

## **Media Avant-Garde and Renewal of Genre. On Merete Pryds Helle's Cell Phone Novel *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* (I Think I Love You), 2008**

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Merete Pryds Helle's work *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* is allegedly the first Danish cell phone novel. It contains 27 text messages that were sent from November 16 to November 24, 2008 with 2,3 text messages a day to addressees/readers who enlisted. The price at punctual enlistment was 10 DKK. The love story told, rather a novella than a novel, unfolds alone via text messages, as the real encounter takes place before the first text message is sent. The dynamics of the plot is so conditioned by an active use of a new medium – and as a fictive exploration of that the work at hand can be characterized as experimental and some form of avant-garde. At the same time it signifies a – continuing and renewing – fusion of two older, genres that have played a great role in the development of fiction. This work is at once an *epistolary novel* à la Richardson or Laclos and a *serial story* à la Sue or Dumas. As is the case in these genres the rhythm of publication and the waiting time play a role for the readers' experience. In terms of plot *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* likewise oscillates between the most elementary, age-old love intrigue and a number of hilarious, often grotesque markers of topicality.

The term 'avant-garde' suggests at least three metaphoric fields. Firstly, the field of *warfare*. An avant-garde can perform daring commando raids, but it can also consist of engineering troops building bridges for an army to come. Secondly, avant-garde is associated with a conception of history as a march towards the future, history as a linear movement involving a notion of *progress*. Thirdly, avant-garde is connected with an idea of *exploration* of hitherto unknown territories, in the physical or mental world.

Especially the first-mentioned field is important for the pervasiveness of the shrill, belligerent connotations of the word avant-garde, and the historical avant-gardes are in fact connected to historical moments of deep crisis, of appalling social contradictions, and of violent, loudly proclaimed ruptures with the past. It has been discussed extensively, at least since Peter Bürger, whether the concept of avant-garde can be justly used beyond historical situations of great crises and movements with the manifest goal of overcoming the contradiction between art and life in a violent rupture with the past.

In this discussion my own position is rather probing and conditional. *If* it would be justified to talk about some kind of literary neo-avant-garde in situations with less crisis and weaker contradictions, at least some preconditions ought to be fulfilled, corresponding to the three fields mentioned: – Firstly, some kind of political, critical edge and engagement in an overcoming of the distance between art and life. – Secondly, an involvement in the presently on-going phases of the process of modernization, both in terms of the technical developments, for instance of the media, and in terms of forms of art and life. – Thirdly and consequently, an exploration of new literary forms, corresponding to the new conditions of literature in an age of digital media.

Through an examination of Merete Pryds Helle's cell phone novel *I Think I Love You* I intend to discuss whether this piece of work could fulfil the notion of neo-avant-garde in the above-mentioned sense. Concerning Merete Pryds Helle's general position in that respect, Jon Helt Haarder concluded his portrait in *Danske Digtere i det 20. århundrede*, Vol. III with the following reflections:

Merete Pryds Helle's work exemplifies well that the discussion on the relationship between form and content, avant-garde and tradition, is often too narrow. In her case, form seems determined by the necessity of the material, but inversely a new form is also a new material. Pryds Helle's novels are not mostly formal experiments or mostly formulations of well-known truths about human beings and the world, but a curiosity that has expressed itself as literature. (Haarder 2000: 472, my translation).

## Exploration of a New Medium

Merete Pryds Helle's work *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* is allegedly the first Danish cell phone novel. It contains 27 text messages that were sent from November 16 to November 24, 2008, with 2 or 3 text messages a day to the cell phones of addressees/readers who enlisted at the address of the publishers. The price at punctual enlistment was 10 DKK. The love story told unfolds almost exclusively via text messages, as the real encounter takes place before the first text message is sent. The heroine just arranges one distant encounter without verbal communication in the course of events. The dynamics of the plot is so conditioned by an active use of a new medium. It is a new form of *documentary fiction*, i.e. at least new in a Danish context.<sup>1</sup> According to Wikipedia and a number of other web addresses, the first cell

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1 Christian Dorph and Simon Pasternak, co-authors of several well-received crime novels, claim to have produced the first Danish 'cell phone short story' ('sms-novelle'), 'Max og Tanja' ('Max and Tanja'), in June 2008. The text can be read on [www.dorphpasternak.dk/blog](http://www.dorphpasternak.dk/blog). Its content is a single suspense situation, and its total length is a little more than half a page. It was produced as an experimental contribution to the

phone novel, with a title that could be translated into *Deep Love* in English, was published in Japan in 2003. In the German-speaking countries, a pioneer of the ‘Handyroman’ has been Oliver Bendel.<sup>2</sup> The existence of similar explorations in other parts of the world may have had some influence on Pryds Helle’s project. At least there seems to be a number of more or less superficial tendencies in common between many cell phone novels: love, and crime in a melodramatic vein and in an urban setting.

