

TENDERNESS AS MORE-THAN-HUMAN RELATIONALITY IN PERNILLE ABD-EL DAYEM'S OMSORGSDAGE

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore tenderness as a concept in aesthetics that relates to both care and vulnerability. Arguing that tenderness is currently a central sensibility in contemporary Nordic literature and art, I define it as a relation of openness, sensitivity, and curiosity between the subject and sensuous stimuli from its surrounding environment. In an affective reading, I show where moments of tenderness as an affective relation arise in the short story collection *Omsorgsdage* by Pernille Abd-el Dayem (2022). I argue that the scenes of tenderness in these stories create spaces of disinterested empathy that do not serve other narrative purposes than existing in the text as reflective spaces of sensitivity and relationality which potentially act as a commentary on the need for more of these spaces in society.

KEYWORDS

Tenderness, Care, Affect theory, More-Than-Human Relationality, Pernille Abd-El Dayem

In this article, I explore tenderness as more-than-human relationality in contemporary Danish literature. Drawing on feminist ethics and aesthetics of vulnerability and care, I define tenderness in a literary context as a character's relation of openness, sensitivity, and curiosity toward the outside world. This relation, I argue, does not serve the unfolding of a narrative, but creates spaces of empathy as its main function in the stories. As such, tenderness is created in the literary characters but also at a structural level in the text, because the scenes in which the tender relation emerges generate spaces of narrative uneventfulness. I explore this literary tendency, focusing exclusively on the characters' relations to more-than-human beings and phenomena, in Pernille Abd-El Dayem's short story collection *Omsorgsdage*¹ with a short comparison to Jonas Eika's short story "Mig, Rory og Aurora" from their work *Efter Solen*.²

These two authors are part of a Nordic movement of writers who either emphasize tenderness as an important political aspect in their practice³ or have been described as writing tenderly in public discourse.⁴ As such, my analysis is a response to this movement, but rather than engaging with its primary political argument, it seeks to point out another potential of tenderness than what is immediately prevalent in this discourse. I argue that, whereas the authors and their critics emphasize the political power of engaging with tenderness, as a variant of engaged literature⁵ that seeks to reveal problems with our society and its handling of mentally vulnerable people, the presence of tenderness in the literary works also generates a space for attunement to more-than-human beings and environments in scenes of narrative uneventfulness. This merits investigation simply because of its stylistic and genre-related innovations, but also because of its potential for generating more-than-human empathy in narrative and affective contexts of ordinariness.⁶ In a correspondence between Danish writers Jonas Eika and Rolf Sparre Johansson in *Obvidat Magasin*,⁷ tenderness is described by Eika as an important aesthetic category of political resistance in contemporary literature as well as in movements of resistance:

Tenderness is the experience of being touched by something that surpasses you without destroying you and is still there after the touch has ceased. It evokes something that you already had in you, and makes you want to pass it on. When you speak tenderly, the other that touched you also speaks. When you are touched tenderly, you are also touched by what made the other tender. The tenderness connects. You are never tender by yourself.⁸

Tenderness as a relation of openness to change and touch from the other is present in the description Eika provides here. This aspect, and the potential of tenderness as an element of resistance, is also inherent in the movement of “tenderness activism,” initiated by the Danish writers Sidsel Ana Welden and Anna Rieder in 2020. Essentially, the movement aims to create a more nuanced way of talking about mental illness, employing poetical language. A connected project was the pamphlet *Tenderness Activist Manifesto*⁹ published by Rieder and Welden among other authors. The manifesto was an attempt at foregrounding softer ways of resistance, for example through writing or art making, for people without the physical or mental means to protest in traditional ways. With the theme of mental vulnerability as a central framework, the movement seeks a political aesthetics of tenderness as a soft and sensitive alternative to a political aesthetics of protest:

Tenderness activism is not in opposition to demonstrations, shouts, physical mobilization, but an expansion of the methods of protest. An alternative to the angry, acting protest.¹⁰

In summary, this movement in contemporary literature foregrounds tenderness as resistance because it cultivates a space for sensitivity that, by the authors in question, is not viewed as being widely accessible in society. Therefore, it serves as an important supplement to the traditional view of resistance as angry and violent protest. But this space of sensitivity, I argue, is also present at a stylistic level of the literary works that are produced in and around this movement. This sensitivity relates to both human and more-than-human beings and environments that the characters observe in scenes that are not meant to build up the narrative or provide any construction of the characters. I argue that these scenes of tenderness might provoke what Ann Jurecics calls social attunement,¹¹ cultivating empathy towards others through the act of reading. However, contrary to Jurecics work, here, my focus is on the literary potentials of generating empathy not towards other humans but toward more-than-human beings and environments.

