

Romantic and Modern Metatexts: Commemorating Andersen and the Self-Referential Text

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On the bicentenary of H.C. Andersen's birth, literary critics and scholars from around the world gathered in Odense to engage in a kind of academic commemoration of the great Danish poet. Commemoration is defined as "the act of honoring the memory of, or serving as a memorial to someone or something." An inscription on a tombstone or a poem honoring a deceased person is a commemoration. We may think of memorial stone or memorial statue. In Latin the term is *commemorare*. In Danish, one uses the terms, *at mindes* (to remember, to recollect, to commemorate), *mindeskraft* (memorial volume), *mindesmærke* (memorial, monument), *mindestøtte* (memorial column), and *mindetale* (memorial speech, eulogy). In the case of Andersen, we celebrate a writer who lived, but we have no living memory of that person. In actuality, we are engaged in a commemoration or the honoring of the memory of a "textual Andersen." The experience of reading or knowing Andersen by means of published texts about or by him. In fact, many of Andersen's texts are informed by a commemorative function. The idea of this paper is to investigate how Andersen formulates these textual commemorations of his own literary legacy.

We are all well aware that Andersen was deeply engaged during his lifetime in the project of crafting a narrative life-story, which would become a popular legacy worldwide. In this endeavor he was tremendously successful. Andersen wrote autobiographies, autobiographical novels, and allegorical tales that told "the fairytale" of his life. To this audience, I need not give examples of the discrepancies between his factual lived life and his idealized representations of it. It is not my project to investigate the patterns, omissions, or veracity in these representations of nineteenth-century writer and celebrity. I propose to investigate the notion of a textual commemoration, and how Andersen applied a certain aesthetic – perhaps a modernist aesthetic –

to his project of constructing textual commemorations of his literary legacy.

The idea which I suggest in my title, that elements of the modern or Modernism are to be found in some of Andersen's texts is not new. Readers of Andersen know of the stylistic experimentation, which the author conducted in the later years of his literary career. According to Jackie Wullschlager:

The collections of 1858 and 1859 mark a new phase in Andersen's composition ... leaving behind the folk models of his youth and the grand classical archetypes of his middle years ... he reinvented the fairy tale as a modern, self-referential, experimental genre. He anticipated some of the ingredients of Modernism – the expression of meaning primarily through style, form and poetic image; fluidity of character and an awareness of the irrational working of the unconscious mind; a diminished importance of plot. (367)

While I do not think that Modernism has exclusive rights to 'the expression of meaning through style, form and poetic image,' I find Wullschlager's assertion that Andersen anticipated Modernism useful. More recently, Danish scholar Jens Andersen makes a bolder claim regarding H.C. Andersen's anticipation of Modernism by presenting his privileging of the child's experiential world as a direct precursor to early twentieth-century developments in psychology and aesthetics:

Og som sådan blev H.C. Andersens eventyr en af modernismens vigtigste forudsætninger. Med sin insisteren på barnets rettigheder og muligheder foregreb den danske eventyrdigter ikke kun Sigmund Freuds psykoanalyse, men også de surrealistiske manifeste fra 1920'erne (Jens Andersen, 376)

[And, as such, the fairy tales of H.C. Andersen served as one of the most important foundations for modernism. With his insistence on the rights and potential of children, Andersen anticipated not only the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud but also the surrealist manifestos of the 1920s] (Nunnally, 240).

