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# A CASE FOR SMILLA

BY THOM SATTERLEE

Until recently, I always read translated fiction in the way I imagine most people do: as if the books were not translated at all. I read almost all of Dostoyevski's novels, a smaller number of Tolstoy's and Solzhenitsyn's, several Chekhov short stories—all as though English had been the authors' first language, and the only difference between Russian and American fiction seemed to be the frequent mention of "samovar," the proper names, and the notion in my mind that winters in Siberia may indeed make Buffalo seem tropical. If I thought of translation at all, I thought in terms of equivalences. I assumed that Russian and English words could be exchanged like rubles for dollars.

Of course, my notions were naive, especially considering that I had learned a foreign language—Danish—and knew that not only words but also grammar, punctuation, and such culturally specific phenomena as humor and idiom required translation. Still, it wasn't until I began to translate that I realized how many decisions translators face. If a "currency exchange" metaphor applies to translation, I quickly learned that some translators offer their authors a better exchange rate. As my interest in translation grew, I found myself reading other people's translations more critically. Two years ago, I would not have paused and pondered over Ronald Wilks's decision to include the cliché "a lot of water has flowed under the bridge" in his translation of Chekhov's "The Black Monk." It would not have crossed my mind to find the original sources for literature translated from Scandinavian languages.

When, a year ago, I heard that a Danish novel was on the bestsellers list, I knew that I would want to read the translation alongside the original. So I bought a copy of Peter Høeg's *Frøken Smillas Fornemmelse for Sne* and its English translation, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, translated by Tiina Nunnally, and began comparing the two.

I started with the Danish, looking for passages that seemed especially hard to translate. One of these instances occurs when Smilla sees a photograph of Professor Løyen's three sons and guesses that they study medicine and "får tretten til alle eksamenerne" (Dan. 25) ["get 13 on all of the exams"]. The difficulty here is with "translating" the grading system used in Danish schools. Since our system is based on a 100-point scale, it would not make sense to American readers if the English maintained the number 13, actually the highest mark possible in Denmark. Nor would it be correct to equate this grade with an "A," since the "13" is

given out much more rarely than A's (only to the Kierkegaards and the H.C. Andersens, as it was explained to me when I was a student in a Danish school). In her translation, Nunnally loses some of the original's specificity, but she avoids possible confusion: "get top grades in all their exams" (Am. 20). This phrase conveys the Danish with as much accuracy as is possible, given the difference in grading systems. I admired Nunnally for making the task look simple.

When it came to problems with maintaining Høeg's style, Nunnally was even more impressive. I expected her to have difficulty in one case when the Danish pairs two comparative adjectives, one of which does not take the same comparative form in English. Høeg's pair "ringere og ondere" would, I thought, be hard to duplicate. Although the first word might be rendered as "baser," maintaining the "er" ending, the second word would normally be translated as "more evil," thus upsetting the balance of Høeg's phrase. Again, Nunnally's solution—"baser and meaner"—seemed simple and conveyed Høeg's style with only a slight loss in meaning.

As I came upon other "difficult" passages in the Danish, I began to dread looking at Nunnally's translations, certain that what I took for insurmountable problems she would translate with apparent ease. Then I heard the unexpected news that a second English-language translation, this one by F. David and titled *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, had been published in Britain. My troubles were over. Now instead of finding myself lacking, I could watch two translators duke it out, and assume the safer role of referee.

With all three books in hand (although, actually, it was more like *one* book in hand, while the other two rested over my knees, opened to the corresponding page and ready to be snatched up for comparison), I began searching through three versions of one great novel. Now I was interested not only in the correspondence to the original, but also the correspondence between translations. I marked all the differences between Nunnally's and David's first chapter. And here was my first surprise. Besides the incidental differences in spelling and Nunnally's choice to express temperature in Fahrenheit instead of Celsius, the two translations were astonishingly similar. Frequently, the translators chose the same words and the same word order for several sentences in a row.