The works I analyse, and generally the ones that are part of the tenderness movement, do not include the climate crisis or the environment as topics. Researchers who analyze contemporary literature that thematizes these topics directly, often emphatically pose the argument that such literature has the capacity to make us imagine the severity of the climate crisis and thereby be more aware of its

effects.¹² However, by relating tenderness—an emotional concept currently engaged with by a literary movement whose primary concern is human vulnerability—to literary scenes of more-than-human relationality, I wish to point out an aspect that might be missing from other works that thematize the climate crisis directly: the cultivation of tender relations to more-than-human environments that happen in the everyday but, importantly, are not the main topic of its novels. This emotional and sensuous dimension might generate more-than-human awareness in ways not accessible in novels that focus on the direct contemporary or future consequences of climate change on a narrative level. The literary works engaging with tenderness are not primarily concerned with a clear narrative altogether, thereby providing space for more-than-human relationality in everyday scenes of simply living on.

MUSINGS ON TENDERNESS

The root of the word “tender” is the Anglo-French adjective *tendre* that denotes softness and delicacy. *Tendre* is also a French verb that means “to offer,” suggesting attending to, or caring for, someone in need. The dual meaning of tenderness as both cultivating kindness and empathy as well as being sensitive to pain suggests a close relation to vulnerability, a term that has been much theorized in philosophy, feminist, and critical theory.¹³ Judith Butler has proposed a concept of vulnerability as a shared condition of precariousness of the body that is “always given over to modes of sociality and environment that limits its individual autonomy.”¹⁴ Opposed to the generalized understanding of vulnerability as being exposed to the potential risk of harm, Butler’s definition denotes a relational condition, shared by all humans, which can potentially create solidarity. An even more radical version of this concept is present in Emmanuel Levinas who does not see in vulnerability merely a way to manifest solidary affects like empathy or sympathy. He suggests that subjectivity itself is inherently vulnerable, because it comes into being as an exposure to others.¹⁵ However, while being related to both Butler’s and Levinas’ concept of vulnerability, what is at play in the concept of tenderness, is rather the emotional *result* of perceiving something vulnerable or fragile.¹⁶

Similarly, the concept of tenderness is closely linked to the aesthetics of care, which I will only cover superficially here to include aspects relating to the literary works that I analyze. James Thompson summarizes the movement of care in the socially engaged arts field in his new work *Care Aesthetics* by drawing lines between the

understanding of care workers' labor as having aesthetic qualities and the understanding of certain works created by artists and writers as enacting care.¹⁷ Defining it as an aesthetics of the everyday that is grounded in human and more-than-human relationships, Yuriko Saito writes that care is a "social aesthetics" which requires the attention to, and empathy for, the other.¹⁸

As both Thompson and Saito emphasize, the aesthetics of care is related to the field of feminist care ethics from the 1980ies onwards. Carol Gilligan among others has shown that care is cultivated in asymmetrical relationships of supporting acts, where the two parts take on the caring and the receiving role at different times.¹⁹ Within the framework of feminist ethics of care, assumptions concerning the need for rationality and objectivity are thus called into question in favour of care practices in individual situations of relationality and interdependence.²⁰ As such, the aesthetics of care relies on an ethics of care as a relational model based on mutual vulnerability and on practices rather than solely on objectivity, rationality and other characteristics of the individual subject.

What interests me about tenderness is how it implies a sensitivity towards the surroundings that could be understood as the condition of possibility for the cultivation of empathy and thereby, referring to Saito, the condition of possibility for a social aesthetics of care. That is, tenderness, denoting the dual meaning of both being sensitive to pain and cultivating empathy for the other, implies that to cultivate empathy and care one needs to first be sufficiently sensitive to let the impressions of the outside world matter enough. In my literary analysis, tenderness is an emotional condition of possibility for a relational way of sensing the world and being open to letting it change you, happening between specific characters' inner worlds and nervous systems and their outer environments.

Moving towards literature, Barthes' definition of tenderness, although in a more romantic context, is "an infinite, insatiable metonymy" and "a crystallization of presence."²¹ With these descriptions, Barthes points to tenderness as a way of staying present with, open to, and curious of one's immediate surroundings as they are continuously unfolding. This state of emotional presence and curiosity echoes author Olga Tokarczyk's speech on tenderness from her acceptance of the Nobel Prize in 2019:

Tenderness is *the art of personifying*, of sharing feelings, and thus *endlessly discovering similarities* [...] Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed [...] Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling [...] Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time.²²

Tokarczyk's description of tenderness in relation to literature highlights the concept's definition as neither vulnerability nor care, but as the sensitivity to another being's fragility and as the ability to be curious about it, without gravitating towards sentimentality. I argue that this is Tokarczyk's way of employing "disinterested" in relation to tenderness here: it is not meant to denote distance to the being or object in question, rather, it refers to showing a deep emotional concern about the other's unique nature regardless of it being human or more-than-human. Furthermore, disinterested empathy essentially emerges out of curiosity and openness, and not a situation where the other is necessarily in need of help or compassion.²³ In my use of the term, this definition helps to emphasize my argument that the literary characters at times cultivate disinterested empathy towards more-than-human phenomena such as scents that are not capable of showing emotional states.

