Body »writing« and soul »speech«

Hans Christian Andersen's *Improvisatoren*

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This article deals with H.C. Andersen's *Improvisatoren* from one particular point of view, namely, the question of the correlation, in Andersen's approach to art and life, of the written and the spoken word, of body and soul. The artist protagonist, Antonio, whose fame rests on his verbal improvisations, shuns the written word as a form of communication for much of the novel, just as he takes but slow and tentative steps to admitting a physical dimension to his purely spiritual notion of love. On this interpretation, life and art coalesce in the novel's unexpected and much-debated closing tableau of an idyllic family unit, and we are faced with a new dimension in both the speech-writing, and the soul-body relationship. The only piece of concrete information that Andersen gives us is that the hero, Antonio, gives up his practice of verbal improvisation concurrently with embarking on married life. Indeed, the very act of writing his autobiography is a step into the world of the written word, and throughout the novel, as a background to the growing success of his verbal improvisations, we get hints of the works he is planning, or trying, to write. It seems, therefore, that Antonio's professional life runs parallel to that of Andersen himself, who, for all his attraction to improvisation, had to come to realize that much as his story-telling enchanted his live audience, his tales had a chance of surviving, once death had sealed his lips, only if they were recorded in the form of the written word.

Hans Christian Andersen won international recognition with his first novel, *Improvisatoren*, written in 1835 upon his return home from Rome. Reflecting his recent impressions of Italy and the influence of Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, Andersen's novel was a resounding success at home and abroad, most conspicuously with German readers.[1] It was the first time that a Danish writer had placed the poet, that key figure of the aesthetics of genius and existential quest, at the center of his work, thereby creating the first »Kunstnerroman« (»Künstlerroman«, »artist's novel«) of Danish Literature. The genre itself was a product of German Romanticism, but would spread throughout the continent in the first half of the 19th century. It is often considered to be a characteristic offshoot, a subgenre, of the *Bildungsroman*. Indeed, Bildungsromans tend, for the most part, to be »artist's novels«, but also – due to the mutual transforming influence that genres have on one another – historical novels as well. Novels that will have a writer, a poet, a painter, a sculptor, an actor or even a scholar for their protagonist. We find several such »Kunstnerroman«, in the classical

1 Ivy York Möller-Christensen, *Den gyldne trekant. H.C. Andersens gennembrud i Tyskland 1831-1850,* Odense Universitetsforlag, Odense, 1992, 62-74.

sense, in Andersen's oeuvre (*Kun en Spillemand*, 1837, *Lykke Peer*, 1870), but some of his fairy tales, too, have aesthetically-sensitive scholars for their hero, for instance the famous »Skyggen« (1847). Many of the attributes representative of the genre (e. g. the notion of artistic genius as a gift of God, the conflation of religious and artistic terms, the hero's love of a woman coinciding with his love of art, the priest and the poet as vassals of celestial beauty, etc.) are already palpably present in his *Improvisatoren*.

On the Romanticism interpretation of life, music, poetry and love are essentially one. The poet needs to experience love because it is only in love that he can find his own identity. Music and poetry, too, are forms of the absolute, with attributes that are inseparable from love. Antonio would become a true poet in the crucible of his adoration for Annunziata, whose identity as a singer plays a key role in the ever-growing attraction she holds for him. That poetry and love spring from one and the same root is demonstrated by the very ways in which Antonio's love affairs unfold. In the novel, we see a poetic work mediated by the written word receive a totally different interpretation than it does when mediated by voice alone; in the same way, Antonio reacts totally differently to the Jewish girl than to Annunziata, or to the blind girl than to Lara, though in fact in both cases he is having to do with one and the same person. Romanticism poetry, which made the subject its primary object, is the poetry of the disappeared body, and this seems to be a particularly apt description of Andersen's art. In the case of Antonio, this antinomy is most evident in his need to choose between a secular and a religious career. One of the much-analyzed scenes of the novel, when an enormous eagle swoops down on a fish swimming close to the surface of the lake and both perish in the horrific struggle that ensues, adumbrates more than just the impending death of Antonio's mother.

