

# **Snow, Shadow, Self: Emil Aarestrup and Poetic Recollection**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the relationship between recollection and lyrical poetry while analysing Emil Aarestrup's poem 'Paa Sneen'. According to the author of this article the reception of the Danish poet Emil Aarestrup has long been influenced by two main themes: exile and naturalism. Taking his starting point from Jørn Vosman's essay 'Værkets verden, værkets holdning', Andersen reevaluates the importance that the dimension of time and the process of recollection have in Aarestrup's work and offers a new interpretation of his poem 'Paa Sneen'.

## **Key words**

Emil Aarestrup, 'Paa Sneen', time, recollection, Jørn Vosman.

What is the relationship between lyrical poetry and recollection? How is recollection constituted in lyrical poetry? And to what extent does recollection challenge the predominant notion of a poem as a here and now?

These three questions will provide the backdrop for this rather short article, where I will discuss recollection in connection with the nineteenth century Danish poet Emil Aarestrup. I will start out examining a particular reading of Aarestrup's canonical poem 'Paa Sneen' before suggesting an alternative reading of the poem, focusing on the aspect of recollection.<sup>1</sup>

Emil Aarestrup is, after Andersen and Kierkegaard, probably the most influential Danish writer in the first half of the nineteenth century. Though hardly known outside Denmark, Emil Aarestrup has influenced generations of Danish writers and has been the subject of more critical readings and interpretations than almost any other Danish poet. He published but one collection of poems, *Digte*, in 1838, which sold a little more than forty copies, and for the better part of his life, he worked as a medical doctor on the rural island of Lolland, south of Sjælland.

This brief biography has led to two persistent myths in the reception of his oeuvre: that of exile and that of naturalism. The idea of exile is based on Aarestrup's distant rural life in Lolland, far removed from the cultural center of Copenhagen, whereas the myth of naturalism is based on Aarestrup's education and profession – and that he, as a medical doctor, used his pen as a 'dissecting scalpel' in his oftentimes erotic poems (Ringgaard 1998: 259). Almost all critical accounts on Aarestrup employ these two myths of exile and naturalism which, as I have previously argued, first appeared in Georg Brandes' two early essays on Aarestrup's poetry (Andersen 2006).

Jørn Vosmar is one of only few critics who completely avoid these persistent myths. In his influential essay 'Værkets verden, værkets holdning', he uses his reading of Aarestrup's 'Paa Sneen' as ammunition in a critique of what he refers to as formalistic readings. The essay is one of only a handful of original theoretical manifestos ever written in Danish literary criticism and though it originally was published more four decades ago, it is still the subject of academic discussions in

Denmark and was recently revitalized in an attempt to show 'hvordan Vosmars eksistentialer kan bruges som pædagogisk redskab' (Kemp and Kirkegaard 2011: 28) (how Vosmar's existentials can be utilized as a pedagogical tool).<sup>2</sup>

Vosmar opens his essay by asking us – the readers – to consider the first two stanzas of Aarestrup's poem – here in my translation:

Hen over Torv og Gade,  
Hvor Sneen laae, den hvide,  
Belyst af Nattens Maane,  
Jeg saae dig hastig skride.

I eventyrlig Skjønhed,  
Krystalklar, straalte Staden,  
Og som et magisk Luftsyn  
Blændede Slotsfaçaden. (Aarestrup 1976: 191)

On square and street  
Where the snow laid white  
Lightened by the moon of the night  
I saw you move quickly on foot

The city beamed crystal clear  
In brilliant beauty.  
And as a magical vision on the air  
The façade of the castle blinding.

After quoting these two stanzas, Vosmar poses five questions grounded in a literal reading of the poem, that he asks us to answer:

Hvor ser de Hende gå: på gaden eller på torvet?  
Bevæger jeget sig, eller står han stille?  
Hvor er jegets position: i en gadeudmunding, ude på torvet eller inde ved enten gadens eller torvets husrække?  
Er der andre mennesker inden for jegets synskreds, eller er Hun alene?

Er der spor efter jeget og/eller andre vejfarende på sneen, eller  
er dens flade uberørt (evt. bortset fra Hendes fodspor?)  
(Vosmar 1969: 76)

Where do you imagine the woman in the poem is walking: On a  
street or across a square?

