

# Narrating the Dead in the Anthropocene Hesitation and Existential Pluralism in Karl Ove Knausgård's Novel Series *The Morning Star*

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**Abstract** In the *Morning Star* series (2020-), Karl Ove Knausgård explores blurred boundaries between life and death, challenging traditional views of mortality. This study uses T. Todorov's theory of the fantastic and V. Despret's existentially pluralist philosophy of the dead to examine how the dead in Knausgård's novels defy binary categorizations. Through narrative techniques e.g., tying and severing of narrative knots, the series creates a space of ambiguity where the dead influence the living, inviting readers to confront questions about reality, agency, and interconnectedness.

**Keywords** The dead. The fantastic. Existential pluralism. Narrative techniques. Other-than-human.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Theoretical Points of Departure. – 2.1 Vinciane Despret. – 2.1.1 The Reality of the Dead. – 2.1.2 Post-Anthropological Relevance. – 2.1.3 Proposed Term: Once-Human. – 2.2 Tzvetan Todorov. – 3 Scope, Method and Relevance of this Paper. – 3.1 Scope. – 3.2 Method. – 3.3 Relevance. – 4 Analysis. – 4.1 Identifying Ways the Dead Act. – 4.2 Instauration and Joint Agency. – 4.3 Narrative Knotting-Technique. – 4.4 Intertextuality. – 4.5 Uncanny, Marvellous, or Both and Neither? – 4.6 Inconsistencies and Severing of Knots. – 5 Final Remarks.



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## 1 Introduction

In Karl Ove Knausgård's novel series *The Morning Star* (2020-), the boundaries between life and death appear blurred. Throughout the series, the Norwegian author reimagines conventional notions of death, questioning what it means to be dead and how the dead relate to the living. He delves into enigmas surrounding the limits of human knowledge, what lies beyond, as well as our capacity to distinguish between what is real and unreal, particularly when it comes to the line between life and death, the living and the dead.

In this paper, I explore how Knausgård's novels reimagine the ontology of death and the dead. Specifically, I ask: How do these texts depict the dead as entities that resist simple categorization, challenging rigid, binary ways of thinking? What does Knausgård's depiction of the dead contribute to broader discussions about the entanglement of the world and the decentring of human-centric perspectives? In this light, the dead become nonhuman agents, despite their human origins, because their existence and actions extend beyond the boundaries of familiar human experience. In viewing these once-human beings as such, while acknowledging their ability to partake in the ongoingness of the world, my interpretation of *The Morning Star* exemplifies the post-anthropological shift toward recognizing the agency of other-than-human forces in shaping reality.

Throughout my paper, I draw on Vinciane Despret's theoretical work on how "the dead come into the lives of the living" (Despret 2021, 18), as well as Tzvetan Todorov's theory of *the fantastic* (1975). Further inspired by Marco Caracciolo's (2022) work on how stories can convey complex interdependencies between human and nonhuman actors, I focus on the storytelling methods Knausgård uses in his series to unsettle the notion that "the dead have no destiny other than nonexistence" (Despret 2021, 4). Ultimately, I aim to show how the series' unique ontology of death invites readers into a space of epistemological ambiguity. This space allows for a more open-minded and fresh way of reimagining death and the dead – not as the stark opposite of life and the living, but as a part of a more fluid, entangled existence. This reimagining raises questions about how it might reshape our understanding of the place of the dead in our lives, and whether contemporary societies are prepared to embrace this fluidity in their relationship with mortality.

## 2 Theoretical Points of Departure

### 2.1 Vinciane Despret

#### 2.1.1 The Reality of the Dead

In *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind* (2021),<sup>1</sup> Belgian philosopher, psychologist, and ethologist Vinciane Despret offers a perspective that challenges traditional binary thinking about how the dead figure in the world. According to Despret, the dead are typically relegated to a realm of either (physical) nonexistence or (imagined) psychic existence, often dismissed as hallucinations, superstitions, or mere products of the imagination. Despret, however, proposes an alternative view.

The dead have ‘ways of being’ that make them into actual real beings in the register that is their own, that they manifest accountable ways of being present, and of which we can feel the effects. (Despret 2021, 8)

Rather than viewing their existence in terms of a binary system, as either fully material or entirely imagined, Despret urges us to view the dead as existing beyond the confines of these poles.

Throughout her work, Despret explores real-life accounts of people who have experienced the presence of their loved ones after death. She argues that the dead continue to play roles in the ongoingness of the world, but they require the cooperation of the living to do so. As Despret explains, “[the] dead have things to accomplish, but they themselves have to be the object of an accomplishment” (9). In this way, the relationship between the living and the dead is symbiotic, bordering on ecology (9-10), forming a kind of ecological interdependence that reflects broader patterns of interaction between human and nonhuman forces.

