

The Death-Poems to Michael Strunge and the Death of David Bowie

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Abstract

The article is a study of twentieth-century poetics and the movement in Danish literature called 'The Poetry of the 80's' and examines the poems that were written in the wake of the suicide of one of the movement's founders, Michael Strunge (1958-1986). This article argues that the tropological nature of these death poems constitutes a genre in and of itself and shows a break from the tradition of Danish commemorative poetry going back to the seventeenth century and the Baroque poet Thomas Kingo. What is so alluring about the death-poems written for Strunge is that the focus shifts from a static portrait of the individual to a personal individualizing of the poet and his fate. Another shift crystallized by this phenomenon is that many of the poems for Strunge were by writers who had never met the poet yet were still able to instill a deep sense of intimacy in their verse. By reading themselves into the fabric of Strunge's own verse, these death-poems changed the fabric of commemorative poetry in the Danish language. The article also pays attention to Strunge's fascination with David Bowie and marks an interesting analogy in the very recent phenomenon of 'Bowietry,' cut-up poetry written for the death of David Bowie and constructed from his own words.

Keywords

Michael Strunge, David Bowie, death-poem (dødedigtning), poetry of the Eighties (firserlyrikken), Paul De Man, Danish poetry

Introduction

The Danish poet Michael Strunge was born on 19 June 1958 in Rødovre, a suburb of Copenhagen. The self-described symbolist published eleven books of poetry in his short life and was one of the glittering figures in the Danish literary movement known as *firserlyrikken* ('the Poetry of the 80's') or *punkpoesi* ('punk poetry') (Handesten et al 2007: 391-394). This lively, colorful group of poets emerged in late 1970's with a neo-romantic world-view, mingling youth culture with the Danish lyric tradition. Through this group a new lyrical 'consciousness of the body' arose, infusing the hyper-sexuality of punk music with the mantic subjectivity of French symbolism (Caws and Luckhurst 2008: 174, Mai 2000: 148-157). In the sample issue of *Sidegaden* (Nr 0, 1981), Strunge's punk journal, the cover prominently features the words: 'Rimbaud, Adam Ant, Street Poetry.'¹ Alongside Strunge were such writers as F.P. Jac, Pia Tafdrup, and Søren Ulrik Thomsen. Strunge was their unofficial shaman, and his death on 9 March 1986 marked an end to that brief but brilliant movement. After all, it was Strunge who proclaimed in his 1978 poem 'Det kommende': 'We are the new lucidity/ won in the battle with the machines/ we are the new creative force/ that designs beauty and eternity/ from the ruins of the past' (Strunge 1995: 63).² The Poetry of the 80's sought to transcend the feeble reality of contemporary bourgeois life.

Strunge's poetry is emblematic of that 80's aesthetic. It is an anti-establishment,, outsider body of work that was influenced by contemporary music, yet is aware of itself in relation to certain earlier poetic movements. In particular, the conceptual songwriting of the British pop star David Bowie had the most profound effect on Strunge's poetic identity. Strunge saw Bowie as '...en af de vigtigste kunstnere i det her århundrede' ('...one of the most important artists of this century') (Rewers 2015: 224), and his infatuation with Bowie can be seen in many allusions to the musician in his work.

In the mid-70's, Strunge frequently wrote about Bowie's work, comparing, for example, his film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) to albums like *Diamond Dogs* (1974) and *Station to Station* (1976) (Rewers 2015: 46). In this period he would often dress and wear his

hair like Bowie (Rewers 2015: 49 and 76-80, Munk 2001: photographs 8, 9, 10, and 12) and he seems to have been especially influenced by the photos on the jacket of his first album, *David Bowie*, as well as the pictures taken on the set of the 1969 film 'The Image,' directed by Michael Armstrong.

Seeing Bowie in concert on April 29, 1976 had a profound effect on Strunge's poetic identity. Two years later, Strunge waited outside Copenhagen's Plaza Hotel to give Bowie two of his poems translated into English by Poul Borum, 'With the Speed of Life' and 'Things to Come.' When Bowie finally appeared, Strunge tried to hand him the poems, but Bowie quickly signed them and moved on, apparently thinking that Strunge was just another fan seeking an autograph. Strunge somehow thrust the translations back into Bowie's hand, earning a smile from the icon (Rewers 2015: 99).

A scrapbook from 1977 features a picture of the poet with the British punk group The Sex Pistols (Rewers 2015: 225). Above the picture Strunge wrote: 'We can be heroes...' a quote from the title track of Bowie's 1977 album *Heroes*. Below the photo he wrote, 'Turn and face the strange,' a line from Bowie's 1971 song 'Changes'. That line is also the epigram of Strunge's debut book of poetry *Livets hastighed* (1978). The first poem of that volume, 'Livets hastighed,' pays tribute to the opening track on Bowie's 1977 album *Low*. The poem, whose title was translated as 'With The Speed of Life,' is an allusion to Bowie's very first instrumental, 'Speed of Light' (Rewers 2015: 99). The poem's quick pace, repetition, and punctuated rhythmic line produce a sustained, staccato-like effect that is unique in Strunge's work, but clearly emulates the chorus of Bowie's 1971 'Changes': 'Ch...ch...ch... ch...changes'.

Strunge's poem is a celebration of constant flux and fluidity while expressing a total dissatisfaction with the emptiness of the world. The poem's last lines pose change as the ultimate tactic of poetic volition: '- I change my life/ before it changes me'. The battle against the despair of monotony is embodied by the poem's central figure, an 'anarchistic chameleon' that is associated with the changing of colors, contrast, and the casting off of masks. In one of Bowie's most haunting songs, 'The Bewlay Brothers' (1971), Bowie mentions the chameleon,

the metaphor that would best describe the multiplicity of his identity. For Strunge, Bowie's matrix of identity induced in him the possibility of a poetry 'devoted to the individual's situation in the world, as it looks now' (Rewers 2015: 224).