Is the 'I' of the poem moving or standing still?

Where is the 'I' of the poem located: in the middle of the street,  
on the square, or standing close to the walls of the houses on  
the square?

Can the 'I' see other people, or is she alone?

Are there other footsteps after the 'I' and/or other travellers  
on the snow, or is its surface untouched (perhaps except her  
footsteps)?

After posing these five questions, Vosmar comments:

Der er ikke i de to strofer noget sprogligt holdepunkt for at  
foretrække én mulighed frem for andre. Stiller man rigoristiske  
krav om helt tekstro læsning, må man hævde at det første  
spørgsmål bør besvares med et både-og og de sidste fire med  
et ved-ikke.

Men sådan svarede De jo ikke, vel? (ibid. 76-77)

There are no formalistic reasons to prefer one possibility to  
another. If we demand a rigorous textual reading of the poem,  
we must conclude that the first question should be answered  
with a 'both and' and the four last ones with a 'do not know.'

But that is not how you answered, is it?

Vosmar claims that over the years he has asked a few hundred  
people these very same questions and that their answers have been  
almost unanimous. And it is the result of this little survey that he  
uses to debunk two formalist readings of the poem – one inspired by  
structuralism, the other by new criticism, as both of these methods  
had reached Denmark belatedly in the mid-1960's:<sup>3</sup>

I begge tilfælde kunne forløbet lige så godt have udspillet sig på en månelys sommernat og personernes positioner være hvilkedesomhelst af de i de spørgsmål foreslåede. (ibid. 86)

In both cases, the poem could just as easily have taken place on a moonlit summer night and the position of the characters could be anywhere of the places suggested in the five questions.

According to Vosmar, the focus on arduous observations, as dictated by formalistic methods like new criticism and structuralism, can be explained by 'usikkerheden over for værkets overordnede elementer, dets verden og holdning' (ibid. 89) (the insecurity towards the broader elements of the literary work, such as its whole and its attitude). Instead, Vosmar proposes a methodological approach that can explain how 'alt i værkets verden virker sammen om at frembringe værkets enhed' (ibid. 80) (everything in the literary work functions in unison to create the unity of the work). In order to do so, we need to base all interpretations on our ability as human beings to perceive:

Vi oplever i kategorierne tid og rum og vi er os bevidst at være et jeg, der er placeret i en omverden, som rummer andet og andre end dette jeg (...) *Tid, rum, omverden* og *jeg* er de fire *fundamentale* og *irreducible* faktorer i vores oplevelser og dermed i vort forhold til tilværelsen som totalitet. En litterær fortolkning, der vil gøre tilfredsstillende rede for værkets holdning, kommer derfor ikke uden om disse faktorer. Eller omvendt: er forholdet til disse faktorer præcist beskrevet, er også værkets holdning beskrives. Alt hvad der kan siges om holdningen i et værk kan føres tilbage til og forstås ud fra de fire eksistentialer. (ibid. 89-90)

We perceive in the categories time and space, and we are aware that we are an 'I', placed in a world consisting of other 'I's' (...) *Time, space, context*, and *I* are the four *fundamental* and *irreducible* factors in our perception and in our relationship to life as a totality. Thus, a literary interpretation that seeks to

explain the attitude of the literary work can not ignore these factors. Or vice versa: if the relationship to these factors is described accurately, so is the attitude of the literary work. Everything that can be said about the atmosphere in a literary work can be taken back to and understood in terms of these four existentials.

After this methodological explanation, Vosmar turns his attention towards 'Paa Sneen' in an attempt to identify these four existentials in the poem. And as the most important one of the existentials, Vosmar starts out trying to establish the time aspect of Aarestrup's poem: 'Der er ikke i stemningen plads for en fortidsorientering' (ibid. 102) (There is no room for an orientation towards the past).

This proclamation seems rather peculiar. Especially because the premise of the poem is nothing but an orientation towards the past as it can be seen through the use of simple past tense.