Thus, with tenderness, I point to a sensitivity that is more open as to what might be included in this perception than earlier research has suggested on the literary aesthetics of vulnerability for example. In Ganteau's comprehensive account of the aesthetics of vulnerability in British literature, the human-to-human relationship is front and center, informed primarily by trauma theory and feminist ethics.²⁴ I suggest that tenderness can foreground a broader spectrum of human and more-than-human beings and phenomena that might be in sensuous and perceptive relation to the subject in question, in line with recent developments in theory on new materialism.²⁵ The dual meaning of tenderness as both mental and bodily sensitivity, which is not to the same degree inherent to the concepts of vulnerability or care, highlights my new materialist understanding of the term.

Consequently, with a point of departure in the ethics and aesthetics of care and vulnerability, and the dual meaning of tenderness as both proneness to sensitivity and cultivation of empathy, I propose to

view tenderness in the context of contemporary literature, as a character's relation of openness, sensitivity, and curiosity toward the outside world of human and more-than-human beings and environments, potentially leading to what Tokarscyk calls disinterested empathy.

A POSTCRITICAL REGISTER

Drawing on my definition of tenderness, it can be understood as an equally cognitive and emotional mode of being present with, and attached to, the world. In this vein, to illustrate how my definition of tenderness is portrayed in works of contemporary literature, I locate my reading in a postcritical register.²⁶ This reading method emerges from the material turn in literary studies²⁷ that moves away from poststructuralism's discursive focus on structures to a new materialist focus on body and affect.²⁸ As one of the central figures in postcritique, Rita Felski draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to advocate for a reparative reading method that, unlike paranoid reading, does not reveal structures in the text, but considers the reader's affective engagement and attachment to it.²⁹ Importantly, she does not believe that it is possible for the researcher to entirely unlearn older forms of analysis and criticism, and therefore, a post-critical reading essentially entails both structural and affective elements. In her work with the postcritical framework, Felski draws inspiration from Bruno Latour's actor-network theory³⁰ and, among other things, foregrounds the processes of identification and attachment. She draws on the understanding of identification as "an affinity that is based on some sense of similarity,"³¹ and emphasizes that this process can lead to attachment. A reading experience of identification and attachment is a complex affair that can be filled with conflict and ambivalence but also constructive insights into affective and aesthetic elements of each literary work. Felski emphasizes that identification is often related to characters, but a reading can also identify with a narrator, an author or a style. Here, my primary identifications revolve around tenderness as a stylistic and (non)narrative quality of the text and as an emotional and cognitive process happening in the characters.

THE IMPRINTS OF SENSES IN OMSORGS DAGE

Danish author Pernille Abd-El Dayem's latest short-story collection *Omsorgsdage* (2022) literally means "care-days." The title is a riff on the allowance of two off-days pr. year that you get from the Danish government to essentially take care of your child. These are called "care days," but with the title, Abd-El Dayem seems to ask: what days

are *not* care days?³² Even though her short stories can be read individually, all the people in them are related to one another in intimate or random ways; they are connected by virtue of sharing a family, a child or an apartment together—or an interest in scents or dogs for example. They cross each other's paths throughout the stories, and each story is a link in a chain of connections where bodies and things are contagious and impressionable. The stories do not have any significant narrative arc, they just flow in and out of very ordinary life situations that are nonetheless highly sensuous. The book is written in a very casual, yet unique language that is characteristic for the mood of the book: it is both ordinary and emotional and quirky.

One of the elements that forms a unifying principle for the short stories is a latent criticism of the assumption that care can only take place within the closed, conventional framework of the nuclear family—instead, it is something that takes place on the street and the park, in the supermarket and the cinema, in the random meetings with human and more-than-human beings and environments in the ordinariness of life. Crucial for this analysis, in *Omsorgsdage* the modern relationship between care and consumption is also examined, and objects and things almost get an agency of their own by virtue of the tender language with which the character's perception of them are described. There is a willed experimentation going on in the characters of the short stories, between them and their surroundings, which challenges and fractures their boundaries of identity and selfhood. It seems like the characters are in a constant dynamic between an opening up of the self to the affective imprints of the environment that one cannot foresee or control, and an attempt to keep an autonomous sense of individuality. The event of thinking with or being witness to another being or environment are central to the stories, and these experiences affect the characters in subtle ways that seem to incite transformations in them beyond what they can immediately recognize or articulate.

