

# The Too-Muchness of Andersen

## Excess as a World Literary Strategy

*By Torsten Bagh Thomsen, University of Southern Denmark*

Since my daughter was very young, I have read Andersen's fairy tales aloud to her at bedtime. Her preferences have changed over the years, but she has always been drawn to the humorous and absurd parts of his authorship – “Numskull Hans” (1855) and “The Emperor's New Clothes” (1837) have long been favorites. For a while, it was “What Hubby Does is Always Right” (1861), which we read repeatedly. One evening, when I was too tired to read, I jokingly suggested that she tell the story to me instead. Without hesitation, she began: “You've been to the country and seen the house where the windows can't be opened and where there's a duck with ducklings in a pond – and a dog.” What surprised me was the specificity of her recollection. I had expected a plot summary or a retelling of the story's moral – unconditional familial love, something we had discussed before. Instead, she offered a recreation of the tale's opening remarkably attentive to detail. Consider the actual beginning of Andersen's version, as translated by John Irons:

Now I'm going to tell you a story I heard when I was small, and every time I've thought about it since then, I've felt it was even lovelier than before, for with stories it's like it often is with people, the older they are the lovelier they get, and that's most agreeable! You've been out in the country, of course? seen a real old farmhouse complete with thatched roof, moss and plants growing there of their own accord, there's a stork's nest on the ridge of the roof – the stork is quite essential – the walls are lop-sided, the windows low, and there's only one that can actually be opened, the baking oven bulges like a pot-belly, and the elder bush hangs out over the fence, where there's a little pond with a duck or some ducklings, right under the gnarled willow tree. Yes, and a dog on a chain of course that barks at all and sundry.” (Irons, 2024)

My daughter's version reflected both the tone and content of this passage. She reproduced the narrator's direct address to the reader, noted the details about the windows (albeit misremembered slightly), and included both duck and ducklings. She even recalled the

chained dog, which the narrator mentions almost lazily, as if weary from conjuring up the rural idyll. What all these remembered elements have in common is their narrative irrelevance. They do not advance the plot. They are, in a word, superfluous.

This superfluity is not unique to this tale. It appears, for example, in the exaggerated dimensions of the dogs' eyes in "The Tinderbox" (1835), the absurdly long compound military title in "The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep" (Billygoatlegs-Majorandminor-generalwarcommandingsergeant, 1845), and the intertextual use of the song "Ach, du lieber Augustin" in "The Swineherd" (1841). Andersen's fairy tales give more than is narratively required, and it is precisely this surplus that I believe readers often latch onto. This surplus of detail, tone, and texture – what I call Andersen's "too-muchness" – points to a broader tendency in his authorship: a deliberate embrace of excess. In what follows, this essay explores how literary overabundance functions as a world literary strategy. I examine how the use of detail, digression, and stylistic surplus in selected fairy tales contributes to Andersen's international appeal, particularly as his works circulate through translation.

### **Theorizing Too-Muchness**

A useful point of departure is Lawrence Venuti's critique of the concept of invariance in translation. In *Contra Instrumentalism* (2019), he polemicizes against what he sees as a common conception of translation, which he describes as *instrumentalism* and defines as follows: "It conceives of translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, an invariant form, meaning, or effect" (p. 1). Something unchangeable and incorruptible is presumed to be contained in the source text, and the translator's task becomes to reproduce this invariant as faithfully as possible – ideally resulting in a neutral and complete transfer of the text from one language to another. In contrast, Venuti proposes a so-called hermeneutic model, according to which: "translation [is] an interpretive act that inevitably varies source-text form, meaning, and effect according to the intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture." (p. 1)

This insight might inform our understanding of Andersen's international reception. Jacob Bøggild and Anne Klara Bom critically point out that Andersen scholarship has often unreflectively perpetuated the notion that "Andersen's universe conveys something universal, something that can appeal to people in general across ethnic, geographical and cultural boundaries and across time" (2020, p. 10, my translation). Yet if there is no core invariant meaning – no inherent universals embedded in the text – it follows that readers and

translators across times and cultures will interpret Andersen's stories differently and adapt them accordingly. A fitting example of this is the many secular retellings and adaptations of "The Little Mermaid" (1837) that omit what one might otherwise assume to be a strong Christian invariant in the tale: the mermaid's longing for an immortal soul. Instead, the story is reimagined across contexts as a secular romance, an allegory of ecological loss, or a trans narrative of transformation and self-realization.

What interests me here is not the fact of variation, but what in Andersen's texts invites such variation in the first place. As I argue elsewhere (Thomsen, 2026), the religious themes in Andersen's authorship appear to prompt the highest degree of manipulation, alteration, and local adaptation. Here, however, I wish to move from theme to form and suggest that Andersen's seemingly trivial details, intertextual references, and locally specific allusions themselves encourage translators to take interpretive liberties when rendering his texts into other languages.