As in every kind of documentary fiction, a conscious imitation of the formal peculiarities of the specific documentary form and/or medium of communication takes place. In the case of the text message form, the single most important feature is the brevity, the degree of concentration. It is in the nature of text messages to be short. If it would be justified to call this a novel (rather than a novella/short story – I will come back to that question), one reason could be: in the text message medium a novel may unfold in what amounts to four pages in transcription. In *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* there is a constant change between rather long messages and typically very short ones. The longest messages placed in the middle of the novel are motivated as dramatic confessions, where the lovers reveal traumatic moments of their life stories to each other. ‘Now I’m going to tell you the real truth.’ – in that way the painful and indelicate confession of M, the woman, starts. Others are very short, but intensive, especially a sequence of three messages, where T, the man, presses on for a date.

The demand of brevity manifests itself in the punctual, telegram-like style, in which T talks about his day of waiting in vain at the Zoo: ‘Du kom ikke? Jeg ventede hele dagen. Flodhestene: 1. Svømmede. 2. Pustede. 3. Viste tænder af hinanden. 4. Åd græs.’ Even more condensed, in a suggestive way, is M’s statement of her holding back, of her last doubts: ‘Jeg troede du havde hørt mit ja, da det rungede ud over København. Skal bare lige finde ud af: Det – Mig – Noget.’ That is really a text message abbreviation of the last, final questions of life.

Thus it is also in accordance with this aspect of the generic style of the text message medium to state your name only with its initial letter: M for the woman, T for the man. As opposed to that, their pet animals are introduced by their full names from the start: his dog Carlo/s,<sup>3</sup> and her cat with the exuberant name of Tiglath-Pileser, named after a cruel Assyrian king.<sup>4</sup> Through their pets and their names they express something about their personalities and about their impressions of one another. And it is not least because of his comparison between Carlos’ character and behaviour and hers that she finally opens up – and reveals her middle name, Carla, in her last text message. The next, and last, text message he signs with his full name, Thomas. The revelation of their names, partly in her case, is thus part of the plot.

Another feature of text messaging is that it is a fast medium. You are supposed to react quickly and spontaneously. Minor errors of language and spelling are of no consequence. Ellipses and abbreviations are accepted, even expected. I interpret the few errors as a

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radio programme ‘Kulturnyt’ (‘Cultural News’) in the public service company Danmarks Radio. This text is not really comparable to *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig*, neither by its form of publication, nor as an exploration of a new medium.

2 Handy means cell phone in modern German. Cf. <http://www.oliverbendel.net/> – in German. His first cell phone novel *Lucy Luder und die Hand des Professors* is first published by the end of 2007, and is taken over by a publishing company in the summer of 2008.

3 In a text message to me of August 20, 2009, Merete Pryds Helle states that she read Emily Dickinson’s letters while she was writing the novel. Emily Dickinson’s dearly loved dog was called Carlo.

4 In fact, there are more of them, the best known being the successful warrior kings: Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BC) and Tiglath-Pileser III (ruled 745-727 BC). In the text message referred to in Note 3 Merete Pryds Helle also revealed the following about the cat’s name: ‘Tiglath-Pileser is the name of the vicar’s cat in Agatha Christie’s novel that I believe has the title *Murder in the Vicarage*.’

conscious part of the form. For instance a lack of interval between letters in some of the messages, and a grammatical error in message 2: ‘Der var ikke første gang’ – instead of ‘Det var...’.

Finally, text message communication is supposed to be characterized by the use of slang, idiolects, and internal codes. One example here is her mysterious excuse for her failing to turn up at the Zoo: ‘Jeg har ikke været ærlig over for dig. Undskyld. Der var pulver i græsset, og jeg lå og græd ned i det. Undskyld. Måske vil det ske igen. Måske ikke.’ In his answer, equally enigmatic, he seems to be able to interpret her code: ‘Du skal ikke undskylde. Det var jo ikke mig, der græd. Jeg kan også være sne, hvis det skal være. Eller er det sneen du græder over? Vil gerne møde dig. T’ Her ‘powder in the grass’ he interprets as ‘snow’, a well-known slang word for cocaine. Does she have a drug problem, and is she also crying over that? After all, she has been involved with a criminal and has spent one year in prison on a false accusation. And is he not admitting that he is not infallible either?

*Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* thus lives up to all standards of documentary fiction. As a cell phone novel it engages in a fictive exploration of a brand new digital medium, a form of communication involving a new generic style, it may be characterized as some kind of realism and at the same time as experimental – and perhaps some kind of avant-garde.