What a fitting image of Bowie Strunge gives us, especially as he was in the 70's: an anarchistic chameleon, a shape-changing guru in drag to all the young dudes out there. In 1980, Strunge published four poems under the title 'Fire Bowieinspirationer' ('Four Bowie-Inspirations') in the influential journal *Hvedekorn* (*Hvedekorn* no. 1, 1980). The poem 'Ziggy i forstad' ('Ziggy in the suburbs') opens with the figure of Ziggy trying to rid himself of the hyper-consumerism and quotidian addictions of a sickened planet: 'Ziggy Stardust opens his eyes./ Looks at the sky for light,/ goes down into the street, morning,/ buys cigarettes./ An earthly habit.' Once in the city's streets, Ziggy is confronted with the passing traffic 'while an old alcoholic/ throws up in the gutter.' Bowie's persona is a cosmic rock and roller caught between humanity's final days and invading extraterrestrial star-men; Strunge's Ziggy is a figure alone 'On this strange, worthless planet.' He does not mediate between the planet and an encroaching annihilation at the hands of an evil presence, but rather between the self-destructive nature of the human race and the clarity of his own inner-thought. Strunge's Ziggy is a mantic figure, a seer charged with proclaiming the fatal vapidness of the modern world.

By the early 80's Strunge's poetry had become somewhat more complex, moving from the topos of punk culture to a vision of world consciousness. The psychedelic punk and lurid moodiness of Bowie's Berlin years became integrated into a sharper and more sentient world, radiant with fragility and a clandestine inner universe revealed through poetic vision. His work became saturated with the crystalline effects that translated the mantic aesthetics of the French symbolists into the urban landscape of Copenhagen. 'Ziggy i forstad' represents the fusing of these two enormous influences in Strunge's art. Ann-Marie Mai marks this transition from Strunge's obsession with Bowie to his adoption of Rimbaud's mantic poet in his last work *Verdenssøn*: 'In *Verdenssøn*, however, Strunge wants to write himself backwards through Rimbaud's program for the seer' (Mai 2000: 152).

In the epigram to his 1981 book *Vi folder drømmens faner ud*, he lists a quote from Rimbaud directly under a quote from Bowie, which suggest the natural progression of influence in Strunge's mind. Strunge even played a 'Baudelairean flâneur' in Claus Bohm's 1981 film *Nattens Engel* ('*Night's Angel*') (Handesten et al 2007: 394). The following two years were extremely productive for Strunge, as he published four books in 1982 and 1983. In November of 1983, Strunge won the Otto Gelsted prize, Denmark's most prestigious literary award for young writers. When he accepted the award, he announced that he would no longer write poetry (Rewers 2015: 15). Strunge had planned to travel to South America with his girlfriend Cecilie Brask for several months but was forced to return early in January 1984 due to his ongoing fight with depression and perhaps to be in Denmark for the release of his new book *Væbnet med vinger*.

Despite his retirement from poetry, Strunge wrote fervently during his South American trip, and the result of this endeavor was his tenth book *Verdenssøn*, which is widely considered his most mature collection of lyric (Mai 2000: 151, Rewers 2015: 17). The electric, neon world that haunted him in Copenhagen followed him to South America, where he found the sinister illuminations of the city reflected in the Amazonian night. His 1985 poem 'Amazone' is an emblem for the perfection of his later style: 'The alligator eyes shine/ orange electric through and into [the dark].' The poem moves through a series of urgent yet silent images, mingling beauty with death: 'The Queen Victoria's flowers/ bloom in the dark/ and the alligators lie silent/ with gaping mouths.' The flowers of the water lily (*Victoria amazonica*) are white the first night and become pink thereafter, reflecting the poetic consciousness in nature. The softness of the image is compromised by the flower's nocturnal blooming and the next line exposes the something lurking beyond sensory perception: 'Anaconda unknown.' This unseen part of existence cannot be escaped: 'Somewhere in this/ a thousand piranha/ whose color/ no one can see' (Strunge 1995: 811).

In the following years, the mental illness that had haunted Strunge his whole life grew more serious and he was institutionalized on several occasions. On 9 March 1986, Strunge suffered a severe attack of mania. Wrestling free from Cecilie, Strunge jumped to his death from

the window of their apartment. He was buried in Assistens Kirkegård in Copenhagen. At his grave sits a small stone with the epitaph, 'Armed with wings,' which was the title of his 1984 book of poetry and also an allusion to a 1983 poem. The epitaph marks the connection between his poetry and death, confirming the dark prescience of Strunge's work.

Death poetry has a long history in Scandinavia and enjoys a particularly rich tradition in Denmark going back to the seventeenth century and the Baroque poet Thomas Kingo (Auken 1998: 51-52). Sune Auken has discussed the contours of this Danish phenomenon, illustrating how productive *dansk dødedigtning* ('Danish death poetry') is as a genre. His definition of the genre is simple yet precise: '*et digt skrevet i anledning af et dødsfald i digterens samtid*' ('a poem written on the occasion of a death among the poet's contemporaries') (Auken 1998: 15). Especially important is Auken's discussion of Tom Kristensen's '*Til min Ven, Digteren Gustaf Munch-Petersen, der faldt som Frivilling i Spanien*,' which he uses as a formal model of the genre (Auken 1998: 27-45). However, the death-poems written to Strunge show a break from the historical shape of the native genre. Auken argues that if one compares the poems written about the death of Strunge to the genre at large, a striking difference emerges. Traditionally, the Danish death-poem is basically the same poem written over and over across many different biographical individuals. However, in the poems written to Strunge, the focus shifts from a portrait of the individual 'til en individualisering, der er så stærk, at der kan opstå endog meget forskellige billeder af den individuelle skæbne' ('to an individualizing that is so strong that it can embody so many different reflections of one individual fate') (Auken 1998: 204). One of my arguments in this essay is that there is one element that all Strunge's death-poems share: Strunge's poetical lexicon. The death of Michael Strunge changed the fabric of commemorative poetry in the Danish language; this essay is an investigation of those turns and changes.

In the wake of Strunge's suicide a number of poems about him began to appear. I have counted more than three dozen of these poems, which is an extraordinary amount for a late-twentieth-century poet. For the first time in the history of the Danish death-poem, Auken

suggests, the scope changes from the personal to the imaginary. Again there is a connection to Bowie, as there is something in the nature of both artists that compels people who did not know them personally to write commemorative poems to them. An upcoming issue of *The Found Review* will be a special issue dedicated to 'Bowietry,' a specific type of cut-up, commemorative fan verse, which is the result of 'your exploration of rubbish, the wonderful, and other oddities sourced from David Bowie-related texts, so that we may find just a little more future in his words yet' ('Special Issue: Bowietry,' *The Foundation Poetry Review*, Web, March 24, 2016).

