

“How often can you ask your reader to leave?”
Text and Reader in Lars Skinnebach: *Din misbruger* (You/r
addict)

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An experimental work of art relates to tradition as the other against which it defines itself. When it comes to literature one way of defining tradition is through the concept of genre. Literary genre represents a set of conventions, which are transcended by the experimental text. The concept of genre is dynamic – the genre forms the basis and starting point of the individual work, but at the same time the innovative work contributes to the transformation and development of the genre. Although the experimental work is produced in opposition to the existing expectations connected to the genre, it also contributes to the continuation and history of the genre as an example of artistic practice. The literary work also relates to the reader as the other who realises the text through his or her participation. The process of interpretation is determined by the reader’s expectations which, in turn, are based on genre. The relation of the experimental literary text to genre and tradition can be viewed through the role of the reader as a focal point.

Din misbruger (You/r Addict) is Lars Skinnebach’s third book.¹ Skinnebach was born in Denmark in 1973, and he has previously published *Det mindste paradis* (The Smallest Paradise), 2000 and *I morgen findes systemerne igen* (Tomorrow the Systems Will Exist Again), 2004. The cover of *Din misbruger* designed by Allan Daastrup is black and white with the title in bold red type. On the front, the background is white, and on the back, it is black. The black extends to the front where it forms the background of the title and the author’s name with irregular edges, as if the words were hastily cut from another text. The visual impression of the front page is a kind of multilayered collage. When one opens the book the contour of the black field on the front page is repeated, but this time in negative, the black area of the front page is now white. Through the paper the title and the name of the author printed in black on the page behind it can be discerned. The design of the book works in three dimensions. There is a contrast between the unpolished expression of the front page combined with the aggressive and direct address of the title and the hidden title and name inside the book. The contradiction between the provocation of the title on the cover and

¹ The Danish title *Din misbruger* can be translated as “You Addict” or “Your Addict”. I have inserted a slash in the English title “You/r Addict” to indicate that the title is ambiguous and that both meanings should be considered.

the veiled title inside the book corresponds to the complex expression of the text which oscillates between provocation and retreat or distance.



Illustration: Cover of Lars Skinnebach *Din misbruger*.

'One of the most striking features of Lars Skinnebach's poetry is the relation to the reader. The reader is addressed directly in many of the poems in *Din misbruger* and the conditions concerning the reader also affect the text as an object of reading and interpretation. By challenging the reader in a very explicit manner the book questions the relationship between text and reader and the role of the reader as an interpreter of the literary text. As a theoretical point of reference I have chosen Jonathan Culler's definition of the poetic genre in *Structuralist Poetics*. Culler's definition of the poetic genre is based on the expectations of the reader. It is a piece of reader-response criticism, and this definition of the genre seems especially relevant in relation to Skinnebach's book, because this work actively addresses the role of the reader, his or her

expectations of the text, and the status of the work as an object of interpretation. Culler's definition of the poetic genre is not primarily based on the linguistic qualities of the text but on "a strategy of reading." He quotes Jean Genette: "[T]he essence of poetry lies not in verbal artifice itself, though that serves as a catalyst, but more simply and profoundly in the type of reading (*attitude de lecture*) which the poem imposes on the reader" (Culler 1986, p. 164). Culler divides the reader's expectations of the poetic text into four categories: "Distance and Deixis", "Organic Wholes", "Theme and Epiphany" and finally "Resistance and Recuperation". My focus will mainly be on the expectations concerning "Distance and deixis" as they are particularly important to the question of the status of the reader in Skinnebach's book. The expectation of "Distance and deixis" concerns the poem as communication. Culler points out, that the poem as communication differs from situations involving an empirical subject and recipient as, for instance, in a letter. When reading a poem, the reader constructs a fictional persona as a centre of the text. Culler writes: "The deictics do not refer us to an external context but force us to construct a fictional situation of utterance, to bring into being a voice and a force addressed, and this requires us to consider the relationship from which the qualities of the voice and the force could be drawn and to give it a central place within the poem" (Culler 1986, p. 166). The reader will attempt to establish a voice as the centre of the poem, and the expectation of this centre is so strong, that the reader will try to construct it even when the speaking voice is not human but attributed, for instance, to an inanimate object or an abstraction. In the same way the voice and the poem can address inanimate objects or abstractions, for instance, by means of apostrophe. The reader's motivation to listen for a central voice seems to be independent of the elements that constitute the inventory of the poem. Establishing a centre of articulation is an important part of the process of discovering a structure in the work and of the process of interpretation.

