TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF *EKPHRASIS*: MORTEN SØNDERGAARD'S *NEDTÆLLING TIL EN SKULPTUR AF MICHELANGELO (PIETÀ DI RONDANINI I MILANO)*

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ABSTRACT. Morten Søndergaard is one of the best known Danish poets who made their debut in the nineties. The visual arts as well as the tension between language and the reality to which words are supposed to refer play a remarkable role in the poet's oeuvre. The article investigates the problem of poetic language in an encounter with a sculpture. The first part introduces some issues of *ekphrasis*, which serve as a point of departure for an analysis of Søndergaard's poem. The aim of the analysis is an examination of a paradox central to the meaning of the poem: while undermining the possibility of verbal representation, the poem introduces various strategies attempting to imitate sculpture. The poet's struggle with language becomes simultaneously the reader's, who faces the question of how to "find our way through what separates words from what is both without a name and more than a name: a sculpture."[1]

WHAT IS *EKPHRASIS*

The last twenty years have seen a considerable growth of interest in the *ekphrasis* genre within current critical discourse.[2] The catego-

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[1] Paraphrasing Julia Kristeva, see: *Giotto's Joy*, in: *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine, L.S. Roudiez, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989, p. 210. The article is a part of a larger project, which covers other literary works of Morten Søndergaard. Some of the questions raised here, both theoretical and concerning the analysis of the poem, are only mentioned briefly due to the limited space of the article, and they lie beyond the focus of the issues under discussion.

[2] See e.g.: Michał Paweł Markowski, *Ekphrasis. Uwagi bibliograficzne z dołączeniem krótkiego komentarza, Pamiętnik Literacki* 2/1999; Adam Dziadek, *Problem ekphrasis – dwa „Widoki Delft"* (Adam Czerniawski i Adam Zagajewski), *Teksty Drugie* 4/2000; http://www.srcs.nctu.edu.tw/joyceliu/mworks/mw-taiwanlit/PalaceMuseum/PalaceMuseumE.html

ry is significant for literary research concerning the ability of language to produce images, or in other words, the prospects of making the non-verbal actual in discourse.[3] *Ekphrasis* sets out a broad framework for theoretical reflection, including questions such as representation, *mimesis*, description, the relation between visual and verbal signs, as well as the category of sign itself.

The term *ekphrasis* is derived from classical rhetoric, where it originally referred to the description of physical reality, and later to a figure of speech evoking a mental image of a work of the visual arts (painting, sculpture, architecture), the aim of which was *enargeia*, i.e. "the capacity of words to describe with a vividness that, in effect, reproduces an object before our eyes (i.e. before the eyes of our mind)."[4] One of the oldest literary examples considered in terms of *ekphrasis* is the description of Achilles' shield in Homer's *Illiad*, where it functions as a notable part of the great epic. In later developments, *ekphrasis* became an independent genre (Philostratus' *Eikones*, circa 200 AD). Nowadays *ekphrastic* poetry, as well as prose, also includes verbal representations of photography, movies, and theatre performances.

As Michał Paweł Markowski puts it, perhaps *ekphrasis* would never have come into being were it not for the illusion of verbal transparency. However, the genre could not have arisen at all were it not for the speaker's awareness of the non-transparency of verbal signs, which makes writing possible.[5] Thus, on the one hand, *ekphrasis* strives to be like a see-through screen showing the audience an undisturbed view of a painting (sculpture, etc.), but on the other hand, it does nothing else but present itself. This is due to the plain fact that the *ekphrastic* poem replaces the concrete work of art which is absent (that is why it needs a verbal re-presentation) and, next, because language is an arbitrary, conventional sysem of signs[6] which participate in the dynamic process of semiosis understood not as "the conjunction between a signifier and its single, univocal signified"[7]

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[3] Markowski, p. 229.

[4] Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis – the Illusion of the Natural Sign*. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992, p.68.

[5] Markowski, p. 230.

[6] Both visual and verbal languages constitute arbitrary, conventional (as opposed to natural) systems of signs. On the discussion of the problem of visual signs as iconic, in Charles Sanders Peirce's typology of signs (*icon, index, symbol*), misunderstood as merely "natural" signs (i.e. "similar" to the real object) and situated in the ontological opposition to verbal signs as symbolic, see: Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, *Semiotics and Art History*, The Art Bulletin, June 1991, vol. LXXIII, no. 2, pp. 189-90; Stanisław Czekalski, *Nie ma nic poza galerią*, w: *Twarzą w twarz z obrazem*, red. M. Poprzęcka, Warszawa 2003, pp. 81-83; Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Semiotyka Peirce'a*, Warszawa 1994. Among the works cited here, it is Murray Krieger (as in n.4) who refers to visual arts as "natural-sign mimesis", see e.g. p. 226, as well as Adam Dziadek, who in the field of contemporary Polish literary theory is one of a few who specialize in the problem of *ekphrasis*, see e.g. Adam Dziadek (as in n.2), p. 147.

[7] As understood in structuralism, see: Bal and Bryson (as in n. 6), p. 192. The man behind structuralist linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), theorized sign as a fixed and static entity, and the way signs function as static, defined by a limited set of rules. Contrary to de Saussure, the semiotic philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce (1834-1914), which has been pivotal for post-structuralist thought, views signification as a dynamic process (semiosis) involving both the production and the interpretation of signs. (see: Bal and Bryson, pp. 188-192)

but, as "the movement from one signifier to another, the *motion* between them." As motion, visual signification cannot be considered in terms of one final meaning, it is "incompatible with the ideas of boundary, threshold, frame."[8]

The contradictory aspirations – presenting the object and replacing it, are one facet of the paradoxical nature of the classical *ekphrasis*. This is the inner dichotomy that opens the field for theoretical elaboration.