Ferguson, for instance, sees the duo of eagle and the fish gripped in its claws as symbolic of Christ soaring towards the heavens with the souls of the faithful in his clasp, and thus expressive of Antonio's ongoing struggle to choose between the two vocations.[2] Be that as it may, the subjective modifications Antonio introduces into his improvised account of the scene at the end of Book I are definitely suggestive of the soul's longing to escape the bonds of its physical body and strive for the heavens above. Recounting to the robbers the life-and-death struggle between the eagle and the fish,

2 George Ferguson, *Sign and Symbols in Christian Art*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1961, 17.

Antonio embellishes his account with a significant new motif. When the young eagle loses the use of one of his wings and bird and fish are swallowed by the lake soon after, the mother eagle starts screeching in despair. She cries and cries until she catches sight of her other son, proudly soaring toward the sun in the clear blue sky: then her mother's heart trembles for joy. The steep curve of reaching for the sun high in the sky is a most effective metaphor for the longing for immortality that rules Antonio's soul. Rooted in Christian tradition, this Neo-Platonist approach to immortality was based on the concept that body and soul were polar opposites.

Antonio's improvisation to the robbers is consistently in keeping with the assumption that the soul has priority over the body; in this, it appears to be an illustrative variant of the meaning of the improvisation he came up with at Annunziata's behest (»Udødelighed«).[3] Given this approach, we can presume that Antonio, in introducing the opera singer Annunziata, would emphasize how much more captivating he found the beauty of her voice than her physical charms. Santa's description, too, makes clear that Annunziata's physical appearance was devoid of the blatantly sensuous (»Noget Legeme maa der til, saalænge vi ere i denne Verden«).[4] Furthermore, the reader can have no doubt that Bernardo cheats on Annunziata with a girl that reminds him of her simply because that girl has a fuller figure, *i.e.*, simply because she impresses him as being more sensuous (»en forunderlig Lighed med Annunziata, kun var hun større og fyldigere«).[5] For Andersen's hero, Antonio, however, the female body can be only an astral body of sorts, one which is, at most, suggestive of the transcendent idea of perfect beauty. We find this disequilibrium between the physical and the spiritual casting its shadow over every one of the tentative gestures of interest that Antonio makes towards the women in the novel, from Annunziata to Flaminia, all the way to Lara. We can speak only of »tentative gestures« and not »initiatives«, for our protagonist is the type of male who is much more given to adoring women than to winning their hearts. What is more, even an outside observer of Antonio is struck by the disharmony between his body and soul. Observing the young man's odd posture, Francesca notes that important as it is to cultivate the soul, one should not totally neglect to care for one's body:

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3 H.C. Andersen, *Improvisatoren. Original Roman I to Dele*, Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab og Forlaget, Borgen, 2005, 101.

4 Idem, 161.

5 Idem, 177.

> Hvor han bukker moersomt (…) sagde Francesca til Fabiani (…) Det er fortræffeligt, at Aanden bliver uddannet, men Legemet maa heller ikke forsømmes[6]

Antonio's peculiar relationship to all things physical is made evident also by his singular interpretation of the sensual dimensions of Annunziata's various operatic roles. He first catches sight of the celebrated diva in her role as a passionate, vital Dido; but much as he is captivated by her performance, from the very first moment he tries to talk himself out of recognizing the smoldering sensuousness behind Annunziata's convincing portrayal of the amorous Carthaginian queen. First, he likens her to the pale and cold Niobe (»bleg og marmorkold, som en Niobe«) then to the Medusa head painted by Leonardo da Vinci:

> Annunziata vidste saa ganske at forandre sit hele Udtryk, isne enhver med Skræk, man maatte aande og lide med hende. Leonardo da Vinci har malet et Medusahoved, det findes paa Galleriet Florents: (…) Saaledes stod nu Dido for os.[7]

Reducing the two mythical figures to a common conceptual denominator, Antonio introduces an oppositional relationship: »turned to stone« applies to both figures, the one in the intransitive, the other in the transitive sense of the words. Right he is in calling himself a sculptor (»Billedhugger«) who is equally at home in the language of mythology and the language of art.

