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## Trying to Disappear: One Translator Among Many Authors

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# Trying to Disappear: One Translator Among Many Authors

by  
Michael Favala Goldman

A literary translator ought, as much as possible, take on the voice of the author, or the author's characters, in much the same way an actor takes on a role in a play. The goal is that the reader forget that the words they are reading have been translated at all. The new work needs to stand on its own as a legitimate work of literature, hopefully bearing successfully the unspoken attitudes and inferences of the original author, but in the new language. The artifice involved ought to be invisible.

There is no avoiding the fact that any derivative art, such as translation, will bear some mark of the intermediary's life experience and knowledge. But the skillful translator will endeavor to minimize his own fingerprints on the text, and let the original author's intent pervade the pages without disruption. Even in a brief excerpt, the reader ought to get a sense of the author's unique voice as well as an appreciation for the translator's sensitivity to the integrity of the original style through his use of word choice, punctuation, sentence structure, use of contractions, and other elements of speech that communicate between the words and lines.

To illustrate this individuality, this article presents brief examples of five of my recent prose translations of works by diverse Danish authors, including Peter Nansen (1915), Knud Sønderby (1950), Tove Ditlevsen (1971), Suzanne Brøgger (1986), and Erik Knudsen (1988). In the first excerpt, from Nansen's novel *Brødrene Menthe*, the reader may note how the numerous adjectives and dense sentences contribute to an elevated and formal style, typical of the time period, but also of the subject matter: two high society attorney brothers. In the next excerpt from Sønderby's essay, there is still formality, evinced by the long sentences and poetic word choices, but it is softened by the sensory language, as the author seems to invite us to be there with him and experience what he is experiencing. The excerpt from Ditlevsen's memoir is stripped of all formality as she reveals her most private ex-

periences in simple, straightforward terms, as if we were her trusted friend. Brøgger's essay uses longer and more complex word choices than Ditlevsen's, reflective of the philosophical nature of her personal observations. Although her sentence structures may be similar to Sønderby's, the abstract nature of her subject causes the reader (and the translator) to slow down and think. Finally there is the prose poem by Knudsen, which is not an excerpt, but a piece in its entirety. In these few lines there are multiple leaps of logic, setting, and surprise, like an impressionistic painting that cannot be discerned up close, but needs distance and an openness of vision to apprehend. The word choices are relatively colloquial, but with surprising sequence and musicality.

In translating each of these pieces of prose, I have had to make scores of choices regarding word choice, punctuation, grammar, and other elements of language. For example, in the first line of the Sønderby excerpt, consider the multiple possibilities for translating "stormen" or "vold." The same goes for "tugthus" in the Nansen excerpt. For me as a translator it felt appropriate in the Ditlevsen excerpt to use contractions and punctuation that accentuate her laconic style. Sometimes I have deleted words or short phrases, which, if included, may have hampered the English without adding anything of value, for example the "ja" towards the end of the Brøgger excerpt. In the middle of the Knudsen prose poem, I have chosen to use an em dash after "høet" instead of the original comma. There is no end to attention to detail in translating literature. Nor is there any ideal perfect solution, just choices that seem to work relatively better or worse in a given context. Art is an approximation. Someone once said that art is what happens in the observer. In my translations, if the reader feels that they are hearing the voice of the original author, that my artifice has become transparent, then I have done my job.

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### **Peter Nansen**

Peter Nansen (1861-1918), besides being the literary director at Gyldendal Publishing from 1896-1916, was the author of six essay collections, six plays, and six novels, of which *Brødrene Menthe* was the last, published three years before his death. He was also a journal-

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ist who wrote for three newspapers over the course of twelve years. Nansen was a central figure in the political and literary life of Copenhagen for most of his adult life, and he had close relationships with cultural icons Herman Bang and Georg Brandes. His second wife was the actress Betty Nansen.

