

“To be able to live among the dead”

On empathetic images of death and dying in Harald Voetmann’s *Amduat. An Oxygen Machine*

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The Danish author Harald Voetmann’s father died at an old age of pneumonia at the regional hospital; shortly thereafter, the author published a book with printed handwriting as an epitaph to his father with the title Amduat. An Oxygen Machine. In ancient Egypt, the Amduat was a night journey of twelve hours in the afterlife of a pharaoh accompanied by the sun god. Voetmann uses this old mythology as a palimpsest for his representation of the last hours of his father’s life in the hospital. Death is and has always been a condition of human life; what has changed in the history of modern medicine is the way health care is delivered to dying patients. I read Amduat. An Oxygen Machine as an attempt to restore the dignity of his father’s life in a medical setting. The handwritten texts are often parodic in style rather than pathetic, even though the subject matter is deeply emotional, and the author’s advanced use of form invites a complex way of attaining empathic identification. The book is a significant contribution to the growing body of literary illness narratives dedicated to the next-of-kin perspective.

Writing of loss in an advanced form and as a ritual

In her classic book *On Death and Dying* (1969), medical doctor Elisabeth Kübler-Ross reminds us that death is and has always been a condition of human life; what has changed in the history of modern medicine is the way health care is delivered to dying patients. When people die in the hospital instead of at home, they often suffer as a result of medical treatment aimed at prolonging life rather than increasing comfort. As an important supplement to case studies like Kübler-Ross' qualitative interviews, literature can offer imaginative stories about death and dying that represent experiences and at the same time create a reality in the reader. Narrative medicine argues that literature creates the empathetic conditions for a deeper understanding of research findings from medical case studies and interviews (Charon 2001, Goyal et al. 2008). An interdisciplinary approach that combines ethnographic fieldwork and literary analysis is needed to improve the care of dying patients in hospitals.

Apart from a few noticeable exceptions in literary fiction, among them Lev Tolstoy's short novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886), the process of dying is described in the mode of fictionalized autobiography by a next-of-kin figure. The Danish author Harald Voetmann (b. 1978) published a literary work on his father's death entitled *Amduat. En iltmaskine* (2018, *Amduat. An Oxygen Machine*) whose aesthetic features are unparalleled in Danish literature. Before illuminating the stylistic, formal and intertextual singularity of this book, I will contextualize the book's affiliation to literary stories about illness and thereafter compare the explicit intention of the book with the typical expectations of such literature. Key words for my initial characterization of this rare book are parody in style instead of pathos and writing as a ritual instead of a therapeutic work.

Voetmann's *Amduat* can be categorized within the rapidly growing body of literature of what Anne Hunsaker Hawkins (1998) labelled "literary pathographies", in recent years extended by next-of-kin literature as studied by Amalie DeFalco (2023). At a thematic level, Voetmann writes about his father's death from pneumonia in the hospital. In Danish literature, literary texts about the death of a relative, often a parent's death, yet sometimes also the loss of a child or partner, have been published by well-established authors such as Pia Tafdrup (2006), Peer Hultberg (2009), Naja Marie Aidt (2017), Helle Helle (2018), and most recently Madame Nielsen (2022). Voetmann's book deals with a death that was expected – and relatively undramatic from a clinical perspective – as the father passed away at an old age at the regional hospital in Holbæk with family members around him. In this case, the family members are three sons, Harald Voetmann being one of them.

In order to understand Voetmann's unusual choice of parodic style and narrative features, I find it illuminating to compare him with Roland Barthes, who wrote about the death of his old mother at their home in 1977; the mother died peacefully. The day after his mother's death, Barthes began a diary that he continued for almost two years; however, the writing was presumably never intended for publication. The title of his daily notes was *The Mourning Diary*. Barthes' mother had lived with him throughout his adulthood, and consequently her death – the loss of his closest confidant and friend – had a destabilizing effect on his life. As his mourning progresses, Barthes slowly learns to live by himself without his mother's presence and to cope with the complete loneliness he feels, despite the sympathy of those around him. Occasionally, he contemplates his own imminent death in the diary:

To think, to know that maman is dead forever, completely, is to think, letter by letter, that I too will die forever and completely. There is then, in mourning, a radical and new domestication of death; for previously, it was only a borrowed knowledge, but now it is my knowledge. It can hardly do me any more harm than my mourning.
(Barthes 2011, p. 119)

As is widely known, Barthes was a pioneering figure of French structuralist and narrative theory, and his more general reflections on the structure of language and the discourse of dying in literature reverberate through the otherwise personal diary.