The paradox named above, discussed by Markowski, takes a noticeable form in relation to the typical figures of speech employed by classical *ekphrasis* in order to visualize the object of art: 1) narrative and 2) apostrophe (i.e. addressing the reader directly). The narrative, meant as replacing a description with a "story," is where the object is referred to "events" which are earlier and later or simply different from those presented for example in a painting (as in *Eikones*, where Philostratus draws not only upon the mythological scene in the picture, but also, in order to explain the painting satisfactorily, upon the preceding and following story), directing the reader's attention away from the painting. Narrativization is hence the intertextualization of a description (the poem enters into a dialogue with other texts: other myths etc.) and, on the other hand, its annihilation, as the poem speaks about something which does not belong to the painting. The apostrophic address, similarly, interrupts the description to speak directly to the reader-spectator and draw his attention to a specific feature of the painting, thus going beyond the text and entering the metadiscoursive space, shared by both the reader and the poet. *Ekphrasis*, then, can be considered in terms of its constant oscillation between the necessity and impossibility of description; between description and narration; between visualization and metadiscourse.[9]

Founded on the mimetic concept of art, *ekphrasis* acclaimed the poet a mediator between a painting and the reader. This was the case of Goethe, who believed in the possibility of verbal translation of a visual work of art (*Philostrats Gemälde*, 1818), and ascribed himself the gift of "seeing nature with the painters' eyes."[10] This leads us to the question of perception: is pure, objective, unmediated perception possible? Does our perception of a four-hundred-year-old sculpture give us access to the object as it was perceived by its contemporary viewers?[11] "Object" and "perception" are not interchangeable: the category of per-

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[8] Bal and Bryson (as in n. 4), p. 192. The authors discuss Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* (French edition Paris, 1978) and the philosopher's idea of frame. The relation between the verbal and the visual in view of Derrida's concept of frame (or "parergon") is a part of my project.

[9] Markowski, p. 232.

[10] Robert Cieślak: *Oko poety. Poezja Różewicza wobec sztuk wizualnych*, Gdańsk 1999, p. 228. (my translation)

[11] The problem of perception and historians' access to the past is discussed from a broad philosophical background by Mieke Bal in her book *Quoting Carravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago 1999. According to the author, what historians do is describe their own seeing and understanding of the sources, and hide their subjective viewpoint behind the pseudo-objective narration using past tense and third person. Reconstruction of the past is in fact the historian's subjective construction. (See also: Stanisław Czekalski, *Semiotyka widzenia i preposteryjna historia obrazów Mieke Bal*, an unpublished paper read out by the author during the art-historians' conference in Nieborów, November 2004.)

ception implies the presence of the viewer, who belongs to a specific time and space, and is immersed in a historical, cultural and personal context, which determines the reception.[12] Is confronting "the pure thing" possible at all? Here may reside another trap connected with the problem of *ekphrasis* (especially the classical one): while trying to visualize the object, does not the poet describe anything else but his own seeing?

MORTEN SØNDERGAARD'S *NEDTÆLLING...* AS POSTMODERN *EKPHRASIS*

The paradoxes mentioned above can serve as a starting point for the reading of *Nedtælling til en skulptur af Michelangelo (Pietà di Rondanini i Milano)*,[13] though Morten Søndergaard's (b1964) poem has little to do with classical *ekphrastic* poetry, which owed a lot to Horace's famous maxim *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting so is poetry").[14] It has similarly little to do with modernist *ekphrasis*, which relates to the theory developed by the critical approach known as New Criticism, where a literary work was treated as an autotelic artefact, unrelated to anything beyond itself, a "well wrought urn."[15] The concept of *ekphrasis* in this formalistic view is derived from the distinction between literary arts as temporal and visual arts as spatial, made by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in *Laokoon* (1766).[16] Modernist literature was to be "art that favors spatial juxtaposition over temporal succession, the formalistic over the historical,"[17] where design and particular relationships between different elements of the poem (but also prose) were to be "perceived simultaneously," dissolving "the inherent consecutiveness of language,"[18] a tendency that can be noticed in the works of e.g. James Joyce, T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound.[19] In the modernist "*ekphrastic* emblem" the thing to be imitated was not just a concrete art object external to the poem, but rather "the status of the sculpture or painting as a physical art object."[20] The poem was to "imitate the spatial object by being one too."[21]

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[12] See also: Bal and Bryson, pp. 184-188.

[13] *Nedtælling til en skulptur af Michelangelo (Pietà di Rondanini i Milano)*, in: Morten Søndergaard, *Vinci, senere*. Digte. Borgen: København 2002. English translation by John Irons: *Countdown for a sculpture of Michelangelo (Pietà di Rondaniniin Milan)*, in: *Vinci, later*, Book Thug 2005. The book was nominated for the Nordic Council's Literature Prize 2003.

[14] See e.g.: Michael Davidson, *Ekphrasis a postmodernistyczne wiersze-obrazy*, trans. P. Mróz, A Warmiński in: *Estetyka w świecie*, vol. 3. Kraków, 1991.

[15] Krieger, p. 222.

[16] See e.g.: W.J.T. Mitchell, *Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory*, in: Mitchell (ed.), *The Language of Images*, Chicago 1980; idem, *The Politics of Genre: Space and Time in Lessing's Laocoon*, in: *Representations*, No. 6 (Spring 1984), pp. 98-115.

[17] Krieger, p. 223 (in his discussion of Joseph Frank, one of the most influential modernist theorists of New Criticism).

[18] Krieger, p. 223.

[19] Davidson, p. 44.

[20] Krieger, p. 226.

[21] Krieger, p. 226. As an example close to this concept of poetry relating to visual arts (but also a play with it) in Danish literature could be Per Højholt's poem *Le tombeau d'Orphée*, printed in: *eksempler*. Antologi, ed. Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, Gyldendal: København 1968.

Morten Søndergaard's poem, not only historically, but first of all because of its inner qualities, can be classified as postmodern *ekphrasis*, as defined by Michael Davidson.[22] According to Davidson, postmodern *ekphrasis* cannot be considered in terms of a "thing" but rather an event, a result of the poet's semiotic activity in his confrontation with a work of the visual arts. The meanings borne by the work of art cannot be isolated from the poet's mind, who presents himself in the act of thinking and creation. The poet re-reads a painting or a sculpture rather as a text than a static, delimited, physical object, and creates a new text. The process of reception is emphasized, similar to the reader's role in re-reading the verbal text. The postmodern *ekphrasis* does not strive to be an imitation of a painting or a sculpture, but on the contrary, it is deconstructive towards its own linguistic strategies as well as the possibility of impersonal, objective representation.

