can call the history of modernity. The anti-hero appears, especially in the literary tradition of Rabelais and Cervantes. Already here one finds a nascent undermining of the Western culture of honor. At the beginning of the modern breakthrough, this evolution hastens. Especially in Ibsen one can see a strong heroism put to the test and to a large extent being undermined by ambivalence and criticism.

THE WORLD WARS

The Western honor culture undergoes a powerful, perhaps final weakening in the first half of the twentieth century. In his book *Honor. A History* (2006), James Bowman writes a comprehensive section about “The Decline and Fall of Western Honor Culture 1914–1975.” In this interpretation the two world wars play a decisive role. As Bowman depicts it, the way in which modern warfare was waged contributed to ending the old honor culture in the Western world. In this context it is relevant to see the two world wars in relation to each other. A development that began in WWI was completed because of WWII. There were only twenty years between them, and WWII can in several respects be considered as a continuation of WWI, with an eye to the concept of honor included. In any case, on the German side it was partly a matter of restoring lost honor after the defeat in WWI. Perhaps in Scandinavia there is also a special reason to see the two world wars in continuity. We acquired direct war experiences of waging modern warfare only in 1940, but by then the entire century’s changing experience was included, with overdue force. With the mobilization in 1914, there was actual enthusiasm for war in Europe, and most drew to the front with the thought of winning a quick and honorable victory for their home superpower. Patriotism and the concept of honor very likely preserved their position on the political level, among military superior officers and in propaganda for the civilian population. But it was different on the battlefield. Life at the front had a hand in undermining the fighting spirit and concept of honor. The background was the long-lasting trench warfare that no one was able to win. The undermining of every conception of honorable battle and proud victory was the result, in the first place, of the number of fallen and maimed; but just as important was the anonymizing and industrializing of the acts of war, and the role that sheer chance played in the life-and-death struggle. In *The Social History of the Machine Gun* John Ellis writes,

If a machine gun could wipe out a whole battalion of men in three minutes, where was the relevance of the old concepts of heroism, glory and fair play between gentlemen? ... In a war in which death was dealt out to so many with such mechanical casualness how could the old traditional modes of thought survive? (Ellis 1986, 142).

In addition to the machine gun and mortars there was another new technique of war, namely gas attacks, where one attempted to annihilate entire areas all in one. In retrospect they are regarded as a forerunner for so-called “carpet bombing.” Trench warfare was purely a war of cannon fodder. With a “no-man’s land” between them, many hundreds of thousands of young men lived and died submerged in narrow

muddy trenches that extended over large parts of Europe. In a succession of onslaughts, the soldiers were ordered out of the trenches, into no-man's land to run into the enemies' shower of bullets and die. The attacking side could win a few worthless kilometers of earth full of slippery mud and corpses. Then they had to dig themselves in again after a loss of thousands of men in each wave of attack. The attackers always had twice as many casualties as the defenders. After the day's battle, the wounded were left lying in no-man's land to slowly die. No one could go out and get them. The survivors who were to face the rain of bullets the next day could try to sleep to the screams of pain from their comrades whom they had shared their water rations with the night before. The soldiers were fighting a war there was no use in winning. Many of those who survived the trenches came home as the living dead. Before they arrived at the front they had learned about patriotism, heroic battle and honorable struggles. But they fought in a battle where nothing they had learned had any meaning. Soon something remarkable happened. A new type of wounded began coming home from the front; not just the large numbers of physically wounded, but young men who did not function as human beings any longer. At first there was the attempt to conceal the phenomenon. They were called cowardly, these silent, apathetic and empty-eyed youth who only a short time before had been the brave champions for the future of the fatherland. They risked being executed for desertion. But little by little one had to realize that they actually were wounded soldiers. The injuries were called shell shock.

The effects of modern warfare are documented by the so-called "war poets," among others Wilfred Owen, who was killed in 1918, and Siegfried Sassoon, who survived. Later a succession of novels were published about experiences on the battlefield; for example, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. In Hemingway we find these famous words: "There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity ... Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages..." (Hemingway 2003, 185). But it wasn't only abstract values that lost their meaning. The very understanding of humanity had to be transformed. The essential image of humanity built on strength, pride, honor and courage fell away to the advantage of a new psychological, therapeutic image of humanity, where trauma was stronger than the sense of honor or courage. This is excellently described by Pat Barker in the biographical novel *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991–1995) where we meet both of the "war poets" Owen and Sassoon, among others, in therapeutic treatment behind the front lines in the care of the Freudian psychiatrist, Dr. Rivers. Despite the excessive losses of human life during WWI, there was great disparity