It is one of the features of Andersen's novels that he is wont to depict a beautiful body in the attractive posture of a statue. For a perfectly crafted statue is a sign that can mediate between living forms and dead forms.[8] This kind of idealization precludes every physical aspect of the human condition from the realm of apperception, indeed, it presents a real alternative to fallible and transitory physical existence. Statues are bodies addressed to eternity; being invulnerable, they are exempt from suffering

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6 Idem, 72.

7 Idem, 90.

8 Dag Heede, *Hjertebrødre: krigen om H.C. Andersens seksualitet*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense, 103-104.

and all the painful necessities that flesh is heir to.[9] The essence of Antonio's strategy is, clearly, to block sensual desire in order to be able to raise the perceived aesthetic form, without interference, into the ideal realm of abstract beauty. In other words, for fear of himself »turning to stone« under the Medusa's gaze, he instinctively turns every vital aesthetic experience which might potentially become an object of his desire into a lifeless form. This form of escapism informs not just his approach to women, but also his attitude to male beauty. For an idealized Annunziata is not the only form with which Antonio invests the statues of antiquity. When he misses his friend, Bernardo, he wanders through the halls of the Vatican Museum daydreaming of him and scanning the statues for Bernardo lookalikes. Some critics maintain that Antonio is not really in love with Annunziata, but is merely jealous of her for having taken Bernardo away from him.[10] The initially well-nigh effeminate Antonio's infatuation with his friend unquestionably gives rise to forms of behaviour more befitting the choreography of a heterosexual courtship. From time to time, Bernardo accosts Antonio on his stunning steed like some fairy-tale prince; and at the Borghese ball, Antonio mopes like some teenage wallflower, casting longing glances at his dashing friend, who is in his element in the circle of elegant ladies. Andersen's descriptions of these scenes are not altogether devoid of erotic content; still, I would argue that the aesthetic reflexes attracting Antonio to both Annunziata and Bernardo are rooted in some abstract, androgynous ideal of beauty. As Johan de Mylius has observed, Antonio's conduct toward Bernardo is not motivated primarily by his need to identify with him: he wants to possess his friend much more than he wants to be like him.[11] Nevertheless, we do find examples of the latter as well, in Chapter V of Book II. When the vulcano breaks out, a terrified Capuchin friar calls on the crowd to save a Madonna painting that had already caught fire. Invoking the Madonna, a woman starts moving toward the flames, when all of a sudden there steps out from the crowd a young cavalry officer, Bernardo, who drives the woman back with his drawn sword and saves her from her senseless self-sacrifice. We have no trouble recognizing Antonio in the terrified friar, Antonio who, under the

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9 Karin Sanders, *Konturer: Skulptur- og dødsbilleder fra guldalderlitteraturen*, Museum Tusculanum Press, København, 1997, 23.

10 Dag Heede, op. cit, 241.

11 Johan de Milyus, *Myte og Roman. H.C. Andersens romaner mellem romantik og realisme*, Gyldendal, København, 1981, 73.

circumstances, can only dream of making the kind of decisive and manly move that only the physical body can set in motion.[12] The psychological projection here is clearly an identification wish. On the other hand, in Paestum and then in Amalfi, we see the basic motifs of the series of love triangles that Antonio is involved in, *i.e*., we see the complex of meanings behind his rivalry with »the other man«, though in the latter town, Bernardo's role, it seems, is assumed by another soldier, Gennaro.

Antonio first sets eyes on Lara, the blind young girl, in Paestum. Her beauty reminds him of the beauty of the Medici Venus statue that Annunziata had once told him about. It is a situation that reflects his ongoing strong attachment to Annunziata, but also the possibility of his breaking with her. For while Antonio's first reflex-reaction to Lara is to identify her, too, with some statue, her beauty, he finds, is of quite another type than the opera singer's. Lara is blind, so *ab ovo* she cannot cast at him the kind of enchanting, petrifying Medusa glance that Antonio saw in Annunziata's eyes at their first encounter. It is to this meeting with the diva that we can date Antonio's—unconscious—reaction of protecting himself from all sexual stimuli by mentally relegating to lifeless statues all potential objects of his desire. Now, for the first time in his life, on meeting a woman who does not provoke this reaction, he is capable of kissing a living, breathing girl. It is a significant kiss: he has crossed a line and has gained a self-confidence that becomes evident in the Amalfi episode. Though here it is Gennaro who boasts of having won the fair lady, in fact, it is Antonio who steals a kiss after having proven himself a gentleman by saving her, with some trickery, from Gennaro's rude advances. Gennaro, with his empty boasts and purely animal lust, would soon drown in the sea, Antonio, on the other hand, miraculously escapes the worst of the storm. His adventure, which ends with a unique kind of »rebirth« after his »purification« in the »blue cave« seems to be a new reformulation of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual.