## The Avant-Garde Tendencies of Prose Fictional Genres. The Revival of the Epistolary Novel and the Serial Novel

According to Mikhail Bakhtin prose fiction, especially the novel, was born with avant-garde features.<sup>5</sup> The most pertinent characteristic of the novel as genre is precisely its permanent rupture with the fixed, traditional genre system that has its origin in the oral medium. The novel is the first form of literature wholly based on writing, and a most peculiar genre, anti-canonical, even anti-generic in its essence. It was born out of an intimate relation with the unfinished present – as an exploration of that present, especially of the new, dynamic moments, pointing towards the future, of this present. Therefore the novel’s latent or manifest aggressiveness against past and tradition, realized in satire, parody and other forms of critique – its ‘modernistic’ or ‘futuristic’ character. This dedication to the actual present is manifested in the generic designation itself. Furthermore, it is not restricted to the long forms of prose fiction. In an Anglo-American context, the term *novel* is used about the long forms.<sup>6</sup> On the Continent – in Italy, Germany, the Scandinavian countries – the term *novella/Novelle* is used about the short forms, concentrated on one plot with a singular, often sensational event as its core. In both cases, the signification of the term is: *news*.

Because of its lack of generic fixation the novel can draw on the other main genres. There are lyrical and dramatic novels. Because of its dedication to the open-ended present it is constantly and irresistibly attracted to documentary fiction – to a blurring of the distinctions between fact and fiction, life and art. The novel, as well as the novella, is drawn towards the journalistic report on the present and so feeds on the non-literary genres of its time. The rhetorical genres of Antiquity: the dialogue, the soliloquy, the apology, the encomion (retrospective life report or burial speech). A whole story for itself is the revelation of the secrets of private life in the public *criminal records* of police investigations and trials of justice – extremely important for prose fiction as such, not only for the special, still growing

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5 In his essay in book length *Discourse in the Novel* and in the condensed formulation of the article ‘Epic and Novel’ (both in Bakhtin, Mikhail: *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. University of Texas Press, Austin 1981).

6 In the same context, the word *novel* is often used especially about the realistic subgenre as opposed to *romance* as a designation for the adventure novel. The continental term *roman* is more all-inclusive of any lengthy form of prose fiction.

and flowering branch of crime fiction. Since Antiquity, stylistic features from every sociolect and all kinds of professional discourse have likewise flavoured novelistic discourse. According to Bakhtin, almost every novelistic word smells of a profession.

Especially noteworthy for the development of prose fiction have been, already in Antiquity, but even more so since the Renaissance, the *private* genres of the *confession* (normally protected by obligations of secrecy), the *diary* (your isolated conversation with yourself), and the *letter* (usually an intimate communication between friends or family members). The motivation for all these forms of documentary fiction can be maintained to be the overcoming of the chasm between the private and the public, the private experience of life made accessible in the public form of fiction.

Ian Watt's classical study *The Rise of the Novel* is still an excellent account of the signification of the epistolary form of the novel. The private letter as a medium for fiction became eminently important during the 17<sup>th</sup> and especially the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Watt somewhat schematically distinguishes between two lines of development: in the English line, with Richardson as its main representative, the writers aimed primarily at 'authenticity'; in the French line, with Choderlos de Laclos (author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, in my evaluation the ultimate masterpiece of the epistolary genre) as its main representative, aimed more at the elegant form. These possible differences set aside, the epistolary form in the hands of Richardson and his followers profoundly developed the 'formal realism' of the novel. In Watt's conception, 'the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience' – and thus 'the final realism of the novel allows a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment than do other literary forms.' (Watt 1966: 33).

This formal development of the novel accompanies and actively furthers a profound change in human sensibility as well as in the main focus of literature in general. Already Madame de Staël (in her most influential work *De l'Allemagne*) noticed that the epistolary form 'always presupposes more sentiment than action.' (quoted from Watt 1966: 182). Watt further concludes that the novel through the letter form, giving a hitherto unknown degree of access to the intimate daily thoughts and feelings of individuals, becomes a token and vehicle of:

the transition from the objective, social, and public orientation of the classical world to the subjective, individualist, and private orientation of the life and literature of the last two hundred years. (Watt 1966: *ibid.*)

One more feature from Watt's study should be mentioned. In the chapter 'Love and the Novel: Pamela', he credits Richardson, as the first writer, for having centered a whole novel plot around 'a single action, a courtship' (Watt 1966: 140). In my opinion, this is a debatable, since Watt obviously ignores the Greek adventure novel of Antiquity. Bakhtin's lengthy essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Essays in Historical Poetics* contains an eminent characterization of the importance of the simple love plot in this early subgenre of the novel and its immense significance in the subsequent development of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

The epistolary novel *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig*, like Richardson's *Pamela, or: Virtue Rewarded*, is documentary fiction and in this capacity imitates the formal traits of contemporary, intimate forms of communication, the letter and the text message respectively. One of the several formal features common to Richardson's and Pryds Helle's documentary fictions is the frequent reduction of names to their initial letters. The main male character in Richardson's *Pamela* is first referred to only as 'my master' and the like, only after several hundred pages he is called Mr. B, but his full name is never mentioned. Both novels focus on

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7 Also accessible in English in the before-mentioned publication *The Dialogic Imagination*.