### **Excerpt from *Brødrene Menthe* (1915)**

Carl Emil Menthe havde ialfald ikke kedet sig i de 20 Aar, hvor han, som den skæmtefulde gamle Aktor sagde, havde "studeret til Tugthus." Ikke alle Pengene var gaaet til Spilde i uheldige Spekulationer. Som Aktor videre sagde: "Paa C. E. Menthe passer i ganske sjælden Grad det gamle Ord: Uheld i Spil, Held i Kærlighed. Denne min forhenværende Kollega har i alle Herrens Lande vundet Sejre, der ikke alene kan tilskrives hans Rundhaandethed. Mens hans Forretnings-Journaler ikke altid udmærker sig ved Akkuratesse, er hans erotiske Journaler af en beundringsværdig Klarhed og Nøjagtighed. Vi faar for hver ny Erobring Navn, Stand, Dato, ja ofte Klokkeslet. Og et nydeligt specificeret Regnskab. Mange af disse Damer har, bortset fra saadanne Udgifter, der vistnok almindeligvis anses for at paahvile den mandlige Part – saasom Fortæring i Restauranter, Automobiler, Vogne, Blomster, Drikkepenge etc. – egentlig ikke lukreret ved Forholdet til vor Fortryller. De har gjort særdeles net Gengæld ved Kærlighedsgaver af udlignende Værdi: kostbare Slipsnaale, Arm- og Fod-Lænker, Cigaret-Etuier o.a.l."

### **From my translation, *The Menthe Brothers***

Carl Emil Menthe had by no means been sitting idle the past twenty years, when he had, as the mocking old prosecutor put it, "studied for the penitentiary." Not all the money had been wasted in unlucky speculations. As the prosecutor stated, "The old adage 'unlucky in gambling, lucky in love' applies particularly well to C. E. Menthe. This man, my prior colleague, has been victorious far and wide, in ways which cannot be ascribed simply to his generosity. While his business ledgers may not always distinguish themselves with their accuracy, the entries in his erotic journals show an admirable degree of clarity and precision. For each new conquest we receive a name, social status, date, often the hour as well. And a delightfully detailed ac-

count. Many of these ladies have, apart from certain expenses which apparently generally rested on the male counterpart – items such as restaurant meals, automobiles, taxis, flowers, tips, etc. – evidently not profited from their relationship to our charmer. They responded quite nicely in kind with gifts of affection of compensatory value: expensive tie clips, arm- and foot-manacles, cigarette cases, etc.”

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### **Knud Sønderby**

Knud Sønderby (1909-66) was an eminent Danish novelist, journalist, translator and essayist. He was also a founding member of the Danish Academy. The initial printing of his first novel, *Midt i en Jazztid* (1931) (In a Jazz Age) sold out in fourteen days due to its immediate popularity among the youth of Denmark. Today it is his most well-known work and an integral part of the Danish literary canon. For two decades Sønderby wrote as a journalist for three major Danish newspapers while publishing four additional novels and six plays, as well as translating numerous works into Danish for the Royal Theater, including *Death of a Salesman*, *Joan of Arc*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. This essay is drawn from one of his six essay collections.

### **From “Blæsten i Vestjylland,” in the essay collection *Hvidtjørnen* (1950)**

Man står og støtter sig til stormen, er helt i elementets vold, må administrere sit åndedræt for ikke at blive kvalt i en for stor mundfuld, sommetider kan man ikke høre andet end suset om En selv. Vinden spiller jo på Ens egen krop som på et instrument, trommer på tøjet, piber om næsebor og øreflip, tuder i mundvigene, nye instrumentale mærkværdigheder for hver stilling, man indtager, og først når man har listet sig til den vinkel, der giver lydlig tomgang om En selv, hører man havets dystre tone i al dens renhed, når på en gang ud i havstokken, Ens øre ligger pludselig derude, overskylles som en musling af hver brusende bølge, skylles frem og tilbage i brændingen, slibes mod sand og vand i havets tunge rytme.