The structure of meaning in Morten Søndergaard's *Nedtælling...* can be defined in terms of the following paradox: on the one hand the poem presents itself as unstable; polysemous; revealing the dynamic nature of signs, both verbal and visual; self-deconstructing; challenging and undermining its ability to visualize sculpture by means of verbal language. On the other hand, what the poem implicitly does is employ linguistic and compositional techniques that attempt to "carve" the sculpture in language. While Søndergaard indirectly but clearly expresses his skepticism towards the possibility of verbal representation, at the same time he constantly implements strategies that seem to be driving at making the inexplicable object of the *ekphrastic* desire – the sculpture – present. It should be emphasized, however, that the moment-to-moment acts of transferring the discourse at the metareflective level derive strictly from the formal features of the sculpture, as if all reflection was rooted in the sensual experience of the work of art.

The most striking characteristics of *Pietà Rondanini* [see fig.1, 2, 3] which become the source of the metadiscoursive excursions in the poem, and which I try to discuss below, can be summed up in the following: "dematerialization;"[23] traces of the process of creation; the relation between Christ and his Mother; the different possible points of viewing "inbuilt" in the composition of the sculpture, and, last but not least, Michelangelo's concept of art, visualized in Buonarroti's last masterpiece.[24]

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[22] Davidson, pp. 46-48. Davidson analyses the works of two New York School poets: Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, see pp. 48-61. For a more in-depth study of Frank O'Hara's poetry and its relation to the visual arts, also of *ekphrastic* poems, see: Filip Lipiński, *'Sometimes I think I'm 'in Love with Painting:' The World of Art in Frank O'Hara's Poetry*, an unpublished M.A. thesis supervised by prof. UAM dr hab. Marek Wilczyński, the Department of English at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań 2003.

[23] A term applied by Żuchowski, see: Tadeusz J. Żuchowski, *Traktat o rzeźbie Michała Anioła – Pietà Rondanini*, in: *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, vol. XXVI, 2001.

[24] Michelangelo worked on *Pietà Rondanini* until his death in 1564. When exactly he began carving the sculpture has not been established, see: Żuchowski, pp. 63-68. Now the sculpture is kept in Castello Sforzesco, Milan, Italy.

NEDTÆLLING
til en skulptur af Michelangelo
(*Pietà di Rondanini i Milano*)

Og inde i stenen findes skulpturen allerede
og inde i den en anden
*   og en anden*
og hvor skal jeg standse
for kun tvivlen står tilbage
ordene ligger
*   i min kuglepen*
det føles godt
at gå til grunde
*   i dette hav af ord*

men du hvisker til mig
at ingen når at færdiggøre
*   det de var i færd med*
og at kærlighed er ét eneste
uafsluttet ønske om at blive ved
*   du rejser mig*
du lader mig falde
måske er det døden selv
*   du prøver at få til at gå*

måske findes det jeg søger
*   i den hvide marmormonolit*
der svæver som en standset angst
midt i et selvmordsspring
*   susende stille nu*
pludselig ingenting
min arm der sover
*   uden for min krop*

måske som sammenrullet mørke
*   under en lygtepæl*
eller noget andet
og langt mere kompliceret
*   min far f.eks. i et epileptisk anfald*
hvad er det han ser når hans øjne
vender det hvide ud

jeg prøver at rejse ham igen
*   filtret ind i mørket*
så tung en krop kan være
*   når den forvandler sig*
til en mærkelig
*   blød sten*

eller er det
*   min lille hvide mor*
der er kommet
*   for at kvæle mig*

COUNTDOWN
for a sculpture by Michelangelo
(*Pietà di Rondanini in Milan*)

and within the block of marble the sculpture lies waiting
and within it another
            and another
and where am I to stop
when doubt remains
the words lie
            in my pen
it feels good
to perish
            in this sea of words

but you whisper to me
no one manages to complete
            what they were busy doing
that love is a single
unfinished wish to go on
            you lift me up
you let me fall
perhaps it is death
            you want to walk

perhaps what I seek
            within the white marble
hovers like fear frozen
in a jumper's eye
            suicidal silence momentarily falls
then suddenly nothing
my arm falls asleep
            outside my body

perhaps it is like the rolled-up darkness
            under a street-lamp
or something else
and far more complex
            my father, for example, in an epileptic fit
what his eyes see
when they roll white

I try to raise him again
            entangled in the darkness
so heavy a body can be
            when it transforms
into strange
            soft stone

or is it
            my small white mother
who has come
            to strangle me

der er næsten ingenting tilbage	there is almost nothing left
en dobbelthovedet engel	a double-headed angel
der smelter alt	that melts everything
med sit	with its
indadvendte blik	introverted look
to mennesker	two people
i en underlig	in a peculiar
forening	union
et bjerg	a mountain
der forsøger	attempting
at gå	to walk

BETWEEN REALITY AND LANGUAGE

Morten Søndergaard's *Nedtælling til en skulptur af Michelangelo (Pietà di Rondanini i Milano)*[25] is part of a much longer poem *Vinci, senere*[26] (2002), consisting of six parts: *Landskaber (Landscapes)*, *I den vaskeægtige vanvittige virkelighed (Out-and-out stark-staring reality)*, *Nedtælling (Countdown)*, *Selv-portræt i udbrud (Self-portrait erupting)*, *De mindste ord (The smallest words)*, *Flow (Flow)*. A significant question, examined in the poem, is, as Thomas Breds-dorff puts it in his review, "digterens bekymring for hvad ord i det hele taget kan,"[27] the poet's concern about the ability of the language to approach reality, which can equally be stated in relation to Søndergaard's literary oeuvre.[28] Breds-dorff calls Søndergaard a language-skeptic ("sprogskeptiker"): it is impossible to see the landscape clearly not only because of the obtrusive guests who have arrived in large numbers at Vinci, a small village situated in central Italy, and are blocking the view. It is also the word (*Ord*) that does not allow the speak-ing subject, as well as the reader, to admire a complete and undisturbed view – because, as Søndergaard writes in the first part of the poem (*Landscapes*), *Ord er døre, der står på klem (Words are doors left ajar)*.[29]

While reading *Nedtælling...*, one should not avoid referring to the context of the whole poem, or at least to some concepts crucial for approaching the

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[25] *Countdown for a sculpture of Michelangelo (Pietà Rondanini in Milan)*. In my own trans-lation: *Countdown to a sculpture...* (the reasons for my translating *Nedtælling til* as *Countdown to* are explained in the analysis below).