Compared to Voetmann's *Amduat*, also a kind of diary, yet much more complex in form, Barthes' style is pathetic, whereas Voetmann uses parody as a rhetorical figure when describing his father. The subtitle, *An Oxygen Machine*, even indicates a satiric distance to the modern highly technological hospital as the oxygen "mask" is exchanged for a "machine" which is associated with the dehumanized medical industry. The concepts of parody and satire will be defined in the following. One more aspect differentiates Voetmann from Barthes' and the typical autobiographical mode of pathography writing. The "I" narrator is often the son sitting at the bedside, but sometimes the "I" narrator is the father dying of pneumonia; a sudden shift which creates an intended confusion in the reader. A confusion that mirrors the confusion and bewilderment in the old, dying father. This dynamic of utterance position is a narrative feature that, according to Dorrit Cohn (1999), draws an autobiographical text into the realm of fiction.

Writing about a relative's death has presumably been therapeutic for many authors in next-of-kin literature. Arthur W. Frank's argument in his book *King Lear: Shakespeare's Dark Consolations* (2022) is that everyone who suffers has a need

not only to tell, but also to hear stories about a suffering that are not theirs. He introduces the methodological concept of a “vulnerable reader” as a supplement to his famous “wounded storyteller”, introduced in the book of that title from the 1990s: “The figure whom I call the vulnerable reader is another side of the wounded storyteller; to be one requires being the other” (Frank 2022, p. 3). Frank’s primary reason for presenting a so-called vulnerable reading of Shakespeare’s classical drama *King Lear* was the expected death of his own father – and his relation to his two daughters is also touched upon. *King Lear* is a family tragedy centered around an old father and his three grown-up daughters. Frank is quite explicit about this personal context in his presentation of the reading strategy and the chosen work of literature: “Vulnerable reading most often begins by seeing how a story mirrors our own suffering” (ibid., p. 6). This is indeed a risky strategy of reading: if a vulnerable reading only centers on this mirroring of one’s own suffering, it risks becoming a narcissistic project. On the other hand, reading a literary text as if it does not on any level mirror one’s own life represents the kind of academic detachment that Rita Felski (2020) and others have criticized in recent years. Inspired by Frank and Felski, I will present a “vulnerable” and an “attached” reading in the following and discuss this new strategy of reading.

The idea of literature’s therapeutic power is dominant in the growing field of bibliotherapy and expressive writing, as introduced in the Nordic region by, for example, Cecilia Pettersen (2020) and the edited volume *Skrivning og sundhed* (2021, Writing and Health). Yet, in contrast to the therapeutic use of literature, exemplified by Frank’s reading of *King Lear* and by Barthes’ writing a diary in the wake of his mother’s death, Voetmann’s intention is explicitly non-therapeutic. If therapy involves repeatedly returning to a wound to heal it, a ritual aims to move on from the loss once and for all. In a public speech, quoted in a newspaper article, Voetmann stated the following intention with his *Amduat*:

The book should be a ritual that is completed. I do not write to achieve catharsis or get rid of something. Several of my books have been written during depressive periods, where I was brooding over something and couldn’t move on until the form was completed and the work was created. So perhaps it is rather the opposite of therapy: the work contributes to creating problems for me. (Voetmann in Turner 2018)¹

Rather atypically for next-of-kin literature and in contrast to bibliotherapy and expressive writing, Voetmann seems skeptical towards the idea that he as an author can achieve a therapeutic purification of uncomfortable emotions through

1. Quotes by Harald Voetmann in the newspaper article and from *Amduat. En iltmaskine* were translated from Danish to English by Anders Juhl Rasmussen.

the creative process. By his own admission, he did not write the *Amduat* to ease his sorrow over losing his father; rather, his act of writing is explained as constituting what anthropological theorists since Victor Turner have called a ritual (Turner 1969). The meaning of a ritual – a well-known practice in various religions and cultures – signifies a transition from one stage in life to another. Voetmann has come to terms with this transition and his loss through the ritual of writing the book. All the texts printed in the *Amduat* are written by hand in what appears to be a first draft, so writing every single page in the book may have taken on the character of a ritual. Consequently, Voetmann mentions in the same above-quoted speech that he does not intend to read the book aloud more than once.