That Vosmar – normally an attentive and skillful reader – ignores or misreads this recollection, this orientation towards the past, is rather interesting. But if we look at his further reading of the poem, we might begin to understand the basis, or reason, of this misreading. Here, Vosmar seems particularly interested in the erotic longing of the 'I' of the poem about which he concludes:

Fra at være intens, men retningsløs, får længslen retning og erotisk farve, for derefter at bremses af jegbevidstheden og omformes til artistisk sensualisme (ibid. 105)

From being intense, but without direction, the longing becomes directed and erotically charged; then it is being stopped by the self-consciousness of the 'I' of the poem and is transformed into artistic sensuality.

What Vosmar refers to when mentioning that the erotic longing is being stopped by an increased self-consciousness, is the poem's sixth and the seventh stanza where the 'I' observes its own shadow next to that of the woman:

Jeg saae den [din skygge] hastigt svæve  
Over den glimmerhvide,  
Ætherisk-rene Flade –  
En anden ved dens Side.  
Det var min egen Skygge!  
Den skyndte sig utrolig –  
Jeg havde aldrig seet den  
Saa langstrakt og urolig. (Aarestrup 1976: 192)

I saw it [your shadow] quickly hover  
Above the glittering white  
Ethereal clean surface –  
Another by its side.

It was my own shadow!  
It hurried incredibly –  
I have never seen it  
So long and restless.

These two stanzas lead Vosmar to conclude that in Aarestrup's poem 'fremtræder livet ganske vist på uendelighedens baggrund, men da er det kun et skyggeliv' (Vosmar 1969: 105) (life appears on the background of infinity, but then it is only a shadow life). And from here, he continues, the parallels 'til Aarestrup's øvrige digtning og romantismen i det hele taget er lette at trække' (ibid. 105) (to Aarestrup's poetry in general and romanticism as such are easy to draw).

With this in mind, Vosmar's misreading of Aarestrup's poem has significant consequences. It involves not only the poem or Aarestrup's poetics, but also an understanding of romanticism as a whole. Using the phrase 'kun et skyggeliv' (only a shadow life), Vosmar suggests that romanticism in Aarestrup's version is inauthentic and inconsequential as Aarestrup, in contrast to the later modernists, does not draw any aesthetic consequences of this doubling of the self. On the other hand, Aarestrup's longing is transformed, and reduced, to 'artistisk

sensualisme' (artistic sensuality) as the doubling of the self 'umuliggør længslens tilfredsstillelse' (ibid. 104) (makes the fulfilling of the longing impossible). In other words, Aarestrup is rejected because he on one hand is too simple and on the other because he is too complex.

This rejection of Aarestrup, which in turns becomes a rejection of romanticism, might serve as an initial explanation of Vosmar's misreading of the time aspect in 'Paa Sneen', stating that there 'ikke i stemningen [er] plads for en fortidsorientering' (ibid. 102) (is no room for an orientation towards the past in the attitude of the poem). Recognizing that the poem is a recollection, as suggested by the past tense, doubles the poetic 'I'. This adds another layer to the poem, as recollection creates a distance between the recollected and the recollecting. I argue that it is exactly in the space between the recollected and the recollecting that Aarestrup's poem takes place. The poem thematizes the process of recollection, addressing the question of how it is possible, through language, to give life to something that by definition is lost. In this reading, the white snow becomes the blank sheet of paper upon which the 'I' tries to imprint the recollection that becomes nothing more than a shadow in the snow. This becomes a micro-narrative within the poem, not unlike the ones identified by Paul de Man, which tells the story about the impossibility of recreating the past in the present.

Focusing on the theme of recollection in 'Paa Sneen' challenges Vosmar's reading not only of Aarestrup's poem but also of romanticism as such. It suggests a complexity that Vosmar does seem willing to accept when dismissing any possibility of recollecting, claiming that the poem does not leave room for a 'fortidsorientering' (orientation towards the past).

Dismissing romantic literature as being too idealistic and thus simplistic is by no means Vosmar's invention. On the contrary, we can identify a similar rejection of romanticism in the bulk of literary criticism from T.S. Eliot to deconstruction. But Vosmar, as mentioned, takes this a step further in his reading of 'Paa Sneen' as Aarestrup at the same time is too complex in his simplicity and too simple in his complexity. This, as we have seen, is not primarily the result of skepticism of romanticism, but can instead be explained by the aspect



of recollection, which challenges not only Vosmar's attempt to propose a new method of literary criticism, but also our understanding of the genre of lyrical poetry as such.