[26] Søndergaard, *Vinci, later* (as in n. 13).

[27] "The poet's concern about what words can do" (my translation), see: Thomas Bredsdorff, *Et spark – langt ind i sproget*, (review, 24th October 2002, see: www.norden.org/nr/pris/lit_pris/2003/sk/BokomtaleDKVinci)

[28] See e.g.: *Digter. Til en film om 10 danske digtere*, red. af Claus Bohm & Neal Ashley Conrad, Forlaget Spring 2000, pp. 30-31; Bergen internasjonale poesifestival 2002, on Morten Søndergaard, see: www.nypoesi.net/bergen-poesifest/soendergaard.html

[29] *Vinci, later*, p. 8.

meaning of the lyric. The final line of *Nedtælling...*, for instance, which consists of a single infinitive *at gå* (to walk), would only be partly understandable if not looked on at relation to the meaning one ascribes to the word when getting gradually acquainted with *Vinci, senere*. The infinitive, divided into two parts, introduces the first section of the poem:

At.	To.
At gå.	To walk.
At gå baglæns i egne fodspor.	To walk backward in your own track.
Skridt: Navn.	Step: Name.
Gang: Bevægelige navne. (9)	Walk: Movable names. (9)

Walking (to walk) is a metaphorical notion referring to the process of naming (implicitly: writing). The metaphorical image of walking describes Søndergaard's idea of writing poetry as "å utvide det feltet man befinner seg i"[30] (expanding the field we are in), the field we are already in. "Already" (*allerede*) is a key word defining the poet's relation to reality and language as dimensions that anticipate his (or her) bodily and conscious existence (which starts in a specific "field" in the world, a particular moment in space and time, from which one begins "to walk"). The word "already," both syntactically and semantically, connects the past with the present, indicating cause-and-effect relationship: without "before" there would be no "now." The final lines of *Vinci, senere* say:

En eller anden siger: Allerede.	Someone says: Already.
Det ord findes. Hvor var det godt, vi huskede	That word exists. Good thing we remembered
at få det med! Allerede er vi kommet frem.	to include it! Already we have arrived.
Allerede kan vi begynde. Det er mærkeligt, men alt andet	Already we begin. It is odd but everything else
vil ikke give mening. Derfor kan vi sige:	will not give meaning. So we can say:
Allerede. (96)	Already. (81)

Our notion of reality and language, and our ability to express it, have meaning only in relation to an "already" preexisting reality and language.

"Den æstetiske susen for mig er der, hvor jeg mærker mig selv som værende i verden. Det gode værk giver en slags verdensfølelse: Først kommer verden, og så kommer jeg tilstede i den."[31] This statement, expressed by Søndergaard in a conversation with Thomas Thøfner,[32] is quite telling. It leads us to the Heideggerian "i-verden-væren" (being-in-the-world) and to the philosopher's concept of *Dasein* as a being "thrown" into a world: a world (history, language) that determines our existence beforehand.[33] We are only "guests" who have entered the world at a given moment:

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[30] Bergen internasjonale poesifestival (as in n. 27).

[31] „For me, the aesthetic rush begins when I mark myself as being in the world. A good work of art gives a kind of feeling of the world: first comes the world, and so I become present in it". (my translation)

[32] Quoted in: Bergen internasjonale...

[33] See: Cezary Woźniak, *Martina Heideggera myślenie sztuki*, Kraków 2004, pp. 36-56, esp. p. 47. Some concepts of Heidegger's philosophy (e.g. Being-in-the-World, Being-towards-Death), including the concept of poetry and art, seem crucial for approaching Søndergaard's poetry and will serve as the point of departure for some parts of my project.

Det er os, der er gæster, indvandrere	We are guests, immigrants
der bliver ved med at gå. (19)	who continue walking. (17)

We are bound to "walk," i.e. to give names to things and thus learn about the world, which is inseparable from this language. We see the world through language:

Æbletræerne blomstrer selvindlysende	The apple-trees blossom self-evidently
og lærer os at se med ord. (9)	and teach us to see with words. (7)

These lines, belonging to the first lyric of *Vinci, senere,* can be read as a hint for the Biblical beginning of Man – reaching out for the fruit of cognition, cognition that starts with the ability to distinguish and name things using words, and thus, unavoidably, "to see [things] with words." The reader's attention is at the same time drawn to the fact that words are not the embodiment of nature, nor are they transparent signs mediating the "landscape." The gap between what the written words are constrained to mean and what they strive to communicate can be compared here to the aporia defining the existence of the forbidden fruit, founded on the impossibility of consuming it – once you have bitten the fruit, you lose "everything" – paradise. Tempted to "touch" the world with words, we unavoidably lose the self-evident (*selvindlysende*) reality. The only thing the poem can do is describe the effort to "speak the landscape," approaching it again and again, never completely reaching (re-presenting) it:

Man kan ikke sige: "Gå til venstre ved det store træ."	One cannot say: 'Turn left at the big tree,'
for sætningen når ikke helt derhen. (16)	because the sentence doesn't quite reach it. (14)

The mediation inherent in verbal language is an illusion – a sentence is unable to fully "reach" an object or concept. The poem does not give an insight into the reality which lies outside language, but rather reflects the movement through the world of semantic, rhythmic and tonal constellations.[34] This is rather the movement itself, the act of seeking and not the act of finding that becomes the real subject of Søndergaard's poetry, also in his *ekphrastic* poems, where the epistemological question of how we perceive and conceive the outer reality is central to the poet's meeting with a work of art.

POETRY AS UNCOVERING THE CORE

A relevant issue, essential for the interpretation of both *Pietà Rondanini* and *Nedtælling...*, is Michelangelo's philosophy of art, founded on Neoplatonism, which in Renaissance Florence was enjoying growing popularity.[35] Michel-

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[34] Bergen internasjonale...