Over the past ten years a few of my predecessors at the International Hans Christian Andersen Conferences have presented evidence of early Modernism in Andersen's texts. The idea that Andersen employed a modernist or Baudelairean poetic vocabulary is explored by

Heinrich Detering in “The Phoenix Principle: Some Remarks on H.C. Andersen’s Poetological Writings.” By examining Andersen’s programmatic writings on poetry, “Fugl Phønix” (“The Phoenix Bird”), “Poesiens Californien” (“The California of Poetry”), “Folkesangens Fugl” (“The Bird of Folk-song”), “Det nye Aarhundredes Musa” (“The Muse of the New Century”), and “Et Blad skrevet i Norge” (“A Paper Written in Norway”), Detering argues that these texts constitute an attempt to establish a new aesthetic or poetological concept situated between Romanticism and early Modernism. He concludes that, “Andersen’s programmatic writings – inclined to radical modernist points of view and at the same time maintaining most conservative Romantic values (...) – these writings are situated on the threshold between late Romanticism and young Modernism, somewhere between Oehlenschläger and Wergeland, between Ørsted and Baudelaire” (Detering, 64). According to Detering, a ‘phoenix principle’ is at work in Andersen’s programmatic writings on literary aesthetics.¹ These texts suggest that poetry, like the mythological phoenix, will eventually be destroyed or consume itself in order to be resurrected from the ashes in a new form. Detering successfully demonstrates that these programmatic texts articulate a fairly consistent aesthetic credo based on a cyclical pattern of destruction and rebirth.

Scholarship has already clearly established that H.C. Andersen was acutely aware that the new industrialized and urban culture, which was emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, would require a new kind of poetry. He took to heart the dogma of natural scientist Hans Christian Ørsted, whose lectures published in the collection *Aanden i Naturen* (*The Soul in Nature*, 1849-50), expressed a dogma of scientific and cultural progress. In the essay “Naturvidenskabens Forhold til Digtekunsten” (“The Relationship of Natural Science to Poetry”), Ørsted is speaking directly to contemporary writers such as Andersen, when he argues that “Digterværket vil forfeile sin Virkning paa Mennesker med sand naturvidenskabelig Dannelse, naar det stiller det Overnaturlige paa en ret afstikkende Maade sammen med det Naturlige” (159) [Literary work will not produce the desired effect on people with genuine scientific understanding, when it combines the supernatural with the natural (i.e. scientific) in an incongruous manner]. Deeply inspired by Ørsted’s ideas and fascinated with new technological discoveries and scientific advancements, Andersen attempted to incorporate the “wonders” of the new age into his literary fairytales. But it is often in these very “science fiction” tales that we see Andersen’s naïve enthusiasm for the new age of technology

mitigated by a strong ambivalence and ambiguity toward the developments of the future.² For example, tales such as “Om Aartusinder” (1851; “In a Thousand Year’s Time”), are prophetic in a vision of a technologically advanced global civilization which is culturally and spiritually impoverished.



“Det nye Aarhundredes Musa” (1861; “The Muse of the New Century”), H.C. Andersen’s poetic manifesto, depicting the arrival of the new muse of the modern age. Illustration by Vilhelm Pedersen.

Readers who doubt how seriously Andersen engaged in formulating a poetic credo for a future age should revisit his most allusive manifesto, “Det nye Aarhundredes Muse” (1861; “The Muse of the New Century”). The artistic manifesto imbedded in this text is veiled in an allegorical narrative about the infancy, youth and maturation of a new

muse of poetry, born in “vor travle maskinbrusende Tid” (*Eventyr* 4:113) [our busy machine age]. The sonorous prophetic tone and Messianic language associated with the coming of the muse and the apocalyptic images of the concluding paragraph point to Andersen struggling with notions of a new aesthetic which rises out of the total destruction of the old. Blending Biblical imagery and Nordic mythology, the text anticipates the fall of the Wall of China, the Clash of Eastern and Western cultures, the demise of civilization, a Ragnarok and a new Gimle. In the final, curiously unforgettable and satirical image, we – that is the readers and the poets – become “os Orme” (4:117) [we the worms] who are killed and mutilated by the plough in order to create fertile new soil for the new generation. One could say that the idea of death, destruction, and rebirth is organically applied in this final image. As Johan de Mylius points out in his discussion of this final passage, it is the poet himself who greets the new century as he is cut down, ploughed under, and buried alive:

Og digteren selv, der står og varsler det ny århundrede, skæres over, udslettes, for at det ny kan komme til. En hilsen fra en, der allerede er død eller levende begravet (264)

[And the poet himself, who stands and forebodes the new century, is cut up and destroyed in order to make room for the new. A greeting from one, who is already dead or buried alive].