between the war experiences of the soldiers and the civilian population. To a large extent the civilians were influenced by propaganda, while the actual experiences at the front made the rhetoric of propaganda obscene, as Hemingway said. This was probably one of the reasons for the “taciturnity” the soldiers brought back from the front, such as Walter Benjamin portrays it in his essay, “The storyteller.” So too in Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, where the impossibility of getting [experiences] across to family and friends when home on leave is described. Paradoxically, men would long to return to the war, because there they were together with comrades who knew what it was like. One of the evolving features that can be seen from WWI to WWII is that the civilian population became more involved in the active actions of the war to a greater extent. The movement was from a “world war” to a “total war.” This also had meaning for the fall of honor. From the outset there was a big difference in what one could call the warring parties’ moral capital in WWII. Nazism appeared as a racially based honor culture without morality. The Holocaust confirmed this to a fault. The Allies had an indisputable moral advantage. When the war was over, this advantage felt fairly securely intact. But there were dishonorable acts of war on a large scale on both sides, and in the post-war period these slowly but surely came to be known publicly. What was new in WWII compared to the first world war was especially the extensive use of air forces. The Royal Air Force, which defended England with its fighter pilots, clearly emerged as heroes with great honor. But already the first day at the helm, Winston Churchill supported large scale bombing of enemy territory. Some of this bombing was obviously directed towards military targets such as armament factories and transport systems. The bombers had enormous striking power but poor accuracy, especially because they often bombed at night. In such raids one could consider civilian losses as a kind of consequential error. But gradually the civilian population also became bombing targets for massive air raids. In 1939 the British had agreed that the RAF would not bomb targets on German soil and not ships lying in port. But after the Germans bombed Rotterdam on May 14, 1940, the bombing of cities became an accepted act of war, and it was practiced by both sides during the war. In his book about honor, Bowman writes about the bombing of cities under the heading “Area Bombing and the Demise of Honor Culture” (Bowman 2006, 169–ff). After the war the Germans’ bombing of Rotterdam, London and other English cities and the Allies’ bombing of Dresden, together with the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki stand as the most large-scale examples of carpet bombing of civilians. Through these actions, western civilization has proven itself dishonorable. What Bowman calls cultural honor, is, so to say, depleted.

“DET ER INGEN HVERDAG MER” [EVERYDAY LIFE IS DEAD AND GONE]

Jeg vil hjem til menneskene (I want to go home to the humans) is the title of the first collection of poetry from perhaps the most eminent author that debuted in Norway directly after the war, Gunvor Hofmo. Even this early title reveals most about the importance of the human factor in her life experiences. She is away from home, and the only home she is yearning for is that of humanity. This feeling of a lost humanity followed Hofmo her entire life, and characterized both her poetry and her state of health. The immediate background was the Holocaust. Hofmo had a Jewish friend and probable lover, Ruth Maier, who came to Norway as a refugee in 1939. But together with 532 other Jews she was deported from Oslo the 26th of November 1942 in the cargo ship *Donau*. She was led directly to the gas chamber at Auschwitz five days later, the 1st of December 1942. She was twenty-two years old. Her diary has been published in both Norwegian and English, and she has been called the Norwegian Anne Frank (*Ruth Maier's Diary: A Young Girl's Life under Nazism*, 2009). A large portion of Hofmo's authorship is directly or indirectly influenced by the inhumanity of the war, so in this sense it can be viewed as a form of witness literature. In her most well-known poem, she describes existence as a permanent state of emergency. The poem is called “Det er ingen hverdag mer” [Everyday life is dead and gone]:

God, if you are still watching:
Everyday life is dead and gone.

There are only silent screams,
There are only black corpses

Hanging in red trees!
Hear how quiet it is.

We turn to go home
But we hear them always.

All we sense each day
Are the breaths of the dead!

If we walk in forgetfulness
We tread on their ashes.

God, if you are still watching:
Everyday life is dead and gone.⁵

5. Few of Hofmo's poems have been translated to English. The translations in this chapter make no attempt at replicating Hofmo's use of rhyme or meter since the meaning would be compromised. The “everyday” of the title refers to the normal weekday. She is stating that a normal day no longer exists.

This is probably as close as we come to a “Zero Hour” experience in Norwegian postwar literature, such as we know if from Heinrich Böll’s and Günter Grass’ Group 47 in Germany. The immediate impact of the war on Norwegian writers was major in many other cases also. Jens Bjørneboe, who debuted in the 1950s, wrote about this experience (with an autobiographical background) in his novel *Stillheten* (1973) [*The Silence*, 2000]:

Then there’s something else, which keeps popping up. It happened thirty-eight years ago, and changed my whole life. I was fifteen years old at the time, and it was all because of a book. I read it through in one day; it wasn’t that long. It was a thin book with contents of a descriptive sort; and even though I had been quite depressed in the previous fourteen years as well, still I can say that since reading this book I’ve never been happy again, or only for brief moments at a time.... It may be the most important book I’ve ever read, and it put an end to my childhood. (Bjørneboe 2000, 164)

The book discussed was Wolfgang Langhof’s account from the German concentration camp Sachsenhausen, *The Peat Bog Soldiers*.

