Precious Play in Morten Søndergaard's *Ordapotek*

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A bard will come, who, with a child's mind, like a new Aladdin, will enter into the cavern of science… *H. C. Andersen 'Poetry's California'*

Abstract. After touching upon some theoretical aspects of play/game – text analogy, the article focuses on the manifestations of play in the project *Wordpharmacy* by the Danish author Morten Søndergaard, including its not problem-free relation to the image of the curious child at play.

In his famous challenge to the fixity of meaning, Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that we can better understand what a word means by reverting to its use rather than its definition. One of his central examples is the word game: we apply it naturally to very different activities, which have only certain 'family resemblances' to each other and which therefore cannot be subsumed under a general term:

> For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can draw one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word 'game.') (Wittgenstein 1986: 33e)

Words belonging to the semantic field of game and play have been fully and legibly used in different discourses without making an attempt to formulate their precise meanings. In literary studies, one speaks, for example, of 'playful narrative strategies' or may say that 'the author is playing games with his/her reader'. However, there are scholars who, in spite of Wittgenstein's warnings, try to conceptualise meanings of literary play. They often take off from general definitions of play-related

phenomena and aspire to adapt them as analytical instruments to the study of the text. Some of them opt for the notion of game, others think that the notion of play is more relevant, or do not care about the distinction at all (cf. Steponavičiūtė 2011: 37-46). There seems to be, nevertheless, a certain consensus that the two concepts point toward different aspects of textuality – that is; 'play' toward transgression and openness; 'games' toward regularity and finitude (cf. Wilson 1990: 78).

In play theory, the more general concept of play is usually related to such notions as freedom, possibility against restriction, illusion, open-endedness (both in terms of processuality and social engagement), risk, change, and even anarchy. It is a free movement 'to-and-fro' (Gadamer 1975: 93), an activity without rules or purpose, performed for its own sake and having fun, but also an inherent human quality and a special attitude of mind. A game, on the other hand, is usually defined as a structure determined by rules, moves, aims, stakes, and limits.[1]

Obviously, play and game are not only opposed to each other but are also related and most games, although regulated and finite, leave space for certain elements of play – innovation, creativity and fun – while most play tends to get sooner or later organised into structures.

As James A. G. Marino (1985: 306) has observed, the concept of 'game', as a temporally and spatially limited activity subject to its own rules and free from the influences of the external world, should have been especially attractive to the structuralist concept of the text as an autonomous and closed structure. Although this model has outlived its days and we more often tend to look upon the text as an open, ever evolving process, we still investigate its underlying formal structures or search for regularities in a particular author's *oeuvre*. However, these regularities, or conventions, are of a different nature than the rules which constitute a game. The constitutive rules, although crucial for determining a particular game, have something unreasonable about them. The game theoretician Bernard Suits, who opposes Wittgenstein's scepticism towards a universal and meaningful definition of all games, proposes one in which he calls the constitutive rules 'unnecessary obstacles' and 'not the most efficient means of achieving the desired state of affairs' (Suits 1990: 41). Using a golf club, for example, is obviously not the most efficient way of getting a ball into holes in the grass – but if it is golf you

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1 Cf. the review of different concepts of play in Edwards 1998: 11-37 and the summary of Newton Garver's distinction between game and play in Scott 1996: 374.

want to play, you simply have to proceed that way. Constitutive rules are thus inseparable from the 'lusory attitude' of the players, i.e. their willingness to accept the 'unnecessary obstacles' in order to be able to play the game.

If we transpose this model onto the text, we have a problem. Are literary conventions 'not the most efficient means to achieve the desired state of affairs'? Are they binding in the way as constitutive rules?[2] Can we know what the desired state of affairs is or was with a text? It is also hardly possible to evaluate the attitude of the players; their readiness to accept these rules before commencing the game – regardless whether we consider the subject of the game to be the writer or the text itself. Of course, there are texts that can be considered to be games in this respect. Such is, for example, the work of the *OuLiPo* group with their constrained writing techniques: the famous lipogram in Georges Perec's *A Void* (*La Disparition*, 1969), in which the letter 'e' is missing, or the s + 7 experiment (cf. Bohman-Kalaja 2004: 23). But these are special cases in which the constraints are formulated and voluntarily accepted in advance. Even such situations, however, are different from a football match; in text a violation of a 'rule' would only call for an interpretation, not a disqualification or penalty.[3]

Play appears to be a much less problematic concept with regard to the study of literary texts. Playful texts demonstrate a possibility against restriction by challenging literary conventions and transgressing the borders of style and genre, they similarly resist closure by containing aporias and blanks, and they can also manipulate other texts as playthings. Playful texts can both create and dispel the illusion of reality through various metafictional techniques, very much as it happens in play: one gets both absorbed in play and is nevertheless aware of the fact that one is playing. By being playful, the text opens itself up for the reader's active response, blurring 'the distinction between observation and participation' (cf. Edwards 1998: 17).