One example of this is the characters' relation to scents. In the short story "lasagna and dreamcake," we read about the relationship between Dan and Don from Dan's perspective. We also read a lot about Dan's love for and collection of scents. These themes are joined in a retrospective scene where Dan meets Don for the first time in a shopping mall in Denmark, with Don working there as a sales assistant of perfumes. When they meet, he presents a special perfume to Dan:

The perfume first said flower, with a note that hung between rose and violet. But then suddenly there was cigar box and cedar wood, which meant that the sweetness of the flowers did not gain the upper hand, but hit a kind of harsh wall, a boundary. The scent was not dry, but glistened with something fluidly fresh that made those notes glow like light through a window in the fog. And in the middle of it all I suddenly sensed a raven sitting and watching apparently without fear.³³

The nuanced sensing of multiple aspects of Dan's favorite perfume is filled with personification, as Tokarscyk alluded to in her description of tenderness. The sentences describe such an attuned relation to the scent that the sensing of it changes almost second by second. What I perceive as a disinterested empathy with the scent, following Tokarscyk's understanding of the term as an empathy that is more invested in the perceived object or phenomena's uniqueness than recognizing a similar feeling-state to oneself, begins when it is described as glistening "with something fluidly fresh that made those notes glow like light through a window fog." This image creates a somber feeling that is underlined by the dark raven, seemingly appearing in the imagination of Dan as a consequence of the scent. It resembles an emotional sensitivity to another phenomena outside the subject, without sentimentalizing it or demanding to possess it.

This experience leads Dan to remember the first time he met "the raven" in Nice. Hidden among local and non-touristy building blocks, Dan encounters small and random perfume stores, and the experience of scent takes center stage again:

The perfumes on the shelves were dusty and unknown brands. They smelled of something I knew. I got vague but lovely associations, laundry, resin, windblown skin. And then suddenly there was one that stood out. It smelled of something I knew but hadn't smelled before. A raven I had seen earlier on a telephone pole appeared again and again when I sniffed the pipette. The black bird that rested on the telephone mast. Rested and looked towards other connections. I must have reacted in a special way when I smelled the raven, because the clerk moved towards me.

- You have found your soul scent!
- What?
- A soul scent is one that opens you up, she explained.³⁴

The personification of the scent as a raven can be understood as a result of a tender relation between the subject and his “soul scent”. Additionally, I identify the clerk’s comment that the scent “opens you up” as in alignment with an understanding of tenderness as a relation of openness between subject and the olfactory phenomena.

In another of the short stories, “Hege,” Jacky is reflecting on the time after she had her eponymous daughter, a child she has with her friend Dan from the previous story:

Jacky is bent over the kitchen sink now. There is a sudden crack in her. It’s starting to be spring. The apple tree flowers drift, float before long out there again, like scattered gazelles on the savannah. The spring Hege was born that could really make the milk flow. The sight of the floating flowers and their scent, but also that Jacky compared them to gazelles. Something reminiscent of something else, altogether, made her breasts tense, a fish skeleton in a fallen holey leaf. On such a spring morning, she could easily deliver 200 ml if she followed the flowers and milked out while still sitting in bed and then again a little later.³⁵

In this scene, Jacky remembers how the sight of the apple flowers activated her body in a way that made her “milk flow”. From the perspective of tenderness, I identify this process of remembrance as the character being highly sensitive to her surroundings and to how the imprints of the outside world impact her in a direct, bodily way. Furthermore, the narrator emphasizes that it is not just the fact that she sees the flowers that makes her body activated in this way, it is also her comparison of them to gazelles. The personification of the flowers are a part of this move of sensitivity between Jacky and her surroundings that creates a relation of tenderness between them. Conversely, when she remembers her breasts being tense, she compares them to a fish skeleton, creating once again an analogical relation between herself and the outside world.

Equally affecting are the stores and concrete buildings that Jacky walks around in her life as a new mother:

A warm and synthetic air is pushed out of the sliding doors at Føtex, it mixes with the wind that blows Jacky past the cafe Kaffekilden, gets hold of her and gently pulls her inside. She puts her heels in. But she’s already through the gate.

The goods ooze. A sunscreen on the shelf already smells from the skin of a distant holiday.

Jacky holds up various earrings next to her face. She bends over the small mirror on the stand. A synthetic smell from the clothes, the plastic packaging mixes with the sweet smell of meatballs from the butcher's department.³⁶

The air from the supermarket and the wind from the outside both become personified as agents that grab and push Jacky into the store. Hereafter, Jacky is sensing the products that are personified in different ways, and their smells are described with great precision. Importantly, as with many of the short stories in *Omsorgsdage*, this *is* the main event of the story: the sensing and experiencing of the surroundings of the characters and the micro intensities that flow between them in a dynamic and affecting way. Even though there are conversations going on between characters as well, these scenes are not framed as more important for the narrative or the characters themselves, on the contrary, the sensuous and reflective scenes fill up most of the textual space.