Both Hofmo and Bjørneboe depict the effects of the war in the form of affective reactions. Bjørneboe stresses depression and joylessness; Hofmo places most emphasis on grief, anxiety, despair and loneliness. The two were of the same generation; Hofmo was born in 1921, Bjørneboe in 1920. The war flooded over them with a shock in their youth. They were eighteen and nineteen when the war broke out; Hofmo was in the midst of a vulnerable time of youth when Ruth Maier was deported and executed. She felt that it was humanity itself that had abandoned the world. She was “on the other side,” in “another reality,” as she writes in one of her most well-known poems. But, more than that, Hofmo had possessed a Christian worldview. Now she turned against both believers and against God, and she did that in the only religious genre where there is a place for rebellion and accusations against God, in the *threnody*, the lament (See Andersen 2007). Large portions of Hofmo’s authorship can be perceived as *threnodies*. Like the composers Arnold Schönberg and Krzysztof Penderecki, Hofmo shaped a new, modernistic variant of the *threnody*, an old genre known from both Biblical and Jewish tradition. Hofmo does not just take aim at a human world without purity and without honor, but against the very worship of honor that had distinguished our culture since the introduction of Christianity. Gunvor Hofmo takes aim at God’s honor. She complains to a God who is without shame. In the poem “Vi som er viet” [We

who are wed] from the collection *Fra en annen virkelighet* (1948) [From Another Reality] she refers to God as “a God who sleeps at night while the earth rips apart,/ a God without purity, without shame.” In “Blinde nattergaler” [Blind Nightingales] from the collection of the same name (1951), she expresses herself even more crassly:

But not the barbarian’s hand
and not the barbarian’s desire
demands us, demands blood
crushes a cross of our spirit!

You, God, are the one who has
poked our eye out,
you are the pain that blends
with the wholeness we once were.

So Hofmo doesn’t just turn against a world where humanity has lost its honor. She is part of the dismantling of a thousand year-old honor culture in the religious mold, the Christian devotion to the honor of God. She is left with a shameless God and a world she cannot endure.

THE THERAPEUTIC IMAGE OF HUMANITY

Sigurd Hoel was born in 1890. He published *Meeting at the Milestone* in 1947 when he was fifty-seven years old. He was among those who introduced psychoanalysis to Norway. He was saddled with an old explanatory model from the first half of the century, and he used it zealously and systematically. It was already known from the shell shock victims of WWI that an understanding of men based on heroic and honorable personal characteristics was not adequate to explain the nature of human reactions in war. This had become persistent societal knowledge ever since the days of the war. Psychoanalysis was ready to rationalize the new knowledge. The conception of a complex non-essentialist self that contained forces it did not itself have control over fit very well in explaining and treating these new human forms of reaction. As described by Pat Barker in *Regeneration*, this is precisely what happened with the shell shocked wounded at Craiglockhart Hospital. Dr. William Rivers was the representative of psychoanalysis. Those admitted were no longer executed as cowardly deserters; they were placed in conversation therapy and received anti-depressants. The image of a therapeutical humanity took over from honor. Sigurd Hoel’s entire book is an effort to transfer the psychoanalytical “talking cure” to the genre of the novel. In this case it is more a matter of a didactic

analysis than a cure. The first person narrator begins with wanting to understand how ordinary people in Norwegian society could become Nazis. He had several of them in his circle of acquaintances and he refers to a time when it was decisive to know who was friend and who was foe. There was a clear dividing line between “good Norwegians” and “traitors,” those who had their good name and reputation intact and those who had forfeited their honor. At the outset, the narrator is known by the nickname “The Spotless One.” But the book’s analysis leads to the same insights that I have already mentioned with respect to the general history of the war. It is stated early in the analysis: “It is not easy to win with dignity.”

Have we learnt enough? Have we experienced enough, thought enough, felt enough, understood enough – or shall we in winning lose the dignity which we have acquired while we were weak, oppressed and trampled upon? (Hoel 1951, 32).

In a word, the analysis shows that The Spotless One is guilty. He does *not* win with his decency and honor intact. Because of a complicated love affair in his youth, it comes to light that The Spotless One is himself the father of Nazism, literally. The most fanatical Nazi among the Norwegians is his own flesh and blood son, who desires to take his life. Perhaps something rather commonplace in Hoel’s portrayal is that behind the treason lies a betrayal of love. And behind this betrayal of love lies the treachery of the old against the young, the old men’s treachery. Despite possible thematic banality, Hoel’s vote is clear: The Spotless One is guilty. Honor is lost. The human being does not consist of essential and honorable qualities. He is complex, and lacks both control and perspective over his own actions. Even the ordinary, common person is under the magnifying glass of suspicion. We are living *after* the essential individual. We are living after honor.