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**From my translation "The Wind in West Jylland,"  
Knud Sønderby, *Selected Essays* (2017):**

You stand leaning against the gale, under the element's power, have to guide your breathing so you don't get suffocated by too large a mouthful. Sometimes you hear nothing but the whoosh around yourself. The wind is playing on your body like on an instrument, drumming on your clothing, whistling through your nostrils and earlobes, howling in the corners of your mouth, new instrumental peculiarities at every change in position. And when you have adjusted yourself to the angle that provides a hiatus to the sounds around your person, then you hear the ocean's sinister tone in all its purity, reaching you all at once from the surf. Your ear is suddenly out there in the water, washed over like a shell by every showering wave, swept back and forth in the breakers, polished against the sand and water in the ocean's heavy rhythm.

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**Tove Ditlevsen**

Tove Ditlevsen (1917-76) was one of the most notable Danish literary personalities of the twentieth century. She enjoyed great popularity as a writer of both poetry and prose. She used her impoverished upbringing, her fragile psyche, and her long-standing problems with relationships and narcotics as sources of inspiration for her writing. The result was a long list of unique, honest, uncompromising works with which countless readers have identified. Ditlevsen wrote more than thirty books, including her semi-autobiographical novel *Barndommens Gade* (The Street of Childhood) which has been recognized as part of the Danish literary canon.

**From *Gift* (1971)**

Mon det er nat eller dag? Jeg løfter mig op på albuerne og lader mig med besvær glide ud af sengen. Jeg opdager, at jeg ikke kan stå oprejst. Så kravler jeg på alle fire hen over gulvet og løfter mig op på skrivebordsstolen. Anstrengelsen er så stor, at jeg må lægge armene hen over skrivemaskinens taster og hvile hovedet et øjeblik på dem. Mit åndedrag hvæser gennem stilheden. Jeg må handle, inden klor-

alen holder op med at virke. I hånden knuger jeg sedlen med Geert Jørgensens telefonnummer. Jeg tænder skrivebordslampen og drejer på skiven, mens jeg lytter efter svar. Hallo, sigen en rolig stemme, det er Geert Jørgensen. Jeg siger mit navn. Å Dem, udbryder han, sikke en tid at vække mig på. Er der noget i vejen? Jeg er syg, siger jeg, han kommer vand i sprøjten. Hvilken sprøjte? Pethidin, siger jeg og er ikke i stand til at forklare mig nærmere. Giver han Dem pethidin, siger han skarpt, hvor længe har det stået på? Jeg ved det ikke, hvisker jeg, nogle år tror jeg, men nu tør han ikke mere. Jeg er ved at dø. Hjælp mig.

**From my translation, *Dependency* (Penguin Classics, 2019)**

I wonder if it's night or day. I lift myself up on my elbow, and with difficulty slide out of bed. I realize that I don't have the strength to stand up. So I crawl on all fours across the floor and pull myself up onto my desk chair. It takes so much effort that I have to lay my head down on the typewriter keys and rest. My breathing wheezes in the silence. I have to take action before the chloral stops working. In my hand I'm clutching the note with Geert Jørgensen's telephone number. I turn on the desk lamp, dial the number, and wait for an answer. Hello, says a calm voice, this is Geert Jørgensen. I say my name. Oh, you! he says. This is quite a time to call and wake me up. Is something wrong? I'm sick, I say. He's putting water in the syringe. What syringe? Demerol, I say. I'm incapable of explaining anymore. Is he giving you Demerol? he says sharply. How long has this been going on? I don't know, I whisper. A few years, I guess, but now he doesn't want to do it anymore. I'm dying. Help me.

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**Suzanne Brøgger**

Suzanne Brøgger (b. 1944) is the author of twenty-five books. As a journalist, essayist, novelist, playwright, and poet, she has made a career of challenging western societal norms, especially with respect to gender, love, and sex. Her 1973 book *Fri os fra kærligheden* (*Deliver Us From Love*) has been translated into twenty languages. She is a member of the Danish Academy and a recipient of a lifelong grant from the Danish Arts Foundation.