One last example is from the short story "Cecil" which is told from the perspective of Jacky's eponymous tenant, a younger woman. In this story she ponders on her relationship with the public square that faces her room:

When Cecil is down there on the square and has drunk some of the coffee, she can get a feeling of being balanced. It still gives peace of mind to open your hand completely and hold something warm. Then the square is a zen garden. She can see four of the five benches / blocks. No matter where she sits, one is hidden, and that gives hope. A fairy forest in a moonland.³⁷

In this example, Cecil experiences the square with her senses and creates analogies such as a fairy forest in a moonland. These analogies serve as an enchantment of the city for the character in the process of taking in the ordinary and everyday urban places and cultivating them with tenderness.

NARRATIVE UNEVENTFULNESS AS SPACE FOR MORE-THAN-HUMAN RELATIONALITY

Abd-El Dayem's short stories are full of these scenes where the sensitivity of the characters heightens the experience of otherwise very ordinary encounters with their surroundings, primarily public space.

The characters create personifications from the sensuous impressions of the outside world, as when the analogy between a scent and an animal is depicted. In this way, tenderness opens them up to their surroundings and generates curiosity towards seemingly insignificant and ordinary more-than-human phenomena, environments, and objects, all imprinted in the characters as sensuous experiences. These scenes generate contemplative spaces in the short stories that do not point towards something outside of themselves that is more important in the narrative, like a love interest or a specific causality of events. Even though human relationships are portrayed and developed in the short stories, the scenes of tenderness are not constructed to support anything but their own existence in these textual spaces that I call narratively uneventful.

In line with the tenderness movement, these scenes in *Omsorgsdage* can be understood as creating an aesthetic space for tenderness that, in the opinion of the movement's authors, is not sufficiently accessible for individuals elsewhere in society. But, as I alluded to in the introduction, the scenes also serve another function in the text: the cultivation of more-than-human relationality fueled by a character's relation of openness, sensitivity, and curiosity to the outside world. As climate fiction researchers like Jens Kramshøj Flinker and Gregers Andersen³⁸ argue, literary texts about climate catastrophes can generate an important awareness of the environment through the imagination of current and future catastrophes. In a much more minor register, I argue that the scenes of narrative uneventfulness in *Omsorgsdage* hold a stylistic quality that conveys the concomitantly ordinary and sensuous relationality between a human character and its more-than-human environment.³⁹ It does not have the same clear political goals that Flinker and Andersen, and even the tenderness movement itself, point too. It provides a type of awareness that resides in the interstices of literary works that themselves often do not have a clear plot structure or narrative arc. It can be argued that the tender spaces of narrative uneventfulness that I have pointed out in *Omsorgsdage* are not substantial enough to provide the same kind of "ecological bildung"⁴⁰ as climate fiction.⁴¹ But the tenderness movement itself speaks to the contrary: just as the movement argues for carving out more space for sensitivity between humans in society, it can be argued that cultivating awareness of the more-than-human environment also has a potential in the seemingly insignificant but tender spaces of openness, sensitivity, and curiosity of the everyday. My reading of *Omsorgsdage* advocates for that.⁴²

In this vein of distinguishing between major and minor events and promises in literary research related to connections between human and more-than-human beings, it is illustrative that Sophie Wennerscheid, in her comprehensive analysis of Jonas Eika's *Efter Solen*, focuses on what she calls "speculative anxiety" in the short story collection.⁴³ The concept denotes a "diffuse" anxiety for the future that is related, albeit not as directly as general climate fiction, to climate change and the loss of control that humans experience in their relation to nature. Even though Wennerscheid emphasizes that her analysis focuses on ambivalent scenes, it is still centered around the high-intensity experience of anxiety.

However, the short stories of *Efter solen* also contain everyday scenes where tender relations between human and more-than-human beings unfold. This is perhaps most prevalent in the short story "Mig, Rory og Aurora," the only one not analyzed by Wennerscheid, and in general not characterized by supernatural elements or extraordinary events. "Mig, Rory og Aurora" could be unfolding in contemporary East London, even though there is a peculiar connection between institutions such as the church, the factory, and the rehab clinic that slightly alludes to a dystopic near-future. The narrator has recently moved in with the two petty-criminal addicts Rory and Aurora after a time as homeless on the streets, and the story depicts their tender but vulnerable and conflicted love triangle. In their wretched apartment located right next to the metropolitan train line, the narrator becomes a childlike figure in the couple's home. She sleeps at the foot of the bed and follows the other two around in their, arguably not ordinary but still everyday-like, reality, dealing and doing drugs and cooking for homeless people. However, like in *Omsorgsdage*, there is no clear plot development. The story is built up around the life of the narrator and her everyday intimate experiences with Rory and Aurora. Often the narrator just observes:

Rory had a way of being in the apartment without [Aurora], always taking care of something, that I really liked him for. He would gently move furniture and clothes around, wipe away crumbs, make the bed and air out. Water plants with a spray bottle and crunch leaves between two fingers, count the money and carefully decide which soup he would make today and which items he would have to steal.⁴⁴

The narrator's observation of Rory's domestic habits—and the habits themselves—are characterised by tenderness towards these objects

of everyday life. The narrator carries her sensuous bodily and more-than-human imprints of Rory and Aurora's home with her throughout the short story:

The piles of clothes, the cold feet and the lumps in the floor; the smell of Rory's soup, the ragged hole in the wall, Rory, his bird-like body in the kitchen, I swallow it all and hold it in my vast stomach.⁴⁵

Even when including Rory himself in her sensuous memories, the character perceives him as an animal, a tendency that runs throughout the short story, where particularly birds and cats are included in allusions or metaphors. Also in scenes of intimacy between the three characters, the more-than-human plays a significant role. During their lovemaking, the pleasure between the three characters extends to objects around them, to the apartment, and to the environment as a whole:

[...] we always tried to open and prolong the pleasure, via hands and mouth, across the mattresses, out through the room, up and over the building. Meanwhile the train whizzed by every ten minutes. The water glasses clinked on the bedside table. The apartment was red with heat against the blue-black of the evening all around. The air was pierced by traffic in all directions, up to the satellite and back again. Someone shouted, followed by another, hey, you! Cars accelerated and slammed on the brakes at the foot of the bed.⁴⁶

Pleasure is here spreading out and connecting the characters with their apartment and with the "evening all around." In contrast to *Omsorgsdage*, here, tenderness is cultivated just as much in the text as in the character, the story being told through a first-person narrator. Although not personified to the same degree as in *Omsorgsdage*, the tender relations between humans and more-than-human beings and phenomena in Eika's scenes of narrative uneventfulness - or, at least, of underprioritized plot—are clearly present.

My identification of tenderness as a more-than-human relationality in *Omsorgsdage* and *Efter solen* shows how it arises in depictions of the seemingly insignificant interstices of the everyday. Even though tenderness does not comprise everything there is to be said about these literary works and their portrayal of more-than-human relationality, I have found it fitting as a perspective to identify several

scenes where the dual meaning of proneness to sensitivity and cultivation of empathy is generative for understanding what goes on with the characters while the narrative itself is quiet uneventful. On a textual level, the relational encounters between the characters and more-than-human environments generate spaces of narrative uneventfulness where tenderness just exists in these short stories that themselves often do not have a clear or steady developing plot, if any at all. Inspired by writings on the ethics and aesthetics of care and vulnerability, my literary conceptualization and subsequent analysis of tenderness points to potentials of the current tenderness movement that goes beyond “soft resistance” and the political fight for more space for vulnerability in society. My proposition is that literary tenderness also generates an awareness of more-than-human relationality depicted in a narratively uneventful and sensitive way in the midst of ordinary situations of the everyday. This is an awareness that is far from both climate fictions of catastrophes and literary depictions of high-intensity feeling states like anxiety and fear about the posthuman future. But perhaps it is just as important for imagining new ways of perceiving and existing with our more-than-human surroundings.