The ritualized conception of artwork can be contrasted to Sigmund Freud's idea of therapy, where through repeated conversations, the patient reveals a hidden trauma. Having outlined the indisputable differences between therapy and ritual, one could argue that the contrast in attitudes between Frank and Voetmann towards the purpose of next-of-kin literature is not a strict dichotomy. In his explanation of why reading Shakespeare can be helpful on a personal level, Frank prefers the metaphor of literature as a "companion", echoing literary critic Wayne C. Booth that: "Good companions do more than commiserate; they complicate who we think we are" (Frank 2022, p. 7). As we can see from the quote above, Voetmann's attitude is not very different: "the work contributes to creating problems for me".

The merged stories of dying in present-day Denmark and ancient Egypt

Against this background, I will turn to the formal and intertextual singularity of Harald Voetmann's book. The author adds two elements to his otherwise rather ordinary story of loss in *Amduat* that makes the project truly unique, and these elements are closely connected. Firstly, he places his father's death in the highly technological hospital within a historical framework of the Egyptian burial chamber, where all pharaohs were buried 5,000-8,000 years ago. In such burial chambers, signs and images depicted the story of an underground journey through the realm of the dead towards the so-called "heart weighing", where it would be decided if the pharaoh could have eternal life or not. If the pharaoh's conscience was clear, meaning the heart was as light as a feather, then access to eternity was granted. According to one myth, called the Egyptian *Amduat* (Apt

and Hornung, 2007), the journey in the underworld towards the heart weighing took twelve hours from sunset to sunrise. Hour by hour, the pharaoh encounters enemies and helpers, monsters and gods, in the company of the sun god Ra. It is the god's task to safely transport the pharaoh to the heart weighing, which is the ultimate trial. Similarly, in his *Amduat*, Voetmann provides a description of his father's final hours, alternating between the fictional space of a burial chamber with depictions of Egyptian gods and a technological hospital room with modern medical equipment and physicians doing their rounds.

The author adds another element to this intertextual description of the hospital room as a burial chamber in that the book's 99 short one-page texts are written by hand. In addition, the book cover is a drawing depicting Egyptian gods as in a burial chamber, but partly transformed into a modern hospital setting. Only the colophon page at the very end of the book is typewritten. Occasionally, it is possible to encounter books in contemporary literature where handwritten fonts are simulated in machine-produced typography. In Voetmann's case, however, the handwriting is no illusion, and its authenticity is revealed by the fact that the font varies in size, appearance, and inclination, which is common for handwriting. Voetmann thereby creates a hybrid between the machine-distributed handwriting as used in contemporary graphic novels and the manuscript culture of actual handwriting on paper found in modern literary archives.

The choice to incorporate Egyptian mythology as a historical framework for the death of Voetmann's father and the decision to have his own handwriting printed in a book are apparently closely related. On the walls of Egyptian burial chambers, the story of the pharaoh and the sun god's journey through the underworld was engraved on the chamber's four walls. Voetmann's handwriting can thus be interpreted as an engraving on paper, or better, an inscription. The book's handwritten pages – the inscriptions – are consequently not numbered with page numbers. Back then, there were no other writing tools; today, authors have many options, yet there is probably no instrument so closely connected to the living human body as handwriting. The Egyptians often left headings in red and generally wrote with black, a graphic variation also known from medieval manuscripts in Europe. Voetmann adopts this principle, with the headings written in red, while the texts are written with a black pen (Illustration 1: see below).

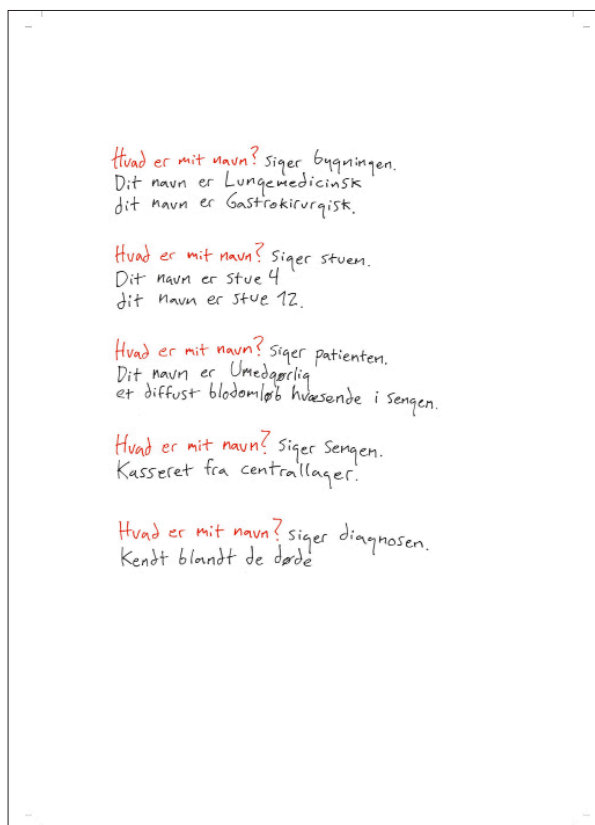


Illustration 1. A handwritten page in two colors from the book.