On the idea of Andersen as a transitional figure between the Romantic and the Modernist, Jacob Bøggild takes a somewhat different track. Building on earlier studies by Torben Brostrøm and Niels Kofoed, Bøggild explores not the phoenix bird, but the “ruin” in Andersen’s texts, an image which he calls one element of romantic “arabesque poetics.” In “Ruinous Reflections: On H.C. Andersen’s Ambiguous Position Between Romanticism and Modernism,” Bøggild argues that the arabesque is a literary modality which “wiggles itself loose from its romantic origins and becomes an integral part of symbolist and modernist poetics” (76). His idea of a building in ruins which is crumbling away and gradually being reclaimed by nature has a certain likeness to the idea of destruction and resurrection of the Phoenix bird. Bøggild proposes that by tracing the development of this image in a series of texts chronologically, one can see the development of this arabesque modality, from the Romantic to the early modern.

The common thread in these essays by Detering and Bøggild is the idea of Andersen's literary texts anticipating literary developments of the next century. It is the conception of literary texts whose contributions are neither static, nor conventionally Romantic. The extent to which there exist specifically modernist elements in Andersen's work is a claim that the reader may continue to ponder. Modernism in arts and literature may be broadly defined as a movement during the century, 1850-1950, a period of unprecedented aesthetic experimentation. One might distinguish modernity in the historical sense (which begins with the Renaissance) from Modernism in the arts and letters. One could argue that aesthetic Modernism is a form of art characteristic of late modernity, a historical period in which social, economic, and cultural life in the Western world has been revolutionized or "modernized." Already in 1931 Edmund Wilson suggests in his introduction to *Axel's Castle* an aesthetic affinity between Romanticism and the modern movement: "Yet the movement of which in our own day we are witnessing the mature development is not merely a degeneration or an elaboration of Romanticism, but rather a counterpart to it, a second flood of the same tide" (2).

Drawing on some of these reflections on literary aesthetics which span late Romanticism and early Modernism, this investigation now turns its focus to Andersen's formulations of textual commemorations. Beginning with a discussion of the self-reflexive or meta-textual elements of selected texts, I will focus on an element which is key to their commemorative function. Consider the idea of meta-fiction, a fiction that deals often playfully and self-referentially with the writing of fiction or fictional conventions. Metafiction – the modernist, experimental metanovel comes to mind here – problematizes the relationship between representation and the subject represented by referring back self-consciously to the writing process and the text itself. In the modern metanovel the reader experiences the protagonist (often depicted as a writer or diarist) reflecting on the act of writing the novel, which ostensibly is the text before us. The modern era abounds with metanovels often in diary form. In the Danish literary canon one could point to Kierkegaard's *Forførerens Dagbog* (1843; *The Seducer's Diary*) and forward to postwar existentialist novels such as Martin A. Hansen's *Løgneren* (1950; *The Liar*). By referring to the creative process, the narrative makes the reader aware of the problematic relationship of the lived experience to textual representation. The conventional mimetic notion of literature is disrupted. Fiction is being written about writing fiction.

To begin with a most light-hearted of Andersen's metatextual commemorations of the Self, let us consider a short text from his mid-career: "Flipperne" (1848; "The Collar"). Readers of Andersen remember this witty and ironic tale about the boastful and ultimately pathetic shirt collar. It is the story of the spunky, but dejected suitor who ends up in the rag-bin. The concluding paragraph of the tale reads:

Og det blev de, alle Kludene bleve hvidt Papir, men Flipperne bleve netop til dette Stykke hvide Papir vi her see, hvorpaa Historien er trykt, og det var fordi at de pralede saa frygteligt bag-efter af hvad der aldrig havde været; og det skal vi tænke paa, at vi ikke bære os ligesaadan ad, for vi kunne saamæn aldrig vide, om vi ikke ogsaa engang komme i Klude-Kassen og blive gjort til hvidt Papir og faae vor hele Historie trykt for paa, selv den aller-hemmeligste og maa saa selv løbe om og fortælle den, ligesom Flipperne. (*Eventyr 2*: 167)