Cut-up was a process Bowie learned from William S. Burroughs, and he described the poetic technique as an 'orphanic engine' ('Special Issue: Bowietry,' *The Foundation Poetry Review*, Web, 24 March 2016). The artist's own words are cut out by strangers and rearranged in order to extend meaning into the future, tapping into the poetic consciousness, or orphanic engine, of the imagined poet. The Danish poet Simon Grotrian demonstrated facets of this technique in his important death-poem to Strunge entitled 'Michael i drømme' ('Michael in dreams') (Grotrian 1993: 10). Words and phrases like 'Himlen falder' ('Heaven falls'), 'gennemlyst' ('transparent'), 'verdenssønnen' ('the world's son'), 'livets hastighed' ('the speed of life'), 'neon-', 'drømmene folder sig ud' ('the dreams fold themselves out') are cut-ups of Strunge's own verse. But the way Grotrian marks the last word of the poem 'nat' ('night') is the ultimate cut-up (Mai 2000: 164). In a 'blue cathedral' of dreams:

Alle der vågner kan se hvad de glemmer
og bærer på en skygge under solen
man kalder den: nat.

(All the vigilant there can see what they forget
and bare a shadow under the sun
one calls it: night.)

The colon delivers the movement of the poem from celestial images to the 'whirling tree' of poetry lit by 'neon leaves' into that space which is the cradle of poetic consciousness, night.

Another exaggerated example of this lexical cutting is Nicolaj Stochholm's 2008 poem 'Fantombro' ('Phantom Brother') (Stochholm 2008: 67-73). Most, if not all, of the people who have submitted cut-up poetry to *The Found Review* for inclusion in the special edition of 'Bowietry' never met David Bowie. Likewise, Grotrian and Stochholm never met Michael Strunge. Stochholm opens his poem by calling out to the poet in a very familiar way, 'Michael, I must talk with you...'. The rambling nautical and mythological imagery of the poem invokes the dead poet as a muse, as divine inspiration. As in the Grotrian poem, 'Fantombro' also displays the usual Strunge lexicon.

To read the death-poems written for Strunge is to enter a marionette theatre of extended reality. Ten of these poems appear under the subtitle '*Digte ved Michael Strunges død*' ('Poems on Michael Strunge's Death') in volume five of F. J. Billeskov Jansen's *Den danske lyric* and I will focus on these poems in this essay (Jansen 1987: 282-285). Since these death-poems originally appeared in newspapers and monographs at different times and are of varying poetic quality, one might question their validity to stand together as a cohesive body. Do they share any poetic or performative features? Do the ten poems in *Den dansk lyric* perform as a cohesive body and are they representative of the many poems not included? How do '*Digte ved Michael Strunges død*' work as death-poems?

A particular situation arises in the case of Strunge's death-poems: they draw words and motifs from Strunge's own corpus. This inter-textual activity between the death-poems and the poetry of the deceased poet produces an extension of the reality of the poet, what Auken has coined '*den ekstratekstuelle virkelighed*' ('extratextual reality') (Auken 1998: 16). What is interesting about the poems written to Strunge by those who did not know him is that they emulate a type of cognizance based on metonymy. Strunge is a certain type of poet's phantom brother. These poems vis-à-vis Bowie's 'orphan engine' extend this extratextual dynamic into a highly figurative and fictive familiarity with the poet.

I would like to discuss three tropological models at play in the '*Digte ved Michael Strunges død*': metalepsis, metonymy, and catachresis. For the sake of brevity, I will only discuss the first three poems in the

collection, but my analysis could easily be extended beyond those. This article unravels how the tropology of these particular death-poems mechanizes *den ekstratekstuelle virkelighed* that attempts to stand-in for and continue the poetic consciousness of Strunge. This interchangeability of sentience clusters around the etymologically related words *corps*, *corpse*, *corpus*, that is, 'body,' 'dead body,' and 'body of work.' The words, however, form a semantic slide that simulates the connectivity of poetic consciousness by a common tropology: the fallen angel. The angel as persona in Strunge's verse becomes the angelic body of the poet, which in turn flies into its next life as the angelic figure of the death-poems. My argument is that through these three tropological models the '*Digte ved Michael Strunges død*' read themselves as an extension of Strunge's consciousness. Strunge himself made this move in a commemorative poem to his friend Old Sarvig, 'Thanks to Ole Sarvig/ for telepathic inspiration for DECEMBER' (Strunge 1995: 453). The poet becomes not only a medium for the future visions of humanity's self-destruction but also a link to the lyrical past.

Metalepsis

The first tropological model the death-poems perform is a metaleptic reading of the *corpse*. By metalepsis, I mean, 'a temporal inversion casting a vision of the future into the past and a vision of the past into the future' (Prins 1999: 135). The death-poems perform as if the *corpse* has already been pre-figured within the poet's own *corpus*. The metaphor for this metalepsis is a semi-sentient being cut-up out of Strunge's own *corpus*: the fallen, manic angel. Paul de Man makes a similar observation on continuity in his essay on Kleist:

Rather than speaking of a synthesis of rising and falling one should speak of a continuity of the aesthetic form that does not allow itself to be disrupted by the borderlines that separate life from death, pathos from levity, rising from falling (de Man 1984: 287).

Strunge's fallen angels cross these borderlines seamlessly, walking the line from life to death, poetry to death poetry, *corpus* to *corpse*. This tropology is very predictable in the death-poems. De Man continues his discussion of Kleist:

Thus conceived, tropes certainly acquire a machinelike, mechanical predictability. They animate the forms like the crank turned by an organ-grinder. This does not prevent the creation of a dialogue between the puppet and the crank-turning puppeteer. Such a dialogue occurs as the visible motions of the puppets are linked to the inner, mental imaginings of the puppeteer by what Kleist calls "the way of the dancer's soul—*der Weg der Seele des Tänzers*." The "soul" results from the substitution for the machinist's consciousness of the movement of the marionettes, one more substitution added to the transformations that keep the system going. (de Man 1984: 288)

It is crucial that the arms of the organ-grinder are visible, because in seeing that motion the concept of soul becomes mechanized. Likewise, we must understand the rhetorical nature of these death-poems in order for these manic angels to project soul. Their consciousness is harnessed through Strunge's by sliding over the semantic cluster that associates body, dead body, and body of work.