'a single action, a courtship'. Like in the Greek romance the action is built upon one of the most simple and durable plot models ever: boy and girl accidentally meet; a sudden love erupts between them; but there are serious obstacles for their union, which can be varied infinitely according to the contemporary situation and drawn out almost endlessly, and which normally constitutes the bulk of the story; mostly – always in the Greek adventure novel, in fairy tales, and in the mass produced popular love novels of later times – these obstacles are surmounted, and the lovers are united in the happy end; or, tragically, they are not. *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* embodies the first possibility. In the novel *Oh, Romeo* (2006) Merete Pryds Helle explored the second possibility, modernizing the paragon of all love tragedies, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, into tragic contradictions in contemporary Danish society, especially between the immigrants from the Islamic world and the right wing populism of the Danish Popular Party. One important formal anticipation in *Oh, Romeo* is the use of documentary fiction, in the diary-form and, most significantly, in the heroine's use of the digital *blog*.

At the same time the cell phone novel *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* continues and renews another subgenre of the novel, characterized by its form of publication: the *serial novel*, the *feuilleton*, as it was developed by tremendous successes like Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43) and Alexandre Dumas' *Le Comte de Monte-Christo* (1844-46). At first, serial novels were published in journals and magazines, such as the famous *Journal des Débats*. Later this form of publication was supplemented by a system of canvassing, of *subscription bookselling*, where a publisher made use of a network of travelling booksellers. Long novels – in an exotic setting, usually involving the top and the bottom of society, with a wealth of vicious intrigues, strong feelings, and culminating in the final victory of noble heroes and heroines over cunning and mean villains – were thus sold in cheap booklets. In any case, the publication in small bits made thick novels accessible to popular readers. Aesthetically, the rhythm of publication and the waiting time played a role for the readers' experience and encouraged serial writers to use and refine techniques of *suspense*, among them every variation of the *cliff hanger*.<sup>8</sup>

The publication of *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* represents a modern version of the subscription system. Through advertisements you are made aware of the publication, you pay the publisher in advance, and you receive the work in small bits successively. There are reminiscences of the melodramatic genre features of the serial novel in the somewhat exotic social environment, in the outrageous miscarriage of justice that has hit the heroine, in the popular love story, and in the suspense moment inherent in the successive form of publication itself. Pryds Helle's cell phone novel, however, more radically than the serial novel and even than the epistolary novel, imitates the form and rhythm of the (text message) medium itself. You receive the text messages almost as the hero and the heroine are supposed to, i.e., with unforeseeable intervals. This formal realism is, however, not driven to the point where the intervals correspond exactly to the necessary intervals in the correspondence between the lovers.

## Glimpses and Blanks of (Animal) Life

The most pervasive features of the work at hand are its *brevity*, its *fragmentary form* with more blanks than filled in elements, and moreover the prevalent *indirect ways of communication*. When receiving the work, because of the brevity of the text message form,

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8 About the subscription system and its effects, see the chapter 'Kolportagelitteratur med arbejderhelte' (Gemzøe 1984); about serial novels of Sue, Dumas, Hugo, and others, see the chapter 'Den sociale eventyrroman' (Gemzøe 1997).

paradoxically, you do not feel that you are missing much – you have the impression that you are getting a full and detailed story. I think that this effect is mainly secured by the use of the well-known, popular plot model. On second and third thoughts, you realize all the blanks, all the things you don't know about the two lovers, and how many of the things mentioned that are uncertain, unreliable or enigmatic, in a sort of code, not least because so much is displaced from human life to the field of animals.

We can gradually infer that the plot is enacted in Copenhagen between young persons in a social and cultural environment on the borderline between the artistic *bohème* and the *yuppies*. She is a ballet dancer, is back at work, dancing *Sylfiden* (*The Sylph*) after having spent a year in prison on a false accusation. *The Sylph* is not, in its original version, by August Bournonville, the 'creator' of *The Royal Danish Ballet*, but it was performed in 1836 (four years after its first performance in Paris) in Bournonville's choreography and with new music by Herman Severin Løvenskiold, the Danish composer. Since then, it has lived as a crown jewel in the repertoire of The Royal Danish Ballet. *Sylfiden* is a major romantic ballet about identity problems – a young man split between his love for an earthly and an unearthly woman.