[35] The prominent patron of the arts, Lorenzo de Medici, supported the Neoplatonic Academy in Florence. In the Medici compound Michelangelo became familiar with Neoplatonism and translations of Plotinus and Plato (see: Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *Estetyka nowożytna*, Warszawa 1991, pp. 140-146, see also: http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~dvess/micel.htm).

angelo believed that the artist's role was to bring preexistent forms out of the material at hand. Art forms are implanted in matter by nature and exist independently of the artist. The artist possesses the gift (called *intelleto*) of seeing the forms and integrating the design of a statue with the proportions of the block of marble. In Michelangelo's view, this ability was a gift from God, and those who possessed *intelleto* did not need to employ any artificial techniques to create a work of art. The goal of carving was to gradually remove the redundant layers of marble and unveil the already existing form of the statue. The last instance, deciding about the form of a sculpture, was the matter, not the outer reality. Thus, representation based on the criterion of fidelity to the object (natural world) was not the main target of the artistic work. A crucial issue in this concept was for the artist to know when to stop carving, so as not to go too far, destroying the block of stone.[36]

Michelangelo's philosophical concept of art and of the artist's role is alluded to in the first stanza of *Nedtælling...* Søndergaard provides here the reader (the viewer?) with two imageries, the first referring to the process of sculpting (lines 1-3), the other to the process of writing (lines 6-10), combining them by two lines (4-5) that might be expressed by both the subject of sculpting and the subject of writing. Writing (implicitly: writing a poem) is compared to sculpting understood as a successive uncovering of the core of the stone, hidden under nontransparent layers of the material. Analogically, poetry has its source (preexists) in the language, which enables the creation of poetry. The juxtaposition of Michelangelo's concept of sculpting with writing poetry in the first stanza draws the reader's attention to the fact that he (or she) deals with a material (language), not a transparent screen showing the object as it is. The matter cannot be treated by the artist as something he (or she) possesses control over. The meaning has its source in the language. The question *Hvor skal jeg standse* (*where am I to stop*) expresses the artist's helplessness in the process of creation and his subordinate position in relation to the language.

Nonetheless, the poet makes an effort to imitate the process of carving. In the three opening lines of *Nedtælling...* we read about going deeper and deeper in the stone in an attempt to uncover the sculpture. This meaning is transferred onto the formal construction of this part of the stanza. The first line is comparatively long: both visually and in terms of the amount of syllables, this is the longest line in the poem. The next line is much shorter, as if the "redundant" words have been removed, and the third one is half as long as the previous and, what is more, the words are shifted towards the centre of the column ("the centre" connoting *within – inde*). The statement develops in anaphoric rhyme (*og [...] / og [...] / og [...]*), repeating the short, single syllable, a strategy evoking the effect of the sound of carving. This effect is reinforced by

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[36] Zuchowski, p. 71.

the rhythmical repetition of the consonant 'n', which in the three lines occurs thirteen times, seven times in the strong final position.[37] It is a strategy that in this context functions as onomatopoeia, a rhetorical device that imitates the sound it represents, though here it should be more appropriate to talk about 'reminding' us of the sound made by hitting a chisel on stone. Hence, the first three lines of the poem refer both to Michelangelo's philosophical concept and to the process of carving, semantically and formally at the same time. They are also a counterpart of a visible feature of the sculpture: the upper parts of *Pietà Rondanini*, unpolished and rough, do not obscure the traces of the work by chisel and pick, the indexes to the process of the creative act.

The word "already" (*allerede*), found in the final position of the first line,[38] seems heterogeneous to the other words, which is due to the lack of an 'n' as well as its soft and fluent sound causing a rhythmical (and visual) asymmetry in this part of the stanza. What the "already" does is transfer the otherwise mechanical act of carving to a more abstract dimension.

Also the construction of the whole poem, like the first stanza, relates to the concept of artistic creation as removing the unnecessary matter and uncovering "the core." Each of the ten successive stanzas the poem is built of, includes one line less, so the first stanza numbers ten lines and the last just one. The strategy employed here is a consequent, gradual reduction of the word, its dematerialization. Accordingly, onto the composition of the poem has been transferred a striking feature of *Pietà Rondanini*, namely its tendency towards progressive dematerialization.[39] The bottom parts of the sculpture – Christ's legs – are smooth, polished and thus realistic, while towards the upper areas of the statue, Christ's torso, parts of his arms, his head and face, as well as Mary's, the stone becomes more and more evident: it is unpolished, left in a coarse-grained, almost rough state, drawing attention rather to the process of sculpting than to a finished work of art.[40] The direction of dematerialization of the sculpture can be read as progressing from top to bottom.[41] The same can be noticed in relation to the poem: in the first, top stanza, the most "abundant" with words, matter is named explicitly (stone / word), while the last stanza consists of a single word – "to walk," which relates to the bottom part of the sculpture – Christ's feet.

Consequently, the final *at gå* (*to walk*) can be interpreted as the ultimate consequence of "carving" in the language. If referred to the metaphorical meaning of "to walk," which turned up earlier in *Vinci, senere*, and has already been

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[37] The analysis relates, of course, to the original, Danish version.

[38] In my own translation the first line sounds as follows: *and within the stone the sculpture lies waiting already.*

[39] Żuchowski, p. 71.

[40] See: Żuchowski, pp. 71, 76.

[41] Idem, p. 81. (Żuchowski perceives the dematerialization as progressing from bottom to top: from the most mimetically worked parts – the legs, to the most obscure. I use the term dematerialization understood as matter becoming less 'matter' as such and more a realistic shape.)

discussed, then a conclusion could be that the effect of writing poetry is not the image of the sculpture but writing poetry. This is, however, only a part of the meaning. The poetic act of creation strives to go beyond the language and "speak" the sculpture. Here the title can help us grasp this meaning. "Countdown" (*Nedtælling*) relates to the structure of the poem. The order in the number of lines in the stanzas, from top to bottom: 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 reminds us of a record of time passing until something important happens (countdown[42]). It is the countdown to Michelangelo's sculpture which "will happen," according to our communicational conventions, <u>after</u> the last word has been said. The sculpture does not belong to the language. The poem can only keep a record of an attempt to take possession of the sculpture with words. Crossing the borders of *this sea of words* (*dette hav af ord*), however, even the borders of one's own *pen* (*min kuglepen*) is impossible. What follows after the last word is a white page: it may function as a screen for the reader's projection of the imagery of the sculpture, evoked by the discourse, in front of his "eyes of the mind."[43]