- 1 Pernille Abd-El Dayem, *Omsorgsdage* (Gyldendal, 2022).
- 2 Jonas Eika, *Efter solen* (Gyldendal, 2018).
- 3 Jonas Eika and Rolf Sparre Johansson, "Korrespondance," *Obvidat Magasin* 1 (2019).
- 4 See, among others, the motivation for awarding Abd-El Dayem the Strunge Prize in 2019: <https://presse.gyldendal.dk/en/PressReleases/Forfatteren%20Pernille%20Abd-El%20Dayem%20tildeles%20aarets%20Michael%20Strunge-pris> (accessed August 14, 2025).
- 5 Tue Andersen Nexø, "Sandheden er Enkel og Krigerisk: Engageret Litteratur og den Politiske Brug af det særligt Litterære," in *Litteratur i brug*, ed. Anne-Marie Mai (Forlaget Spring, 2019), 184–207.
- 6 Katherine Stewart, *Ordinary Feelings* (Duke University Press, 2007).
- 7 Eika and Johansson, "Korrespondance."
- 8 "Ømhed er erfaringen af at være blevet berørt af noget, som overstiger en uden at ødelægge en, og som stadig er der efter berøringen er hørt op. Det fremkalder noget, som man allerede havde i sig, og giver en lyst til at give det videre. Når man taler ømt, taler det andet, som berørte en, også. Når man bliver berørt ømt, berøres man også af det, der gjorde den anden øm. Ømheden forbinder. Øm er man aldrig for sig selv." Eika and Johansson, "Korrespondance."
- 9 "Ømhedsaktivistisk Manifest," 2022.
- 10 "Ømhedsaktivisme er ikke i opposition til demonstrationer, tilråb, fysisk mobilisering, men en udvidelse af protestmetoderne. Et alternativ til den vrede, handlende protest." "Ømhedsaktivistisk Manifest," 2022.
- 11 Ann Jurecic, "Is Teaching Empathy Possible?," in *Narrative Medicine in Education, Practice and Interventions*, ed. Anders Juhl Rasmussen, Anne-Marie Mai and Helle Ploug Hansen (Anthem Press), 25–37.
- 12 Gregers Andersen, *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis. A New Perspective on Life in the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2020); John Thieme, *Anthropocene Realism* (Bloomsbury, 2023); Jens Kramshøj Flinker, "Den Skandinaviske Cli-fi: En Ny Genre i Antropocæn?," *Spring* 42 (2018): 41–66.
- 13 See among others, Alyson Cole, "All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique," *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 17, no. 2 (2016): 260–277; Erinn Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (Routledge, 2014); Aastha Mishra, "Reflections on the Value of Vulnerability: Towards a Relational Understanding of Vulnerability with Ethics of Care," *International Journal of Philosophy and Social-Psychological Sciences* 4, no. 4 (2019): 31–38; Rosi Braidotti, "Affirmations versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates," *Symposium* 10, no. 1 (2006): 235–254; Per Nortvedt, "Subjectivity and Vulnerability: Reflections on the Foundation of Ethical Sensibility," *Nursing Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (2003): 222–230; Xin Mao, "The Three Faces of Vulnerability," *Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 25, no. 1–2 (2020): 209–221.
- 14 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009), 31, see also Judith Butler et. al., ed., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Duke University Press, 2016).
- 15 Emanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duchesne University Press, 1998 [1974]).
- 16 Psychological research suggests that tenderness is evoked in an individual when another being or thing is perceived as vulnerable, leading to the wish to care, see David A. Lishner et. al., "Tenderness and Sympathy: Distinct Empathic Emotions Elicited by Different Forms of Need," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 5(2011): 614–625.
- 17 James Thompson, *Care Aesthetics: For Artful Care and Careful Art* (Routledge, 2023).
- 18 Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).
- 19 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Harvard University Press, 1982). See also Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (University of California Press, 1984).
- 20 Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, (Routledge, 1993); see also Susan J. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves. Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).
- 21 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill & Wang, 2001 [1977]), 224–225.
- 22 Olga Tokarczuk, "Nobel Lecture: The Tender Narrator." <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/> (accessed August 10, 2024).
- 23 In the dictionary empathy is described as "the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation" (Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy>), whereas with the disinterested type of empathy I am alluding to here, it does not necessarily arise by a comparison between subject and object but out of curiosity as to the uniqueness of the object in question.
- 24 Jean-Michel Ganteau, *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction* (Routledge, 2015). See also Miriam Fernández Santiago and Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández, ed., *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature* (Routledge, 2023).
- 25 See among others Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Duke University Press, 2009); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, ed., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010); Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012); Anna Hickey-Moody and Tara Page, ed., *Art, Pedagogy, Cultural Resistance: New Materialisms* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).
- 26 Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).
- 27 Martin Gregersen and Tobias Skiveren, *Den Materielle Drejning. Natur, Krop og Teknologi i (Nyere) Dansk Litteratur* (Syddansk Universitets Forlag, 2016).