More a *figura* than a metaphor, the manic angel can only be read as indistinguishable from Strunge and all representations of itself found in Strunge's *corpus*. The angelic figure in the '*Digte ved Michael Strunges død*' creates the illusion of a continuum with Strunge's authorship, an extended *corpus*, so to speak, that performs future meaning. This prefigurative gesture reads backwards in time, simulating a retrojective vision of the future in the past, and yet projects forward in time, performing a refigured vision of the past in the present. The death-poems read their own performance as *telepatisk inspiration*, thus performing the act of reading as extended *corpus*.

The mechanics of this project lose sight of the actual *corpse*. Instead of a finite death, *et dødsfald* ('death', lit. 'death-fall'), the death-poems negotiate a state of sentience where the *corps* is a metaleptic

consciousness that conquers death. As Strunge writes at the end of *Ud af natten*, 'I am strong as a human, Angel, death I slay' (Strunge 1995: 456).

A poem from Strunge's 1984 book, *Væpnet med Vinger*, illustrates how this manic angel is constructed from a telepathic interior of memory, voice, and the poet's own conception of his mental illness (Strunge 1995: 704-705):

Jeg husker dit navn
men ansigtet tager bort,
jeg ved at jeg kender dig
når vi ses igen.

Kan du høre mig?
jeg husker.

Maniske engle
bryder æterens kulde
med deres varme lys.

(I remember your name
but your face slips away,
I know that I will recognize you
when we see one another again.

Can you hear me?
I remember.

Manic angels
break the ether's cold
with their warm light.)

Here, the warm light of the manic angels breaks through *æterens kulde* ('ether's cold'), which functions as a metaphor for the oblivion preventing any remembrance or reflection from transpiring between the *jeg* and the *du*. At first, oblivion is presented as a forgetting of the face despite remembering the name. Remembrance of a name is

not reciprocal enough a phenomenon to account for referentiality in Strunge; there must be a face-to-face encounter in order to prevent oblivion. Strunge's manic angels are apotropaic figures. They occupy the state substantiated by infinite reflection between pairs: inside and outside, two lovers, the city and the universe, the body and the universe, the cigarette fag and the sun, etc. A few stanzas from 'Jeg husker dit navn' ('I remember your name') illustrate my point (Strunge 1995: 704):

Min stemme gennem ætermørket
 når dig i dit rum, vi ånder
 kilometer mellem os
 skal disse ord passere.

(My voice through the ether-dark
 when I in your space, we breath
 kilometers between us
 shall these words be true.)

The *jeg's* voice stretches out through oblivion (*ætermørket*) reaching the '*dig i dit rum*' ('you in your room') and forms itself as a spectral parallel to the warm light of the manic angels breaking through oblivion (*æters kulde*). The synergy of Strunge's universe is felt in the image of the two bodies breathing in a telepathic synchronicity. The empirical distance separating the two bodies is navigated by the poet's voice that reaches through the ether to the beloved as consciousness. Here, the manic angel becomes an allegorical consciousness for the lyrical voice, '*skal disse ord passere*' ('shal these words be true') as well as the inner-voice of mental illness (Strunge 1995: 705):

Jeg har tænkt på englene indeni –
 har set dem springe ud
 af mennesker og hjælpe mig.
 Det nytter bare ikke
 at holde dem fast herude som engle –
 engle blir de først
 når jeg er lukket inde i sindssygen.

(I have thought of the angels deep within –
have seen them spring out
of people and help me.
It is really of no use
to hold them tight out here as angels –
angels are they foremost
when I am locked inside insanity.)

The contemplation of angels is located far within the self, *indeni*. These private, interior angels becomes contrasted against the lyrical voice which operates '*herude som engle*' ('out here as angels'). The final lines of the poem expose the previous contemplation of angels (*tænkte på englene*) ('thought of the angels') as severely detrimental (*blir de først*) ('they are foremost') to the internal prison (*lukket inde*) ('locked inside') of mental illness. The manic angel becomes a site of trans-subjectivity for the poetic consciousness as it struggles to escape oblivion, a reaction to the fragility of recall. Oblivion haunts the *jeg* of Strunge's *corpus* in the notion of falling or the fall. 'The fall is life itself/' proclaims the *jeg* in 'Nærmere,' a short poem from *Vi folder drømmens faner ud* (Strunge 1995: 333).

It is, of course, a fiction that the fallen, manic angel of the death-poems is both the winged figure in Strunge's *corpus* and Strunge himself. Likewise, it is fiction that the sentient *du* of the death-poems has a telepathic connectivity to the mind of Strunge. Yet, this is a 'truth' that the death-poems insist on during performance. And is it not a hauntingly beautiful notion that Strunge pre-figured his own death in his poetry, which configured his actual death, which becomes refigured through the performance of the death-poems? But this would require that Strunge actually experienced his death (a future event) as a past event to which his poetry is pre-figurative.

De Man discusses this metaleptic 'fiction' in his lectures on Wordsworth in 1967 and 1972:

...for we all know that we can proleptically anticipate empirical events, but not our death, which is not for us an empirical event – it is in fact metalepsis, a leap outside thematic reality into the

rhetorical fiction of the sign (de Man 1993: 201).

De Man's 'leap' into the fiction of the sign is a suspension of temporal impossibility. Wordsworth can enter into a mutability with his Boy of Winander who foretells Wordsworth's death (a future event), which Wordsworth later relates to us as if it took place in the past. For De Man this is problematic because referentiality is construed by Wordsworth's 'relentless fall into death,' itself a metaphor for de Man's 'leap':

This leap cannot be represented, nor can it be reflected upon from within the inwardness of a subject...It has no value as truth, only as figure. The poem does not reflect on death but on the rhetorical power of language that can make it seem as if we could anticipate the unimaginable (de Man 1993: 201).