Sometimes entire paragraphs were mirror images. The following, for instance, appeared in exactly the same form in both the British and American translations:

And it gets colder, and I'm happy because I know that now the frost has gained momentum; now the ice will stay, now the crystals have formed bridges and enclosed the salt water in pockets that have a structure like the veins of a tree through which the liquid slowly seeps.... (Am. 7; Brit. 6; Dan. 14)

I was amazed that two translators could agree on so much. Consider, for instance, the many ways there are to say "it gets colder": "it cools down," "it becomes cold," "the temperature drops." Yet, both Nunnally and David chose the same phrase. Moreover, since there are no contractions in Danish, one of the two translators might have chosen to follow the original "jeg glader mig" more closely by rendering it as "I am happy." The translators also agreed on the use of a semicolon after the word "momentum," although the Danish uses a comma instead. Finally, it would certainly be possible for one of two translators, presumably working on different sides of the Atlantic, to have written "tree veins" instead of "veins of a tree," "soaks" instead of "seeps."

Realizing how unusual it is for separate translations to share so many similarities, I felt that I had stumbled onto a clue. Like Smilla, who reads footprints in the snow and makes inferences based on her extensive knowledge of snow, I began to wonder about the two translations. And like a good detective, I chose to investigate. Posing as the Colombo of the publishing world, I wrote letters to both publishers, asking open-ended and seemingly naive questions: How was the novel translated? Were they aware of another English language translation being produced when they decided to publish their books? Could I have the addresses for Tiina Nunnally and F. David so that I could write to them? I sent the letters and waited. Meanwhile, I theorized on what might be the case. Perhaps the two translators worked together, modifying their individual versions to better fit an American or British audience. Perhaps one of them translated the entire novel, and the other used a completed copy to form a second book. Both theories seemed sound, but the second carried legal and moral implications that the publishers might not wish to discuss.

On October 15th I received a letter from Guido Waldman of the Harvill Press, London.<sup>1</sup> There was neither collusion nor plagiarism between Tiina Nunnally and F. David. As a matter of fact, there was, or is, no F. David. The name had been made up and used for the British translation, which was approved by the author but "repudiated" by the translator. In his letter Waldman explained:

Farrar, Straus and Giroux commissioned an English translation by Tiina Nunnally. The author went over it with his Danish publishers, both of them highly proficient in English usage, and made a number of suggestions on it. Some of these the translator accepted, some she rejected. The American publishers chose to go with their translator's version, while Harvill [the British publisher], working more closely with the author and his Danish publisher, chose to accept the English text as it was approved by them. The translator therefore repudiated the version to be published by Harvill and asked for her name to be removed from it. Therefore the Harvill edition has gone out with a pseudonymous translator, F. David. (Waldman, 1)

Thus, the mystery was solved. But not completely. I now understood why the two versions were so similar, but why did the American translator feel so strongly about the suggestions made by Høeg and his publisher that she "repudiated" their version: Was there really a "case" for publishing two Smillas?

At first, my answer was no. The differences seemed minor—mere adjustments to target a British audience, which really ran no risk of alienating an American audience. How difficult would it be, for instance, for an American reader to encounter "colour" instead of "color," "centre" for "center," "grey" for "gray"? The problem did not seem serious. Similarly, an American reader should have little trouble converting Celsius to Fahrenheit, or kilometers to miles. And wouldn't a British reader understand the American "longshoreman" (32) without being helped to the word "docker"? (26) Whether one is British or American and encounters "You're bloody heartless, Smilla" (Brit. 34), or "You're damned heartless, Smilla" (Am. 41), the meaning and the emotion are perfectly clear. After all, the British have no difficulty reading Hemingway; Americans have no difficulty reading E.M. Forster. I could see how Tiina Nunnally might think these nods to a British readership were unnecessary, but I didn't understand how she could find them so offensive that she would repudiate her whole translation because of them.

Other differences in word choice, having nothing to do with Britishism or Americanism, seemed likewise trivial. Why argue over whether Smilla's father has "acquired" (Brit. 26) or "gotten" (Am. 31) new golf balls? I prefer the British choice, but I wouldn't go to war for it—I wouldn't even raise my voice in its defense. Likewise, Smilla's father may "become acutely interested in people's motives" (Am. 38) or "take intense interest in people's motives" (Brit. 38), Smilla may wear "decent clothes" (Brit. 40) or be "dressed up" (Am. 48), she may go to a "shady" (Am. 223) or a "seedy" (Brit. 185) dive, and I would not protest.