The Egyptian Amduat can be traced back to Thutmose III's tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Later the Egyptologists began to transcribe and copy it, and much later, it was portrayed in translated publications like *The Egyptian Amduat. The Book of the Hidden Chamber* (2007). Likewise, the reader of Voetmann's *Amduat* gets an intimate sense of reading something that could have been written in the hospital room by a son in the final days and hours of his father's life. With its narrative of the journey through the underworld and a father's death, Voetmann highlights the temporal organization of a process that involves past, present, and future. Simultaneously, the author makes use of the spatial aspect by outlining the burial chamber in a drawing printed on the opposite page to the table of contents. The twelve-hour journey through the underworld is told chronologically in the Egyptian Amduat, but Voetmann's drawing of the burial chamber as a space and the non-linear story told in the 99 short texts produces a fragmented experience of chronology and a narrative plot.

What I have attempted to describe here is succinctly explained by the author on the back of the book cover in simple words addressed to the reader (first sentence) and the father (second sentence):

When my father died, I was reminded of the period after my mother's death, when he took me on a journey to Egypt. I thought, well, when you also are dying now, and if I cannot help you, I will take you to Egypt.

Obviously, the book is meant as an epitaph to the father. On the book's title page, the author makes another brief statement about the two, merged narratives in the form of a poem:

*The journey of the Sun through
the underworld's countries
as described in
Tuthmosis III's tomb
in the Valley of the Kings
and father's death at Holbæk
hospital*

These merged stories from ancient Egypt and the present remind me of Kübler-Ross's conclusion in her famous book that death is and has always been a condition of human life. Here, the Egyptian gods have been replaced by physicians administering medication and using advanced technology: religiosity has been replaced by science. Yet, the intimate relationship between a dying father and a grieving son is unchanged and part of the human condition.

Parodic style and genre hybridity

As touched upon in my comparison with Barthes' mourning diary, Voetmann's *Amduat* is unusual in that it portrays the loss of a beloved father through the style of parody, i.e. exaggeration and distortion of the usually sincere discourse of pathographies. Most, if not all, literary works on the suffering and death of relatives that I know of are characterized by pathos, seeking the reader's compassion through identification with their own grief. No one loses a beloved family member without mourning, and Voetmann presumably does not mourn any less than does, for example, Barthes over the loss of a parent. As already stated, his book is an attempt to restore the dignity of his father's life in the medical, dehumanized setting.

However, since his debut novel, Voetmann has explored parody and satire as stylistic devices, and he recently translated the old Roman satirical poets *Sulpicia* (2016) and *Juvenal* (2020). He obviously finds the parodic modus and the moral satire more fitting than sincerity and pathos to present the deeply personal emotions affiliated with his own father's death. The Greek *parodia* means "counter-song" and is often understood as ridiculing a background text or discourse. Linda Hutcheon's has clarified the concept, and in her account the modern use of parody does not necessarily aim at ridicule, whereas satire is decidedly moral in its intent (1978). In my view, Voetmann's *Amduat* is a parody of the sincere pathography discourse, the "mourning" diaries, and satirical towards a medical system that fails to meet the fundamental need for dignity.

An excerpt from the book's table of contents can illustrate Voetmann's exaggerated and distorted style. When mastered, this parodic style evokes bodily reactions of laughter and tears at the same time:

"She who smashes the foreheads of the sun's enemies"

"She who repels the evil and slaughters Dreadface"

"The furious one who slaughters him-with-the-low-heart"

"Smashes the foreheads", "slaughters" and "the furious" are hyperbolic adjectives describing the battle between good and evil, and this reference to the perilous journey in the ancient afterworld is obviously in complete contrast to the final quiet hours of the father's life in a modern hospital. As a further example of this, a nurse carefully massages cream into his father's nose, but the scene is parodically represented with labelling the nose a "bill", and for variation "the hawk's bill" (p. 41). From a modern point of view, the Egyptian *Amduat* uses the same kind of distortion: the many animal-like monsters encountered by the pharaoh and the sun god in their journey are strange, distorted figures, such as humans with animal heads, for example Anubis with his jackal head. Parody of the sincere pathography discourse is for Voetmann also an imitation of the Egyptian *Amduat*. Furthermore, a dialogue in Voetmann's book between his father and a nurse about dinner is witnessed by the son and recounted like an absurd comedy: (father) "I want sausage on bread", (nurse) "You can have potato soup" (father to son) "Must I have sausage soup? Why must I have sausage soup?" (p. 53).