For Strunge the leap was not purely rhetorical, having repercussions and finite results in the empirical world. However, the death-poems operate as if Strunge himself leapt out 'into the rhetorical fiction of the sign' and became the manic angel of his own *corpus*. This series of sleights, of substitutions between *corps* and *corpus*, and *corpse*, allow the angelic figure in Strunge's poetry to leap into the death-poems and subsequently become the fallen angel. In the death-poems, Strunge's *dødsfald*, like Wordsworth's 'Boy of Winander' and Sappho's 'leap,' reveals the looseness of referentiality that is the engine of their poetics (Prins 1999: 191).

This notion of metalepsis is prominent in the first poem in Jansen's collection, 'Til Michael Strunge' by Søren W. Nielsen (Jansen 1987: 282):

Til Michael Strunge

I fjernsynet siges du død
men jeg ved
du danser sort i det evige rum
 bevæger kroppen opad
i elevatorris

du danser på et spejlgulv
i en glidende strøm af stjernemusik
og vandet pisker fra dit hår
og vandet pisker fra dine vinger
som dengang
du var engel
under neonlysets regnbue
og skrev digte om livet
med døden i hælene
sådan husker jeg til sidst
at du åbnede en dør til universet
og gik bort for at være her.

(To Michael Strunge

On the television you were said to be dead
but I know

you are dancing blackly in the eternal open
your body drifting upwards
in elevator ecstasy
you are dancing on a mirror floor
in a gliding stream of star music
and the water whipping off your hair
and the water whipping of your wings

like that time
you were an angel
under the neon light's rainbow
and wrote poetry about life
with death (nipping) at your heels
in this way will I remember to the very end

that you opened a door to the universe
and died so as to be here.)

The first two lines establish that Strunge's *dødsfald* is a production if not a performance: '*I fjernsynet siges du død/ men jeg ved*' ('On the television you were said to be dead/ but I know'). The actuality of the poet's death becomes something contested by the passivity of the verbal construction. Instead, we understand that the impersonal notification of the poet's death is being produced on television, often a metaphor for urban oblivion in Strunge. The TV operates as a portal to oblivion in 'Decay 1978' from *Skrigerne!* (1980), and is one of the *iltapparater* ('resuscitators') in *Billedpistolen* (1985) that obfuscate reality. The production on the television is quickly deauthorized, 'men jeg ved' ('but I know'), a voice able to contest the empirical reality of the *corpse* by knowing the action and whereabouts of the figure: 'du danser sort' ('you are dancing darkly').

The *sort* ('black') that backdrops the astrothesia and manifestations of fallen angel, the *sort* that surrounds the city *i nat(ten)* ('tonight,' 'in the night'), transforms into the *sort* that is poetry *herude*, black words on white paper, thought hovering against the white death of oblivion. In this later phase of Strunge's *corpus*, *sort* becomes a mechanized consciousness or memory for evading oblivion. The phrase *i text* has replaced *i nat(ten)* as the poetic landscape, where poetic consciousness is arms and armor against the forces of oblivion.

Nielsen's poem encourages this knowledge of the poet's location by elevating the poet against the darkness of the cosmos. The third and fourth lines project the body of the poet as dancing in a cosmic, eternal landscape, constantly moving upwards. The *corps* is defying the laws of gravity, the force that keeps both space and time in order and that presupposes the event being projected on the television, *et dødsfald*. The fifth line 'in elevator ecstasy' is an eerie metaphor for both the rising body and the escalating sentiment of the performance. The poem turns into a celebration of the poet's sentience and the next two lines re-formulate the actuality (*jeg ved*) of the poetic body represented by *du*. Once again, the poetic body is confirmed to be in an astral, paradisiacal landscape: 'du danser på et spejlgulv/ i en glidende strøm af stjernemusik' ('you are dancing on a mirror floor/ in a gliding stream of star music').

The stream that emerges in line 7 consists of sound that moves like

water. Until this point in the poem, the body of the poet was the only thing moving in the poem and the television the only source of sound. Line 8 resonates with and is symmetric to line 4, where the *du* was first present. Here the abstract condition of the landscape with its mirrored floor and river of music actually materializes coming in contact with the *corps* that has likewise become less abstract, less ethereal: ‘and the water whipping from your hair.’ Water flows through landscape and through time in order to manifest shape and movement, but here the water takes shape by coming into course not with the earth but with the body of the poet. Over his hair, the gliding serenity of the astral stream breaks into countless beads that fall from the poet’s wet hair, an image which in itself is an *astrothesia* that tropes tears as planets and stars. This transition from elevator ecstasy, of always moving upwards, to the tears of the fallen angel generating the astral bodies by colliding with the poet’s *corps*, forces the fall into the fiction of the *figura*.

In this stream of astrothetic forgetting and misrecognition, there surges the memory of the poet as he was. The immediate formulaic echo, *og vandet pisker fra dine vinger* (‘and the water whipping from your wings’), sounds distressed, as if it cannot be prevented. The image of water shedding from the wings of the poetic body cannot sustain the authority projected in the first eight lines of the poem. The *du* is no longer defined by *danser sort* but is forced back down by the thematic erosion of *vandet pisker* until it is drowned out by the emergence of an angelic figure, ‘you were an angel.’ This forces the performance into a state of recall and loss, ‘like that time,’ which is represented in the temporal shift to the past, *du var* at line 11 and (*du*) *skrev* at line 13. This further disrupts the *du danser* manufactured by the string of present verbal postulations exerting an elevated authority over the media production in line 1, ‘*I fjernsynet siges du død*’ (‘On the television you were said to be dead/’).

The image of death chasing the *du*, nipping at its heels, recalls the poet’s lifelong battle with mental illness. His poetic flirtation with suicide is animated as death hunting him down, but his only defense is poetry itself. The only present verbal construction remaining in the poem is the poet’s own remembering in line 15, ‘*sådan husker jeg*

til sidst’ (‘in this way will I remember to the very end/’). The act of remembering again turns to an ambiguous nature in the adverbial phrase *til sidst*. Are we to understand this finality in terms of the poem’s return to the memory of *i elevatorrus* as a reauthorization of the dancer drifting upwards? Or does *til sidst* stand-in for the body of the poet, a forgotten *jeg*, replacing the dancing *du* with a frozen image of the body as disfigured finitude?