The fantastic scene in the blue cave, the hovering between life and death, is reminiscent of the journey to the underworld made by Dante, the great paragon. As Antonio lies in a faint, a boat passes before his mind's eye, the boatman an old man much like Charon. Sitting in the boat is the blind Lara, who, with arms outstretched towards Antonio, asks him to gather some medicinal herbs growing on the slope under the cliffs so that they might help her regain her sight. Antonio manages to do as she asks where-

12 Dag Heede, op. cit, 77.

upon the boat and its passengers disappear from view. The receptive/protective cave that is the scene of all these wondrous happenings continues to conjure up the mother image, while its motifs seem to be a direct continuation of an earlier improvisation of Antonio's, the one on Fata Morgana. The key symbols of the scene are the red flowers with their promise of complete love (»de røde Blomster«) which stand for Antonio's budding sensuality. Contrast this with the scene of Gennaro leaving Amalfi, when he summed up his stay in cocksure words using the language of flowers; even this floral symbolism, however, expressed only his raw sexuality: »Here, too, we plucked some roses!« (»der have vi plukket Roser«).[13]

Antonio's red roses, on the other hand, are the realization of the theretofore unknown possibility that a love emanating from the spirit would be able to give a spiritual dimension even to physical contact. The kiss Antonio breathed on the blind girl's forehead in Paestum was the first indication of this prospect, while the last would come at the end of the book when Antonio and Lara—who had concurrently regained her sight—would enter into the mystic union of two bodies and two souls that marriage was thought to be. For the protagonist, Antonio, there is but one real alternative to this much-desired vocation: the total renunciation of every form of worldly pleasure, in short, consecrating his life to the priesthood. The unambiguous symbol of this life choice in Andersen's work is Flaminia, the last female figure in the novel, and the most pure. Flaminia—whose very name comes from the Latin word for »priest«, i.e. *flamen*—was brought up in a convent, and though, as she tells us, she had for a short while had contact with worldly pleasures, she ultimately chose to become the bride of Christ. She is Antonio's other self, his true soulmate, but he would prove unable to follow her along her chosen path. Western tradition has always considered writing, letters, and the visible script to be like the body, like matter: extraneous to the spirit, to the word, to logos. And the soul-body problem is, without a doubt, derived from the problem of writing, to which it seems, conversely, to lend its metaphors.[14] The phonocentric approach we find in Andersen's novel seems to substantiate this observation: practically to the end of the book, the written word is consistently secondary to the spoken in Antonio's art, as, by way of analogy, the body is subordinate to the soul in his concept of love. Antonio is an artist for whom »sound« means more than »writing«. At the beginning of Ch. VIII

13 H.C. Andersen, *Improvisatoren*, 212.

14 Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1967, 52.

of Book I, we learn that books have proved inadequate (»mine Bøger vare mig ikke nok«) to fill the emptiness (»Tomhed«) that possessed his soul after Bernardo's departure. In this state of dissonance, we are told, losing himself in music was the only way he found at least moments of spiritual harmony (»Musik alene bragte øieblikkelig Harmonie«). In his search for the aesthetic, music brought him closer to the experience of purity than the much-read works of the poets: »i tonernes Verden fik mit Liv og min hele Stræben først Klarhed, her fandt jeg mere, end nogen Digter«. For all that, Antonio's own first attempt to approach Annunziata takes a written form. The adulatory poem he writes to her in the ecstatic moments following her performance, a poem which, bedecked with flowers and garlands, he throws at her feet, would evoke no response from her, of course: »Jeg havde i min Begeistring skrevet nogle Linier paa Papiir, mellem Blomster og Krandse fløi det for hendes Fødder«.[15] It is only years later when he opens the package of letters the dying Annunziata has returned to him that he himself rereads the yellowed page. He does, however, get a »response« to the letter he writes to Bernardo at the time that they are vying for Annunziata's love. He writes the letter in an effort to see clearly. He was perfectly willing to step aside, he said, if he were convinced that Annunziata loved Bernardo. If, on the other hand, she loved him instead, it was up to Bernardo to draw the appropriate conclusion:

> elskede hun mig, hvad Fordringer havde da Bernardo? Han kunde jo beile til hende, var hans Kjærlighed stærk som min, og elskede hun ham, ja, da vilde jeg øieblikkelig træde tilbage. Dette skrev jeg endnu samme Dag i et Brev til ham.[16]

This letter would be the cause of the nearly fatal attack that Bernardo launched on Antonio. It is not so much the message of the letter, however, that provokes Bernardo to such ire, but the disturbing difference that he finds between Antonio's »words« and his »writing«. The jealous Bernardo, who lives in the three-dimensional world of the physical, naturally gives credence to the body's correlative, the written word, for he explicitly accuses his friend of having misled and deceived him with his

15 H.C. Andersen, *Improvisatoren*, 91.

16 Idem, 124.

mendacious, smooth »speech« (»Du bedrog med falsk, sledsk Tale«).[17] When, however, Bernardo's gun accidentally goes off, and Annunziata, who arrives on the scene, falls to her knees and kisses the unconscious Bernardo on the forehead (»Da bøiede hun sit Hoved ned mod den Døde, jeg hørte hun græd, og saae hendes Læber berøre Bernardo's Pande«), it is Antonio who misunderstands her body language. Since she gives him no answer to the question of who it is that she really loves (»Hvem var Dig kjærest af os to?«), when it comes to decoding her metacommunication, he can't even imagine a scenario that would decide the matter in his favor. The body language of her kiss and the decisiveness with which she waves him away (»Bort! stammede hun og gjorde et Tegn med Haanden«)[18] excludes the possibility of his interpreting her curt »Bort!«, i.e. »Away!« as Annunziata's concern for him at the sight of the approaching gendarmes. As Antonio sees it, Annunziata has touched Bernardo's forehead with the most subtle part of her body, her lips, and the lips, for Antonio, are the preserve of sound and speech, the only mode through which a loving soul can find true expression.

The end of the novel, however, holds some real surprises. For instance, when the first-person narrator shares with the reader the information that Annunziata has taken seriously ill and has lost her singing voice. Antonio first sees this for himself when he unwittingly enters a little hole-in-the-wall Venetian theatre and is shocked to recognize his erstwhile love in the unsightly, no-voice singer on the stage. His disappointment is all the greater, he tells us, because he had stayed in the theatre expressly in the hope of feasting his eyes on a vision of female beauty (»De smukke Qvinder vil jeg see paa«). Reflecting on his current self, he notes that he can no longer be teased for having goat's milk course through his veins (»man skal ikke spotte Drengen fra Campagnen med Gjedemælken i Blodet«) for under the circumstances his blood was boiling and his heart was beating as if he were a Bernardo or Federigo (»mit Blod er varmt, mit Hjerte kan banke, som Bernardos, som Federigos«).[19] Surprising words from an Antonio who, until then, had given not the least indication that he was at all touched by the sight of a woman's physical charms. It is with anger that he thinks of Bernardo, suspecting that he left Annunziata because she had lost her beauty. But his anger seems to have in it a modicum of »understand-

17 Idem, 126.

18 Idem, 127.

19 Idem, 266.

ing«, since it seems that the Antonio of the above quote, who is trying to liken his thinking to Bernardo's, is no longer quite wooden. For the first time, perhaps, Antonio has come to realize that voice is mediated by the body, that a bodiless voice is an impossibility, and that from the point of view of artistic effect, the visual is as important as the auditive. Given his new insights, he is no longer so sure that the kiss Annunziata breathed on Bernardo's forehead meant exactly what he had thought it meant (»Bernardo havde altsaa forladt hende! eller havde hun ikke elsket ham?«).[20] Ultimately, he receives the final answer to these tormenting questions from »writing«, whose nature is analogous to that of the body, and this opens a new chapter in the long-time dialogue of body and soul. For Antonio, on reading Annunziata's own letter, finds out not just the details of her illness, but also that it had always been him that she had loved. In that terrible moment—she tells him—it was only her fear for Antonio's safety that had rendered her speechless, and she had flung herself over Bernardo, whom she believed to be dead, only in helpless despair:

> Jeg elskede dig, elskede Dig fra mine lykkelige Dage til mit sidste Øieblik (…) Min Smerte over Ulykken, der skilte os ad, den store Jammer, knugede mit Hjerte, bandt min Tunge, jeg skjulte mit Ansigt ved den Dødes Legeme[21]

Antonio, as we see, finds the solution to his life's most oppressive mystery in the linguistic form of écriture in Derrida's sense of the word, *i.e.*, in the last traces left by the disintegrating body, for it is the now silent voice embodied in writing that is beginning to mediate to him the truth so long obscured by body language. To bring home this point, Andersen uses metaphors directly referring to the physical body to communicate what turns out to be a false message: the emotional shock she had received constricted Annunziata's heart (»Hjerte«), and tied her tongue (»Tunge«). The polysemous word »tongue«, which refers at once to a human body part, and to a non-material means of interpersonal communication (»Sprog«), is particularly suited to illustrating this duality. For the fact is that linguistic signs, which originate in the body, in physicality, can, in any particular communicative situation, lead to mistakes in understanding every bit as serious as can forms of speech, which arise directly from the soul. The

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20 Idem, 267f.

21 Idem, 277.

obvious goal would be to create harmony between the two, seeing that the heroes of the novel are at home only in certain specific dimensions of linguistic usage, each in keeping with their different ways of life. Bernardo, the seducer, best understands forms of metacommunication mediated by the body, whether it be a subtle gesture or just a provocative glance. When he is injured by the shot fired by Antonio, it is a form of physical contact—Annunziata's kiss—which brings him back from the brink of death; conversely, Antonio's improvisation on the subject of immortality makes the point that, as he sees it, the power of the word can breathe life into even inanimate things. It is, however, important to notice in Antonio's conduct those minute, almost imperceptible changes which gradually bring him nearer and nearer to the once categorically repudiated world of the senses, and perhaps even to its derivative, the written word.

As we see it, the turning point in Antonio's world view is his unexpected Venetian encounter with the now ugly Annunziata. We have already had occasion to refer to the fact that this takes place at a stage of Antonio's personality development when the first-person narrator is ready to mold himself after Bernardo, *i.e.*, the »real he-man« prototype, and step out into the »real world«. Coming face to face with the wasting away of a body racked by illness is what brings home to him how fully the singing voice is at the mercy of the vicissitudes of the body's well-being, rooted in the non-physical world of music though it be. The disillusioning sight also benumbs his budding sensuousness. At first glance, Antonio's long-standing infatuation with Annunziata might be seen as just the necessary impulse toward his winning out over his rival, thanks to his own art:

> hendes Kjærlighed vilde have givet min Aand en større Kraft og Udvikling. Havde jeg den Gang fulgt hende og var optraadt som Improvisator, vilde maaske min Triumph have knyttet sig til hendes, vi havde skiftet Plads.[22]

But it does not take long to realize that the art of verbal improvisation is as dependent on the moment as the art of singing, and so cannot hold the key to the artistic immortality that Antonio has so coveted for so long.

A man can escape the clutch of mortality only through creating something permanent, or through biological reproduction. By the end of the novel, we see Antonio as having lost the kind of self-assuredness which

22 Idem, 271f.

he once thought predestined him, through the strength of his words, to breathe new life into Annunziata's »lifeless« singing. We find that he has no such strength. Annunziata's art would disappear without a trace along with her mouldering body, as would Antonio's body and art. In the epilogue, however, it seems that we are introduced to a new set of possibilities. Enter the mysterious, tall and sallow (»temmelig høi og noget bleg«)[23] figure, whom some critics recognize as the monk Poggio, who bears Andersen's features. It is he who tells us that Antonio and Maria (Lara) are happily married and already have a young daughter, whom they have named Annunziata:

> han spurgte, hvad det hed, og den gamle Dame, min kjære Rosa var det, sagde: Annunziata! Et deiligt Navn, sagde han, og kyssede den Lille, mit og Laras Barn.[24]