Philosophically, Despret’s approach is grounded in ‘existential pluralism’, a theoretical framework associated with the French philosopher Étienne Souriau (1892-1979) that recognizes multiple modes of existence, each with its own reality, meaning that entities – whether living, dead, material, or immaterial – coexist in different ways without being reducible to a single, fixed understanding of reality (Noske 2015). The concept of different modes of existence is central to Despret’s argument that the dead, like all things,

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in French under the title *Au bonheur des morts, Récits de ceux qui restent* (2015).

exist – albeit not in the same way as the living. “The reality of the dead is obviously not the same as that of mountains, sheep, or black holes”, Despret reminds us, “but their difference does not negate their existence” (2021, 7). This recognition allows for a more nuanced understanding of the reality of the dead. Through their influence, the dead continue to exert agency. As Despret emphasizes, “We effectively know about their presence because of their potential to act, or rather, to give rise to action, through their capacity to affect us from the ‘outside’” (8).

Through Bruno Latour (2011), Despret borrows the concept of ‘instauration’ from Souriau (2015) to explain how the dead appear in the lives of the living. Instauration refers to the process of bringing something into existence, suggesting a more complex form of creation than mere fabrication. As Despret explains in her interpretation of Souriau’s philosophy, instauration is a collaborative process, where beings – including the dead – are co-created through mutual interaction. Despret argues that it is not a one-sided construction by the living; instead, “we help the dead to be or become what they are; we don’t invent them” (7). In summary, concepts such as instauration and modes of existence challenge rigid definitions of reality by acknowledging that forces beyond the strictly material or imagined, such as the dead, actively influence the world.

### 2.1.2 Post-Anthropological Relevance

Despret’s understanding of the dead aligns with post-anthropological ideas, such as those found in Latour’s actor-network theory (e.g., 1996) and Jane Bennett’s vibrant matter (2010), which recognize the agency of nonhuman forces in shaping the world. In Despret’s view, the dead exert agency through their ongoing influence on the living, a process that challenges rigid binaries by recognizing the dead as entities with their own mode of existence, affecting the world without being living human beings. Donna J. Haraway (2016) acknowledges Despret’s role in “bringing the dead into active presence” (Despret 2021, 6), illustrating how her philosophy contributes to a broader reimagining of entangled realities. Despret’s emphasis on the joint agency of the living and the dead, as well as the symbiotic relationship between them, fits naturally into post-anthropological thought, where humans and nonhumans are interconnected. However, for some readers, labelling dead humans as nonhuman might feel imprecise, as it overlooks their lingering connection to their former human state. This raises the question: how do we account for their unique status without losing sight of their origins?

### 2.1.3 Proposed Term: Once-Human

When reading post-anthropological discourse, we often see terms such as ‘nonhuman’ and ‘other-than-human’. However, throughout my work, I have found that these existing terms do not quite fit beings that ‘used to be human’ but whose mode of existence have since shifted beyond those we typically associate with the human state. To address this, I propose the term ‘once-human’, referring to beings that were originally living humans but now exist in a different way – whether through regular death (e.g., Harry’s parents in *Harry Potter*), corruption into monstrous entities (e.g., the Ringwraiths in *The Lord of the Rings*), ascension to a higher state of being, such as becoming a god (e.g., Talos in *The Elder Scrolls*), or any combination of such transformations (e.g., the Dead Three in *The Forgotten Realms*, who through death ascend to monstrous divinity). This term helps differentiate once-human beings from living humans while acknowledging their origins in human nature, setting them apart from other nonhuman actors like animals, plants, or fungi.

While the term once-human risks sounding as though it strips the dead of their humanity, I employ it with caution. The term is not meant to dehumanize beloved deceased family members by equating them with fantastical entities like the Ringwraiths; rather, it serves as a conceptual tool to recognize that all beings who once lived as humans can continue to exist and influence the world in ways that differ from living human beings. This term acknowledges the uniqueness of each once-human being’s mode of presence, whether it involves a gentle lingering or a more mythologized form of ongoingness. Being once-human does not necessarily erase one’s connection to humanity – though it may, as seen when comparing the enduring presence of Harry Potter’s parents to the corrupted forms of Tolkien’s Ringwraiths. There are also those who occupy an intermediate space, such as ghostly beings in Gothic fiction (e.g., Poe’s *Ligeia*), where the once-human being’s humanity persists even as it takes on a more monstrous character.

## 2.2 Tzvetan Todorov

To understand the narrative strategies that blur the boundaries between life and death in *The Morning Star* series, I draw on Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of ‘the fantastic’. In his work (1973), Todorov describes how stories featuring seemingly supernatural events can lead readers to hesitate between natural and supernatural explanations. If the strange events are explained through supernatural means, the story is ‘marvellous’; if rational explanations prevail, it

is 'uncanny'. When hesitation remains unresolved, the narrative occupies the realm of 'the fantastic'.