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**From “Om at gå over floden – inspirationskilder og forudsætninger” (1986)**

Når man har oplevet meget og levet i mange forskellige kulturer, kan der ske 1 à 2: Enten forstærkes ens sammenligningstrang og fordomme eller der kan også ske det, at normerne og referencerne istedet bryder sammen. Det er muligt, det er sket sådan for mig. Virkeligheden har med andre ord været langt stærkere og mere mangfoldig end nogen kategorier kunne holde til. Derfor har sammenbruddene for mig været gennembrud ind imod stedse voksende virkeligheder og afstedkommet en åbenhed, der ikke dømmes – og en accept af virkeligheden, som den er, i al sin vidunderlige gru, ja. Og det er vel det, som gør, at mange finder mine bøger skræmmende, truende, frastødende, mens andre igen oplever dem som befriende.

**From my translation, *Liberated: Selected Essays of Suzanne Brøgger* (2020)**

When one has experienced a lot and lived in various cultures, either of two things can happen: either one's need to make comparisons and judgments is strengthened, or norms and reference points break down. The latter is perhaps what has happened to me. Reality has, in other words, proved to be stronger and more multifaceted than what any categories could contain. Therefore my breakdowns have been breakthroughs into continually expanding realities, resulting in an openness that doesn't judge – and an acceptance of reality as it is, in all its wonderful horror. And this is most likely why many people find my books frightening, threatening, and off-putting, while others find them liberating.

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**Erik Knudsen**

Erik Knudsen (1922-2007) published seventeen poetry collections, as well as dozens of pieces for Danish radio, TV, and theater. While working as a teacher for most of his life, he was also a literary editor and a translator of plays and poetry. A peace activist, Knudsen founded organizations opposing both the Vietnam War and military



interventions in South America. He was an active lecturer in the peace movement and often spoke at demonstrations.

**From *Hjemme i labyrinten* (1988)**

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Så begynder den skønneste og farligste rejse, rejsen ind i os selv. Stille og landligt begynder den. Et mørkt rum. Maskinlade eller udhus. Lyset kommer fra et lille hul beregnet for høns. Engang kunne vi presse os igennem – vi gør det igen. Og står i ukrudt til halsen, vilde hindbær, nælder, sten og rustne skår i græsset. Hvad er der bag den dør? Hvad er der oppe på loftet? En svedig lugt i høet, parfume? stearin? Og så eksploderer billedet i en moderne slagmark. Instruktøren har endnu engang overrumplet os, afdækket vor indre virkelighed og påvist dens ydre udtryk. Rejsen ind i os selv var rejsen ind i Krigen – som ikke er andet end vor barneskræk, vore konflikter og mareridt forstørret op i Cinerama og Eastmancolor. En modbydelig film – fordi sandheden om mennesket er modbydelig, logisk sat sammen, glimrende fotograferet.

**From my translation, Erik Knudsen, *Selected Poems* (2019)**

So begins the most beautiful and most dangerous journey, the journey into ourselves. It begins quiet and pastoral. A dark room. Machine shed or outbuilding. Light is coming from a little opening meant for chickens. We used to be able to squeeze through – we do it again. And we're standing in weeds up to our chin, wild raspberries, nettle, rocks and rusty fragments in the grass. What is behind that door? What is up in the loft? A sweaty smell in the hay – perfume? wax? And then the picture explodes into a modern battlefield. The director has taken us by surprise yet again, uncovered our inner reality and demonstrated its outer expression. The journey into ourselves was a journey into the War – which was nothing other than our childhood fears, our conflicts and nightmares enlarged in Cinerama and EastmanColor. A horrible film – because the truth about people is horrible, logically constructed, brilliantly photographed.

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