2 See the discussion of the problematic analogy between literary conventions and game rules in Wilson 1990: 75-104.

3 There are, of course, other ways in which texts can be paralleled to games: the narrative structure of a text can resemble that of an empirical game, games may function as an element in character construction, or as metaphors expressing a certain worldview, they can also provide patterns for understanding the reader's involvement with the text (cf. Wilson 1990: 104, Bohman-Kalaja 2004: 8, Steponavičiūtė 2011: 187).

At first sight, postmodern art can, in its entirety, be viewed through the lens of the concept of play. The question is, however, how long art can be subversive and transgressive without these qualities themselves becoming a cliché.

It is also a paradox of today's Western art that finding a well-established boundary, which still can be transgressed, has become a luxury while freedom has been completely naturalised. All the earlier taboos seem to have been broken and all the traditional artistic conventions have already been subverted. Nobody seems to have the authority (except financially and perhaps in the form of political correctness) to limit an artist's need for self-expression.

'Will art survive, if there are no rules' – the Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova asks in his poem 'Užupis' (1999). The question implies the importance of preserving the mastery of form in poetry: its classical background.[4] However, subversive art is no less dependent on the tradition or another pre-given authority than, for example, a classical sonnet: it can only be subversive with respect to something. The relational dynamism of playful art can be illustrated by Lars von Trier's project *The Five Obstructions* (2003). In it, Von Trier's teacher and friend Jørgen Leth is asked to remake his classical *The Perfect Human* (1967), by observing five constraints formulated by von Trier. And although this makes the project resemble a true game according to Suits's definition, the emphasis equally lies on the possibility of transgressive play. Von Trier's 'rules' are subversive and original in themselves, as he demands that Leth abandon his usual artistic methods. His tribute to his teacher lies in giving Leth a possibility to show his immense creativity not only by finding new artistic solutions within the new constraints but also by originally manipulating these very 'rules'.[5] In sport, this would not be acceptable, but those who win in tennis are not always those who have played the most beautiful game.

Even if there is nobody who can artificially construct restrictions that an artist can both observe and play with, and despite the fact that transgression and subversion have almost become conventional, there

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4 Orig. 'Ar menas tvers, jei nebus taisyklių' (Venclova 2010: 255).
5 The second episode of the project, in which Leth shoots the scene in Bombay, speaks for itself: although von Trier 'penalises' Leth for violating the rule which requires not to make the miserable place visible (and this is in accordance with the logic of the game), he nevertheless acknowledges that Leth has again produced a very good film.

is still hope that artistic play will survive, since a creative mind seems to know that '[a]ny activity or object can be playful; anything [...] can be transformed into a plaything' (cf. Wilson 1990: 18).

An interesting example of such creative approach is the project *Ordapotek* or *Wordpharmacy* by the Danish poet Morten Søndegaard, who chooses as his plaything a system that lies outside the field of art: the pharmaceutics.

The project is playful in many respects. It is a shape-shifter, accessible in several different forms. First introduced as an interactive installation at the exhibition *Love* (a wordplay on the Danish word for 'laws' and the English 'love') in 2010[6], it continues its life as a portable pharmacy in two different formats. It consists of typical medicine packages but with the name of a word class inscribed. Each package contains what resembles a typical Patient Information Leaflet explaining the functions, indications, recommended doses, and side effects – for the word class in question.[7]

There is also an exhibition poster addressed to kids with a more cheerful and colourful layout, which repeats some of the same information but is supplied with examples which can be directly applied in teaching, and thus is more 'pedagogical': 'Stedord står i stedet for andre ord, fx kan hun stå i stedet for pigen, eller den stå i stedet for pigens rygsæk [...].'[8] The project reveals itself through yet another idiosyncrasy when we hear the author reciting the texts from the leaflets, which unambiguously reminds us that it is poetry we are dealing with here.[9]