So why should two presses on other sides of the Atlantic produce, roughly, the same book? Wouldn't it be financially wiser to print all the books in the same place, to consolidate operations as car, toy, and clothes manufacturers do? I wondered if Nunnally and Høeg simply could not compromise, and like two kids who can't get along, each grabbed a ball and played alone.

But as I continued to compare the books, what had at first appeared as single, incidental differences began to take the form of patterns which revealed the "translators" opposing philosophies of translation. In the British translation, for instance, there is a greater stress on following the Danish as closely as possible. Considering the two titles, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* renders the Danish *Frøken Smillas Fornemmelse for Sne* word for word, where the American drops the title "Miss" altogether. This disagreement does seem to be one worth fighting for. I can appreciate Høeg wanting to present an English title with all the words of his Danish. Likewise, I can imagine that Nunnally may have cringed at the overly-polite "Miss," which in my mind at least conjures images of ante-bellum South.

"F. David's" translation is also more likely to recreate conventions of Danish grammar. As in German, the inversion of subject and verb is common in Danish. As a rule, Danish sentences that begin with a word other than the subject must switch the positions of subject and verb. This inversion does not occur as often in modern English, of course. Neither "F. David" nor Nunnally attempt to follow the Danish inversions in all cases, but "F. David" follows the Danish pattern more frequently. In some instances, both the British and the American translations follow the inversions in the Danish, and many times the English sounds perfectly smooth:

In a duffel bag there are two hooded rubber suits with zippers at the wrists and ankles. Wetsuits made of neoprene. At least half an inch [fifteen millimetres] thick. Underneath are two Poseidon dry suits. And under them are gloves, socks, two thermal suits, safety lines, and six different kinds of battery-powered lamps.... (Am. 405; Brit. 334; Dan. 357)

The last two sentences succeed in inverting subject and verb and still sounding natural.

There are also occasions when inversions do not sound natural in English, but are nonetheless effective. In the following passage, presented identically in F. David's and Nunnally's versions, inverting subjects and verbs achieves a higher, more formal diction, which suits the particular scene being described. Smilla is alone in her apartment:

I sit down on the sofa. First come the images from the day. I let them pass. Then come memories from when I was a child, vacillating between slight

depression and mild elation; I let them go, too. Then comes peace. That's when I put on a record. Then I sit down and cry. I'm not crying about anything or anyone in particular. The life I live I created for myself, and I wouldn't want it any different. I cry because in the universe there is something as beautiful as Kremer playing the Brahms violin concerto. (Brit. 50; Am. 59; Dan. 58)

Without the inversions, the passage would not carry the somber mood and would lose its poetic quality. Of course, it is impossible for me to say whose hand was in on this translation. Perhaps Nunnally translated the passage as it appears above, and Høeg approved. Or perhaps Høeg suggested that Nunnally change her translation to the above, and she accepted.

Only when one translation follows an inversion while the other chooses not to does it become clear that Høeg and Nunnally have disagreed. In the following, F. David follows the Danish basically word for word.

F. David: "With Isaiah in his coffin has come a procession..." (3).

Nunnally: "A procession follows Isaiah in his coffin..." (4).

F. David: "[L]ike the bow of a ship, loom the walls of Vestre Prison" (3).

Nunnally: "[L]ike the bow of a ship, the walls of Vestre Prison loom" (4).

F. David: "Never must a bureaucrat in the prosecutor's office doubt that he is right" (187).

Nunnally: "A bureaucrat in the prosecutor's office must never doubt..." (225).

F. David: "Somewhere in the low fog banks where the ice floats out to sea is Tørk" (386).

Nunnally: "Tørk is somewhere in the low fog banks where the ice floats out to sea" (471).

I can guess at reasons for Høeg's choices in the sentences quoted above. Not only does he present sentences that are closer to the Danish, but by following the inversion he is able to capture an element of the original's style. Høeg might argue that he had the option in Danish to begin the first example with the subject "et følge" ("a procession"), but to elevate the language he decided to invert subject and verb. This reason, however, would not take into account that an inversion in Danish is not equal to an inversion in English, where the effect is significantly more dramatic. To my ear, the inversions in the first two examples sound overly dramatic, and the last two sound awkward. I much prefer Nunnally's strong, colloquial English. Nunnally seems to understand the limitations of the English language and to follow the Danish grammar only when doing so will not produce a stilted translation.