Another expectation related to interpretation is that of coherence. Contrary to ordinary speech-acts the expectation of the poetic text is that it forms a whole where the individual parts support and explain each other. Even when the text is a modernist and fragmentary work the reading will be based on an expectation of totality, and the reader's interpretation will strive to organise the elements of the text in relation to a recognisable model. Culler mentions the binary opposition and the resolution of this as one of the structures of interpretation which meets the reader's expectation of totality. Even if the reader does not consciously expect harmony and coherence from the text, he or she will attempt to understand the text as a whole in the process of interpretation.

According to Culler’s theory the reader approaches the text with a set of expectations that only to a limited extent vary or adjust themselves according to the characteristics of the individual work which he or she is presented with. The process of interpretation itself implies certain assumptions about the nature of the poetic text.

The speaking voice in *Din misbruger* addresses the reader with a considerable degree of provocation throughout the work. The voice of the poem is difficult to identify and the deictic conditions of the text are unclear. Some of the problems concerning the voice of the poem are noticeable from the first lines of the first poem in the book:

I put the wind down
with my hands and a smile, mood
and that sort of thing we become
accustomed to putting down the decentralized
listeners and viewers in all countries
come to me!²

The first word in the poem is “I”, but the voice does not seem to belong to an ordinary human being. The subject of the text claims to have supernatural powers and to be able to tame the wind with his or her bare hands. In addition to using his hands in this process we are told that the subject also uses his or her “smile” and “mood”. The smile has no previous motivation in the text. The word “mood” also suggests something inconstant or perhaps even superficial. The impression is one of assumed cheerfulness perhaps required by the social context which the subject is part of. What we meet is at least not the presence of the deeply feeling subject of a confessional poem, but rather an empty gesture or grimace. The voice summons its audience “listeners and viewers in all countries”, and from the beginning the speaking subject emphasises his or her position as the centre of articulation. The status of the voice can be read as an ironic comment on the privileged position of the lyrical subject.

The relationships among the deictic elements of the poems are also unclear especially at the level of syntax. The speaking voice is addressing “the decentralized / listeners and viewers in all countries” (line 4–5) and summoning

² The first poem in *Din misbruger* (You/r Addict) is printed in its entirety before this article. All translations from *Din misbruger* are by Marianne Ølholm and can be read in the web journal *Action.Yes*, Vol. 1, Issue 3, 2006 at <<http://www.actionyes.org/>>.

them. “Listeners and viewers” must be an audience, perhaps the readers of the poem. Most Danish readers will associate this phrase with the organisation “Active Listeners and Viewers” (*Aktive lyttere og seere*) which at the initiative of the politician Erhard Jacobsen took part in the Danish media debate in the 1970’s demanding that leftwing journalists and artists in Denmark’s Radio, which at that time was the only broadcasting institution in Denmark, were prevented from practising ‘indoctrination’. The “listeners and viewers” in Skinnebach’s poem, however, are “decentralized” and do not belong to a group. “[W]e”, the group which does appear in the poem, “Become / accustomed to putting down”. What is put down may be the “decentralized / viewers and listeners”, but the syntax is not clear. It is difficult to determine the syntactical relations among the various positions in the poem, among “I”, “we” and “you” (“the decentralised / listeners and viewers”). However, it can be established that these positions are associated with certain qualities. There is an omnipotent subject summoning the readers. All of the agents are involved in some form of sociality; there is the smile as an extrovert gesture, the collective process of becoming “accustomed to” which implies a form of social adjustment and the “putting down”, which suggests a social order or hierarchy.

A few lines later the subject of the text addresses the reader directly.