As far as the portable wordpharmacy is concerned, it, no doubt, does not fit in within the traditional borders of poetry, although Søndegaard, or course, is not the first to challenge them. It is paradigmatic that the publisher *BookThug* identifies *Wordpharmacy* as a 'concrete poetical work' while the Danish literary scholar Charlotte Engberg (2012: 51) sets it the

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6 One can see a clip of a virtual exhibition tour at *Læseklubber*, http://www.dr.dk/ Nyheder/Kultur/Laeseklubber/Testklubben/Artikler/20120209151723_1.htm.

7 One can get a picture of what the project looks like by going to the poet's personal website http://www.wordpharmacy.com.

8 *Pronouns stand instead of other words, for example,* **she** *can stand instead of the girl, or* **it** *can stand instead of the girl's rucksack* [my translation]; https://dl.dropbox-usercontent.com/u/1998743/*Plakat.Love.Bag.pdf.

9 Some recordings can be found on *Bookthug*, http://www.bookthug.ca/proddetail. php?prod=201221. Most recently, the texts of *Wordpharmacy* have been incorporated into the collection of poems *Fordele og ulemper ved at udvikle vinger* (Pros and Cons on Developing Wings, 2013).

context of the 'book objects' produced in the sixties by Danish artists like Vagn Steen, Hans Jørgen Nielsen, and Per Kirkeby, who also composed three-dimensional poetry, integrating in their work materials and techniques from different arts.

Together with these authors and the authors of the early avant-garde before them, Søndergaard once again brings to the fore the question of what constitutes poetry. Nobody today would claim that poetry is rhymes and metres; nor can it be defined by the degree of subjectivity, its graphic design, or even the context of media. Its most universal feature remains perhaps the special use of language, the dominance of the poetic function in Jakobson's terms, and Søndergaard stages this feature by making language the protagonist of his work. Also here there have been artists before him, and *Wordpharmacy* has been compared to Gertrud Stein's *Poetry and Grammar*, 1935 (Löfström 2011; Engberg 2012). Like Stein, Søndergaard is aware of the problematic relationship between the word and the world:

> Ved brug af Substantiver® kan De komme i tvivl om sprogets evne til at dække verden. Vær derfor opmærksom på, at der er stor forskel på ord og ting. Man kan eksempelvis ikke slå søm i med ordet hammer.[10]

Although dealing with the same subject as it was done by his predecessor, Søndegaard remains original. His attitude towards language is characterised by Engberg as 'more investigating, analytical – and yes, – loving' than Stein's (Engberg 2012: 49), who has strong reservations about certain word-classes (nouns and adjectives) when it comes to poetry.

Søndergaard's project is also a playful parody of the authoritative discourse of modern language studies: it directly alludes to the dissertation *Danish Core Words* by the Danish linguist Hanne Ruus (Engberg 2012: 47) and indirectly (at least through the interpreter's later association) to the Danish language policy of light heartedly removing rarely used words (a treasure for a poet) from the Dictionary of Danish Orthography (ibid: 42).

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10 *By using Nouns®, you may come to doubt the ability of language to cover the world. Therefore be aware of the great difference between words and things. One cannot, for example, hammer in a nail with the word hammer.* Here and later in the paper the translations are mine. *Wordpharmacy* is translated into English by Barbara Haveland, but unfortunately, the translation was unavailable when I was working on this paper.

Søndergaard's s greatest originality, however, appears to be the idea of organising a poetical text according to a whole set of conventions belonging to a system in its nature very remote from literature – pharmaceutics. Nobody before him seems to have pushed the limits of poetry in such an unexpected direction. Pharmaceutics is one of the least playful spheres of human life: 'play,' here, just as in piloting an aircraft or performing an operation, can have lethal consequences. However, by transposing a pharmaceutical structure from its usual context into that of literature, Søndergaard liberates it from its pragmatic function, allowing us to enjoy it for the sake of a new experience – this time under the sign of play.