A final aspect of the book's formal exceptionalities is the blend of formal genres. Here the three major literary genres, epic, dramatic, and lyrical, are mixed in the book as a whole and even in the individual texts. The first text in the book, starting with the question "Where are you?" and continuing with the answer "I am at home", fits nicely into the dramatic genre. Presumably, it's the son who asks, and

the father who answers. The son continues: "You are not at home". Later someone asks the question, "Where am I?", which in fact could come from either the son or the father. It is a parodic dialogue spanning four pages, addressing the question of where the father is located: in his own fuzzy perception of where he is and in the son's equally disturbed perception of the situation. The death of his father is an unreal experience for the son. Thematically, it introduces the notion that the father is no longer in his home but in a hospital, bedridden, confused, and bewildered, and the son is together with him in an imaginary world as well as in reality. Being "at home" for a dying patient and his relative can also mean finding rest in death. In this sense, the father is not at home in this first text, as the book is an imaginary journey undertaken by father and son through the twelve hours of afterlife until permanent rest is found.

If the first text is a dramatic, rather absurd dialogue printed on the page as a poem, then the next text, entitled (in red pen): "**To be able to die among the living**", is an epic text that begins:

In the time after his death, Dad kept getting up from the grave. He couldn't grasp that he was dead and had to stay lying down. Just as he had lacked awareness of his illness at times, he now lacked awareness of death. (p. 5)

It is clearly a grotesque description of unnatural conditions: if the father is dead, he cannot literally get up from the grave, again and again! Awareness of illness is a commonly used medical term, and physicians often recognize a lack of awareness of illness in patients when entering the terminal phase. The quoted metaphor "awareness of death" is Voetmann's playful invention, and it probably means that it is the relatives, not the father, who have difficulty accepting the loss of their father. The text takes up no more than one page, and like the dramatic dialogue, it deals with the issue of finding rest, both for the dying person and for the relatives.

The third text in the book is lyrical and consists of some lines of verse, with each line written on a separate page. Thus, the following four pages of the book read as follows, with line breaks marked "/" and page breaks marked "///":

*A door is a knife //
A knife is an hour //
A door is a knife/a knife is an hour //
A look is a wound/and a wound is a feather. (p. 6-9)*

The lyrical verses and short poems slowly build up from simple and seemingly unpoetic words, which, through their juxtaposition, take on poetic qualities. Read literally, the sentences make no sense. A door is *not* a knife, a knife is *not* an hour.

Symbolically, these verse lines point to the hospital room, time approaching the cessation of time for the father, the knife, as what can separate the father from his surroundings, the eye contact that still exists between them, the wound as a metonymy for death, and finally, the feather that could evoke associations to Egyptian mythology. As mentioned previously, the journey through the underworld ends with the weighing of the pharaoh's heart; if the heart is as light as a feather, access to eternity is granted.

This almost programmatic blending of genres in the first pages of Voetmann's *Amduat* could be perceived as a true *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the idea existed in German Romanticism around 1800, where Friedrich Schlegel in particular defined the visionary, romantic literature as a fusion of epic, dramatic, and lyrical genres (2014). The juxtaposition of dramatic, epic, and lyrical texts in Voetmann's book takes another turn when individual texts blend dramatic and epic, or epic and lyrical, elements within the same text. An example of an indeterminate dramatic and epic text is "**Not to end in loneliness**", where the son engages in a dialogue with his father in an epic form:

"Do you know where you are"? And the father answers "I am at home. I am at Bøgebakken". "No dad, you are in Holbæk Hospital. You have severe pneumonia. And you have probably had a stroke again." "Is it you", the father asks. "How nice to see you. Is that your mom outside the window?" "No, mom has been dead for 25 years now. This is an oxygen mask, it will help you to breathe. No, you need to keep it on your face, you need to keep it on, dad. Take my hand or the bed guard. We are all here with you." (p. 38)

"Bøgebakken" refers to the house in the town of Birkerød where the family lived when the children were growing up. The father hallucinates about being at home with his wife and three sons, but this illusion of place and time is being contested by the fact that his son and his brothers are sitting next to their father's bed. The title of the text suggests that being there with the father in the hospital is intended to alleviate the fear of him facing death alone and in isolation.