It can be assumed with reasonable certainty that the heroine is going to take part in a performance of the famous ballet corps at The Royal Theatre. But she has also been involved in a lengthy relationship to a criminal, a simple burglar who in spite of all is a most popular person in the circles where our characters meet. He is the reason for her prison sentence on an unjust accusation – if she is to be believed? It is also implied that from time to time she has a drug abuse problem, with cocaine, allegedly the preferred drug of the metropolitan 'creative classes' – an effect (or even one of the causes) of her time in prison? She is young and beautiful with long, reddish hair and white skin, dresses fancifully in silver shorts. Furthermore, she is well endowed with cultural capital. Every year she visits Egypt and brings home a hippopotamus in ceramics. She also knows the names of cruel Assyrian warrior kings; Tiglath-Pileser she calls her cat that again and again brings her half-dead mice that she has to kill. Her work starts at three p.m. So she lives in a world of glamour, art and culture, but also of dubious morals and with a permeable border to the criminal world.

Concerning the hero of the story we are informed that he is free at three p.m., and that he leaves his writing desk full of carefully ordered piles of paper. We don't know whether his work is simply office work, whether it has a creative character (advertisement, architecture?) or is even (like hers) of an artistic nature, but we may surely assume that it has a certain degree of independence. He lives in a top-floor flat of the Carlsberg Silo (one of the tallest buildings in Copenhagen, quite a fashionable place with a fantastic view). After work he usually spends his time jogging, equipped with a heart rate monitor and accompanied by his dog Carlo/s, in Søndermarken, next to the Copenhagen Zoo. Just as she is careful how she dresses, he is an advanced consumer celebrating the coming union of the lovers with a necklace to his dog, adorned with Swarovski stones.

Both of the characters have a distinct relation to their bodies; she lives by hers; jogging is his favourite pastime. They both seem to favour a healthy life style, characterized by fruit and fish. This perspective can be widened to a close relation to the natural, animal aspects of life, manifested in the intimate relationships between them and their respective pet animals, and in a rather open and relaxed attitude to sex.

Much more complicated are their relations to psychological and existential matters. The heroine ends up by confessing that at the party where they met, she took revenge on her former, criminal lover, rather indelicately. She infected the fruit salad, his favourite dish, with bacteria from her own shit. She feels uncomfortable about that just as she feels guilty about killing all the mice that Tiglath-Pileser brings to her incessantly. On top of everything, her drug problem can be associated with the inextricable, psychological ambivalence that the

imprisonment forced upon her: 'Nu kan jeg ikke holde det ud, hvis jeg ikke har frit udsyn og kan ikke holde det ud, hvis jeg ikke har vægge omkring mig. Jeg føler mig som en af de der vippedukker med sand i bunden.' That is why she has all-encompassing problems figuring out the fundamentals of existence: It – Me – Something.

As a young man the hero has taken part in a vicious deception of a French girl, who trusted him and was even in love with him. He is still haunted by guilt because of this. By behaving decently in the new love affair now developing between the two, he hopes somehow to do penance. Moreover, his brother once, at the age of 16, jumped from the top of another Copenhagen tower, the Domus Vista: 'Hver nat lige inden jeg sover, besætter han mig og jeg er ét med ham i det øjeblik han krummer tærne i sine tennissko og sætter af.' Finally, he cannot, through his jogging activities, escape from a feeling of existential emptiness. Every time he returns home he feels like opening the door to a dark room.

Thus there is a peculiar logic in the ostensible fact that the main communication between the lovers is displaced to the less problematic sphere of *nature* – the field of bodies and animals. The hippopotamus is a *leitmotiv*. Carla's home is, as suggested before, full of ceramic hippos that she has brought back from her yearly travels to Egypt. She falls in love with him because he seems to walk like a hippo, has an irresistible desire to jump upon his back and imagines that they could find a lake to live in. Their first date – where she lets him down – is set by the enclosure of the hippos at the Zoo. Also their next meeting – where she lets him see her behind bars – takes place at the Zoo. As mentioned before, it is also in the vicinity of the Copenhagen Zoo, in Søndermarken, where she follows him and observes his jogging activities and his straying dog.

In addition to the imagery surrounding the hippos, the lovers very much communicate through their pets, her cruel cat and his dog respectively, constantly straying but in the end always faithfully returning.<sup>9</sup> His affections, including their sensual aspects, he partly admits by projecting them on to his dog: 'Jeg har en hund. Den vil gerne møde dig, vil gerne slikke dine hænder. Den hedder Carlo.' Later this image is expanded in the following sensual and 'animal' declaration of love: 'Men du var så smuk med det røde hår ned til livet og din hud som mælk, jeg vil slikke op.' But also for her the dog is an emotional go-between. The most important steps up to her final decision to give in to her feelings and move into his flat have both something to do with his dog. In text message 18, she reveals that she has followed after him and his dog. Important in her emotional development is the unrest she feels, when she meets the straying dog without its master. She refers to the dog as Carlos, and so does he from now on. In his next text message T touches her, makes her open up and reveal her middle name Carla by comparing her with Carlos: 'Han finder mig altid, men det er hans nature at jage egern og kaniner, han styrter efter dem mens jeg løber videre. [...] Tænk at du synes jeg er ligesom Carlos; jeg hedder Carla til mellemnavn.'