Despret's critique of binary thinking about the reality of the dead challenges the tendency to classify them as either purely imagined or non-existent. Connecting this to Todorov's framework, different stories conceptualize the dead in various ways: uncanny narratives often dismiss the dead as dreams or hallucinations, reinforcing the view of death as life's opposite. In strictly marvellous texts, the dead continue to exist in ways that defy natural laws, suggesting a challenge to binary thinking. These narratives grant the dead their own mode of being, but because they are tied to supernatural frameworks that remain impossible in the world we recognize outside of fiction, they do not necessarily suggest a plausible representation of how the dead could exist in the real world. By contrast, fantastic texts maintain a state of hesitation, where readers cannot fully resolve whether the dead belong to the realm of the imagined or the otherworldly. This ambiguity allows the dead to occupy a liminal space, supporting Despret's call for multiple modes of existence.

Applying Todorov's theory to Knausgård's work serves as a tool to explore the complex ontology of the dead in his novels. Classifying the narrative as uncanny, marvellous, or fantastic is not the end goal but a means to understand how Knausgård portrays the fluidity of reality between life and death. This analysis helps reveal what kind of existence his narrative grants to the dead, how it challenges traditional binaries, and how it might expand on Despret's ideas about the interconnectedness of the living and the dead.

While Todorov suggests that the fantastic thrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the lines between reality and unreality were less defined, Knausgård's novels might invite us to reconsider this claim. It is possible that these boundaries are becoming blurred again, reflected not only in post-anthropological thought but also potentially in contemporary literature, where the dead may be portrayed as entities that challenge clear distinctions between the real and the unreal. Further studies are required to argue this notion.

### 3 Scope, Method and Relevance of this Paper

#### 3.1 Scope

While I speak broadly of *The Morning Star* series as a whole, this paper will focus on examples from the first three instalments, as they (at the time of writing) are the only volumes available in English translation, accessible to a wider audience. This includes *The Morning Star* (2021), *The Wolves of Eternity* (2023), and *The Third Realm* (2024), originally published in Norwegian as *Morgenstjernen* (2020), *Ulvene fra evighetens skog* (2021), and *Det tredje riket* (2022). Although my analysis is based on the original Norwegian versions, all references throughout this paper will be to the English translations. Future research will incorporate the fourth and fifth novel as well as any subsequent instalments to this ongoing series, to assess how later volumes might challenge or reinforce the findings presented here.

#### 3.2 Method

My analysis uses a methodological model I developed to examine narratives across various media where death or the dead appear in unconventional ways, such as in the TV-series *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) and the video game *Slay the Princess* (2023). Drawing on the theories of Tzvetan Todorov and Vinciane Despret, the model explores how these stories reinforce or challenge binary views of the dead's reality.

In this paper, I focus on moments in Knausgård's novels where the dead 'behave' in ways that blur the line between life and death. Using Todorov's theory of the fantastic, I analyse how hesitation arises when characters and readers question whether these events are rationally explainable or supernatural. This involves determining whether the ambiguity remains or resolves into the uncanny or marvellous. Ultimately, I explore how Knausgård's portrayal of the dead suggests a more fluid understanding of existence, expanding beyond traditional human-centred views to acknowledge the agency of once-human forces.

#### 3.3 Relevance

This paper explores how Knausgård's *Morning Star* series challenges rigid, human-centric views on death and the dead, contributing to the broader understanding of death in the Anthropocene. It explores how narratives can embrace the influence of once-human forces as part of

the world's intricate ongoingness, aligning with post-anthropological literary studies that recognize the agency of nonhuman forces – e.g., forests, mycelium, frogs – and extending this to include the dead.

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Identifying Ways the Dead Act

As a new star appears in the sky, strange events unfold. Demonic figures emerge in the wilderness, and the dead begin to defy the boundaries of death. This is the premise of the *Morning Star* series, where the dead challenge conventional roles, resisting the expectation to remain absent or passive in the world of the living.

One example is Egil's encounter with a dead girl named Emma. Despite her death, Egil sees Emma sitting beneath a tree by a pool, her presence vivid enough to unsettle him. She rises, turns, and walks away, leaving Egil questioning what he witnessed (Knausgård 2021, 662). This moment blurs the expected separation between the living and the dead, suggesting that the dead may retain a presence that defies simple explanation.

Another instance involves Ramsvik, a deceased patient in a chapter narrated by the nurse Solveig. During his own heart transplant surgery, Ramsvik revives, forcing the medical staff to halt the procedure. "‘What the hell is happening?’ said the surgeon. ‘It can't be, it's impossible!’ [...] ‘The definition of death is that it's irreversible [...] No one can come back from the dead’" (Knausgård 2021, 179). This scene challenges the medical definition of death, confronting both characters and readers with the idea that the boundary between life and death may be more porous than assumed.

Similarly, the priest Kathrine encounters a deceased man named Kristian Hadeland under puzzling circumstances. She recognizes him in his coffin as someone she met just two days earlier, even though records show he died a week before (Knausgård 2021, 82). After his burial, Kathrine sees him again at a supermarket, but he disappears when she tries to follow him (320-1). This encounter adds to the series' sense of uncertainty, as the dead seem to remain active in ways that defy linear notions of time and death.