[All the rags were turned into white paper, but the collar turned into this very piece of white paper that we're looking at now, the one on which this story is printed. That's because he boasted so terribly afterward about things that had never happened. That's something we should remember, so we don't behave the same way, because we never can tell whether we too might one day end up in the rag bin and be turned into white paper and have our whole story printed on it, even our innermost secrets, and then have to run around talking about them, just like the collar.] (*Fairy Tales*, 263)

The clever personification of inanimate objects, the self-deprecating and ironic humor of the narrator, the moralistic didactic tone of this conclusion, these are all quintessential elements of Andersen's tales. But most noteworthy in this context is the narrator and protagonist of the story (the collar itself) who ends up as a piece of paper upon which his own embarrassing story is printed, "Flipperne bleve netop til dette Stykke hvide Papir vi her see, hvorpaa Historien er trykt" [the collar turned into this very piece of white paper that we're looking at now, the one on which this story is printed]. The conclusion of the tale points not only to the private nature of the story, but also directly to the self-referential and tangible aspect of the text. This fiction is self-reflexive and metatextual in the most literal sense. Perhaps one should not argue that it be regarded as a kind of commemoration of

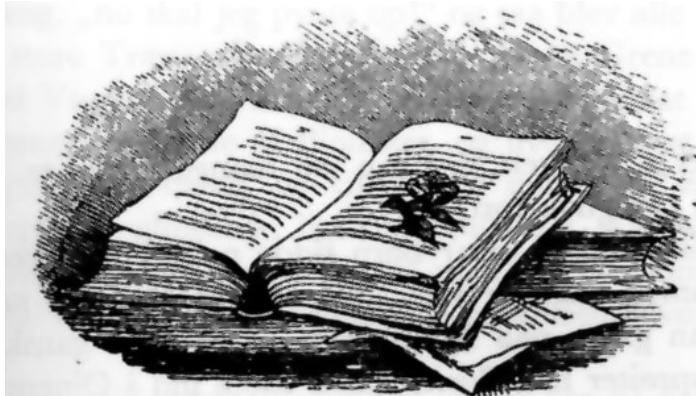
Andersen's literary legacy, but it is certainly an ironic commentary on the biography of a self-promoting celebrity. In writing "Flipperne" Andersen responded to the censorious Danish press, which had criticized him for boasting his way across England in 1847. Certainly, the tale is self-mocking, the author satirizing himself as a compulsive autobiographer. As a "commemoration," the text points directly to its own perpetuity as a published and printed piece of literature, which offers a representation of the author as a loveless bachelor, whose public status required that all the intimacies of his life story be "printed on a piece of paper."

In another text, "En Rose fra Homers Grav" ("A Rose from Homer's Grave"), first published as a chapter in the travel book, *En Digtets Bazar* (1842; *A Poet's Bazaar*) and later in a slightly amended version in a collection of 1862, we can study closely how this particular self-referential aesthetic functions in a commemorative text.³ By evoking ancient Greece, the birthplace of civilization, the grave of the immortal Greek poet – and by associating this setting with potent and favored Romantic symbols, the rose and the nightingale – Andersen's text announces ideas of literary longevity and also points to the material nature of textual production. The text functions as a textual commemoration of the author H.C. Andersen in the most direct sense, while it also hints at notions of death (organic decomposition in the grave of Homer) and at rebirth, those very elements that seem to form the basis of Andersen's poetic credo.