- 28 See among many others Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique*, Part II, no. 31 (1995): 83–109. For a framework of "becoming" from where both new materialist and affect theory draws a lot of its inspiration see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
- 29 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2002). See also Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (Blackwell, 2008).
- 30 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 31 Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature*, 81.
- 32 In an interview with Danish newspaper Politiken the author mentions this concept as an inspiration: Birgitte Kjær, "Anmelderrost forfatter er flyttet til Møn: 'Nu drømmer jeg om at skrive mange bøger, at skrive enormt mange bøger. Men jeg ved ikke, om jeg kan leve af det,'" *Politiken*, December 18, 2022. <https://politiken.dk/kultur/boger/art9090828/%C2%B8Nu-dr%C3%B8mmer-jeg-om-at-skrive-mange-b%C3%B8ger-at-skrive-enormt-mange-b%C3%B8ger> (accessed August 14, 2025).
- 33 "Parfumen sagde først blomst, med en klag der hang imellem rose og viol. Men så var der pludselig cigarkasse og cedertræ, der gjorde at sødmen fra blomsterne ikke fik overtaget, men ramte en slags barsk væg, en grænse. Duften var ikke tør, men glinsede med noget flydende friskt, der fik den noter til at gløde som lys gennem et vindue i tågen. Og midt i det hele fornemmede jeg pludselig en ravn, der sad og skuede tilsyneladende uden frygt," Pernille Abd-El Dayem, *Omsorgsdage*, 40.
- 34 "Parfumerne på hylderne var støvede og ikke kendte mærker. De duftede af noget, jeg kendte. Jeg fik vage, men dejlige associationer, vasketøj, harpiks, vindblæst hud. Og så pludselig var der en som skilte sig ud. Den duftede af noget jeg kendte, men ikke havde duftet før. En ravn, jeg havde set tidligere i en telefonmast, dukkede op igen og igen, når jeg snusede til pipetten. Den sorte fugl der hvilede i telefonmasten. Hvilede og så mod andre forbindelser. Jeg må have reageret på en særlig måde, da jeg duftede raven, for ekspedienten bevægede sig hen mod mig. Du har fundet din sjæleduft! Hvad? En sjæleduft er den, der åbner én op, forklarede hun." Pernille Abd-El Dayem, *Omsorgsdage*, 42.
- 35 "Jacky står bøjet over køkkenvasken nu. Der er pludselig et knæk i hende. Det er ved at blive forår. Æbleblomsterne driver, svæver snart forbi derude igen, som spredte gazeller på savannen. Foråret Hege blev født kunne dét virkelig få mælken til at løbe. Synet af de svævende blomster og deres duft, men også at Jacky sammenlignede dem med gazeller. Noget der mindede om noget andet, i det hele taget, fik hendes bryster til at spændes, et fiskeskelet i et nedfaldent hullet blad. Sådan en forårmorgen kunne hun let levere over 200 ml, hvis hun fulgte blomsterne og malkede ud, mens hun stadig sad i sengen og så igen lidt senere." Abd-El Dayem, *Omsorgsdage*, 51.
- 36 "En lun og syntetisk luft stødes ud af skydedørene ved Føtex, den blander sig med vinden, der puster Jacky forbi cafeen Kaffekilden, får greb i hende og genner hende nænsomt ind. Hun sætter hælene i. Men hun er allerede gennem porten. Varerne emmer. En solcreme på hylden dufter allerede fra huden på en fjern ferie. Jacky holder forskellige øringer op ved siden af sit ansigt. Hun bukker sig ned over det lille spejl på standen. En syntetisk duft fra tøjet, plastemballagen blander sig med den søde duft af frikadeller fra slagterafdelingen." Abd-El Dayem, *Omsorgsdage*, 62.
- 37 "Når Cecil er dernede på pladsen og har drukket lidt af kaffen, kan hun få en fornemmelse af at være afbalanceret. Det giver alligevel en ro at få åbnet hånden helt og holde om noget varmt. Så er pladsen en zenhave. Hun kan se fire af de fem bænke/blokke. Lige meget hvor hun sætter sig, er den ene gemt, og det giver håb. En fabelskov i et måneland." Abd-El Dayem, *Omsorgsdage*, 71.
- 38 Jens Kramshøj Flinker, "Den skandinaviske cli-fi"; Gregers Andersen, *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis*.
- 39 As Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin reminds us, it is the sensuous experience of the more-than-human that art holds a primary potential for providing, not factual knowledge. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, ed., *Art in the Anthropocene* (Open Humanities Press, 2015).
- 40 Jens Kramshøj Flinker, "Den skandinaviske cli-fi," 42.
- 41 Another distinction in my argument compared to the mentioned climate fiction research is that the more-than-human awareness or "ecological bildung" I point to is not limited to ideas of landscape-informed nature such as plants or trees but can be any non-human being or phenomenon, such as scents or concrete.
- 42 The insight that these literary works cultivate a tender relation between the characters and the more-than-human cannot be separated from my postcritical reading method. It will always be a characteristic of this method that its interpretations are affected by what identifications the reader has had with the text. Here it is especially important to point out since I connect my analysis to a normative point about more-than-human awareness.
- 43 Sophie Wengerschied, "At kigge ind i et mørkt spejl. Fremtidsangst i Jonas Eikas *Efter solen*," in *Angst i Dansk Litteratur*, ed. Markus Floris Christensen and Anders Ehlers Dam (Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2023).
- 44 "Rory havde en måde at være i lejligheden på uden hende, hele tiden i gang med at drage omsorg for et eller andet, som jeg virkelig godt kunne lide ham for. Han flyttede nænsomt rundt på møbler og tøj, tørrede krummer af, redte seng og luftede ud. Vandede planter med en spray og nulrede blade mellem to fingre, talte pengene og bestemte omhyggeligt hvilken suppe han ville lave i dag, og hvilke varer han så var nødt til at stjæle." Jonas Eika, *Efter solen*, 110.

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- 45 "Tøjbunkerne, fodkulde og knasterne i gulvet; duften af Rorys suppe, det flossede hul i væggen, Rory, hans fugleagtige krop i køkkenet, jeg suger det alt sammen og rummer det i min vidtstrakte mave." Jonas Eika, *Efter solen*, 114.
- 46 "[...] vi forsøgte altid at åbne og forlænge nydelsen, via hænder og mund, tværs over madrasserne, ud gennem værelset, op og ovenud af bygningen. Imens toget hvinede igennem hvert tiende minut. Vandglassene klirrede på natbordet. Lejligheden bugnede rødt af varme mod aftenens blåsorte rundtomkring. Luften var gennemhullet af trafik i alle retninger, op til satellitten og tilbage igen. Nogen råbte, satte i løv efter en anden, hey, du! Biler gassede op og huggede bremserne i for foden af sengen." Jonas Eika, *Efter solen*, 112.