Syvert Løyning's encounters with his deceased father also complicate the expected relationship between the living and the dead. His father appears in dreams, offering subtle hints that encourage Syvert to delve into his father's hidden past. These dreams spark Syvert's curiosity, leading him to uncover secrets, including the existence of a half-sister living in Russia. Here, the dead influence



the living indirectly, guiding Syvert toward discoveries that reshape his life as well as his understanding of his father's life and death.

Moreover, during what seems to be a psychotic breakdown, the artist Tove sees a swarm of undead beings pouring over the land as the new star rises, screaming her name as she hides – like a scene from a myth or nightmare (Knausgård 2024, 441).

These instances show the dead disrupting conventional boundaries between life and death, suggesting a lingering presence that defies straight-forward explanations. This presence, as I will explore next, deeply influences the living, shaping their actions and perceptions in unexpected ways.

#### 4.2      Instauration and Joint Agency

Building on how the dead defy expected roles, we see their presence in the *Morning Star* series extending beyond mere haunting to actively shaping the world of the living. This furthers Despret's work on instauration, where the dead participate in ongoing life processes.

In the *Morning Star* series, the dead do not simply vanish; instead, they continue to influence the living, shaping thoughts, actions, and destinies. Egil's encounter with Emma, for example, deeply alters his worldview. After seeing Emma, Egil becomes absorbed in exploring the nature of death, embarking on an intellectual journey that changes his perspective on reality – not as defined solely by scientific models, but as a network where human understanding is intertwined with nonhuman, including once-human, forces.

I could not forget that I had seen a dead girl sitting by an outdoor swimming pool, silent and withdrawn, dressed in the clothes she had been wearing when she died, nor could I pretend not to have seen her. So I began to write about it, and about what it could mean. And as I wrote, it was as if something opened up inside me, I began to understand to what great extent our language constrains the world, arranging it and placing its various elements in logical systems that are of such nature that we see neither the system nor the logic, only the world it presents to us [...]. I saw the oak trees in the house, so ponderous and calm, and I saw that they too, as us, were living things, without name, boundless and free. In glimpses, I saw the world behind language, a world of transformation and mystery, and one night I saw my [deceased] mother, Torill, in a dream [...]. [It was as if she] had been waiting for me in that dream, and was already there when I came. (Knausgård 2021, 664-5)

This introspective shift suggests that Emma's presence catalysed Egil's deeper understanding of the world – one that goes beyond conventional

rational explanations. It shows that the dead, in Knausgård's narrative, can play an active role in shaping the living – an example of instauration, where the dead become participants in the world's ongoing creation.

Similarly, Syvert's dreams about his deceased father lead him to uncover hidden truths. In one dream, his father's cryptic comments in the basement laundry room hint at future events, such as their mother's illness (Knausgård 2023, 68). These dreams blur the line between life and death, guiding Syvert to discover his father's secret life, a half-sister in Russia, and the possibility that his father's death was a suicide. Despret describes such dreams as "oracular" (2021, 64), not because they predict the future but because they prompt the dreamer to reflect and act. Syvert's father, though dead, continues to guide his son toward knowledge he might not have sought otherwise.

This theme continues when Syvert, decades later, meets his half-sister Alevtina in Moscow. She recognizes their father from a photograph, despite never having met him: "I've seen him before! I've dreamt about him. Oh my goodness. How is that even possible?" (Knausgård 2023, 777). This encounter, like Syvert's own dreams, suggests that the dead can cross boundaries, leaving traces that defy rational explanation. Even though Alevtina quickly rationalizes her experience, it still leaves room for a marvellous interpretation, especially since it coincides with the new star's appearance and the mysterious cessation of death, themes from the series' first instalment.

Through such stories, Knausgård challenges traditional notions of agency, showing how the dead can shape the lives of the living, actively participating in the world's ongoing creation. This challenges conventional thinking that links life to action and death to passivity. Characters like Egil and Syvert, who are transformed by their encounters with the dead, encourage readers to see the dead as more than just memories – they are active, evolving forces shaping the world, furthering Despret's ideas. This blurring of boundaries embodies instauration, revealing how the living and the dead engage in a shared process of becoming.

These examples of instauration demonstrate how the dead influence the living's understanding of reality. Yet, Knausgård's narrative technique also plays a crucial role in shaping how these influences are perceived, blurring the lines between what is real and imagined.

### 4.3 Narrative Knotting-Technique

While the influence of the dead on the living is clear, the ways Knausgård presents these interactions is key to the reader's experience. Through a narrative knotting technique, he intertwines perspectives and links storylines to create a tapestry that challenges straightforward interpretations.

He employs this technique by weaving together multiple perspectives, connecting disparate storylines through recurring motifs and events. These 'knots' blur the line between the supernatural and the rational, suggesting deeper connections between occurrences. By overlapping narratives, Knausgård encourages readers to identify patterns that the characters themselves don't notice, adding layers of complexity to the interpretation of supernatural events.