One can break down this short text into three layers of commemoration.⁴ On the first level is the tale of the rose on Homer's Grave. The title of the tale and the text itself commemorate the great classical poet, Homer, the presumed author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The reader is thus reminded that Homer gained literary immortality. A rose is the speaking subject of the text, representing poetry which springs out of the grave of Homer. The rose utters: "Iliadens Sanger blev Jord i denne Jord, hvorfra jeg spirer!" (*Eventyr* 4:44) [The poet of Iliad became earth in the earth from which I sprout!]. The rose (that is, Poetry) questions how she who is so sacred should only bloom for a poor nightingale. The nightingale then sings herself to death and is buried in Homer's grave.

The second level of commemoration in this text moves from Homer to Andersen. Interestingly, this action takes place in the dream of the rose. At night the rose folds its leaves tightly and dreams of "en Sanger fra Norden" (4:44) [a poet from the North] who arrives at the site of Homer's grave. The rose dreams that she is plucked and pres-

sed between the pages of a book and taken as a memento by the young poet to “sit fjerne Fædreland” (4:44) [his distant Fatherland]. In this level of the text, Andersen the poet and his extraordinary journey to the Orient is commemorated. In this way, the author’s literary legacy is associated with that of the great poet of antiquity. But, as in the first part of the story (with the death of the nightingale), there is a dark implication in the text. In a phantasmagorical appearance, the young poet plucks and steals the very rose of poetry from Homer’s grave, with the result that: “Og Rosen visnede af Sorg og laae i den snevre Bog, som han aabnede i sit Hjem, og han sagde; ‘her er en Rose fra Homers Grav.’” (4:44) [And the rose withered in sorrow and lay in the narrow book, which he opened in his home and said ‘here is a rose from Homer’s grave’]. The rose’s transformation from living organism to withered, textual artifact is a sorrowful metamorphosis.



“En Rose fra Homers Grav” (1842/1862; A Rose from Homer’s Grave). In a tale commemorating H.C. Andersen’s journey to the Near East, the rose plucked from Homer’s grave becomes an artifact resting between the pages of the *Iliad*. Illustration by Vilhelm Pedersen.

The third and final level of commemoration in the text must be considered. The rose wakes up from the dream (the dream of being plucked or taken), the hot Asian sun rises, and the rose hears the footsteps of travelers. The rose’s nightmare becomes a reality. The rose is plucked by a poet from the North in a passage, which is suggestive of the violation of virginity. The young poet breaks the rose off by the stem, and “trykkede et Kys paa dens friske Mund” (4:45) [presses a kiss on its fresh mouth] and takes it with him home to the land of fog and northern lights. Here in this third level of this highly self-re-

flexive text, the plucked rose is converted into a textual artifact. It lies pressed between the pages of a book (actually a volume of the *Iliad*) where, as a tangible artifact, it commemorates Homer's grave, Andersen's visit to that site, and the idea of the immortality of great literature.

One could stop here, and read this tale as a self-aggrandizing author's efforts to associate his own legacy with that of the ancient Greek poets. However, the reader notes yet another layer in this textual commemoration. The final lines of the text read: "Som en Mumie hviler nu Blomsterliget i hans *Iliade*, og som i Drømme hører den ham aabne Bogen og sige: 'Her er en Rose fra Homers Grav!'" (4:45) [Like a mummy the flower corpse now rests in his *Iliad*, and as in a dream it hears him open the book and say: 'Here is a rose from Homer's Grave!']. The rose of poetry is sadly desecrated in this final image; it is mummified, embalmed, a corpse of a flower confined to a book-coffin in a library of the foggy North. The narrative perspective of the tale is that of the rose (poetry), not of the young traveler. Here in the conclusion, in a kind of recurring nightmare, the rose hears the words spoken again and again over its bibliophilic grave, 'Her er en Rose fra Homers Grav!' ['Here is a rose from Homer's grave!']. The image is Gothic and eerie, reminiscent even of the horror tales of American poet Edgar Allan Poe. It is a darkly pessimistic commentary on the process of converting life into art, the symbol of the dead and decaying rose echoing the aesthetic sensibilities of late Romantic period.