This view finds support in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, who, in his reflections on world literature, uses the concept of *bajey khoroch* – translated as "thrifless excess," "wasteful spending," or "careless expenditure" – to describe a purposeless beauty that, he suggests, characterizes the world at large and literary texts in particular, and that resonates deeply within the human heart. As he puts it:

Wherever in the world we see the possibility of such a correlate of our heart, our heart unquestioningly gives itself there. Beauty in the world is a manifestation of such largesse. The flower, we see, is in no hurry to become the seed; it transcends its need and blooms beautifully; the clouds do not rush off after raining, they languorously and needlessly catch our eyes with their colours; the trees do not stick-like spread their arms outwards as beggars for light and shower, but green thickets of leaves fill the horizon with their bounty; the sea, we notice, is not an immense office that transports water to the atmosphere in the form of clouds but awes us in its fathomlessness; and the mountain not only feeds water to the rivers of the earth but like Rudra, deep in yoga, stills the fears of those who cross the skies – thus we discover the *briday-dharma* (the heart's-purpose) of the world. The over-wizened intellect might ask, why this careless expenditure in needless efforts? The ever-young heart answers, just because it pleases me, I see no other reason. The heart knows: there is one heart that expresses itself every moment in the universe. Why else would there be so much beauty, music, gestures, signs, and signals, so much decoration across creation? (1907/2015, pp. 283–284)

Tagore describes an intuitive, non-rational attraction to the beautiful, the excessive, or the poetic in the world – an epistemology that stands apart from the utilitarian logic of the intellect and instead affirms the necessity of feeling and perception. This conception aligns with Andersen’s writing, where beauty and charm often lie in the digression, the absurd image, the “careless expenditure.” Venuti helps us see how Andersen’s surplus resists instrumental reading, while Tagore allows us to understand that resistance as aesthetic generosity. In what follows, I explore how this excess manifests in Andersen’s fairy tales, and, more importantly, how it travels through translation.

### **Excess through Locally Specific References**

One way Andersen’s textual excess most clearly takes form is through his use of locally specific references: place names, cultural markers, or social details that may seem peripheral to the plot but contribute to the tone and texture of the narrative. These references often resist direct translation, not because they are untranslatable in a technical sense, but because their function lies more in evocation than in information. They localize the narrative voice, grounding it in a Danish cultural and geographical context, while simultaneously prompting translators to adapt, omit, or creatively substitute such details in the target language. This kind of situated detail – ultimately dispensable to the story’s unfolding – thus becomes a site of negotiation and transformation where Andersen’s “too-muchness” travels differently depending on the receiving culture.

A particularly illustrative case is Andersen’s tale “The Ugly Duckling” (1843). After her proper ducklings have all hatched, the mother duck struggles with one remaining egg that refuses to open. An older duck advises her to give it up, suggesting it is probably a turkey’s egg. To this, the mother duck replies in the Danish original: “har jeg nu ligget saa længe, saa kan jeg ligge Dyrehavstiden med!” (Andersen, 2024). The literal translation would be: “now that I have been laying this long, I can also lay for the duration of the Dyrehavstid.” The expression refers to a specific cultural idiom denoting a period during which the Danish amusement park Dyrehavsbakken is open. At the time Andersen wrote the tale, the idiom was commonly used to mean “a little while longer.”

This reference is not necessary to the plot. It is a flourish, a culturally specific idiom that enriches the tone and comic texture of the story but poses challenges for translation. Some of Andersen’s earliest English translators, Charles Boner and Caroline Peachey, each translating the tale in 1846, chose to retain the humorous tone while generalizing the

reference. Boner rendered the line as “I have sat so long, that I will still devote the harvest-time to it” (1846, p. 22), while Peachey wrote, “I have been sitting so long, that I may as well spend the harvest here.” (1846, p. 177). Though “Dyrehavstid” becomes “harvest-time” – a more generic image – the joke remains: no egg requires an entire season to hatch. The absurd overstatement is preserved, if not amplified.