In the final (happy) end, the scattered images of contemporary urban life are troubled and problem-ridden, but not desperate, not without possible exits.

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9 Compare Emily Dickinson's admittance to feeling closer to her dog and other creatures of nature than to other human beings: 'You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog large as myself, that my father bought to me. They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano.' (Letter to Mr. T. W. Higginson, April 26, 1862, Dickinson 2003: 254). In a letter later in the same year she further declares: 'Of "shunning men and women," – they talk of hallowed things, aloud, and embarrass my dog. He and I don't object to them, if they'll exist their side.' (Dickinson 2003: 258).



## Revival of tradition and/or avant-garde experiment?

This story is full of blanks, creating a considerable amount of insecurity in every reading of it. It is also characterized by demonstratively unrealistic moments. Among them are the before-mentioned melodramatic, literary and almost trivial aspects of the love story. By their very nature of formula, however, they help to hold together the fragments. Equally remote from traditional realism, but working in an opposite direction, are a number of unconventional, hyperbolic and grotesque details: the hippos in ceramics and at the Zoo, the silver shorts, the 'poisoning' of the fruit salad, the peppermint lotion for the tired legs of the ballet dancer, the dog necklace with Swarovski stones etc.

In spite of – as well as by means of – all the blanks and in combination with both the melodramatic and the grotesque moments, *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* contains striking images of contemporary forms of communication, of urban life, and of human types. You get glimpses of an urban environment of the 'creative classes', young persons inclined to live as singles with their pets. The *contingency* of (post)modernity seems to assume new forms, expressed in the following main contradictions: on the one hand a surplus of energy and glamour, on the other isolation and loneliness; on the one hand an advanced and conscious relationship to nature and to your body, including sex, on the other complicated psychological and existential problems: an insecurity of identity and ethics, feelings of guilt, traumatic experiences, inability to cope with aggressions as well as affections.

Such contingencies are also unfolded in Merete Pryds Helle's immediately preceding works. *Det glade vanvid* (*Sheer Madness*, 2005) and *Oh, Romeo* (2006) were published in her own name. The location is obviously Copenhagen. While *Det glade vanvid* is experimental as an exploration of a plotless juxtaposition of actual contradictions in daily life, *Oh, Romeo*, holding on to a definite Shakespearean plot, is a politically engaged modernization of this old story. But Merete Pryds Helle has furthermore demonstrated her interest in experimenting with her identity as a writer as well as in exploring popular genres. Behind the pseudonym Liv Mørk ('Dark Life'), who is presented as a blind writer, Merete Pryds Helle has published two crime novels. Liv Mørk has even her own face book profile. Liv Mørk's second crime novel *Falken og falkoneren* (*The Falcon and the Falconeer*) was published in 2008, the same year as *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig*. The main scene of action is Copenhagen, with important excursions to Sicily, Peru, Jordan, and Russia. The plot encompasses the contemporary global political scene (Sicilian and Russian Mafia, Islamic terrorism and other related items) and contains a considerable element of melodrama.

In the cell phone novel the focus is much closer and the atmosphere much more intimate, but of course melodrama can be seen as some kind of common ground. Without the definite political edge of the preceding works, *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* is experimental as a formal exploration of the aesthetic possibilities of a new medium, a novel form of documentary fiction and, through that, a partial, fragmentary mapping of contemporary forms of communication and existence. I have also in some detail demonstrated that as a pioneer work, using new media, it is at the same time a continuation and a renewal of significant genre traditions in prose fiction.

Is this avant-garde? I still hesitate to give a definite answer. But *if* there is sense in the three main criteria of a contemporary literary work to qualify as some kind of neo-avant-garde that I tried to define in my introduction – the answer might conclusively be affirmative.

I acknowledge with thanks help given by Katrine Højlund Bræmer, who first attracted my attention to the coming publication of *Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig* and later contributed substantially to the transfer of the work from cell phone to paper.

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Enclosure

**Merete Pryds Helle: Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig**  
**16-Nov-2008 11:18**

Kære læser.

Du vil i løbet af de næste 8 dage modtage sms'er med de 27 episoder, romanen består af. Pris i perioden 14. til 16. november er 10,- og herefter er prisen 25,- (+ alm. SMS-takst for den besked, du sendte for at tilmelde dig tjenesten). Beløbet lægges på din mobilregning/trækkes på taletidskortet.

God fornøjelse!

