

# What Carries Over

## The Translator as Fraud, Freud, and Friend

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**W**HILE I WAS NEARING COMPLETION on my collection of translations from the Danish, *The World Cut Out with Crooked Scissors* (New Issues, 2007), the selected prose poetry of Carsten René Nielsen, I was called to American University to interview for my present position. Halfway through the day, I was introduced to a Danish woman who was the intern of our dean. As he began to tell her all about the book, she turned to me, about to speak, and immediately I found myself trapped.

I don't speak Danish. To date, though I've "translated" scores of Danish poems, I know perhaps ten Danish words. I had to explain nicely to our Dean, and to this disappointed Dane, a dean and a Dane, that I had no idea what she was saying. I stammered while explaining how these were mere versions from the Danish, that Carsten and I had done the work together, but this did not salve my feeling of fraudulence. I had described the book as a translation, and myself as its translator. In fact, against my wishes (but because she is wonderful and supportive), it was my editor who had insisted the horrifying words TRANSLATED BY precede my name on the front cover of this collection. Still now, my inner Catholic screams "Liar!" But what is it to translate works of poetry? How did this influence my work? What did I learn? And, by rights, am I indeed the translator of these poems?

In my introduction to *The World Cut Out with Crooked Scissors*, I offer the reader some background and context to our project. I heard Carsten's poems in Copenhagen in 1995, contacted him via e-mail, asked where I could find some English versions, and, since there weren't any, we began to make our own together. To our mutual surprise, American journals began to show interest in his strange, surrealist prose poetry. Like them, I was immediately drawn to the poems. They were violent, sexually charged, shockingly graphic—nothing, in fact, close to what I was writing, but the voice underneath the strange subject matter felt familiar to me. The poems were present in a way that most American poetry, the poetry I was reading in magazines, was not. As I note in the introduction, the word that describes them is "*underligt*" in Danish. The poems glowed "wonder-like" in their encounter with everyday materials, coffee pots, body parts, windows, tennis courts, insects.

When I returned to the states, Carsten and I began those first awkward trans-

lations into English, in which he would translate the poems, word for word, into an unremarkable and unreadable English, and I, on the other end of this correspondence, would shape these small creatures, like globular Play-Doh sculptures, into what I thought he'd intended them to be. I would send them back to him, and he would say, essentially, no!, and shape the sculpture into something more distinguishable, and then me, then him, and so on. Each poem required four or five e-mails with copious notes. This work excluded the problem of line breaks, as he was writing only in prose. That was enough to occupy us for ten years. We translated close to 150 of his poems, later using an online telephone service (Skype), which expedited the process. When my then-

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editor, the late Herb Scott, saw the collection we had made, he cut the book in half. (Herb had a way of sawing books in half. Thank God for his Houdini-like powers.) What remained were 75 clean pages of our best work.

What fascinates me is this: these 75 pages are not Carsten's best work. He has told me that the poems Herb and I loved best were sometimes better in the English than in Danish. So something (*what?*) was provided by the English that the Danish poem lacked. Further, there were poems for which he was well known in Danish which, in English, simply did not work. Not for lack of precise nouns and verbs and adjectives. But because they did not work—the poems themselves flawed implicitly in English, no matter how precise the transcription. A translation is a recognition of that which can be severed from its culture of origin and transplanted to the new culture. And live on. I think of Stephen Mitchell's translations of Rilke, Merwin's translations of Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Songs and a Song of Despair*. The poems carry over. I tell my students of translation that our first purpose in this project, perhaps our foremost purpose, is to recognize which poems carry over. Don't uproot a poem unless you can take the whole bulb.

I had before me reams and reams of transcriptions from another language. I was tempted to rewrite each poem, cut whole lines and parts of speech, the stuff that did not translate. But I learned how to be loyal to them, to find a way to translate every sentence, or none at all. Sometimes, that was not possible, and the poems were cut. Other times, I was forced to be inventive: while some sentence patterns were altered, no images could change. I was given a needle-hole through which to fit a camel. Further, I could not take Carsten's dictionary transcriptions as the final say, as sometimes he did not understand the nuances of English words. One memorable instance of this occurred when we were working on the poem, "Tanguy." Here is the poem as it appears in its final version in the book.

### Tanguy

Above the gray sea: a mist of soil where large, drop-shaped bones lie petrified among the flies' wings. And in this dead beehive turned inside-out stand frozen pennants, nodes in time and space, the shadows of other insects. If you walk in this landscape, you will sooner or later encounter the skeletal vestige of the moth's soft back, from which, all the while, the plant you've sought has been growing: a pin.<sup>1</sup>

When Carsten sent me a preliminary version of this poem, he had transcribed the final word as “needle” rather than “pin.” Distracted by the hellish description of Tanguy’s surrealism, I thought the image of the needle at the poem’s conclusion seemed to work: it recalled images of the addict’s hypodermic needle, or the needle that puts the madman to sleep. Or I thought of the needle that sews this shattered landscape into unity. It was only while Carsten and I discussed the poem informally, just before the book went to print, that we discovered the obvious. The object holds the moth’s soft back to the wall. It was a pin, not a needle! The care with which I had to parse each poem, perhaps more care than I used with my own, became my second obligation. I was this poem’s only defense against misinterpretation. I had to be its advocate, apprehend its multiplicities of meaning, represent it as its agent to the new culture.

Aside from the technical responsibilities I undertook, there arose a spiritual challenge as well. You labor with love for a poem that could be your own; or rather, feels like your own; only to give it away. The better the translator, the more he or she becomes invisible. My artistic opinion about certain lines and phrases mattered less and less to me. While I might have written many of Carsten’s poems differently, my focus had to remain on what was there, what was given. This was a spectacular lesson. I had to detach myself from outcomes. I had to disappear.

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There was, indeed, a profound effect on my poems. Last October I published a collection of prose poetry (also sawed in half by our patron, Herb Scott), not so much inspired by Carsten but perhaps coaxed from under the surface by him. To “inspire” poems seems to suggest they’d come down from above. These poems were brought “up” and were offered a helping hand by another poet at the edge of the quicksand. Becoming invisible as a translator—losing myself, losing what I thought my poetry should look like, sound like, even what it should mean—changed my poetry. From this stillness came new poems. I remain amazed by how my work was thus transported.

Today I take my students through the same process in a graduate course (“The Art of Translation”) required of all MFA candidates at American University. While almost none speak another language fluently, all are made to find a native speaker in the language of their chosen poet (in DC this is not difficult). The course was designed by the great Myra Sklarew, who translates from Lithuanian and who understands the ben-

<sup>1</sup> “Tanguy” from *The World Cut Out With Crooked Scissors: Selected Prose Poems*, by Carsten Rene Nielsen, translated from the Danish by David Keplinger. Copyright ©2007. Used by permission of New Issues Poetry and Prose.

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German. Some students will choose to sacrifice certain enjambments for the rhyme; others will let go of the rhyme in their faithfulness to given words or phrases. We workshop these poems in one great sitting; and the students talk about their choices, treating Rilke's poem as their own. Has the final effect of the poem—the pacing panther trapped in his cage—been preserved? How has the sense of the poem been altered by our choices?

Translation is the hand that totes the poem from one place to another. A good translator is like a good magician. What appears in her hand is suddenly a bouquet of flowers, when only a moment ago there was a stick. Though the poem has come from far off, it is at once present and surprising, sometimes horrifying, thanks to the translator's advocacy. I feel a bit more confident that, at my best moments, I was the translator of Carsten's poetry. At my best moments, I'm translator of my own. 

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