Another text lies somewhere between the epic and lyrical genres and is also one of the very few non-parodic texts in the book – apart from the first line written in red and which twists a previous (quoted) heading:

To be able to live among the dead.

I adjusted your mask.

Your head had fallen from the pillow.

Immensely skinny and damaged to look at.

Mother showed me that one can die young.

You showed me how old one can become.

In my face I see yours. In yours I see my children. (p. 62)

The lyrical form is fused with epic qualities through a short narrative, within which the author gives a shockingly personal reflection on mortality. The death of a parent often prompts grown-up children to contemplate how long they themselves might live. In this case, Voetmann's mother lived a relatively short life while his father lived much longer, and therefore it is an open question as to whether he and his own children will enjoy a long or a short life. This text reminds us of Barthes' reflection on his own mortality from his mourning diary: "To think, to know that *maman* is dead *forever, completely*, is to think, letter by letter, that I too will die *forever* and *completely*."

Complex empathetic identification

At this point, I would like to discuss a point made by Arthur Frank and quoted previously. To what extent can a book like Harald Voetmann's *Amduat* be read as a mirroring of one's own suffering, in this case one's own grief following the death of a relative? In Rita Felski's chapter on the notion of identification between the reader and a literary work from *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), she argues that these ties between reader and work can take many forms. Her book explores how readers feel connected to aesthetic works such as literature and film, and she examines the theoretical and analytical aspects of the affective relationship between the reader and the work. One of the categories explored is identification, which has for a long time been considered an unacademic – or more precisely pre-academic – approach to literature. However, Felski argues that identification in its fundamental form is simply unavoidable even for the most critical and self-aware reader. Furthermore, she suggests that identification should not be perceived solely as a naive connection between the reader and the narrator or character. Identification, in her terms, is not synonymous with sameness, and it is neither sentimental nor unreflective (Felski 2020, p. 84-85).

When it comes to literary stories about illness, whether this is a literary pathography or next-of-kin literature, it is useful to examine the type of

identification characterized by empathy as the sharing of feelings. According to Felski, empathy with the narrator or a character in a novel is one of four types of identification, and she adds “alignment”, “allegiance”, and “recognition” to the empathic relation (see also Jurecic 2012):

Alignment refers to the formal means by which texts shape a reader's or viewer's access to character. Allegiance speaks to the question of how ethical or political values – that is, acts of evaluating – draw audiences closer to some figures rather than others (p. 96) ... Recognition names an experience of coming to know; of being struck by some kind of insight about the self (p. 101) ... Empathy: sharing someone's feelings and responding with concern to these feelings. (...) To refer to someone as empathic is to imply not just that they are aware of others' feelings but also that they respond to these feelings in a compassionate manner. (ibid., p. 105)

The definition of empathy 4), as compassion for the suffering of others, is differentiated from the other three types of identification which lean towards 1) narrative techniques, 2) ethical and political values, and 3) recognition in terms of self-awareness. Most books and films about relatives will generate compassion for the person witnessing a loved one's illness or death. The question then is whether the reader – in casu *me* as reader – develops empathy towards the relative sitting at his father's bedside in Voetmann's *Amduat*. I will argue that certain aspects of the book pull me in one direction, while others draw me in another, and this tension creates a rare and ambiguous experience. The fact that the book's style is mainly parodic, and that the overarching historical intertext is ancient Egyptian mythology, do not instill in me any immediate feelings of *alignment* and *allegiance* with the relative and his loss. On the other hand, the dynamic utterance situation that the narrator “I” is often the son, but sometimes also the father, creates a strong *recognition* of the close relationship between the two men, and a strong *recognition* of the intimate relationship between reality and illusion. This feature arguably increases the reader's – here *my* – sense of being close to the rare experience of dying: the reader does not merely listen to a dying patient, but actually is the dying patient for a moment through the power of imagination. I do not only recognize the intimate relationship between the son and the father on a textual level. On a personal level, I also identify with this complex relation as I am both a grown-up son (born in 1979, so similar in age to Voetmann) to an old father and a father to two young children. Thus, by means of the advanced form used, and not least through the handwritten texts, the voice and the story touch my heart and foster *empathy*.