If we briefly return to the first two stanzas in the poem – keeping the insights added by a focus on recollection in mind – we see that an entirely different reading becomes possible than the one proposed by Vosmar. In such a reading it becomes irrelevant whether the 'I' of the poem is moving or standing still, or if the woman is alone or not. Here, there is no woman but a poetic 'I' and 'you', which reflects the now and then of recollection. The shadow across the snow is the writing on the blank page that can never be anything but a shadow, as the past exists only as a shadow that can never be fully recalled or, perhaps, rewritten.

That the situation described in the poem is an allegorical reflection of the poetic process of recollection is emphasized in the second stanza with words like 'eventyrlig' and 'magisk Luftsyn'. This suggests that the cityscape serves as a metaphor. Furthermore, in the following stanza's description of the 'you', we find an extensive use of metonymy, but a surprising lack of personal pronouns. This, too, suggests, that the woman is not real. Instead, she serves as distraction while the 'I' of the poem tries to convince us that he has succeed in recollecting the past, though in reality the 'you' represents the recollection of the poem as such.

In his attempt to sidestep the formalism of structuralism and new criticism, Vosmar proposes a reading that simplifies Aarestrup's poem unnecessarily. It is a reading that seems to find its philosophical origin in phenomenology and where the four aforementioned existentials all are represented in the dictum 'I. Am. Here. Now'. This dictum came to serve as a motto for a generation of Danish poets from 1980 and on, just as Vosmar in general has been highly influential in the understanding of modernism in Danish literary criticism.

In addition to contradicting his theoretical agenda, Jørn Vosmar's misreading of the time aspect in 'Paa Sneen' seems based on a dominating perception of lyrical poetry as representing a 'here and now', where the poetic utterance is seen as expressing 'a state of mind or a process of [...] thought and feeling', as Meyer Abrams puts it in the influential *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Abrams 1993: 108). This widespread understanding of lyrical poetry leaves no room to engage

in aspects of recollection within the genre, as recollection is considered a narrative trait that undermines the very genre of lyrical poetry itself.

This is exactly what a focus on recollection has shown. The recollection undermines, not the genre of lyrical poetry, but the understanding of lyrical poetry as expressing a here and now. It introduces a narrative element in the discrepancy between the recollection and the recollected, between past and present, and shifts the focus from the object of recollection to the process of recollecting.

And this is what we find in Aarestrup's poem. From being a poem about an erotic encounter in a winter's night, we have seen how the poem is, in fact, an allegory on poetic memory. It touches on one of the most fundamental issues of all poetic writing – the relation between the signifier and the signified – and shows that Aarestrup is far more complex than Jørn Vosmar gives him credit for. With my suggested reading of 'Paa Sneen' a new understanding of Aarestrup and his 'Erotiske Situationer' – the suite from which the poem is taken – emerges. And due to his enormous influence in Danish literary history, it becomes possible to trace this poetry of recollection as a significant but critically ignored niche in Danish poetry and, perhaps, in poetry in general. Future scholarship on this ignored tradition will force us to rethink the time aspect in lyrical poetry and thus challenge our understanding of lyrical poetry as such.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'Paa Sneen' is part of the state authorized canon, *Kulturkanon*, commissioned by the Danish Cultural Ministry in 2005. Here, the poem is one of twenty-four poems from medieval ballads to the present where 'de valgte tekster sammenfatter noget essentielt i forfatterskabet' (the selected texts recapitulate something essential in the authorship) (Kulturministeriet 2005: 163).

<sup>2</sup> Vosmar's essay is also discussed in a phenomenological and cognitive context in Anita Bech Albertsen's dissertation *Et tekstanalytisk mellemværende* (Albertsen 2009: 151-155). Furthermore, Martin Jørgensen includes Vosmar's 'epokegørende artikel' (epochal essay) in an examination of phenomenological literary criticisms in the book *Tæt på litteratur* (Jørgensen 2010: 37), while Anne-Marie Mai and Dan Ringgaard refer to the article as 'nybrydende' (ground breaking) (Mai and Ringgaard 2009: 16).

<sup>3</sup> The two readings in question are by Brandt-Pedersen (1967) and Schiødt (1965).

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