One might ask whether the text might be read as a disturbing allegory of poetic representation. The organic rose, a symbol of poetry sprung from the ancient Greek poet's grave and plucked by the young Romantic poet traveling in the exotic Orient, is transformed in the final passage into a textual artifact (a dried flower), pressed into a volume of poetry. It functions like text printed on a page. It is a tangible artifact of what once was. One could argue that there is some kind of aesthetic principle at work here in Andersen's text. Similar to the crumbling "ruins" being reclaimed by nature, or similar to the Phoenix bird who consumes herself in order to rise anew from the ashes, the rose is destroyed – sacrificed or deflowered, if you will – in order to produce a text about it. The fate of the rose plucked from Homer's grave – like the collar ("Flipperne") which becomes the paper upon which its story is printed, is ultimately one of alienation. Andersen's text when read closely is neither nostalgic nor sentimental, but is a story which is both Romantic and Modernist in the most

profound sense. It addresses the question of how poetic idioms (even those indebted to classical literature) are converted and transformed into new literary art forms; this process, Andersen suggests, requires a radical desecration of old forms in order to create new fictions. In the case of “En Rose fra Homers Grav,” this de-composition (like the soil in Homer’s grave) is sorrowful and painful. In the end the text does not tell a story of the immortality of poetry. The text implies that the destruction and death of a poetic discourse is worthy of mourning, worthy of a commemoration.



“Den stumme Bog” (1863: “The Silent Album”) by H.C. Andersen, a short tale about death and the transitoriness of poetic discourse, symbolized by a collection of pressed flowers. Illustration by Vilhelm Pedersen.

In closing I might also point to another text in which images of flowers (memories) and texts (books) are conflated, although to a somewhat different effect. It is the text entitled “Den stumme Bog” (1863), which is translated as “The Silent Album” (1974) by Erik Christian Haugaard. A better translation of the title would be “The Mute Book” (The book which does not speak). This text opens with a description of a corpse lying in an open coffin. Under the head of the deceased, the old student from Upsala, is placed,

en stor, tyk Bog, hvis Blade hvert var et heelt Ark graat Papir, og mellem hvert laae, gjemt og glemt, visne Blomster, et heelt Herbarium ... Til hver Blomst knyttede sig et Capitel af hans Liv. (*Eventyr* 4:57)

[a large, thick book, whose pages were a large sheet of grey paper, and between each one lay, preserved and forgotten, withered flowers, an entire herbarium ... To each flower was tied a chapter in his life.]

This short tale turns on the idea of the pressed flowers as tangible signs which tell the stories of the rich “chapters” in the life of the deceased. The tragic implication of the tale is that, with the passing of the man these signs (the pressed flowers) can no longer be read. The tale speaks to the transitoriness of life and of the texts, which represent it. The artifact or textual sign, without its proper reader or audience, may quickly lose its significance for the next generation. It is “gjemt” (saved), but also soon “glemt” (forgotten). This final textual commemoration expresses a dark and very modern pessimism about the longevity of poetic discourse and about the author’s literary legacy.

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Notes

1. The myth of the phoenix describes an Arabian bird, said to make a nest of spices, sing a melodious dirge, flap its wings to set fire to the pile, consume itself in the ashes, but then arise with new life to repeat the former one. The 'phoenix cycle' is the period between transformations of the phoenix, generally supposed to be five hundred years.
2. For further discussion of this topic, see Stecher-Hansen, "Science Fiction in the Age of Romanticism: Hans Christian Andersen's Futuristic Tales." *Selecta* 14 (1993): 74-77.
3. English translations of the quotations from "En Rose fra Homers Grav" and "Den stumme Bog" are by the author of the article, not by Erik Christian Haugaard.
4. This analysis of "En Rose fra Homers Grav" is inspired by ideas in Mark Hebsgaard's unpublished lecture, "From Time Immemorial to Immortality: Callimachus, Hans Christian Andersen and Literary Perpetuity," delivered at the Second International Hans Christian Andersen Conference, Odense, 1996.