

# Stretching the limits of language:

## On ‘bad’ translation

Andreas Eckhardt-Læssøe

Last year saw the publication of *Ikke at dø*, the Danish translation of American poet Anne Boyer’s *The Undying*, which translator and writer Ditte Holm Bro and I had been working on together on and off for two years. Previously, the two of us had collaborated with the editor and writer Rasmus Graff (of [Ovo Press](#)) on the publication of *Beklædning imod kvinder* (*Garments Against Women*), a book of poetry, also by Anne Boyer.

Boyer’s books are tricky; they often use wordplay and stretch and strain the playing to the almost absurd, but without becoming absurd. Boyer thinks through her imagery, more than she uses imagery to illustrate thought. One poem in particular, ‘The Open Book’, was incredibly nerve-wracking. This is because the whole poem rests on a series of wordplays revolving around the imagery of an open book and legibility and book-keeping, and the overall point of the poem is to show and explore a complex and confusing relationship between honesty and greed, capitalism and literature. Lucky for us, though, it turned out that enough of the idioms used also existed in Danish, so the structure of the poem held – barely.

In other words, Anne Boyer’s poems are some of the most frustrating and thrilling I’ve ever translated. In fact, when I look back at the first emails initiating the collaboration between the three of us, we all used the word ‘irritating’ to describe why we couldn’t really get over these poems, they got stuck in our metabolism of them, and we had to translate them to figure out why.

### Conveying weirdness

After the poems came the prose. *The Undying* is a book about Boyer’s personal experience with breast cancer – not quite surviving it, but also not dying from it, hence the title – which is a prime example of the challenges the translation of the book posed. How to translate something so eye-catching and immediate, but at the same time so layered and complex? We chose to focus on the complexity of the title, ignoring that the most obvious reading of it was as a noun. Instead, we chose to focus exclusively on the verb form inside it, on the process. To us, it seemed more like Anne Boyer to choose complexity over style when you can’t have both. Following that, I would go so far as to say that we sometimes chose clunky

over smooth in terms of stylistic register in order to represent the weirdness of Anne Boyer's prose. That weirdness has its own form of precision, and we wanted to convey that weirdness and that precision, making the reader acutely aware of the frictions of the text and thus the friction of the content.

A critic called our translation unreadable, and while it was hurtful to be viewed as incompetent, I think what we did was indeed outside of the conventional way of translating. Instead of a smooth and 'correct' form of Danish, we tried to keep the tension that's palpable in the English

text by transferring this weirdness to the Danish. It would definitely be too self-aggrandizing to say that we created a new language, but I would feel comfortable saying that we stretched the Danish language a bit; we carved out a small, new space in the Danish language where Anne Boyer's writing could live.

### A process of negotiation

When translating, I go through the following three stages: outlining, negotiation and polishing. In the first phase, the translation moves along fast and is not bogged down by editing or even too much thinking. I call it outlining. The English source-text is somewhat obvious throughout the entire translated text, and in many places, I'll leave entire sentences or even paragraphs untranslated, or I'll write several possible translations alongside each other in yellow highlighting.

The result is a rather chaotic text that carries me over to the much slower and painstaking process of negotiation. Often, this second step will involve an editor or another reader of some kind, and together we'll go through two to three readings, making this stage by far the lengthiest one. When collaborating with another translator, this is also the phase where we would go from having divided the chapters between us, to taking turns going through each other's texts. It is in this part of the process that I'd like to dwell on what is being negotiated, and why working with Anne Boyer's texts made me think of the whole process of translating in a new way.

When translating, I go through several revisions in which the translated text



Cover for *Ikke at dø*, by Thea von der Maase/OVO Press.

is neither the original anymore, nor a real and finished translation yet. This may feel as if the once stable ground of language is shifting underneath your feet. And while that is in fact something in the nature of language – it always shifts and changes, morphs – the experience can be quite overwhelming when you find yourself face to face with this. In this phase, I often feel like I am losing touch with how my own language, Danish, actually works, and I find myself doubting everything, at every turn. The authority of language – the rules of syntax and punctuation – is supposed to harness this sense of being lost, but I would venture that it's sometimes important to stay with the lostness. That keeping in the specificity of the language, staying true to its weirdness, is the hardest job for the translator.

#### An urge towards smoothness

And then, a certain urge to smooth out weirdness creeps in. And while it is easy enough to say that you shouldn't do this and instead be true to the original text, not fearing the clunkiness and weirdness, it is quite hard to practice. An instinct towards making the text 'readable' probably characterizes much of what translators do. And there is also this feeling of not wanting to get in the way of the text, that the best possible outcome is to have made yourself invisible as a translator, and I think that can sometimes lead to choices that won't stick out.

Trying to exemplify this, remembering all the choices leading to the published text, is hard. But let me try and reconstruct. Here is a short paragraph in English:

“What being a writer does to a person is make her a servant of those sensory details, obedient to the world of appearances and issuing forth book after book compliant with deceptive and unforgivable showing, full of cruel and unnecessary showing, irresponsibly sparing every ethically required telling, as telling is that other truth, and the senses are prone to showing's lies.” (*The Undying*, p. 113).

“It may feel as if the once stable ground of language is shifting underneath your feet”

And the Danish:

“Hvad det gør ved et menneske at være forfatter er at hun bliver en tjener for disse sanselige detaljer, lydig over for den ydre verden og at hun udgiver bog efter bog i overensstemmelse med et vildledende og utilgiveligt *showing*, fuld af ondartet og unødvendigt *showing*, uansvarligt afstående fra enhver etisk påkrævet *telling*, eftersom *telling* er den anden sandhed, og sanserne er til falds for *showings* løgne.” (*Ikke at dø*, p. 121).

From the very outset, we were in trouble with this sentence. It was long and



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Photo: Jarl Therkelsen Kaldan*

winding, running through the stop lights of typical Danish syntax where carrying the subject of the sentence across several clauses is much harder to do. If we had given in to the urge of smoothing, of making the sentence more accessible, we could, for instance, have split it up in two, thereby losing part of the unruly, chaotic nature of the original. The compromise was to just straighten it out a little bit, putting in an extra *hun* ('she'), hopefully making it a little more readable. Then there was the question of punctuation. We worked from an idea of not over-punctuating, since commas, especially, can weigh down a sentence in Danish. The sentence has both a run-on energy in the first half, and also a complex listing in the second, and more commas weren't necessarily going to help with the understanding.

Achieving this balance between smoothing out and conveying the weirdness is a hard balance to find, and it is, of course, easier said than done. If we were to do it again, I am quite sure the result would come out differently. But then, that is the beauty of translation: it is a living, breathing thing, precisely like language itself.