The verbal, the visual and the auditive modalities

In a final attempt to highlight the book's effectiveness in provoking empathetic images, one can argue that Voetmann not only merges stories of dying in present-day Denmark and ancient Egypt, he also seeks to merge verbal and visual modalities, resulting in what has been called *graphic medicine* (Williams et al. 2015, Phelan 2023) as an extension of the established field of *narrative medicine* (Charon 2006, Rasmussen et al. 2022). In addition to the use of handwriting as described above, the book has drawings (mediated or generated by a computer program) of gods and animals on the front and back covers as well as on the two flaps. All the approximately 20 gods and five animals in the book's four paratexts are presumably drawn following instructions from Voetmann and copied from the Egyptian Amduat. The gods and animals are combined in a very specific way that must have required the expertise of an Egyptologist (Illustration 2: see below).

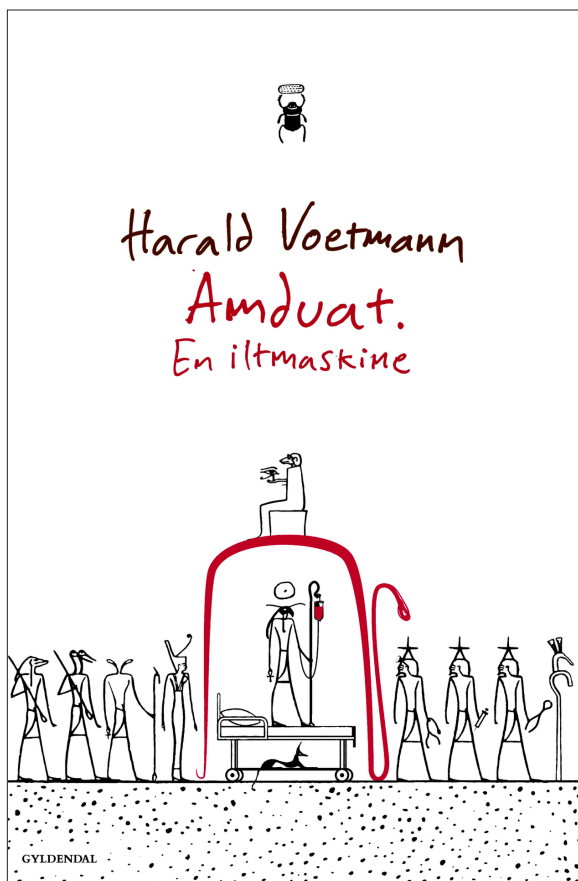


Illustration 2. The book cover.

Most of the gods on Voetmann's cover are direct copies from the burial chamber's narrative. However, the drawing on the front cover of the sun god Ra standing on a hospital bed clearly has a drip on his arm, and the three gods on his right have been equipped with a stethoscope, a syringe, and a pair of forceps, respectively. Thus, the sun god Ra on the cover is associated with the father, who, in the texts, lies in bed with an oxygen mask to breathe, and the Egyptian gods, here from the 7th hour of the Egyptian *Amduat*, are associated with modern physicians. As mentioned previously, the gods were tasked with helping the pharaoh on the perilous journey through the underworld where they had to pass the serpent Apep, which is depicted in Voetmann's *Amduat* on the book's first inner flap. In addition to the sun god Ra on the front cover, Apep also appears alongside Horus on the same first inner flap, and Anubis on the second inner flap; these gods are also named in the handwritten texts. Above the author's name on the front cover is a scarab, an ancient Egyptian religious symbol of life and rebirth, which was associated with the early morning sun, Khepri.

In his book *Narrative Medicine* (2023), James Phelan, one of the leading scholars in the field of narratology, recently applied a rhetorical approach to narrative defined by attention to narrative as communication between an author and an audience. The communication situation is defined thus: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened (Phelan 2023, p. 4). What happened in the case of Voetmann is that his father died. The occasion is therefore simply the death of his father, whereas the purpose of him telling the story is what this article is trying to nail. The most important consequence of the rhetorical approach to literary narratives is that it involves the author paying particular attention to the reader's cognition, affect, and ethics, as well as to the interactions between these layers. Phelan does not only include literary narratives in his book, he also includes a chapter on graphic novels about health and thereby attempts to analyze both the verbal and the visual aspects of this upcoming genre that intersects the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare. Whether Voetmann's *Amudat* should be categorized as a graphic novel or a printed manuscript is less important than to recognize that this multimodal expression of drawings and handwriting fulfills its purpose better when perceived as a physical book rather than an e-book.