[...] are you even
 paying attention to what the writing has
 to offer you, the line break
 is no longer a problem
 for world peace and the pretty girls
 are after me, nobody, nobody
 and how, I say, more
 brings his chairs, sits in the garden
 in the present tense, always on the edge
 of gatherings so free, so free

Jonathan Culler mentions distance and impersonality as conditions which the reader expects of the poetic text. He claims that “the lyric is not heard but overheard” (Culler 1986, p. 165). This expectation is challenged in Skinnebach’s text. The poem speaks directly to the reader and breaks the deictic conventions described by Culler. Of course, it is not unusual for a poem to address the reader within the deictic conventions of impersonality. What is particular about Skinnebach’s text is that the reader is not addressed as a kind of general representative of humanity. Skinnebach’s appeal to the reader has been read as a

reference to Baudelaire's address to the hypocritical reader in *Les Fleur du Mal*. The difference is, however, that the speaking voice in Skinnebach's poems not only appeals to the ethics of the reader. The reader is urged to pay attention to technical details in the actual writing, such as line breaks. The reader is no longer a fictional abstraction constructed from the poem as a whole by the reader's investment of his or her imagination, as Culler describes it. The reader's attention is drawn to particular details of the writing in front of him, and it is hard to disassociate these specific details of the physical text in front of the reader's eyes from the actual process of reading this particular text at this particular time. The reader is no longer a construction of the text, but a physical and empirical person engaged in the act of reading.

A few lines later in the same poem we hear that the poem takes place in "the present tense", which also ties it to the here and now of the reading. The text takes place in time exactly when it is being read and interpreted by the reader. In the same sentence somebody "brings his chairs, sits in the garden / in the present tense, always on the edge / of gatherings so free, so free". Like the garden the text is a confined space, and it can also be described as the setting of a "gathering" in the sense of the meeting between the text and one or more readers. The person in the garden places himself in a position at the edge. The motif of the outcast is present throughout the book and this condition also includes the reader. It connects the reader to the social and ethical concerns in the work, but it also concerns the relationship between text and reader. The reader is challenged not to take his or her approach to the literary, poetic work for granted and urged to reflect on the consequences and responsibilities of readership.

Just as it is difficult to determine the identity of the speaking subject it is also unclear whom this subject is addressing:

You say you are okay? Are you? Well
you give yourself away, it is your Jutlandic dialect
which shivers down your spine like flowers
thrown among the desperados of the earth
and all those letters carried by unknown names
Give my regards. I greet you too

At first sight it appears as if we are given some clues to the identification of the "you" in the text who has so far been anonymous. It says "you give yourself away" ("du er afsløret"). What identifies this "you" is his or her language in the form of "your Jutlandic dialect." From being general and unspecific, "you" is now associated with a distinguishing quality. However, although the dialect

allegedly “gives” the “you away” it is in fact a characteristic which ties the subject to a group, more specifically everyone who speaks Jutlandic. What the dialect gives away is the affiliation to a social group which is geographically defined. Within the same sentence “your Jutlandic dialect” is compared to “letters carried by unknown names,” and although the “you” is identified by the dialect, he or she is still as unknown as the writers or “carriers” of the letters mentioned a few lines later. There is also another kind of disclosure in the poem. It appears that the “you” has claimed to be “okay”, but this is questioned by the speaking subject. The Jutlandic dialect is associated with a deviance from a linguistic norm. A dialect is a variation of a (national) language and generally not considered to be a standard form of expression. The dialect is described as “flowers / thrown among the desperados of the earth”. The identification of the “you” through language connects him or her to the position of a social outcast. This is confirmed later in the poem by the question: “do you / still belong among the outcasts?” The dialect is also related to beauty and excess through the image of the flowers. Toward the end of the poem, dialect is connected to the poetics of the work:

I am fonder of a Greenlandic dialect myself
hidden behind mountains of stupidity and take
What a poetics! What a life! [...]

The poetics of the work itself is linked to an obscure and exotic form of language which is tied to a geographically remote region and in this way the language of the poem is related to a peripheral position.