The last two lines perform as extended *corpus*, the telepathic memory of the death-poem refigured by reading the *corpse* as a death-fall into fiction: ‘*at du åbnede en dør til universet/ og gik bort for at være her.*’ (‘that you opened a door to the universe/ and died so as to be here.’)

The meaning of the last lines creates a lens for the two-fold metaleptic vision: 1. ‘that you opened a door from the eternal to the temporal and left the eternal realm in order to be here on earth’; 2. ‘that you opened a door to the universe and left this earth (i.e. died) to be here,’ i.e., ‘on the page’ or ‘in the poet’s memory.’ The first reading is the fiction of Strunge as the mantic, manic fallen angel. The second reading projects a metonymic *her* that is inhabited by the poet’s consciousness as well as the collective consciousness of poetry. It is a continuum of performative tropes through which the manic angel of Strunge’s *corpus* stands in for Strunge and leaps into the fiction of future signs.

Metonymy

The second tropological model I would like to focus on is metonymy, a syntactic continuity that is always a rhetoric of connectivity. Whereas metalepsis mechanizes the *figura* of fallen angel performing across the *corpse* by reading Strunge’s *dødsfald* into ‘the rhetorical fiction of the sign,’ (and this, in turn, allows for a spectral community of subjectivity extending backwards into Strunge’s *corpus* and forwards into the death-poems), metonymy is interested in interlacing voice across the same boundary, the *corpse*.

Metonymy is the trope of ecology, the decay of matter in the production of matter. This ecological figuring and re-figuring of matter

from the temporal to the eternal is fundamentally recuperative, and is one way in which poetry as a performative phenomenon recycles itself: as a productive refiguration instead of a 'destructive repetition' (Prins 1999: 191).

By re-projecting the language and figures of Strunge's *corpus*, the death-poems mechanize an connection between themselves and Strunge's *corpus*. This metonymic tissue connecting these two distinct bodies of poetry is the *corpse*. But in order to have voice, the new *corps* must have face. A metonymic skeleton already de-faced by its own game of prosopopoeia emerges in the orthographic graveyard of the death-poems: here, words are like bones and poems like bodies. Prosopopoeia, which de Man defines quite literally as 'to confer mask or a face (*prosopon*),' is a rhetorical tactic to phenomenalyze voice (de Man 1984: 76). Through this ecological metonymy of the *corpse*, the death-poems perform as death masks amplifying a voice recuperated from beyond the grave. Let us examine the poem 'Et Støvlespark' ('A Boot Kick') by Karsten Nielsen (Jansen 1987: 282-283):

Et Støvlespark

Ind i den forlorne stank
i de selvtilfredse stuer
Sendte du en knyttet næve
af nat, drøm og poesi.

Et støvlespark af ungdom
slog hul i den stivnede bevidsthed
Og knoglerne dansede
i takt til 80'ernes vanvid.

Et ansigt så hæret
af storbyens sår
En krop så sårbar
af poesiens år.

Og nu i nat
søger ordene forgæves dine spinkle hænder.

(A Boot Kick)

Into the make-believe stench
in the self-complacent rooms
You sent a clenched fist
of night, dreams and poetry.

A boot kick of youth
struck a hole in the stiffening certainty
And (your) bones danced
in step to the lunacy of the eighties.

A face so ravaged
from Copenhagen's wounds
A body so fragile
from the years of poetry.

And now out in the night
there are words searching in vain for your frail hands.)

The first stanza of poem 'Et Støvlespark' ('A Boot Kick') opens the chain of metonymy by describing the interior architecture of bourgeois consciousness into which the *du* delivers a poem. The *du* here operates in the past tense, but is not clear whether the act referred to is specific to one completed action or more generally applicable to the metaphor of writing referenced by the *corpus*. I would argue that 'You sent' is referencing the *corps's* production of both a *corpus* and a *corpse*. Nielsen's poem does not render the *corpse* as simply dead, but rather reads the *corpse* as an action or performance that is part of the poet's *corpus*: Strunge's final poem, so to speak, delivered at his death.

The shock of the poet's death is narrated in terms of a defiant protest, a clenched fist. This is parallel textually to Strunge's 'I throw myself out'. The delivery of the *corpse* is figured by the clenched fist, 'af nat, drøm og poesi.' ('of night, dreams, and poetry.') The poet's body becomes a metonym for the poetic body, the hand, or more specifically, the hand that writes. The clenched fist stands in for the

body of the poet who is a limb of a greater, more eternal body, the *corpus*.

The tone of defiance is further figured in the second stanza. The clenched fist is traded in for a boot-kick, an action performed by another body piece, the foot. This metonym does not refer to the delivery of the last poem. Instead, the boot-kick dresses itself up in the shock wave surrounding the delivered *corpse*; a more intimate, verified portrait of Strunge hangs in the analogical fabric of punk stereographs and their make up: *nat, drøm, poesi, ungdom...* It was a boot-kick *af ungdom* ('of youth') and in Strunge *ungdom* is the metaphor of possibility, the metaphor of revolution. The gesture of delivery, the clenched fist, is translated into the 'punk' image of the leather boot kicking some ass, putting a '*hul i den stivnede bevidsthed*/' ('a hole in the stiffening certainty/').

The third metonym is skeletal, an already prosopopoeiaic fiction: 'And the bones danced.' The dancing bones open out of the paratactic upbeat marked by *og* ('and') in line-initial position. The death-poem becomes substantially louder with the metaleptic rattling of the poet's bones upon impact as they, too, dance. Here, the beat of the dance is measured by the decade's mental condition, '*i takt til 80'ernes vanvid*/' ('in step to the lunacy of the eighties/'), and the sound of the bones on impact. The dancing bones are a metaphor for the metonymic chain between Strunge's *corps/corpus/corpse* and the death-poems and the being they refigure. The words of the death-poems themselves perform as the dancing bones, de-facing the poet's *corps*, announcing the poet's *corpse*, and producing a new *corpus* each time they are read.