One example is Egil's encounter with the dead girl, Emma, in the final chapter of series' inaugural novel. This story is framed as the second part of an essay by Egil titled "On Death and the Dead" (Knausgård 2021, 611-16). The encounter begins the night before, during a sleeper train journey across Norway, where Egil meets a stranger named Frank. Frank insists that Egil stay up with him to drink beer and cognac. As the night progresses, Frank reveals that he has recently started seeing dead people and insists he is not insane (646). When Egil asks if anyone else has seen these dead people he sees, Frank admits that no one else has. He's troubled by why he alone is experiencing this. Frank recounts that one of the dead pointed at him and said, "You are doomed!" (647) – words that echo those spoken to Turid, another narrator, by a resident at a care facility after she encounters a demonic figure in the forest (560).

This type of narrative knotting is discussed by Marco Caracciolo in *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (2021). He examines "narratives featuring plotlines that, while seemingly independent, come together in a surprising convergence", referencing Arnaud Schmitt (2014) and calling "the confluence of [such] distinct plotlines a diegetic 'knot'" (Caracciolo 2021, 37). Knausgård frequently uses this technique, where narrators experience similar events without directly interacting, leaving the reader to trace the connections between their stories. For example, the demonic figure seen by Turid reappears before other narrators. Turid encounters it in the woods while searching for a missing care facility resident (Knausgård 2021, 363-9). Tove speaks to it during a psychotic episode (Knausgård 2024, 429-30). Egil hears it near the sea, considering the possibility that it might be an undead (Knausgård 2021, 439). Policeman Geir spots it in a video clip while investigating a ritualistic murder of death metal band members, showing it to Kathrine for her clerical perspective (Knausgård 2024, 471-6). Jostein, during a coma, encounters multiple such figures in a space between life and death (Knausgård 2021, 579-609). It is unclear if these figures are the same; Jostein's vision of many suggests they might differ. Yet, their repeated appearances make it hard for readers to dismiss their reality within the story. No single character can piece these events together, leaving interpretation to the reader – much like the role of the dead in the series.

After recounting a time when a dead man spoke to him, Frank accuses Egil of disbelief. Egil responds:

I believe that you saw what you saw. But I don't believe that what you saw was an accurate representation of reality [...]. I saw a dead person too once, my grandfather. He was as plain to me as you are now. But he wasn't there. He was in my mind. (Knausgård 2021, 648)

Frank asks, "What was he doing there?" (648), humorously suggesting that Egil's grandfather might have had some agency in appearing. This dialogue resonates with Despret's ideas about the relationships between the living and the dead. She discusses the "inventiveness of the dead and the living in their relationships" and warns against the living taking all the credit for this creativity (Despret 2021, 19) – as Egil does here.

Frank then reveals that Emma, his daughter, is dead: "She was six years old. Hit by a lorry on the road outside our house" (Knausgård 2021, 648). He links her death to the pronouncement of his doom. When the train reaches its destination, Frank shares that Emma's funeral is that day and convinces Egil to join him. Both drunk from the night before, Egil hesitates, but Frank persuades him. At the church, Egil notices Frank is shunned by his family: "No one seated there acknowledged him. They made room without a word. What had he done? What was his sin?" (654). Frank grows more agitated throughout the day:

[Emma is] in the ground. She can't talk. Do you understand what I'm saying? She can't move. She can't even think! She's lying there completely still and alone. It's so terrible. And then that cunt of a priest with her hymn about the little flower in the forest. And what else did she say, that Emma was a star in the sky? She's nothing! Nothing! Nothing! (660)

Eventually, they arrive at a public pool where Frank used to take his kids. They see a little girl, and Frank believes it is Emma. He speaks to her: "Emma, I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry. You're the most precious little girl in all the world. Do you know that?" (662). At first, we likely assume that Frank is simply confusing this girl for Emma – perhaps due to grief, intoxication, or the fact that this place reminds him of his daughter. But then:

She gave no indication of even noticing he was there. All she did was stare into space. A sliver of doubt crept into my mind as I noticed that her T-shirt was flecked with what appeared to be blood. 'Say something to me, Emma. Anything at all. I love you.

I love you, my petal.' She stood up, and a chill went through me. The right side of her head was crushed. 'Don't go,' said Frank. 'Not now that I've found you again.' She walked up the slope towards the fence where there was some thick shrubbery, and then she was gone. (662)

The encounter thrusts readers into Todorovian hesitation. Is Emma's ghost real, or are Frank and Egil hallucinating? Each narrator's story can be rationalized – Frank's vision of Emma might be attributed to grief and intoxication, just as Kristian Hadeland's lingering presence might be Kathrine mistaking someone else for him. But identifying these narrative knots deepens the ambiguity. Egil's encounter with Emma connects his story to others, like Syvert's dreams of his dead father and Ramsvik's revival. As more narrators experience similar phenomena, it becomes harder to dismiss the idea of a supernatural force.