**[1] Jeg elsker**  
**16-Nov-2008 11:19**

Hej, jeg stod i vinduet og så dig gå fra festen. Du gik langsomt som en flodhest. Bag mig dansede de andre, men jeg havde lyst til løbe efter dig, springe op på din ryg. Jeg tænkte at vi kunne finde en sø at bo i. Måske var din cykel punkteret. Måske ved du ikke hvem jeg er?M [sic]

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[2] Jeg elsker**  
**17-Nov-2008 17:04**

Jeg ved godt hvem du er. Der [sic] var ikke første gang, jeg så dig. Det var også dig, der satte en turkis keramikflodhest i græsset ved det nye flodhesteanlæg. Du havde sølvshorts på. Normalt går jeg hurtigt – men den aften; der var noget galt til den fest. Noget, jeg ikke forstod. T

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[3] Jeg elsker**  
**18-Nov-2008 18:38**

Hej. Det var ikke mig. Det burde have været mig. Hvert år rejser jeg til Egypten og hvert år køber jeg en keramikflodhest. De står i mit vindue og ser bestemt og lidt trodsigt ud over havnen. Men du har ret i det med festen. Der var noget galt. Og i shortsene. Jeg går altid i sølvshorts. Måske vil jeg gå i Zoo i morgen. Hvis ikke det sner. M

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[4] Jeg elsker**  
**18-Nov-2008 18:38**

Det sner sjældent i november. Gå endelig. T.

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[5] Jeg elsker**  
**18-Nov-2008 18:38**

Du kom ikke? Jeg ventede hele dagen. Flodhestene: 1. Svømmede. 2. Prustede. 3. Viste tænder af hinanden. 4. Åd græs. Jeg læste to krimier og spiste en sandwich med tun. Ingen sølvshorts standsede op. T

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[6] Jeg elsker**

**18-Nov-2008 22:29**

Jeg har ikke været ærlig over for dig. Undskyld. Der var pulver i græsset, og jeg lå og græd ned i det. Undskyld. Måske vil det ske igen. Måske ikke. M

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[7] Jeg elsker**

**19-Nov-2008 23:43**

Du skal ikke undskylde. Det var jo ikke mig, der græd. Jeg kan også være sne, hvis det skal være. Eller er det sneen du græder over? Vil gerne møde dig. T

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[8] Jeg elsker**

**19-Nov-2008 23:43**

Jeg ved ikke om jeg tør. M

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[9] Jeg elsker**

**19-Nov-2008 23:43**

Jeg er ikke farlig. T

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[10] Jeg elsker**

**20-Nov-2008 13:41**

Nu skal jeg fortælle dig alting, som det er. Til festen var en mand, der engang fik mig i fængsel. Han havde begået et røveri hos en guldsmed og gemte smykkerne under min seng, hvor vi i to år havde elsket hver aften kl. 20 præcis. Politiet troede ikke på, at jeg ikke vidste noget. Jeg havde hørt ringlende lyde mens vi lå der nøgne, men bildte mig ind, at det var lykkelyde. Jeg havde ikke set ham siden og nu er han berømt, og alle, ja undskyld, slikker ham i røven. Jeg gik på toilettet og sørgede for at få beskidte hænder og så vendte jeg frugten i frugtsalaten med mine bakterier. Han elsker frugt. Han spiste og spiste. Undskyld hvis også du kom til at lide. M

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[11] Jeg elsker**

**20-Nov-2008 15:59**

Så havde jeg ikke gået langsomt som en flodhest, men løbet som en hund. Jeg har en hund. Den vil gerne møde dig, vil gerne slikke dine hænder. Den hedder Carlo. Jeg har en gang snydt en ung pige. Hun var fransk, på sommerferie i Tisvilde. Hun var så forelsket i mig som en hvalp, og en gang på stranden kyssede jeg hende så lang tid, som det tog min ven at tømme hendes pung. Vil gerne af med min skyld, men ved ikke hvordan. T

STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[12] Jeg elsker**

**20-Nov-2008 23:10**

Jeg har en kat. Den hedder Tiglath-Pileser efter en grusom assyrisk konge. Den fanger mus og lægger dem stadig levende for mine fødder. Så må jeg slå dem ihjel. Det får mig også til at føle skyld, skyld større end himlen. Hvis der er en musehimmel, er jeg deres djævel. I dag har jeg dog hverken grædt eller dræbt mus. Kl. tre skal jeg på arbejde. Efter et år i fængslet er det

en fest at gå på arbejde. M  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[13] Jeg elsker**  
**21-Nov-2008 13:53**

Klokken tre har jeg fri. Jeg efterlader mit skrivebord fuld af pertentlige bunker papir. Så går Carlo og jeg i Søndermarken. Han jager egern, jeg løber og holder styr på min puls. Bagefter er der tomt, som om jeg åbner døren til et mørkt værelse. Vil du tænde et lys derinde? T  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[14] Jeg elsker**  
**21-Nov-2008 17:59**