The graphic choice Voetmann makes in printing his own handwriting supports his assumed intention to present human life – across thousands of years – as something to wonder at. In Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction" from 1935, it was noted that:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.

(Benjamin 1969, p. 3)

The reproduction of the Egyptian *Amduat* from Tuthmosis III's tomb in a printed book about the ancient chamber will always lack the here-and-now character of human perception in the tomb. Additionally, for the Egyptians, the creation of writings and paintings was more than merely a way of keeping a record. Word and image contained magical powers which could make extraordinary things happen – for example help souls in their hazardous passage from death to afterlife. One could argue that with his *Amduat*, Voetmann is taking the question of the mechanical reproduction of books to its limit in a performative gesture: this rare book in Danish literature not only merges the present and the past, the verbal and the visual, but also merges the handwritten manuscript and the mechanically reproduced book in an examination of a liminal human experience: the loss of a father.

In addition to the graphic modalities of the work, I previously mentioned that the text was read aloud to an audience only once, during the reception of a literary prize; together with the audiobook, which is read aloud by the author, these factors all add something to the essential idea of considering this particular artwork as a ritual rather than therapy. Typically, when a book is read aloud, minor misreadings have been corrected in an edited recording. In this case, Voetmann seems to have completed the reading in one take, and the listener can therefore sense from his quite remarkable shifting tone of the voice when the author is moved emotionally by reading his own texts.

Conclusion

Wrapping up this article, Voetmann's *Amduat* begs the delicate question as to who are perceived as gods in present-day society? The ancient Egyptians were typically dead by the age of 35, they had a strong belief in their many gods, and they expected that death was followed by rebirth. Their cyclical view of life and death was supported by the recurring patterns of natural phenomena like the movement of the sun. Death was no more and no less than a transition: the entering of a new phase of being-in-the-world (Apt and Hornung, 2007). In the present-day Nordic region, people are living much longer than ever before: these days, men die on average around 80 years old, and most of the – native – population is completely secularized. If the ancient Egyptians had a short life and

believed in eternity, modern Scandinavians will typically live a relatively long life and believe that death is a definitive ending. The answer to the question of who the new gods in our society are may be the physicians prolonging human lives in their highly technological hospitals. Another question is to what extent modern humans can replace their metaphysical need for understanding the full spectrum of human life with medical knowledge of the biological body? The answers to this question may be found in an identificatory reading of artworks like Harald Voetmann's *Amduat. An Oxygen Machine*.

To follow up on the opening argument made in narrative medicine, what literature does – in supplementing medical case studies and qualitative interviews like Kübler-Ross' *On Death and Dying* – is to offer imaginative stories on death and dying. These stories create a reality in the reader that is formed from empathetically identifying with the dying person. Without acknowledging these stories, medical research tends to neglect the personal, intimate side of human experience, which covers emotions and sensations as well as metaphysical beliefs. What makes Voetmann's *Amduat* constitute such a significant contribution to the illness narrative, and more specifically to the growing body of next-of-kin literature, is the unusual stylistic use of parody instead of the typical pathos of pathographies and the moral satire of a highly technological medical hospital. To create a sense of distance – but not detachment – from intimate feelings, the text employs genre hybridity blending lyric, epic and drama, along with the use of fictional features in the enunciation. These features result in the reader's confusion over "who speaks?" mirroring the father's confusion in his final hours before death. In contrast to most bibliotherapy and expressive writing in health, Voetmann has the explicit aim of perceiving writing – and reading aloud – as a ritual instead of a therapeutic work. This ritual work about the loss of his father has been carried out not only two, but three times in various media fora: when writing the texts by hand without editing, when reading the book aloud once in public, and finally when reading the texts aloud in a recording studio in presumably one take.

A so-called vulnerable or post-critical reading of Voetmann's *Amduat*, inspired by Arthur Frank and Rita Felski, invites the reader to reflect personally on their own situation, in casu *my* own relations to my old father and to my young daughters to whom I am a father. Everyone who reads the book will find it inspires their own personal reflections on family relationships, ageing, and dying. For me, the lasting impact of reading the book is a reminder of a powerful medical system, where physicians act as gods prolonging life, yet fail to meet the fundamental need for patient dignity, and the recognition of life as a vibrant mystery when faced with death as the unknown territory.

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