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PRESENT

Coming back to the first stanza, it is worth stopping for a while at the meaningful strategy of the usage of the pronoun *I* (*jeg*) in the question crucial to the process of artistic creation as well as to the problem of representation: *where am I to stop* (*hvor skal jeg standse*). As mentioned above, lines four and five: *and where am I to stop / when doubt remains* (*og hvor skal jeg standse / for kun tvivlen står tilbage*) function as a link between the first imagery referring to sculpting, and the second one, which bears upon writing. The first person singular can thus be read, on the one hand, as giving voice to the sculptor, while on the other hand, it can be identified with the poet. The grammatical subject of the question is hence the place where the sculptor and the poet meet. Does the "meeting", however, imply a mutual understanding, a fulfilled communicative act? Is the poet able to "see with [sculptor's] eyes?"[44] And, what is more, is he capable of communicating this view to the reader, becoming thus a mediator between the work of art and the audience? In other words, does Søndergaard present us with the paradox of classical *ekphrasis*, founded on contradictory aims: on the one hand establishing the double mediation (between the sculpture and the discourse and between the poem and the reader) and, on the other hand, attempting to do away with the double screen, trying to put us in front of the sculpture? This question returns in the fourth stanza, where the "poet" asks: *what his eyes see / when they roll white* (*hvad er det han ser når hans*

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[42] That is why, in my opinion, the title *Nedtælling til...* should rather be translated literally as *Countdown to* (and not "Countdown(.) for...").

[43] Markowski, p. 236.

[44] Originally: [painter's], see n. 10.

øjne / vender det hvide ud) ('*he*' read here as 'the sculptor'), implying at the same time a dichotomy between his own and the sculptor's perception of *Pietà*.

Søndergaard, a "language-skeptic," seems to doubt any communication between perceptions, as well as in the chance of communicating his own perception of the sculpture to the reader. Already in the first stanza clear information concerning the medium at hand is given: the word. In the first reading, the imagery of uncovering the sculpture preexisting in the stone conjures up, before the reader's "eyes of the mind," the process of carving (also by incorporation of the techniques I have discussed). It is as if the poem were trying to efface itself, presenting the subject in front of a block of marble. However, reconsidered from the perspective of the second imagery *([...] my pen [...] this sea of words)*, the poem unveils itself as written with words. The comparison of writing poetry with sculpting (as Michelangelo conceived it) is thus more an expression of the poet's view of poetry and art than an attempt to represent the process of carving.

The pronoun "I," in fact, directs the reader's attention to the perspective from which the sculpture is being perceived: it is the perspective of the speaking subject, who does not try to give an illusion of objectivity and distance, and hide him(/her)self behind the grammatical third person and the past tense.[45] The use of the present tense in the first stanza, as well as throughout the poem, reinforces the subjective point of view of the speaking subject, who is beholding *Pietà Rondanini* as an individual and, at the same time, historical being: the words lie in *my pen*, a metonymic figure standing for the poet's individual idiom, though the poet refers to the act of writing as going down to the "bottom"[46] of *this sea of words*, the metaphor describing this (i.e. nearest) language as something the speaking (writing) subject is immersed in.

The problem of perceiving the sculpture through the mediation of the 'here and now' perspective recurs throughout the poem on the level of linguistic strategies that allow the same words to be read as referring to more than just one idea: they can be understood both in relation to *Pietà Rondanini*, to the figure of the sculptor and to the speaking subject (poet) as well as to the context of the whole poem *Vinci, senere*. This is first of all due to the narrativization of the discourse. What the poem attempts to achieve is in fact not visualization of the sculpture but rather a communicative compensation for the lack of experiencing the work of art directly.[47] Consequently, the narrativization is an intertextualization of the description: the poem enters a semiotic play which takes place between the poem and other literary texts (the most obvious being *Vinci, senere*, the Biblical story of Crucifixion and Michelangelo's biography).[48] This play is going on at two levels: the first being the

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[45] See n. 11.

[46] *at gå til grunde* can be translated as *perish* (as in John Irons' translation), but also as *to go to the bottom*.

[47] Markowski, p. 232.

[48] An interesting field for intertextual analysis could be the poem's relation to the well-known lyric of J.P. Jacobsen, *Arabesk til en haandtegning af Michel Angelo (Kvindeprofil med sænkede Blikke i Ufficierne)*, printed e.g. in: *Dansk lyrik*, ed. T. Bjørnvig, Gyldendal: København 1965.

poet's perception of the sculpture, the second the reader's own associations. The narrative verse in *Nedtælling...* does not, however, aim at hiding this double dimension. The twofold subjective viewpoint is marked in the first stanza. Apart from the poet-spectator there is the clear implication of the reader-spectator's presence and his participation in the process of creation: the first stanza situates the reader in front of the "now" of creation – *the words lie / in my pen*, the process of writing has just started. The plurality of perspectives from which the meaning can be perceived is inherent in the composition of the sculpture, imposing three different views: the front view [fig.1], the front left view [fig.2] (from this perspective, Christ's body seems light, as if the force of gravitation did not exist and Mary could raise her Son's body) and the front right view [fig.3] (from which the heaviness of Christ's body is best seen).[49] Accordingly, we find the verbal counterparts of these views in the second stanza: the front view [fig.1]: *but you whisper to me* (*men du hvisker til mig*); the view from the (viewer's) left [fig.2]: *you lift me up* (*du rejser mig*); and the view from the (viewer's) right [fig.3]: *you let me fall* (*du lader mig falde*).