The recurring appearance of the new star is another knot that seems linked to these strange events. Perhaps the dead's presence is intertwined with these knots? Together, these intertwined elements create a complex narrative where readers can't be certain if the dead are fully absent or present. They prompt us to wonder if otherworldly forces might be at work – something tied to the new star and the demonic figures. Yet, the ambiguity remains, and that's the point. The hesitation is the point. As these threads intertwine, readers are left suspended between rational and supernatural explanations.

This narrative structure, encouraging readers to find patterns among perspectives, is further enriched by Knausgård's intertextual references, adding layers of meaning through connections to older literary and religious traditions.

#### 4.4 Intertextuality

By weaving intertextual references into his narrative, Knausgård deepens the thematic complexity of his narrative knots. These references – often to biblical texts – connect the presence of the dead to broader questions of mortality and cosmic change, adding further depth to the semantics of the series.

In the first and third books of the *Morning Star* series, the appearance of the new star seems linked to the restless dead. This association invites readers to connect the rise of the new star with the undead, a symbol that Egil ties to biblical references to the morning star, which symbolizes both Christ and Lucifer (Rev 22:16; Isa 14:12-15). The biblical intertext is central to the series' meaning. Its epigraph, taken from the Book of Revelation, states: "And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to

die, and death shall flee from them". The biblical prophecy describes an apocalyptic scenario where death vanishes, leading to a period of destruction and torment, at one point people will suffer while unable to die, before a new world is born (Rev 9:3-11). Knausgård's use of this epigraph highlights not the promise of eternal life but the endless suffering that characterizes the cataclysm.

Egil's reflections echo this apocalyptic theme, as he suggests that "those days" have arrived. "I believe 'them' to be us", he writes, linking the disappearance of death to a looming sense of doom (Knausgård 2021, 642). He then asks, "But if it is the case that death one day will be gone, what then of the already dead?" This question captures the series' tension between life and death, amplifying its exploration of immortality and the unknown. It also mirrors Jostein's journey through the liminal realm during his coma, where he finds the bridge to the land of the dead blocked – an evocative metaphor for the inaccessibility of death (571-608). Together, Egil's musings and Jostein's vision form a narrative knot, suggesting that the new star and the restless dead are tied to a fundamental change in the nature of death. This link emphasizes the idea that the boundary between life and death is eroding, aligning with the series' apocalyptic undertones.

Knausgård's intertwining of apocalyptic themes with his portrayal of death raises further questions. At times, the series implies that immortality is undesirable, aligning more with Gothic literature's dark visions than with the Christian promise of redemption. Unlike the Christian afterlife, where eternal life is a divine reward, Gothic fiction often depicts the return of the dead as a curse. As Simon Marsden (2021) observes in his article about the Gothic and the apocalyptic imagination, "When the dead return in Gothic, they tend to do so not as the redeemed and resurrected bodies of Christian hope, but in the monstrous forms of zombies, vampires, and spectres" (481). Sometimes, the return of the dead in Knausgård's series appear in such a manner, surrounded by emotions of dread, such as when Yevgeny hears thuds and knocking coming from inside liquid-filled tanks containing human corpses (Knausgård 2023, 712). The scene invites the reader to imagine what it must be like to wake up inside such a container, drowning yet unable to die.

However, at other times, the presence of the restless dead offers solace and continuity. Syvert's dreams of his father, for instance, help him understand his family's past and connect with his half-sister, while Egil and Frank's encounter with Emma fosters a moment of connection amid loss. Here, the lingering dead act as a bridge between past and present, allowing the living to preserve the legacies of those they have lost in a way that grants solace, reunion or moments of clarity.

This duality – where immortality is both a source of horror and comfort – contributes to the series’ overarching ambiguity. It challenges readers to navigate conflicting interpretations of life beyond death, complicating any straightforward understanding of the new star or the nature of the restless dead. Knausgård may be suggesting that the mysteries – especially those around life, death, and immortality – elude simple human comprehension. As explored in later sections, this uncertainty deepens the novel’s engagement with the unsolvable, inviting readers to confront questions without clear answers.

These intertextual elements add depth to the series, but they also contribute to its ambiguity, further blurring the line between the rational and the supernatural. To further explore this ambiguity, it is crucial to examine how the series navigates between the uncanny and the marvellous.

#### 4.5 Uncanny, Marvellous, or Both and Neither?

As intertextual references deepen the narrative’s ambiguity, they contribute to the tension between uncanny and marvellous interpretations. The *Morning Star* series keeps readers suspended between these two modes, challenging them to question the true nature of the events unfolding.

The possibility of rationalizing the strange occurrences within each narrator’s perspective, combined with the connections between their experiences, creates a state of uncertainty. This makes it difficult to determine whether the dead are imagined or otherworldly. This ambiguity aligns with Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of the fantastic, which hinges on hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations.