THE BLACK BIRD

An important characteristic of most honor cultures is that they appear as pronouncedly male cultures. Nini Roll Anker’s *Kvinnen og den svarte fuglen* (1945) [*The Woman and the Black Bird*]⁶ can represent the feminist aspect of Western honor culture’s deterioration in the time after the war. Perhaps this aspect is among the most striking traits in the development of the entire era. I shall not assert what is cause and what is effect here. And of course on this point one can

6. This novel has not been translated to English.

also make delicate distinctions by pointing out that “feminism” had been in the spotlight in the Scandinavian societies at least since the 1870s. But that was also precisely the time Ibsen started his ambivalent undermining of masculine heroism. Nini Roll Anker was born in 1873. She died during the war in 1942, at seventy-nine years of age. Her novel *Kvinnen og den svarte fuglen* was published posthumously in 1945. She belonged to an upper class stratum in Norwegian society but was herself a socialist, pacifist and feminist, something that characterizes her novel ideologically. She was not among the most radical feminists of her generation, but she was certainly among the most zealous pacifists. In *Kvinnen og den svarte fuglen* we encounter Bett, mother of three, two boys and a girl. She is married to Just who works in “Iron and Steel” and produces weapons. Both sons are called up for military duty as soldiers. Hans returns blind and maimed for life. “He was not human any longer ... a figure without hands, without anything in the arms of the jacket. A head without a face” (Anker 1945, 182–83). Otto becomes a deserter. He cannot participate any longer, and his mother helps him to get away. They are captured, and the text is written by Bett in prison while Otto is waiting for his punishment as a deserter. Just is the bearer of the typical masculine culture, in the novel depicted as unimaginative, non-flexible and rigid, an admirer of “Iron and Steel” in several senses, of large muscles and swelling chests. He is proud of his sons who are fighting bravely in the war, his “honor group” is nationalistic and he is insensitive to losses on the enemy’s side. He gets into quarrels with his sister-in-law and his daughter who operate with completely different “honor groups.” They stand for the idea of a working class general strike against war, and the notion that the mothers of the world could end all war when they finally become sufficiently enlightened and realize their potential power. There are many ideological layers in the novel. For my context here, it is most important to illustrate that the deterioration of honor culture clears the way for, or happens parallel to, a new growth of female influence. After the weakening of honor culture in western society there is a new focus directed towards equality and human rights questions, and equal rights for women and men is a part of this development. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948, and underscores the transition to a global philosophy of political equal rights. Shifts in histories of ideas and ideologies such as these are naturally complex. But nevertheless there cannot be any doubt that there is a connection between the deterioration of honor culture in Western societies and the weakening of patriarchal hegemony, something that Bowman discusses in his book (Bowman 2006, 117–ff). This has created a new cultural situation, not least in the Scandinavian societies, where women play a very different and more prominent role than in

most honor cultures. I believe that the weakening of the old honor culture and the transition to an equality based and human rights culture are among the most important changes in Western society. They took place slowly and through time, but the world wars probably played an important role in the process of change, and the establishment of a global network of human rights in 1948 demonstrates that something decisive had happened, at least as far as it concerns the nation as “honor group.” This does not mean that any one of us does not have an individual sense of honor. There is also no doubt that honor culture survives within definite “honor groups,” also in the western world. Especially in criminal gang environments, strict honor codes still rule. In particular areas of competition there are also still elements of honor culture with specific honor codes, for example in sports, artistic or our own academic environments. But the western welfare society does not converge around a concept of honor as the culture’s central code of values. Society’s fundamental, clear value system is equal rights, equal rights to communal public assets.

II. KARL OVE KNAUSGÅRD: MY STRUGGLE

THE LATE-MODERN WELFARE STATE

Consequently, there is good reason to believe that traditional honor cultures in the western world were weakened and changed character in a continuous evolution from the outbreak of modernity and forward to the two world wars. Experiences in the wars represented in their turn an undeniable undermining of what one could call cultural honor. Societies moved in the direction of values based on rights and ideals of equality, that is, equality as principle. Cultural values formulated in legal language, and with intended global validity, could be presumed to be less affectively dependent. They should be able to be asserted and invoked independently of national and cultural feelings that had proven to be so catastrophic in both world wars.