Kimberly S. Bohman-Kalaja, an American literary scholar who proposes her own theory of literary play, sees the difference between a text which is simply innovative and what she calls a 'playtext' in the dialogical nature of the latter, claiming that in a playtext, the 'emphasis [lies] on process rather than product, a fundamental aspect of Play' (Bohman-Kalaja 2007 :12). Most, if not all, theorists of play in literature and art consider the social aspect; that is, the ability of an artistic object to elicit a further response in order to be crucial for viewing it from the perspective of play.[11]

By cross-breeding literature and pharmaceutics, by making unexpected parallels and juxtapositions between word classes and pills or tinctures, Søndergaard invites his reader to reflect further on the implications of his textual play. Does language heal, or can it also be a drug and poison?[12] Will one accept the idea that texts have become a commodity, as the bar-codes 'adorning' the leaflets, as well as the general parallel between literature and the pharmaceutical industry in this project suggest? Do poets still hold the greatest authority when it comes to language – or is the insisting reminder to consult a poet or librarian should any problems with using words occur a self-ironic realisation of the status of poetry in the modern world? One can be puzzled by finding out that words and sentences are the sole contents of the packages and thus wander what such unexpected reversal of the usual semiotic status of language means. Is this perhaps a suggestion that in poetry words will never resign themselves to being arbitrary signifiers of meaning?

11 See, for example, Gadamer 1998: 23-24, Zillen 2001: 493, Bruss 1977: 153, Hutchinson 1983: 14.
12 Engberg (2012: 49-54) makes on this background interesting observations about words as homeopathic medicine and arsenic.

An engaged reader may also find in this text a parallel to the human world, in which some are able to move the world (verbs), some may appear unbending and reserved (numerals), some are problem children and are naughty, but artistic (adverbs), some latch on to others like ticks, politicians, and other parasites (adjectives), while some have a rich inner life, but are aware of their limitations (nouns). People and words alike, the reader may reflect, are all part of larger multifaceted communities; defining others and being defined by them. Sentences such as 'Substantiver® betegner ting, man kan tale om, enten konkrete ting, f.eks. "hus", "stol", "kat", "dør", eller tænkte forhold, f.eks. "dansker", "spøgelse", "trylledrik'[13] do not only contain witty provocations with regard to our traditional thinking (here: the concept of ethnicity), but also ironically deconstruct the very attempt to isolate the function of a separate word class. The noun can only be explained through words belonging to other classes and the interdependence of the word classes, although not discussed explicitly, can be brought to the fore by noticing their often overlapping side-effects or by recognising the provoking absurdity of certain idiosyncrasies of a particular word class (who can take seriously the proposition that conjunctions may cause a reduction in the baby's birth weight?).

It has been noticed by literary scholars that texts, which are playful in their nature, i.e. are innovative, transgressive and intellectually stimulating, are likely to contain explicit references to empirical games.[14] The earlier mentioned concept of the play-text also includes such referencing. Bohman Kalaja (2004: 8-9) emphasises that concrete games may function as a unifying element of the play-text, represented on the level of its contents, but also structuring its plot, foregrounding its ethics, and serving as a metaphor for the relationship between the text and the reader.

Games or other forms of play are not discussed explicitly in *Word-pharmacy*. However, one finds metatexts, in which Søndergaard's work is characterised with the help of a concrete image of play. In his presentation of the poet's creative enterprise on the website of *Poetry International*, Neal Ashley Conrad Conrad writes: 'His polyphonic attitude towards reality has meant that he has never been afraid to try things out,

13 *Nouns signify things, which one can talk about, either concrete things, for example, 'house', 'chair', 'cat', 'door', or imagined conditions, such as 'Dane', 'ghost', or 'magic drink'.*

14 Such references can be considered meta-communicational signals of play (Gregory Bateson's term) by which texts draw attention to their playful character, cf. Steponavičiūtė 2011: 45.

like a productive child at play'.[15] In one of his interviews, Søndergaard also promotes this image of himself, as a playing child, philosopher, and scientist in one:

> I try to approach both poetry and world by making the two phenomena collide and then see what happens [...] I'm a naive person. But I am fond of scientific information or philosophical explanation of the worlds [sic] condition, of any occurrence of intense attention in the things that surround us. [...] When the child is a child, it plays games and the games are deadly serious. As a child, all senses are alert. You hear the adults talking, they pass on information, and the child makes the wildest conclusions. As a child the world is a big secret. The child is both a scientist, shipwrecked and a philosopher. As a child you discover that language is crucial. Poetry is language that require[s] [sic] a particular kind of childish reading, a slow, intensely observant and playful reading.[16]