Literary critic Tom E. Hverven (NRK Radio 2020) interprets *The Morning Star*’s events as products of dream states, hallucinations, or altered mental experiences. Rikke A. Kraglund (2022), however, views this as reductive, drawing on “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” (Alber et al. 2010) to argue that the story encourages readers to consider the possibility that these events might be genuinely supernatural. I lean toward Kraglund’s perspective, not because it definitively categorizes the story as marvellous, but because it encourages an openness to multiple possibilities.

In Todorovian terms, Hverven’s reading leans toward the uncanny, while Kraglund leans toward the marvellous. Perhaps both interpretations hold merit. For instance, while in a coma, Jostein wanders through a liminal space between life and death. He finds the bridge to the land of the dead blocked, suggesting that death itself has become inaccessible (Knausgård 2021, 571-608). Nearby, he

witnesses demonic figures performing rituals. This vision implies a crumbling boundary between life and death, resonating with scenes involving Ramsvik, Emma, and Kristian. Meanwhile, in one of Tove's chapters, a demon tells her of the new star's arrival before it appears (Knausgård 2024, 434). These knots suggest connections between the star, the demonic figures, and the dead's presence, nudging toward a marvellous interpretation. Yet, Jostein's experience could be seen as a dream – a product of his coma – and Tove's visions could be dismissed as part of her psychosis. Such explanations align with Hverven's uncanny reading. Still, the recurrence of these themes and figures across narratives invites a broader supernatural interpretation.

Todorov argues that a story falls into the fantastic when both readers and characters hesitate between natural and supernatural explanations. Jostein, upon waking from his coma, shows no such hesitation; he appears to forget his entire vision (2021, 607-8). This contrasts with Egil, who remains puzzled by his encounter with Emma. Egil's reflections in the final chapter of *The Morning Star* reveal a growing belief that the dead linger in our world, suggesting a porous boundary between life and death. Yet, when he first sees Emma, he attempts to rationalize the experience: "It couldn't be true. It could only be a hallucination. But we'd both seen her. Was I now so completely on Frank's wavelength as to have been induced to see the same as him?" (663). Egil's blend of belief, doubt, and introspection embodies the hesitation Todorov describes, keeping the ambiguity of the encounter alive in both his mind and the reader's. This echoes the uncertainty in Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), where critics debate whether Madeline's return from the grave is a physical resurrection or a shared delusion (Shackleford 2017). Todorov classifies Poe's story as uncanny, but I argue that it holds signs pointing to both uncanny and marvellous interpretations, resisting a definitive categorization.

Similarly, *The Morning Star* resists clear classification. Like Madeline in Poe's tale, Emma becomes something in between – a presence that cannot be easily defined as real or imagined. This mirrors Despret's idea of the dead occupying a unique mode of being, a "register that is their own" (Despret 2021, 8). The narrative does not provide enough evidence to fully accept or reject the reality of Emma's presence, instead inviting the reader into a space of perpetual ambiguity.

The tension between the uncanny and the marvellous is further enriched through the series' intertextual ties, drawing on ancient stories and religious themes. These references can fill in gaps for the reader, but they often point in different directions, adding complexity rather than clarity. Instead of resolving the ambiguity, they reinforce the notion that the dead defy a binary understanding of existence. Yet, this openness to multiple interpretations is complicated by



inconsistencies within the narrative, which challenge a cohesive marvellous reading and suggest that simple categorization cannot capture the series' full complexity.

#### 4.6 Inconsistencies and Severing of Knots

Earlier, I discussed Tom E. Hverven's and Rikke A. Kraglund's differing views on *The Morning Star*, suggesting both might hold truth. While each narrator's story leans toward the uncanny – where encounters with the restless dead can be rationalized as hallucinations, dream states etc. – the series as a whole leans toward the marvellous, suggesting supernatural forces at play. However, this view oversimplifies the series' complexity. Not all elements support a marvellous interpretation, even when considering the series collectively. Inconsistencies emerge in the depiction of the dead across the narratives. For example, in *The Morning Star* and *The Third Realm*, the dead seem tied to the rise of the new star. But in *Wolves of Eternity*, Syvert's father communicates through dreams long before the star appears. These variations suggest that the "rules" governing the dead are fluid, resembling what fantasy author Brandon Sanderson calls a "Soft Magic" system (Sanderson 2007), relying on ambiguity and mystery rather than clearly defined explanations. Such discrepancies unravel the narrative knots, pulling readers back into Todorovian hesitation between the uncanny and the marvellous.

Knausgård's writing creates a constant oscillation, where readers move between two realities: one where the dead are imagined (on an individual scale) and another where they are supernaturally real (on a collective scale). As the story unfolds, distinguishing between these interpretations becomes increasingly challenging. Knots are tied and untied, leaving readers in doubt. The dead exist in a space that is neither entirely material nor fully imagined, immersing us in a realm of persistent ambiguity.

Ultimately, *The Morning Star* series resists a clear-cut interpretation, inviting readers to navigate its ambiguous terrain, where life and death, natural and supernatural, blend fluidly. This refusal to provide definitive answers is perhaps its most enduring feature, drawing readers into the uncertainty at the core of its narrative.