In this time of late modernity, traditional conceptions of honor seem to play a quite subordinate role as culture-carrying and politically controlling incentives in the West.⁷ Actually, there are many examples, especially in art and cultural life, of a type of anti-honor culture, a cultivation of and building of celebrity by means of phenomena that traditionally would have been perceived as damaging to per-

7. One must nevertheless still be somewhat cautious in generalizing on this point. During the big political conflict of the Greek financial crisis, it was noticeable that the top Greek politicians again and again argued from the sense that the honor of the Greeks had been accosted.

sonal honor. The most obvious examples would be the use of *the painful and embarrassing* as a basic element in comic art forms. It is sufficient to mention Rowan Atkinson's success with "Mr. Bean" or Rolv Wesenlund with his "Fleksnes" TV series.⁸ We saw an extreme exploitation of this phenomenon in Sasha Baron Cohen's film "Borat." The paradoxical connection between honor and the dishonorable was accentuated in this case when the film, which is heavily based on embarrassing episodes and shameless or dishonorable and offensive conduct, won a Golden Globe award in 2007, and was nominated for several other highly esteemed prizes. When the late modern Western societies and the Muslim honor culture time and again come into conflict about caricature art, we should not disregard the fact that the Western appreciation of the dishonorable in humor plays an important role in the cultural antagonism. The struggles about caricature are perhaps an example of the collision between an intact honor culture and a comic art form "after honor".

But the representation of the traditionally embarrassing or painful and dishonorable is not only found in cartoons and comic art. The Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik scored considerable bipartisan support by being open about his mental health issue, depression. This example draws attention to an important aspect of the function of the embarrassing or painful and potentially dishonorable in late modernity. In serious, as opposed to comic, contexts they function as an indicator for honesty and authenticity, and those are traits that a person in late modernity considers more valuable than traditional honorable personal characteristics. The courage to reveal oneself is seen as more valuable than traditional daring in battle or other situations requiring great deeds. Shame-ridden phenomena that earlier would have caused shame no longer necessarily do so, but in some cases quite the opposite, respect. Openness surrounding earlier topics of shame can be one of several gains from the weakening of honor culture, be it mental problems, bullying, sexual tendencies or the like. The appreciation for bringing private relationships and concerns into the public sphere is a part of this development, and has clearly contributed to changes in attitudes and greater tolerance. In the last few years this development has been conveyed to newer levels both in traditional and new media such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, etc.

But revealing one's own life also leads involuntarily to the revealing of the lives of others. We live in social relationships. The characterization "ruthless" has become a positive description in connection with self revelation, but accompany-

8. "Fleksnes" was a very popular Scandinavian sitcom, based on the British series "Hancock's Half Hour."

ing problems have been thrown into relief from both ethical and legal quarters. It is perhaps easy to agree that everyone has the ownership rights to his own life story. But most people can see that one treads onto problematic grounds when a person carries out “ruthless” public exposure of information about others, who themselves do not wish the exposure and who often can be defenseless with respect to it (for example, children or the deceased), or who dispute its truth content. In such cases, one deprives the ownership rights of another to *his* life story. Moreover, the sociologist Richard Sennett has pointed out greater societal problems tied to what he calls *The Fall of Public Man* or “The tyrannies of intimacy,” that is, the phenomenon that the public sphere more and more functions on the premises of the sphere of intimacy (Sennett 1974, 337).

MY STRUGGLE

Scarcely any cultural phenomenon in the last few years has actualized these aspects of the changes in honor culture to a higher degree than the publication of Karl Ove Knausgård’s *Min Kamp I–VI* [*My Struggle I–VI*]. Knausgård has won greater prestige more quickly than any other participant in public life based to a large extent on his “ruthless” revelation of relationships that belong to the intimate sphere, and that would traditionally be perceived as both publically irrelevant, partly painful or embarrassing and even quite ignominious. If we deem literary prizes as a badge of “honor,” we can very well say that Knausgård has won considerable honor within a particular honor group precisely by breaking with fundamental traditional honor codes. While the collected reception of the work has shown that this relationship takes place in an affective sphere, the work itself is also quite affective in its method of narration, something that, among others, Eivind Tjønneland has called attention to with his formulation of what he perceives as *Knausgård-koden* [The Knausgård code] (Tjønneland 2010). Knausgård himself writes in *My Struggle II* that the only reason he wanted to write was to be able to express feelings. This is what he says after a powerful musical experience causes him to start crying:

My feelings soared and before I knew what was happening my eyes were moist. It was only then that I realized how little I normally felt, how numb I had become. When I was eighteen I was full of such feelings all the time, the world seemed more intense and that was why I wanted to write, it was the sole reason, I wanted to touch something that music touched. The human voice’s lament and sorrow, joy and delight, I wanted to evoke everything the world had bestowed upon us. (Knausgård 2013, 345–46)