Det ville jeg gerne, men er i tvivl om pæren virker. Måske skal den skiftes. Lad os bare prøve. Klokken 22 ved bagindgangen til Zoo. Jeg ved, hvordan man kommer ind, jeg er også et dyr i bur. M

**[15] Jeg elsker**  
**22-Nov-2008 11:44**

Jeg havde ikke forstået, at jeg skulle stå udenfor og se dig i bur. Men du var så smuk med det røde hår ned til livet og din hud er som en skål mælk, jeg vil slikke op. Tak. Hvad kan jeg give dig? T  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[16] Jeg elsker**  
**22-Nov-2008 11:44**

Ser du, jeg var i fængsel, det var ikke godt. Det vækkede mit barndomsfængsel, som jeg havde forladt og låst efter mig. Nu kan jeg ikke holde det ud, hvis jeg ikke har frit udsyn og kan ikke holde det ud, hvis jeg ikke har vægge omkring mig. Jeg føler mig som en af de der vippedukker med sand i bunden. M  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[17] Jeg elsker**  
**22-Nov-2008 23:27**

Du er kommet til den rette. Jeg bor i den øverste lejlighed i Carlsbergsiloen. Der er åbent udsyn til den ene side, vægge til den anden. Du skal dog vide, at vinduerne er sikret, så de ikke kan åbnes andet end på klem. Jeg er så bange for at springe ud. Min bror sprang fra Domus Vista, da han var 16. Hver nat lige inden jeg sover, besætter han mig og jeg er ét med ham i det øjeblik han krummer tærne i sine tennissko og sætter af. T  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[18] Jeg elsker**  
**22-Nov-2008 23:27**

Det er som om jeg allerede kender dig bedre end mig selv. Er det godt eller skidt? Jeg fulgte efter dig og Carlos. Du købte fisk hos fiskehandleren. Jeg elsker fisk. Du så på den store boksebold i vinduet nede ad gaden, så smilede du og gik videre. Hvad smilede du af? M  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[19] Jeg elsker**

**23-Nov-2008 10:29**

Svarer du på mit tilbud? Jeg smilede, fordi de skriver de sælger til barfodet sport, og jeg tænkte, hvad med sex? Jeg har ikke set dine fødder. Jeg ved slet ikke hvem du er, og alligevel tilbyder jeg dig at bo hos mig. Har du hul i ryggen som en elverpige? T  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[20] Jeg elsker**

**23-Nov-2008 15:29**

Jeg troede du havde hørt mit ja, da det rungede over København. Skal bare lige finde ud af: Det – Mig – Noget. Jeg har balletfødder, hårde, lange, bøjelige. Vidste du ikke det? Lige nu danser jeg Sylfiden og har slet ikke tid til det her. M  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[21] Jeg elsker**

**23-Nov-2008 18:29**

Jeg ville ellers gerne i Zoo igen. T  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[22] Jeg elsker**

**23-Nov-2008 22:29**

Undskyld, hvis jeg trænger mig på. T  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[23] Jeg elsker**

**23-Nov-2008 22:39**

Tænker ikke på andet end dig. Følger du efter mig? T  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[24] Jeg elsker**

**24-Nov-2008 09:29**

Jeg så Carlos alene. Blev så forskrækket. Hvor var du? M  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[25] Jeg elsker**

**24-Nov-2008 15:29**

Han finder mig altid, men det er hans natur at jage egern og kaniner, han styrter efter dem mens jeg løber videre. Der kan gå en time eller mere før han finder mig, nogle gange er jeg helt træt og standser op for at få pusten. Jeg tænker, at du er ligesom Carlos. T  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[26] Jeg elsker**

**24-Nov-2008 21:29**

Tænk at du synes jeg er ligesom Carlos; jeg hedder Carla til mellemnavn. Jeg har bestilt en flyttebil til kl.12 [sic] i morgen. Jeg har pakket flodhestene forsigtigt i en kasse. Er du sød at sende mig den nøjagtige adresse? Det er alvor, også at jeg skal danse meget den næste tid, mine fødder vil gøre ondt og jeg vil ikke vide helt hvem jeg er, men vil gerne være din. M C  
STOP: send jeg elsker stop til 1225

**[27] Jeg elsker**

**24-Nov-2008 22:29**

Har indkøbt fodbadesalt og pebermyntecreme. Den ene vindueskarm er ryddet. Carlos insisterede på et nyt halsbånd med swarovski sten, mente vi skulle fejre det. Køleskabet ligner en fiskeforretning. Jeg venter dig foran lågen fra klokken 12. Din Thomas.

Dette var den sidste episode af SMS-romanen Jeg tror, jeg elsker dig. Vi håber, du har nydt læsningen.

Venlig hilsen

Lindhardt og Ringhof