### 5 Final Remarks

Knausgård's novels present a form of existential pluralism, where multiple realities about the lingering dead coexist. The continuous tying and severing of narrative knots create a sense of ongoing hesitation, keeping readers from fully committing to an uncanny or

marvellous interpretation. These novels align with Todorov's concept of the fantastic while resonating with Vinciane Despret's idea that the dead occupy a space beyond binary distinctions - neither fully material nor entirely imagined.

Todorov claimed in 1970 that the fantastic was tied to earlier centuries when the boundaries between the real and the unreal were less defined. Knausgård's novels challenge this assertion, suggesting that these boundaries are once again becoming obscured. By creating a multi-layered narrative where the dead appear to possess a lingering presence, Knausgård destabilizes the strict divides between life and death, materiality and imagination.

In *The Morning Star* series, two conceptions of immortality emerge. On one hand, the story suggests a marvellous, physical immortality - an eerie phenomenon where death itself seems to stop following the rise of a mysterious star. Characters like Egil and Syvert reflect on the unsettling implications of such a world, fearing that a deathless existence might lead to stagnation and repetition. Yet, the role of this storyline, which unfolds subtly within the characters' otherwise mundane realities, may be to draw our attention toward a deeper, more elusive form of deathlessness. Beyond the notion of living forever in a physical sense, the series gestures toward a kind of immortality that is more nuanced - one where the ontological boundaries between life and death are blurred, and the dead remain active through a reciprocal relationship with the living.

Knausgård's narrative does more than explore these ideas - it *embodies* them. Egil, in his reflections, acknowledges the limitations of language and thought when faced with the mysteries of life and death. He writes of how our system of thought, our language, is poorly equipped to grasp such questions. And this struggle is mirrored in the narrative itself. Within the words of each narrator, the mysterious encounters with the dead become uncanny - rationalized, explained away, or dismissed as imagination. The dead are deemed just that - dead, with no further influence or presence. Yet, something different emerges in the spaces between the lines, between the narrators' stories, and between the words themselves. It is here, in these gaps and overlaps, that a more marvellous reality takes shape.

By inviting readers to read between the lines, to identify the unspoken knots that make the story lean towards the marvellous, Knausgård's series asks us to reconsider the boundaries of our own perspective. It suggests that what we cannot explain through our current language or rational systems might still hold a form of reality. This leads us to ask: What might it mean to imagine a world where our understanding of reality is not the only one that holds? Where other forces - perhaps even once-human forces - have their own ways of shaping reality? Knausgård's narrative suggests that our perspective may be just one among many, and that a more open-minded view

could allow for a reality where the dead, like other nonhuman agents, have their own modes of being that constitute reality.

Knausgård's narrative challenges us to reconsider how rigidly members of modern society approach the unknown, especially our conceptions of death and the dead. His characters mirror many of us, brushing off experiences that defy easy explanation, rationalizing away what they cannot fully understand. The priest Kathrine convinces herself that the man she saw after his death must have been a lookalike (Knausgård 2021, 187); the medical staff performing a heart transplant on a patient who suddenly revives attribute the event to faulty equipment (2021, 181); Syvert's half-sister, upon recognizing their father from a dream, dismisses it as *déjà vu* (Knausgård 2023, 777); and so on. This resistance to ambiguity and mystery reflects a broader cultural reluctance to accept a world where the boundaries between the living and the dead, the real and the unreal, are not so fixed.

By tying knots between events and steering the narrative toward the marvellous, Knausgård challenges the modern impulse to dismiss what cannot be measured or conventionally explained. The series invites readers to imagine possibilities that elude its characters – suggesting that the dead might persist subtly, influencing the living and participating in the world's ongoingness in ways beyond rational or scientific comprehension. This perspective on death, where the dead are part of an entangled reality, prompts us to ask: Are contemporary societies ready to embrace such a shift? Can we accept that our understanding of reality might be incomplete, shaped by forces and presences beyond our grasp?

The novels seem to imply that we are not ready. Most characters dismiss the unknown, clinging to rationality and rejecting possibilities that lie beyond explanation. Yet, the narrative as a whole critiques this outlook, suggesting it is short-sighted – a refusal to acknowledge the depth and complexity that exists at the margins of understanding. It encourages us to remain open to mysteries, hinting at the potential richness gained by embracing what lies beyond the boundaries of explanation.

Ultimately, the *Morning Star* series does not provide clear answers about the nature of the dead. Instead, it opens a space for readers to engage with these questions, challenging us to navigate the uncertainties that lie at the edges of our understanding. It shows us that while language and logic may limit our grasp of the unknown, the spaces between – those moments of ambiguity and hesitation – might reveal a deeper, more interconnected reality. By leaving its mysteries unresolved, the series prompts us to reflect not only on the dead but on the limitations of our own perspectives, suggesting that one step on the path to understanding our entangled world might lie in embracing the ambiguity between the living and the dead.

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