In his book, *Honor: A Phenomenology*, Robert L. Oprisko points out that it is appropriate to distinguish between shame and dishonor in connection with the rupture of honor culture: “Shame is a fact of life. The society will have expectations for each member based upon their identities and their past actions” (Oprisko 2012, 73). He also stresses that “prestige is gained through excelling. Shame is avoided by not failing” (71). Unni Wikan thinks that it is common in honor cultures to be more concerned with avoiding shame than with obtaining honor. This assertion is cited and discussed by both Stewart and Oprisko (*ibid.*). In the late modern Western variant we encounter in Knausgård, this fear and sensitivity to individual shame appears to be strongly weakened or altered. This is explicitly mentioned in *My Struggle II*: “I don’t give a shit about myself” as an answer to his friend Geir’s commentary on self exposure. What shocked Geir in the reading of Knausgård’s first novel *Ute av verden* [Out of the World] was “the fact that you went so far, put so much of yourself into it” (Knausgård 2013, 166). In this case it concerns a crime, a punishable sexual act committed against a thirteen year old girl – an act that Knausgård in *My Struggle II* certainly does what he can to cast a mystifying veil over. At any rate, he feels no shame. He “doesn’t give a shit” in connection with exposure of painful or dishonorable actions, he claims. An obvious example of this is the description of premature ejaculation in connection with sexual encounters with women. Neither does his own unfaithfulness towards women he is involved with make him uncomfortable. The same is true of unfaithfulness where he himself is cuckolded. In line with statistical knowledge of life in late modernity such occurrences appear rather more commonplace than dishonorable. He also talks about drunkenness, wild behavior, acts of vandalism, failure and stupidity during his time in Bergen, for example, apparently without a need to conceal what is painful or embarrassing. As far as it goes, he seems sensitive to his own failures, but not affected by embarrassment or shame. He is ostensibly indifferent to expectations that society might have for him, and the form of prestige that one gains through “excelling.” *My Struggle* depicts both a recklessly revealing person and a type of shameless person.

Certainly on this point a delicate distinction is needed. It is not the case that the Knausgård whom we encounter in *My Struggle* never feels shame. On the contrary. He is prone to feeling insignificant in relation to others. The most dramatic episode of shame is probably the grave self-inflicted injury he inflicts upon himself at an author’s seminar on Biskops-Arnø. After being rejected by a woman (the woman who later became his wife), he cuts up his own face with a piece of broken glass. (A corresponding episode is found in *My Struggle V*.) When he meets the other authors (including the repudiating Linda) the next day, there is no doubt that

he feels shame. As he does in other situations as well. He can feel intense shame but he is not ashamed of that. The point is that shame never causes him to conceal himself or go into hiding. Here it is appropriate to be reminded of the psychologist Erik Erikson's classic description of "autonomy versus shame and doubt" in his major work *Childhood and Society* from 1963:

Shame is an emotion insufficiently studied, because in our civilization it is so early and easily absorbed by guilt. Shame supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at: in one word, self-conscious. One is visible and not ready to be visible; which is why we dream of shame as a situation in which we are stared at in a condition of incomplete dress, in night attire, "with one's pants down." Shame is early expressed in an impulse to bury one's face, or to sink, right then and there, into the ground. But this, I think, is essentially rage turned against the self. He who is ashamed would like to force the world not to look at him, not to notice his exposure. He would like to destroy the eyes of the world. Instead he must wish for his own invisibility. (Erikson 1993, 252–253).

As is evident, Knausgård's *My Struggle* involves a gigantic initiative that consistently moves in the opposite direction from Erikson's description of shame. Knausgård displays it. He talks exhaustively about it. The Knausgård that we encounter outside the work *My Struggle* even appears to make shame a type of psychological basic mode of his life. The issue is that every time he writes what he is ashamed to have written, his editor says he is writing his best, according to the writer himself. He refers to it as his "shame-o-meter" (Knausgård 2013b, 3). It is not the case that shame is something foreign to him. The brazenness consists in that he narrates intimately about it, that he "[doesn't] give a shit" and believes from the editor's statement that he scores artistic points for it. To be sure, the critic Ane Farsethås also believes that the editor is right: "It is when he descends the lowest, and humiliates himself as much as possible, that the literary self arises to the greatest heights" (Farsethås 2012, 305–06).

As opposed to shame, dishonor is, according to Oprisko, directed not at oneself but at an honor group: "Dishonor differs from shame ... because it actively engages the values of a group to dismiss it" (Oprisko 2012, 69). It is likely in this sphere that *My Struggle* has emerged as most controversial in its public reception. If we recapitulate for a moment some of the elements from the old honor culture we came from, it seems undoubtable that the honor group we have the foremost obligations to is the family or clan, then in-laws and those with whom we have