Another challenge presented by the Danish is the translation of proper nouns and languages other than Danish. Again, in several instances Nunnally and F. David agree about how to handle certain cases. When the Danish uses the proper noun "Mester Jakelfigur" (54) to name a puppet character, both the British and American translate with the proper noun "Punch"—a brilliant move that saves one of the book's most memorable passages:

[D]uring the night, [Isaiah] would sometimes roll over toward me, sound asleep, and lie there for several minutes. Against my skin he would get a diminutive erection that came and went, came and went, like Punch in a puppet show. (Am. 55; Brit. 46)

And sometimes both books choose to leave foreign words untranslated, particularly when understanding is not challenged. When Smilla snoops among Tørk Hviid's books, she notices several journals. Since the reader already knows that these are journal titles, meaning is not sacrificed when Smilla lists, "Naturens Verden" and "Varv" (Brit. 336; Am. 407). In fact, if these words had been translated into English, or explained parenthetically, the effect would have been to distance the reader from Smilla's experience.

However, Nunnally and F. David do not always agree on how to handle proper nouns or foreign words. In many instances, Nunnally prefers to give the reader an English word to explain a place name, while F. David leaves the name untranslated. In the British we find references to "Kongens Have," "Christianhavns Torv" (21), "Strandvejen" (26), "Jens Kofods Gade" (49), and "Godthåbsvej" (51). In contrast, the American translation provides clues: "The King's Garden," "Christianhavns Square" (26), "Strand Drive" (31), "Jens Kofods Street" (58), and "Godthåbs Road" (61). Again, I prefer Nunnally's translation, which strikes a fair compromise between the Danish name and the English translation by providing only as much information as is necessary for the reader to understand what is being described. Her translation preserves the "atmosphere" created by the Danish names, but also allows the English reader to know the setting being described. I cannot understand why F. David did not follow her example. Does he think that he is being more faithful to the original by reproducing the entire Danish place name?

I am also troubled by passages in the British in which the ship's cook utters German words. Although the Danish provides no help for understanding the German, Høeg can depend on his native readers to make sense of the German, since Danes have mandatory German classes throughout grade school. However, F. David should not rely on English readers having enough knowledge of German to understand, for example, "Sie müssen schlafen. Sie brauchen medizinische..." (384). English readers, also, may struggle with "im schnee" and "Mit flaschen" (384). Perhaps the most

he should count on, particularly from American readers, is the occasional "Fräulein Smilla," which is about all that Nunnally trusts to her readers. Nunnally's tactic for the German passages is to present English translation beside the shorter German quotes, as in "Then we'll all work im schnee, in the snow" (468). For longer passages, she simply abandons the German altogether.

Perhaps a more critical issue than inversions, proper nouns, and non-Danish words is the translation of humor and idiomatic expressions. This area was the hardest test for Høeg and his publisher, who Waldman assured me were "highly proficient in English usage." Naturally, it takes an especially sensitive ear to translate a joke or an idiom. Some would argue that these matters are untranslatable. In the case of *Smilla*, we find that certain translations convey a better sense of the original.

Early in the novel, Smilla meets a detective who, in the American, reminds her "of an ingrown toenail. Flat and hard and full of impatient irritation" (10). Throughout the rest of the novel, she refers to him simply as "the Toenail," thus scoring a jab each time he appears. F. David, however, makes one small change by calling the detective "an ingrown nail" (8), later referring to the detective as "the Nail." F. David's choice is problematic, because despite his initial clue, "ingrown," the primary sense in English of *that piece of metal which is hammered into wood* overwhelms the intended sense of *toenail* or *ingrown nail*. Of course, Nunnally's "Toenail" is more disparaging. It is also funnier. I can't help wondering if Høeg wanted to remain closer to the sound of his Danish word "negl" ["nail"] (16), which does not have the double-meaning of the English word. In fact, Danish has separate words: "søm" for a nail you hammer, and "negl" for the kind you paint, clip, or are bothered by when it becomes ingrown.