THE SEMIOTIC GAP

What is the effect of "carving" the words, then? Paradoxically, while trying to imitate the process of carving and the sculpture, the poem openly tells us that the result of the act is "an other" (*en anden*). The sculpture is referred to as the "other" in relation to the discourse. This leads us to the notion of "the semiotic Other," used by W. J. T. Mitchell in reference to a "semiotic gap" between two systems of signs, occurring unavoidably in the act of re-reading with words an object of the visual arts.[50] This gap is a result of the use of signs in the process of reception that "opens onto the 'polytheism' of hidden and dispersed practices that make up the semiotic play."[51] At the moment when the text is made, "enunciation [the poem] and enunciated [the sculpture] cleave at the most fundamental level."[52] The gap, which does not allow for the successful verbal representation of the artwork, becomes a space filled with the already mentioned "imagination effect,"[53] the effect brought about by the visual piece of art in the beholder's mind. The spectator's imagination evokes his memories[54] and thus the object of reference becomes opaque.

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[49] Żuchowski, p. 82.

[50] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Ekphrasis and the Other*, in: *Picture Theory*, Chicago 1994, pp. 151-181; see also: http://www.srcs.nctu.edu.tw/joyceliu/mworks/mw-taiwanlit/PalaceMuseum/Palace-MuseumE.html

[51] Bal and Bryson (as in n. 6), p. 187.

[52] Idem.

[53] Markowski, p. 236.

[54] I would not like to elaborate here on the possibilities that psychoanalytic theories open in relation to the category of the Other. (Joyce C. H. Liu in *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, December 1997, pp. 933-946, writes about "a space relaying the poet's unconscious and his idiosyncratic personal history, filled with linguistic, cultural, political, and erotic desires," see: http://www.srcs.nctu.edu.tw/joyceliu/mworks/mw-taiwanlit/PalaceMuseum/PalaceMuseumE.html)

This is what the reader deals with throughout Søndergaard's poem. We encounter difficulties, caused by references to facts and persons, which seem to belong to the poet's "personal history," as in the fourth stanza, where we read about:

min far f.eks. i et epileptisk anfald	my father, for example, in an epileptic fit
hvad er det han ser når hans øjne	what his eyes see
vender det hvide ud	when they roll white

The above lines present the experience of perception as evoking a discrete memory in the speaker's mind, where the effect is more of a "then" than a "now," despite the grammatical present tense. Having read *Vinci, senere*, we recognize the figure of the father from the previous poem *Footwear (Fodtøj)*, where the speaking subject creates a surrealistic imagery of his coming across his father, who is lying in the grass by a road, entangled in an electric fence:

der lå <u>min far</u> i græsset	<u>My father</u> lay in the grass, his neck
viklet ind i et elektrisk hegn	entwined in an electric fence
<u>*Hans øine*</u> *<u>så</u> helt til bunden*	<u>His eyes gazed</u> far into
af den sjæl jeg indtil det tidspunkt	the parts of me I was
ikke var klar over jeg var udstyret med	unaware I possessed until that moment
(50, my emphasis)	(47)

COMMUNICATION – THE UNFULFILLED WISH

In the iconographic subject of pietà a significant potential of meaning resides in the relation between Christ and his Mother. In *Pietà Rondanini* an unusual emphasis is laid on the strong "spiritual bond"[55] between Christ and Mary. Their bodies almost melt into one, the boundaries between them remaining unclear and fluent. This feature of *Pietà* is "verbalized" in the poem by the implementation of a structure close to a dialogue: beginning with the second stanza, partly in the third, throughout the fifth and sixth, the voice is interchangeably given to Mary and Christ. The "dialogue," however, remains at the level of stanzaic division, never becoming realized within one stanza. What we observe is in fact an exchange of short monologues: the communication between Mother and Son is never realized, and a hint of mutual misunderstanding can be noticed. In the fifth stanza we read Mary saying:

jeg prøver at rejse ham igen	I try to raise him again

and then Christ in the next one:

eller er det	or is it
min lille hvide mor	my small white mother

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[55] See: Zuchowski, p. 76.

    der er kommet   who has come
      for at kvæle mig   to strangle me

The poem interprets the close relation between Mother and Son as an *unfinished wish (uafsluttet ønske)* /the second stanza/, a wish to continue staying close to each other (*blive ved*[56]) that cannot be "finished", understood as fulfilled ("afsluttet", "fuldendt").

In the second stanza the speaking subject can be identified with Christ. The strategy of giving voice to Christ (animating the figure) responds to an unusual, in terms of iconographic tradition, feature of *Pietà Rondanini*, namely the activeness (as opposed to traditional passivity and inertia) of Christ, whose arms "seek for support in Mary's body."[57] The lines:

    men du hvisker til mig   but you whisper to me
  at ingen når at færdiggøre   no one manages to complete
      det de var i færd med   what they were busy doing
  og at kærlighed er ét eneste   that love is a single
  uafsluttet ønske om at blive ved unfinished wish to go on

can be read as the ("whispered") Mother's words, expressed by Christ, referring implicitly to her Son's death and maternal love. The implementation of indirect speech (immersing one statement in another) can be seen as a counterpart to the formal feature of the "melting" of the bodies into one; also the verb *blive ved* can be read as referring to the formal closeness of the figures, as well as *a double-headed angel (en dobbelthovedet engel)* in the seventh stanza or in the eighth stanza: *two people / in a peculiar / union (to mennesker / i en underlig / forening)*. However, the second stanza not only makes a reference to the formal features of the sculpture but also, implicitly, to other texts: the evangelical scene of laying Christ's Body in the tomb after His death upon the Cross, as well as to the earlier death of the father (*Footwear*) and to Michelangelo's biography. *Pietà Rondanini* was Buonarroti's last work, often considered as unfinished (*non-finito*),[58] due to the roughness, loosely outlined features and the separate arm that has remained from an earlier version of the sculpture.[59] The lines: *no one manages to complete / what they were busy doing (at ingen når at færdiggøre / det de var i færd med)* allude especially to the *non-finito* problem and the artist's death. It should be emphasized, however, that the artist's life functions in *Nedtælling...* as one of the many intertexts, not as a romantic

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[56] *blive ved* means *continue*, but there is an ambiguity here, which is difficult to translate directly into English: blive (remain, stay) ved (by, near) translated literally means "to remain near to", or "to stay close to."

[57] Żuchowski, p. 76.

[58] Żuchowski argues that the artist exhausted the potential offered by the matter and that *Pietà Rondanini* is a finished artwork. See: Żuchowski, p. 86.