Once again the death-poem's rhythmic form shifts. Here, the beat is not measured by the syntactic continuity of anatomical metaphors but in the face, the nexus of identity and voice. To animate this body, the line shortens and becomes extremely assonant. The song-like quality and shape of the stanza stands awkwardly against the elegiac tone, which gathers towards the end of the line. But the shape of the stanza is broken; the five-syllable quatrain is not really a quatrain but a decasyllabic couplet rhyming *sår* with *år*. This heaviness at the end of the line is the wound: cf., *så hæret/ sår/ så sårbar/ ...sår*. This is a very interesting figuring of rhyme, a phonetic coagulation hardening at

the fractured joint performing a spectral shift into a dangerous, elegiac moment of prosopopeia.

The wounded face is projected as ravaged. The metaphor seems to be that the wounds of Copenhagen were written on the poet's face, but it also invokes its mirror opposite, a *corpse* that upon impact is itself a wound on the face of the city, a metaphorical relationship that ascribes consciousness to Strunge's *corpus*.

The final line, 'from the years of poetry,' splits open the wounds of the big city by wounding the body. The 'pain' on the poet's face is written back on to the cityscape in the delivered *corpse*. This is figured in the fractured line: 'En krop så sårbar' ('A body so fragile/') where there is phonetically the shadow of a wound within a wound. The years the poet spent writing poetry have weakened him, making him susceptible and vulnerable to the dangers of the urban landscape.

Again the (a)rhythmic structure of the death-poem is jarred by the paratactic interruption: 'And now out in the night/ there are words searching in vain for your frail hands.' The death-poem, in the final moments of its performance, moves into the present tense, a temporal possibility motivated by the metonymic syntax of the first two stanzas sliding into the false security of the third quatrain with its 'mixaphonic' rhyme and elegiac stasis. Out of the complex of wounds (city, body, poetical line) a mystical 'now' emerges in appositional simultaneity with the death-poem's final metonymic gesture, *i nat*. Danish *i nat*, means 'tonight' in everyday speech, although it can refer to the previous night ('last night') and the coming night ('tomorrow night'). *I nat* is simultaneously 'tonight', i.e., the night of the morning of Strunge's death, any night following Strunge's death, the eternal night that the world experiences as a result of being deprived of Strunge's life and poetry, and the trope of eternal night that lurks as a mumming of consciousness in Strunge's *corpus*.

The last two lines of Nielsen's poem 'Et Støvlespark' mechanize the here-ness of Strunge's *corpus* by the telepathic metonym of consciousness *i nat*. The words seeking in vain for the *du's* hands is a somber metaphor for writing, death, and silence. The death-poems perform as if they are the organic bones of the *corps*. They dance the dancer's dance each time they are performed by masquerading

as the skeletal animation of the *corpse*. This creates the fiction of an extended *corpus* because the death-poems mechanize themselves as death-masks that induce the mystical now of the eternal night through an amplification of a synesthetic voice that acts as a metonymic skin between the here of themselves and the there of the poet's consciousness.

Catachresis

The third tropological model that is at play in the death-poems to Michael Strunge is catachresis. The death-poems disarticulate themselves and perform as the broken voice, which stands in for both the broken body of the poet and the lyrical voice *postmortem*. Here, the death of the poet transcends the physical and metaphysical engine of his own body and soul. The *corpse* stimulates a crisis in the linguistic fabric of poetry: the death of the poet signals the vulnerability of poetry, of language itself. By physically disarticulating language either on a lexical level or on a semantic level, the death-poems project a heightened pathos over the corpse that borders on lament (Auken 1998: 201-02). This timbre of the lament under the catachretic model is different from the previous two performative models. Whereas metalepsis and metonymy perform a recuperation of the *corps* or *corpus* by transnavigating the empirical boundaries of death and the body symbolized in the actual *corpse*, catachresis reads in the *corpse* the death of poetry itself. In the poem 'Til Michael,' Klaus Høeck's metaphor for this disarticulation of the poetic voice is the samurai's sword, a displaced (non-Danish) artifact that stands as an archaic symbol of honor, a patterned weapon of violence, and a poetic code of suicide (Jansen 1987: 282):

Til Michael

der er en ømhed
som sårer hjertet mer end
et samuraisværd

en maskulin hen

givenhed mer grusom end
en rose i blomst

der er et liv som
ikke kun males i år
men i kærlighed

i kortere glimt
men klarere så du sand
heden mer end vi

(To Michael

there is a tenderness
that wounds the heart more than
a samurai's sword

a masculine de-
votion more cruel than
a rose in bloom

there is a life that
can not be measured in years
but in love

in shorter glimpses
though clearer you saw re-
ality more than we)

The first line of the poem immediately makes an elegiac gesture by articulating into existence 'en ømhed' ('a tenderness'). This tenderness in the next line 'sårer hjertet' ('wounds the heart'), but it becomes measured against a very physical artifact: *et samuraisværd* ('a samurai sword'). At first, the sword performs a subservient role as a figure that verifies the pain-producing attribute of the tenderness. It is a beautiful metaphor that induces a tone of pain in the emotional coloring of the

poem: an abstract poetic tenderness more deadly than the adamant blade of a samurai warrior. But there is something heavy about the metaphor of the sword. This is physically represented in the metric weight of the word *samuraisværd*. It is the only intact word of four or more syllables throughout the poem.

The poem is metrically secure, repeating the metrical pattern 5/7/5 in each stanza. The sword enforces a strict adherence to the line count. In the first line of the second stanza we have what should be an eight-syllable line, **en maskulin hengivenhed/* ('a masculine devotion'). Instead the word *hengivenhed* has been sliced in two across the boundary of the line. The remaining three syllables continue at 2.2, where an emasculated devotion is measured against the cruelty of 'a rose in bloom' at 2.3. How can devotion be more cruel than a rose in bloom? The expression here is one of the fleetingness of beauty. The broken '*hen/ givenhed*' ('de/ votion') is what is '*mer grusom end/ en rose i blomst*' ('more cruel than/ a rose in bloom'); it is a reminder that desire and beauty are wounds that the fragility of language cannot bind.