Similarly, F. David sacrifices humor when he does not follow Nunnally's translation for the name of the apartment house where Smilla lives. The American translation reads,

We live in the White Palace...the whole thing...makes a cheap and flimsy impression, but there's nothing trivial about the rent.... So the nickname, the White Palace, is something of an insult to those of us who live here, but still basically appropriate. (6)

Take out the word "Palace," replace it with "Cells," and you have an approximation of F. David's "translation." But what is ironically humorous about living in "White Cells"? The joke depends on the apartment house not fulfilling the promise of its trumped-up name. Humor is so vulnerable that one wrong word ruins the joke. Nunnally seems to know this fact instinctively.

F. David's versions of the Danish idioms are likewise pale compared to Nunnally's. Where Nunnally successfully skirts a cliché with "You can't win every time" (42), F. David plunges in with "You can't win them all" (35). Where F. David insists on a literal translation of the Danish phrase that describes Isaiah's system of hiding things inside a brick wall ("et digt af teknisk opfindsomhed"), supplying the odd-sounding "a poem of technical ingenuity" (54), Nunnally finds the closest English equivalent, "a dream of technical ingenuity" (54). And probably the worst instance of Høeg's "highly proficient" English not serving him well occurs when he has Dr. Lagermann say to Smilla's father, "Just have a look at this....Because there's something here that'll knock the socks off you" (210). "Knock your socks off" would be better. But Nunnally is able to avoid the cliché altogether with "Just have a look at this....Because there's something here that'll surprise the hell out of you" (255). Never mind that the Danish makes no mention of "hell" (228)—Nunnally's translation fits the idiomatic sense of the Danish perfectly.

Finally, F. David makes several outright mistakes. For instance, when he refers to "the worn-down sole of [Isaiah's] basketball boots with the barely visible outline of concentric circles in front of the arch on which the player is supposed to pirouette" (7), he is mistaken in the words "boots" and "pirouette." The image of a Michael Jordan pirouetting with the ball is hilarious, and not intended in the Danish. Likewise, when Smilla visits Lagermann at his home one early morning, she does not see "rollerblade protectors" (55) in the hallway, since Rollerblades® do not need to be protected and are not likely to be in use in December in Denmark. Rather, F. David should have written "skateblade protectors" for the ice skates that Lagermann's children are likely putting to use on the frozen marsh nearby. And the Danish needn't be consulted to know that something is wrong when F. David has Smilla contradicting herself in this sentence: "During periods when Moritz was gone and we couldn't afford paraffin, or when supplies were short because the ship hadn't arrived, my mother would set paraffin candles on top of the mirror" (402). (F. David meant to say "we couldn't afford kerosene.")

It seems fair to make the following generalizations concerning the two *Smillas*: Høeg's main concern is for a translation that stays as close to the original Danish as possible, although by straining to do so he sometimes does the opposite. His insistence on following Danish grammar, even when it abuses English, and his inclusion of untranslated Danish place names and German passages asks the reader to approach the original work. Nunnally, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with producing a "readable" translation, and thus may seem more loyal to her English language readers than to preserving the Danish qualities of Høeg's original. It seems to me, however, that Høeg's is a false sense of "fidelity," and the American translation would serve him and his readers much better than the British.

Translators are sometimes called "traitors" for not being "faithful" to the original work. Most recently author Milan Kundera has decried certain betrayals by translators of his novels.<sup>2</sup> But authors may be traitors, too. By offering British readers a less readable version of his novel, Peter Høeg betrays his own work. And just as important, by forcing on his translator only two options—either compromise her artistic standards by accepting his changes, or reject the author's changes and remove her name from a translation which is overwhelmingly her own—Høeg has betrayed his translator. That Nunnally stood behind her translations is, of course, to her credit. And the greatest vindication of her choice can be found in "F. David's" inferior translation.

#### NOTES

1. As of April 10, 1996, I have not received a letter from the American publisher, Dell.
2. Hutchinson, Mark. "In Defense of Fiction." *New York Times* 22 October 1995: Section 7, page 30.

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