The image of the child at play may bring us to the roots of the theory of play and the concept of *Weltspiel*, which starts with the Heraclitian idea that 'Lifetime [aion] is a child at play, moving pieces in a game, the kingship belongs to the child.'[17] The poet, we may infer, exists as the sole ruler of the universe, which he creates and controls according to his whim and/or personal rules that we will never know for sure. However, the image employed in the earlier mentioned metatexts can also be understood in a less romantic way. The poet as a curious child, going beyond what he already knows and has experienced, marvelling at reality, imitating and manipulating it in order to create something new, and inviting others to share the joy of his play. The play of a curious child can be risky ('making the two phenomena collide and then see what happens'[18]), but the curious child cannot help doing these things. Not because it will prove him useful – which it can do, no doubt. The playing child does not think about the pragmatic value of his activity; he plays to play, because it is fun, because it gives a sense of freedom and personal satisfaction. Søndergaard, interestingly, notes the non-pragmatic

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15　http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/9405/Morten-Sondergaard.

16　http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/maintenant-48-morten-søndergaard.

17　Fragment 52. Quoted from Spariosu (1989) op. cit., p. 13.

18　Cf. the quote from the poet's interview above.

character of his work in the interview mentioned above, thus indirectly
relating the poetic activity and that of a playing child:

> [W]riting poems imply [sic] a great freedom. Because there are few
> areas in the world which are not subject to some form of economic
> regulation. You can argue that the opposite of money is a poem. This
> gives a freedom which is unique. It also provides an obligation to use
> that freedom wisely. No one buys poetry, very few people read poetry.
> It is a problem and a freedom.

In the light of the above quotations, it could appear strange that the
website of *Wordpharmacy* also contained an internet store, where the
poetic product could be purchased.
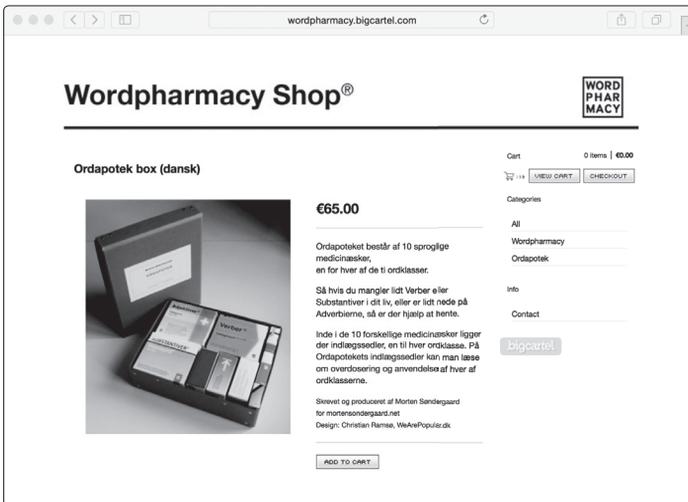
Poor old Huizinga, who believed play to be an activity with no material
interest and who regretted so much the loss of playspirit in professional
sports (Huizinga 1970: 223-224)? The branding of the author's own name
may indeed corrupt the unity of the image of the curious child at play as
an emblem for Søndergaard's playful project. Living in the 21st century,
however, it would be absurd to expect that poets (or scientists for that
matter) should feed on heavenly nectar. By selling the product directly,

the author may keep for himself a larger share of the literary field, which is often dominated by publishers and distributors (a kind of 'adjectives', latching on to 'nouns'?). It is also obvious that the production of the multimedial product has its costs and so does the use of a shopping platform. In general, Søndergaard seems to be generous with respect to his audience, as a lot of his poems can be found through free internet access. Even if the *Wordpharmacy* may yield some financial profit, it is very unlikely that this is the expected payoff that drives the project forward.

During the period from the time of the commencement of this paper to the time it went to press, the price of the product and ways of ordering it have changed or expanded several times: one could purchase the healing words through a link from the author's website to a shopping platform, directly on the Big Cartel site, by sending an e-mail to the poet or an art gallery. This makes the impression that we again have to do with an experiment (this time – a commercial one) and that Søndergaard is playing his original store to the full. Seen in this light, his chances to compete with one of the world's most powerful industries have proven to be not bad at all – if we consider the profit in terms of the consumers' positive experience and appreciation.

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