On Dag Heede's analysis, the Poggio figure has the function of taking over from Antonio the role of artist, something which, due to his changed circumstances, our protagonist can no longer play. Marriage, according to Dag Heede, is *ab ovo* contrary to the logic of Antonio's character. The purpose of the introduced Andersen-like figure is to allow the author to distance himself from Antonio who has turned his back on art, and has regressed to an average life.[25] In my opinion, all that the text itself allows us to presume is that Antonio stopped his improvisations; if this is so, the decision might be an instance of moving beyond the speech-centered aesthetics of Romanticism poetry. Let us not forget that by writing his own autobiography, the first-person narrator has already crossed over into the world of »writing«, of the written word, concurrently satisfying the precondition of immortality. The path he trod was similar to Andersen's own who—for all his empathy for the art of improvisation—obviously had to come to recognize that highly effective as his stories were when spoken to an audience in person, the only way that they would outlive their creator was to have them put down on paper. It is as if Antonio himself had recognized that for all its advantages and impact, improvisation was an art of the moment. It cannot be coincidental that in the background of the improviser's growing success he is clandestinely working on writing. Not long

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23 Idem, 294.

24 Idem, 294f.

25 Dag Heede, op. cit, 132f.

before his marriage, the first-person narrator tells us that he has started to write a drama about the life of Leonardo da Vinci. The idea comes to him during his stay in Milan, where Antonio hears the legend about the great artist's unhappy love life, and immediately thinks of Flaminia and Annunziata. The mention of the two names in one breath, as well as the story of the events surrounding Lara-Maria, suggest that by the end of the novel not just the relationship of the spoken to the written word, but that of body and soul, too, have taken on a new dimension.

Annunziata dies and is buried, while Flaminia enters the convent to become the bride of Christ, *i.e.*, is buried alive. It is a solution open to Abbé Antonio as well, but he chooses another path. Initially, it seems that even in Lara-Maria, his future wife, he can discover only the beauty of dead forms. This is what is implied by his dream in which Maria is dead. But his first waking words suggest that values which he, until then, had considered to be marginal, death had revealed to him in their true light. The dead Lara's closed eyes and silent lips are still able to »speak« to him: it is as if at that moment, Antonio finally becomes aware of the inescapably physical nature of human existence: »Lara! i Døden taler Dit lukkede Øie, Din stumme Læbe til mig!« And when he awakens from his nightmare, he realizes not just that Lara, the blind girl he met in Paestum, and Maria, the podesta's daughter, are one and the same person (»jeg kjender Dig! har kjendt Dig i Maria«)[26], but that Maria has had a successful operation and has regained her sight. Antonio, who earlier had had no understanding of body language, is now able to read the expression in her eyes (»i Marias Øie læste jeg, at hun havde været Vidne til mit Hjertes Bekjendelse«) and feels blood, sensuality and life return in his throbbing veins (»jeg føler Livet vendt tilbage i mit Blod«).[27]

The seeing eye is not only the mirror of the soul, but also one of the important centers of female charm. Thus, describing the ethereal spirituality of the female figure unwittingly involves a kind of tempered sensuousness. With the marriage act, Antonio clearly enters what he had so far explicitly denied, the world of the physical, and little Annunziata is the fruit this bears. The sounds of the art of singing might fade into oblivion, but the body is capable of renewal and the soul lives on, reborn in an other form. There can be little doubt that Antonio and Maria's child is Annunziata's reincarnation, as the meaning of the name makes clear. Sven

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26 H.C. Andersen, *Improvisatoren*, 290.

27 Idem, 291.

Møller Kristensen has shown that Annunziata's name refers to the day of the biblical Annunciation (»bebudelse«), the feast day of Jesus's conception.[28] Somewhat ironically, he notes that in Andersen's novel, too, little Annunziata's conception can only have been the work of the Holy Spirit. Be that as it may, the analogy in *Improvisatoren* declares the possibility of the body's rebirth, even as the *Apocalypse* speaks of the resurrection not of the soul, but of the body. These, perhaps, are considerations which might serve to bridge the logical hiatus between most of the book and its idyllic closing scenes.

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28 Sven Møller Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros. Studier i danske romantik*, Gyldendal, København, 1966, 164.