[59] See: Żuchowski, pp. 75-76.

myth of the creative subject who has given origin to the work. As Roland Barthes puts it, the author's "life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work."[60] What all these intertextual references have in common is the main subject of the iconographic theme of *Pietà*: Death. The same can be stated about the meanings of the three possible positions for viewing the sculpture, which illustrate the iconographic stages of the Passion of Christ: *Imago Pietàtis* [fig. 1], Commitment to the tomb [fig. 3] and the Resurrection [fig. 2].[61]

CREATION AS DEATH

The concept of death as the ultimate borderline of artistic creation, but also of all relations with the others, can again be considered at the metadiscoursive level. In the third stanza a voice is once more given to the sculptor:

måske findes det jeg søger	perhaps what I seek
i den hvide marmormonolit	within the white marble
der svæver som en standset angst	hovers like fear frozen
midt i et selvmordsspring	in a jumper's eye
susende stille nu	suicidal silence momentarily falls
pludselig ingenting	then suddenly nothing
min arm der sover	my arm falls asleep
uden for min krop	outside my body

The problem of the quest for the essence of artistic creation is taken up again. Here, however, it turns out to be hovering on the border of death. In this stanza the subject does not ask 'where am I to stop' (*hvor skal jeg standse*) but talks rather about 'a fear stopped in the middle of a suicide-jump'[62] – *en standset angst / midt i et selvmordsspring,* a suicide-jump with which naming (writing) is equivocal: words, once written, free themselves from the artist's "hand," entering the general circulation of signs, and being re-read by innumerable readers, participate in an unpredictable play of meanings – just like Michelangelo's sculpture re-read by the poet in *Nedtælling...,* interpreted subsequently by the readers. "My arm" (*min arm*) is the artist's (both the sculptor's and the poet's) synecdoche; *my arm falls asleep / outside my body* is a poetic imagery of death. This imagery has its "source" in the sculpture: its integral part is the separated arm, carved with precision and polished, hanging numb. Looking at the sculpture from the right side [fig.3], we will understand the lines: *susende stille nu* (referring to the figure of Christ, tense in its stillness, as if stopped short), and *then suddenly nothing (pludselig ingenting)* ("nothing," an empty space between the main

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[60] Roland Barthes, *From Work to Text*, in *Modern Literary Theory*, New York 1996.

[61] Zuchowski, pp. 81-82. The images respond respectively to: the front view, the front right view and the front left view.

[62] (which is my own rough translation)

sculpture and the arm). The "jump" into death is visible by the contrast be-tween the active arms of Christ and the dead stump of the separated arm.

In relation to the lines *my arm falls asleep / outside my body*, and remem-bering that we are dealing with a literary text, we could, following Roland Barthes,[63] ask: who says it? Christ? the sculptor? the poet? the dead father? The sentence "I am dead" is "not only an unreliable statement, but also an utterly *impossible speech act*."[64] Consequently, narrowing the subject of the statement down to the literary text, removing it from the sphere of "human" dimensions, we will have to talk of "the Death of the Author", whose "hand, se-parated from the voice, carried by the pure gesture of writing (and not saying), designates a field with no beginning and source, or at least a field that takes its be-ginning and has its source in the language, which itself questions all sources and any beginning."[65]

THE WORK OF ART AS "VISUAL IMPLANTATION"

Language is thus not just an instrument but the matter of life. The "author" is not a Creator, capable of bringing order to the poem and possessing control over the meaning. The reader's relation to the poem is parallel to Søndergaard's relation to the sculpture. The poet tries to look at Michelangelo's work from different viewpoints, hoping to discover *what his eyes see / when they roll white* ('his' read here as the sculptor's), but remains unable to create one ob-jective and static view: this results in discontinuous narration, where the sub-ject and the persons named change from stanza to stanza. Consequently, the act of reading the poem becomes a dynamic process during which the reader, coming across difficulties, has to confront the sculpture in order to check what relates to the work of art, and thus he actively participates in the struggle with the language, just like the poet. Both the poet and the reader are engaged in an active reception of the sculpture and – for the reader – also the poem. The work of art becomes a "visual implantation"[66] or a "pre-text"[67] which serves as a starting point for the poet's reflection on art, poetry, seeing and existential

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[63] Roland Barthes, *Analiza tekstualna opowiadania Edgara Poego*, trans. M.P. Markowski, in: idem, *Lektury*, ed. M.P. Markowski, Warszawa 2001, p. 160.

[64] Roland Barthes, *Śmierć autora*, trans. M.P. Markowski, *Teksty Drugie*, 1-2/1999, p. 250.

[65] Idem, my translation.

[66] Dziadek (as in n. 2).

[67] In her book *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word and Image Opposition*, Chicago 1991, Mieke Bal analyses the relationship between written texts and works of the visual arts. The term "pre-text," referring to an earlier written text serving as an "inspiration" for a painting (e.g. the Bible, myths), is specified by the author as "literally a pretext." "Between the text (...) and the image (...), the painting produces its own narrative, reducible to neither – the work's visual/narrative textuality." (p. 20) The opposite relationship, between a visual work of art and a written text, could be defined similarly in reference to *Nedtælling...*

questions. The act of reading, both the poet's and the reader's, "is never passive, as its function is the creation of a new text, not imitation of the original by different means."[68]

The relation of the language to the sculpture is like the relationship between Mary and Christ, defined in *Nedtælling...* as *uafsluttet ønske om at blive ved* – the unfulfilled wish of the words to stay close to the work of art. There exists, however, a place where words find their limit, where the language "dematerializes" itself in front of the desired, silent work. Coming to this place (the "white page" following the last word of the "countdown"), we experience a momentary glance of the sculpture, catch "sight" of it in our mind's eye, encountering at the same time its inexplicability, the impossibility of grasping an object by means of words and enclosing it in discourse. The absence of fulfillment, however, the "impassable path" between discourse and a work of art, seems a necessary condition for the potentiality and power of poetic creation. That is why the poet, still hoping to "un-cover" the mystery of language, and unable to resist the temptation, is determined "to walk" further –

at gå.

Fig. 1. Pietà di Rondanini,   Fig. 2. Pietà di Rondanini,   Fig. 3. Pietà di Rondanini,
the front view   the front left view   the front right view

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[68] Davidson, p. 58. (my translation)