family ties. Those who have protested most vehemently against Knausgård's project are precisely his family and the "clan" he comes from. In a letter to the editor in *Klassekampen* on the 3rd of October, 2009, several family members wrote: "We are talking about confessional literature and factual prose. Judas literature. It is a book full of insinuations, lies, incorrect characterizations of people and disclosures that quite clearly break Norwegian law in this domain." This conflict between Knausgård and his kin is perhaps the clearest example of how far late-modern values have moved from the traditional honor culture. Knausgård does not only disperse disgrace on his father and grandmother's family, he also exposes his own lovers, his nuclear family and his own children. Thus he breaks with the traditional society's primary honor groups. In *My Struggle VI* he touches upon what this has cost the one closest to him, his wife Linda. Even a positively inclined critic like Jon Helt Haarder takes a skeptical attitude towards Knausgård's discussion of his own children: "With his confessions Knausgård places not just himself, but also those closest to him in the hands of his readers. Something that, especially in connection with the children, is risky, if not reprehensible" (Haarder 2014, 203). Knausgård's project exemplifies the clear deterioration of the traditional honor culture, especially by showing an apparent indifference to one's own shame and a corresponding disloyalty to traditional honor groups. Knausgård himself often stresses his need for solitude. He claims that he would prefer to be alone; he wants to be free. He is dependent on having time alone. But Knausgård is not at all alone. On the one hand, he does write himself free from community and honor groups he does not want to belong to. But at the same time he is writing himself into new honor groups, late-modern honor groups that are not based on family and kinship, but on "fame." Late modernity's primary honor groups are based on prestige, excellence, fame and celebrity or star status:

Prestige is the conception of honor that positively affects an individual's hierarchical social value in a group. Prestige is the process whereby external groups grant honor to a member for achieving or displaying excellence in deeds and attributes considered good by said group. (Oprisko 2012, 63).

This is Oprisko's definition of prestige, and he asserts that the concept corresponds to Stewart's term "vertical honor." "...vertical (or positive) honor [is] the right to special respect enjoyed by those who are superior, ..." writes Stewart (Stewart 1994, 59). He lists a long series of characteristics or qualities that can be the basis for such respect, but ends his litany by saying "or anything else." Oprisko also concludes: "A person can get honored for anything as long as it is of value to

and considered virtuous by the honor-bestowing sovereign” (Oprisko 2012, 63). So it should not surprise anyone that one can obtain “vertical honor” based on phenomena that *outside* of a specific honor group (authors) traditionally would be considered as covered in shame and disgrace. W. L. Sessions in his book *Honor for Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation and Defense* (2010) distinguishes between, among others, *conferred honor*, *recognition honor* and *positional honor*. In the case of Knausgård, initially it is a matter of recognition honor, which according to Sessions ranks the highest. There is nevertheless no doubt that this creates a basis for *positional honor* in the next instance. Knausgård’s work *My Struggle I–VI* has won him a position as perhaps Norway’s most famous writer, at home and abroad. By this I do not mean to claim that it was just the break with traditional honor codes that has earned Knausgård recognition honor. Many have called attention to the aesthetic and artistic merit of *My Struggle*. My point, in the context in which I place *My Struggle*, is that the break with traditional honor culture has not made Knausgård dishonorable. Quite the contrary. It demonstrates the weakened honor culture of our time.

It is also fitting to remark that Knausgård obviously pokes into a real and bitter family conflict. My point is not in any way to take a position on the matter in dispute. For all I know, Knausgård as well as his kin can have their legitimate concerns. My focus is the symptomatic in the relationship between the individual and a traditional honor group and its honor code. It should also be added that, of course, family conflicts have followed the history of literature throughout time. What is special in Knausgård’s case is that it is a question of an actual, known family in a recognizable local environment – not this or that literary Oedipus or a staged Doll House. As an autobiographical text, *My Struggle* therefore accomplishes what autobiographies are in the habit of doing. The work projects and constitutes a self. Autobiographies are not neutral accounts of a life lived. They also create what they write about, that is, a self that the author or writer can identify with and live with. In Knausgård’s case it is clearly evident, as mentioned, that in that process there are several communities that he wants to write himself out of, especially traditional honor groups – and some communities that he wants to write himself into, especially the community of authors. As a consequence of succeeding so well at this, “for achieving or displaying excellence” he also achieves being taken up in the late-modern media society’s special honor group, the celebrity or star status group. Such honor groups are distinguished to a large degree by late modernity’s general “fluid” nature. The celebrity’s star lights up the sky for a while, but can often be extinguished after a time. Late-modern communities rarely hold guarantees of durability. They are also to a much lesser degree marked by

loyalty than traditional fellowships were. Inner competition is more conspicuous than solidarity and equality. There is competition for the attention of the media and the public, and those are limited, as is well known. Seen in this light, this type of prestige is similar to what Stewart calls *competitive honor* (Stewart 1994, 59ff). One does not gain attention by being loyal and adapting oneself to established social codes. One gains attention by forcing open established borders, breaking with recognized codes, also recognized honor codes. Here is where Knausgård's ruthlessness has its effect. Knausgård himself reflects over this ruthlessness that causes him to break with accepted decency:

One of the questions this book gave rise to for me when I wrote it is what there is to gain by transgressing the social, by describing what no one wants described, that is, the secret and the hidden. Expressed in another way: what value does ruthlessness have ... its consequences do not only affect me, but also others. At the same time, it is true. To write it, one must be free, and to be free one must be ruthless. (Knausgård 2011, 970, my trans.)⁹

Knausgård writes for his freedom, not for fame. That is definitely an artistic fact. But the social fact is maximum prestige in the honor group in this cultural arena. The first fact takes place in the text; the other fact takes place in public – both the ignominy that he casts over traditional honor groups and the inclusion in the late-modern honor group of celebrities. As little as *My Struggle* can be regarded from a text internal perspective (with its ambiguous status as novel and autobiography); just as less can the reception of the work be regarded as a purely aesthetic judgement of quality. The text is a performative speech act. It creates a celebrity, a prominent member of a late-modern honor group. And it disgraces traditional honor groups. It is evident in the work that the author himself reflects on honor. His conceptions of honor are, quite surprisingly, strikingly old-fashioned, almost Old Norse. It is also obvious that he sees – and regrets – the weakening that the traditional honor culture has experienced in late modernity. We find Knausgård's fascination for elements from traditional honor culture in his interest in boxing, the boxing environment, and his friend Geir. The boxing environment is precisely a special honor group where it is a matter of quite simple, traditional honor codes that distinguish it from the rest of society – but that can perhaps be reminiscent of values from way back in Egil Skallagrímson's time. Knausgård puts the blame on the society of the welfare state when it concerns the weakening of these values:

9. This quotation is from Book VI of *My Struggle*, which has not yet appeared in English translation.

He [Geir] had boxed at a club in Stockholm for three years in order to gain a firsthand view of the milieu he described [in the book *The Aesthetics of a Broken Nose*]. There the values that the welfare state had otherwise subverted, such as masculinity, honor, violence and pain, were upheld, and the interest for me lay in how different society looked when viewed from that angle, with the set of values they had retained. (Knausgård 2013, 126)

What Knausgård touches on here is precisely how different society appears when one contemplates it through the eyes of a different community or the codes of different honor cultures. He himself represents precisely the characteristic welfare state's late modern "fluid" values. The group that has accused him of writing "Judas literature," represents – parallel to the boxing environment – another honor group with a different honor code.

In toto, Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* reveals the status of the honor culture and concepts of honor in late-modern, Western society. An almost total emancipation from traditional honor groups is possible. It is not just possible but even highly esteemed to rid oneself of traditional honor codes as well, including widespread ethical norms. In line with developments in other fields in late-modern society, belonging to honor groups and loyalty to honor codes are topics for choice and rechoice (what Anthony Giddens calls *second choices*). At the same time, both the work itself and its reception show that traditional feelings of honor are still found as residual values in society. The exposure of traditional honor groups evokes frustration, anger and despair, even illness reactions, in these same honor groups; but, of course, without mobilization of the judicial system to take a position against honor infringement (even if lawsuits are threatened).¹⁰ It is perhaps somewhat surprising that the "emancipated" one also shows frustration in connection with the deterioration of the honor culture. This frustration is expressed espe-

10. The relationship between honor and law is a wide-ranging subject. Stewart has a separate chapter about it in his book. He shows that in countries where there has been a close connection between honor and law, the number of litigations about insults to honor have greatly decreased, which underscores the weakening of honor cultures. (At the beginning of the 1900s there were 50,000 cases per year in Germany. In the 1960s this was reduced to between 8000 and 10,000. See Stewart 14). In addition, Stewart cites Montaigne who wrote that "there are two sets of laws, those of honor and those of justice, in many matters quite opposed" (cited in Stewart 79). Montaigne also said that "He who appeals to the laws to get satisfaction for an offence to his honor, dishonors himself" (Stewart 80). It is clearly a common feature in the history of honor that such a discrepancy between the judicial system and the honor culture has existed. In European history this meant, for example, that one turned a blind eye to a dueling tradition that actually was illegal — in the same way as other honor cultures have continued to take lightly phenomena such as so-called murders of honor, for example.

cially in the relationship of the feminist sides of the lost honor culture. As mentioned, most honor cultures are very much dominated by males. Late-modern Western society, which is heading towards equality, shakes the honor culture's traditional male role. *My Struggle* shows considerable frustration in connection with late-modern gender identity, something that especially emerges in the context of parental roles. But Knausgård also shows interest in the values of traditional, masculine honor culture in connection with his admiration for the boxing environment. Therefore he turns against the same late-modern welfare state society that has made it possible for him to be emancipated from traditional honor groups and honor codes.

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