Another characteristic of the voice in *Din misbruger* is the use of exclamations, rhetorical questions and speech acts. The voice gains momentum through the use of these rhetorical devices. There are two examples of this in the extract above: “What a poetics! What a life!” and both are followed by an exclamation mark. The rhetorical questions involve the reader in the text. There are several examples of this in the poem for instance: “You say you are okay? Are you?” and “Do you still belong among the outcasts?” The voice also summons the listeners: “decentralized / listeners and viewers in all countries / come to me!” Another way in which the role of the voice is emphasised is through greetings: “Give my regards. I greet you too”. In greetings the semantic content is subordinate to the function of saluting the other. A similar function is found in the exclamation “Hurray!” at the end of the poem. It is an expression of celebration and in connection with “forward” it also becomes a battle cry. In a way it sums up the whole text as a rhetorical gesture. The exclamations are a hyperbolic form

connected to the irony of the text, and in this way they deflate the poetic voice as much as they support it. The voice of the poem exposes its own artificiality by making extensive use of the available rhetorical devices of the genre, and the way in which this voice is constructed is closely related to how the text functions as communication. In spite of the apparent emotional intensity of the use of exclamations the voice of the poem avoids sincerity and distances itself from the reader by not providing the possibility of identification.

The role of the reader is based on the expectation of producing an interpretation and establishing a coherent structure by mastering the resistance of the text. One of the expectations connected to the poetic text in Jonathan Culler’s definition of the poetic genre, is that of resistance and recuperation. The reader approaches the poetic text with the expectation of meeting a difficult text, and he or she is prepared to make an effort to reach an interpretation or an experience of the text as an organic whole. The language of the poem contains elements that are not accessible to a purely semantic approach, and a reading of the poem must account for these elements and attribute meaning to them. Culler mentions the rhetorical devices associated with the poetic genre including metaphor and metonymy. In his or her interpretation of the text the reader naturalises the rhetorical obstacles by resolving them and integrating them into the reading. The poetic text’s contradictions and deviances from common logic forces the reader to assume what Culler calls a “poetic attitude to words,” and reading becomes an explorative and creative process. In Lars Skinnebach’s *Dimmisbruger* the most conspicuous resistance is centred around the line breaks in the text. The enjambment creates uncertainty regarding how the poems function grammatically. The line is a smaller unit than the sentence, and in many places it is unclear how the individual line relates to the rest of the sentence of which it is part.

The expectation of overcoming poetic text’s resistance is radically challenged by its open rejection of the reader, which is expressed in the text:

Where have you been, I missed you
Do not feel intimidated
you are in safe hands
You do not understand the communication?
Or the question?
How often can you ask your reader to leave?
I ask you not to read me
and still you persist
is that not impolite?

Do you believe more in the act of communication, the little you,
than in the statement?

By asking the reader to leave the text, Skinnebach's poem challenges the expectations connected to the poetic genre. The role of the reader is based on the expectation of being able to interpret the text by means of his or her literary competences, but the reader as an interpreter is openly rejected by the text. In the last two lines there is a direct reference to the deictic conditions of the poetic text. The reader is asked: "Do you believe more in the act of communication, the little you, / than in the statement?" The reader is challenged to question the role of the deictic conditions of the text. The poem itself as a gesture of communication is dismissed. The expectations of the poetic text's impersonal and distant deictic conditions as they are defined by Jonathan Culler are suspended, and the text speaks directly to the reader about the process of interpretation that he or she is actively involved in when reading the poem.

The rejection of the reader must be seen in the light of some of the other themes in the text. The literary skills and competences of the reader relate him or her to a social context in the broadest sense, and the refusal of the text to enter into a process of interpretation is ultimately an ethical stand and a critical position. The text turns its back on the cultural circulation not by being a hermetically closed, literary product, but by actively confronting the reader and explicitly refusing interpretation.

Din Misbruger challenges the reader to revise his or her expectations of the text as a literary product. It exceeds the limits of the poetic text especially in regard to the conditions of deixis where the expectation of the poetic text is, that it is impersonal and not connected to an empirical context of communication. With its direct attacks on the reader the text undermines the reader's distance to the text as a literary product. The experienced reader of poetic texts is probably accustomed to encountering provocations in the text and to integrating these in an interpretation, but in this case the provocations are directed at the very status of the reader as an interpreter, and they can therefore not easily be naturalised. In this way a definition of the poetic genre based on the expectations of the reader becomes problematic, because the text fundamentally questions the role of the reader as interpreter of the text. The relationship between text and reader is one of interdependence as the double meaning of the Danish title *Din misbruger* suggests. The field of reading and interpretation is fraught with controversies, and it involves an infinite network of factors external to the text itself. The function of the reader is associated with responsibility and he or she is drawn

into a context of social and ethical perspectives, which include the text, the reader, the author and literature as an institution.

References

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