The third stanza repeats the formula at 1.1, *der er*, but is careful to compose its lines mostly of monosyllabic words. At 3.2 the line breaks from the comparative formula 'more than X' established in the preceding two stanzas. The stanza is lacking any threatening words and escapes disfigurement, although one wonders why *kærlighed* ('love') escapes mutilation. The poem sweetens its tone along with its imagery and performs a return to the elegiac gesture: a life that could only be reckoned by the love it emanated and by the love it invoked. This gesture entails that the poet's life, which is not necessarily distinct from his *corpus* nor his *corpse*, must be fathomed (*males*) outside of time. It is a reminder that we must forget the tragedy of a 27-year old *corpse* nor an 8-year old *corpus*, tragic because they have been 'cut short' by the *samuraisværd*, here a metaphor for *seppuku*, a code of suicide. One need not think any further than the Japanese poet and samurai Mishima.³

The paradoxical comparative 'clearer' in the fourth stanza contains an anxiety, proceeding tenuously under the watch of the samurai sword. The final stanza transfers the metaphor onto the *liv* of the poet by measuring his sentient understanding, which is projected in a visual

metonym, '*i kortere glimt*/' '(in shorter glimpses/'. Despite being cut short, the poet experienced '*sand/ heden mer end vi*' ('tr/ uth more than we'). Again the sword strikes at the end of the line, scoring the word 'truth' across the line break at 4.2. It is a splitting of reality between a *du* and a *vi*. The *vi* is the voice of the poem acknowledging the notion of proximity brought up earlier. It is a *vi* that represents the *corpus* of death-poems to Michael Strunge. The *vi* is left in the linguistic crisis announced by the death-poems themselves: the place in language where all referentiality is broken down, where tropological models are themselves the manic suicide of poetry.

In Vagn Lundbye's visionary death-poem to Strunge '*Rhino, ramt af den renhed ved en ung digters død*' ('Rhino, Struck by the Purity of a Young Poet's Death') we see a similar disarticulation of language (Lundbye 1990: 89). However, it is not the lexicon that is disfigured by the death of Strunge, but the logic of semantical reference. The poem's three stanzas open with statements that paralyze language's ability to yield meaning (Auken 1998: 201-203). For example, stanza one begins: 'There exist places where you see/ longer than you see'; stanza two: 'There exist animals that do not die/ the Trakl-night they die/'; and finally: 'There exist ways that do not exist/ before they no longer exist'. In Lundbye's poem language is so staggered at Strunge's death that semantic coherence cannot be expressed through syntactic logic. Rather, it is the name of an earlier suicide poet, like in the Høeck poem above, that establishes meaning. Embedded in the second stanza are the names Trakl, Sarvig, and Majakovskij, all poets whose lives were taken by their own hand. These names punctuate a genealogy in language that exists beyond grammatical meaning, yet accents the meaningful topography of poetical consciousness.

In closing, I would like to quote another poem of Strunge's from *Ud af Natten* (Strunge 1995: 411). It is a poem that projects the cranks (*katapult*) of the organ (*poesien*) being turned by the organ grinder (*piloten*) turning the 'madness of words' (De Man 1984: 122). And it is a poem that should remind us of how beautiful and intense the lyric of Michael Strunge are even without pretending he never died.

NY ORDRE

Spørgsmålet er
om poesien skal gennembryde lydmuren
eller
om piloten skal lade sig skyde ud med katapult
og lande med faldskærmen på ryggen og tuschpenen i hånden
og se en røgsøjle dét sted
vor han kunne være blevet dræbt?

Gennembryd den mur
- og spring *så* ud!

(New Order

The question is
whether poetry can break through the sound barrier
or
if the pilot should let himself be shot out with a catapult
and land with the parachute on his back and the felt pen in hand
and see a column of smoke in that place
where he could have been killed?

break through the wall
- and then *jump* out!)

‘NY ORDRE’ reveals the precarious flight of the modern poet; he is a test pilot trying to break the barriers between perception and sentience. The last lines define a purpose for the poetical consciousness: all constructions of social boundaries and categories are subject to the art of human words. Strunge’s leap into the fiction of the sign exemplifies the sheer power of the poetic line to reconstruct itself and create a nexus of meaning and intimacy through an imaginary telepathic inspiration, the signs and traces of which are left in the corpora of our poets.

The very last line of the poem is reminiscent of a later Bowie song, ‘Jump They Say,’ which appeared on *Black Tie White Noise* (1993). Many think that the song was written for Terry Burns, Bowie’s half

brother who suffered from schizophrenia. The two were very close growing up, sharing a room, and Bowie credited Burns with turning him on to jazz music, Buddhism, and beat poetry. In the mid-80's Burns' mental health deteriorated and he was committed to Cane Hill asylum. In 1982, he attempted suicide by jumping from the window of the asylum but managed to survive. Three years later, he escaped Cane Hill and committed suicide by laying himself over the train tracks at the nearby Coulsdon Station. After Strunge gave Bowie his poetry outside the Plaza Hotel in 1978, he waited for news that Bowie would use his lyrics on an upcoming album. That moment never came. But, the lyrics of 'Jump They Say' give a glimpse of the power of reading commemorative poetry after the death of Strunge. Not only is everything always ecologically connected, always cut-up, but true meaning lies in the realm of the deeply imaginary relationships that provide our frail bodies with meanings greater than ourselves:

When comes the shaking man
A nation in his eyes
Striped with blood and emblazed tattoo
Streaking cathedral spire

They say
he has no brain
They say
he has no mood
They say
he was born again
They say
look at him climb
They say "Jump"

Endnotes

¹ Strunge was one of the founding editors of the punk periodical *Sidegaden* ('Side-street') which ran from 1981-84 and featured multi-media work that took an aggressive stance against the commercial tediousness of main street Copenhagen. For a reproduction of the journal's cover, see Handesten et al, 2007: 400.

² All translations in this article are my own. To my knowledge, no translations of the poems included here have ever appeared in print.

³ Yukio Mishima (1925-1970), pseudonym for Hiraoka Kimitake. In 1968 he founded the Shield Society, dedicated to the preservation of the samurai code. In 1970 he seized control of military headquarters in Tokyo in an attempt to incite Japan to the heroic ideals of its past. After the movement failed, Mishima committed *seppuku* with his sword. His last *Kabuki* work, *The Moon Like a Drawn Bow*, performed at the National Theatre in 1969, ends with scene of a *seppuku*.

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