Later translations, however, tend to neutralize the excess. The 1852 English version by Clara de Chatelain reads: “since I have sat so long, a few days more won’t make much odds.” (p. 177). The 1853 German Lorck edition – allegedly translated by Andersen himself – gives: “habe ich nun so lange gesessen, so kann ich auch noch einige Tage sitzen.”<sup>1</sup> (Andersen(?), 1853, p. 143), thereby changing “Dyrehavstiden” to the more general “a few more days.” A French version similarly renders the expression less specific, letting the duck refer vaguely to “a bit more”: “Puisque j’ai tant fait que de le couvrir jusqu’à présent, je veux continuer encore un peu.”<sup>2</sup> (C..., 1848, p. 205). All of these renderings are similar in tone and content, opting for a flattened, generic formulation that omits the culturally marked idiom. But sometimes translators do the opposite: rather than neutralizing the culturally specific reference, they seize the opportunity to impose an interpretive layer onto the text. This is particularly interesting because such choices often shift the tone in a direction quite different from the original. A case in point is a French translation of the same passage, in which the mother duck replies: “il ne m’en coûtera pas plus d’accomplir mon devoir consciencieusement” (Brandon, 1853, p. 117), which translates roughly as: “it will not cost me more to accomplish my duty conscientiously.” This rendering projects a high degree of conscientiousness onto the character. The mother duck is no longer wry or casually resigned; she is imbued with a strong sense of maternal duty.

Notably, if the German Lorck edition was indeed Andersen’s own translation, his decision to forego the Dyrehavstid reference in favor of a more general phrase suggests a pragmatic awareness of what might – or might not – travel across linguistic and cultural borders. It also implies that Andersen recognized the limits of too-muchness: not every excess is exportable. Yet, as the comparison between translations shows, the more generic versions – though perhaps more accessible – also sacrifice some of the tale’s tonal richness. The imaginative surplus diminishes.

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<sup>1</sup> “Have I now sat so long, then I can also sit a few more days.” (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> “Since I have gone so far as to brood it until now, I want to continue a bit more.” (my translation).

This small but telling example shows how Andersen's too-muchness often resides in linguistic and cultural particulars that resist straightforward equivalence. Translators must decide whether to omit, generalize, or reinterpret such elements, and none of them opts for a strictly literal rendering. Some make the passage more generic; others infuse it with moral or emotional overtones. In every case, the excess of the original is reduced – yet it is precisely this surplus, this initial abundance, that sets translation in motion and gives rise to such variation in the first place.

### Exporting the Round Tower

A similar case arises in “The Tinderbox” in the description of the dogs’ eyes. In the Danish original, Andersen writes: “Øine saa store som Thekopper [...] Møllehjul [...] Rundetaarn,” which translates literally to: “Eyes as big as teacups [...] millwheels [...] the Round Tower.” (Andersen, 2024). The passage escalates in absurdity, with the final image referencing a well-known landmark in Copenhagen: The Round Tower (Rundetårn), built by King Christian IV in the 17th century. This specific detail provides a humorous crescendo but also introduces a culturally localized excess that challenges translation.

One early German translator, Major von Jenssen, chose to retain this reference in his 1839 version: “Theetassen [...] Mühlenräder [...] der runde Thurm.”<sup>3</sup> (p. 2–3) To help the reader, he includes a footnote explaining the historical and architectural significance of the Round Tower. While this may seem like an unnecessary interruption – footnotes are rare in fairy tales – it also draws attention to the cultural foreignness of the text. The footnote not only retains Andersen’s specificity but amplifies the textual surplus by momentarily disrupting narrative flow. In doing so, the translation draws attention to itself as a translation.

By contrast, Clara de Chatelain’s 1852 English translation opts for a neutralizing alternative: “eyes as big as tea-cups [...] millwheels [...] eyes as big as a tower.” (p. 233) The exaggeration is retained, but the cultural marker is lost. The Round Tower becomes simply “a tower,” nullifying the local excess while preserving scale. The result is a more fluent and universally legible version, albeit one that lacks the specific humor of the original.

Interestingly, the 1853 Lorck edition – again allegedly translated by Andersen – introduces a compromise. Instead of referencing the Round Tower, the third dog’s eyes are described as “so gross wie ein Stadthor” (Andersen(?), 1853, p. 188), “as big as a city gate.” The choice of “Stadthor” gestures toward a culturally resonant image in a German context.

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<sup>3</sup> “teacups [...] mill wheels [...] the round tower.” (my translation).

Many cities in Germany retained medieval gates as recognizable architectural landmarks, and the substitution, while generic, retains the principle of specificity and excess by invoking a local visual reference.

French translators, however, took the passage in a different direction entirely. Rather than replacing the final image with a locally specific landmark, they eliminated it altogether. In versions from 1848 and 1853, the largest dog has eyes as big as “des roues de moulin” (mill wheels) – the same as the middle dog in the Danish version. But for the middle dog, they introduced new similes: “un fromage de Hollande” (a Dutch cheese; C..., 1848, p. 125) and later “un fromage de Gruyères” (a Gruyères cheese; Brandon, 1853, p. 186). These choices remove the original escalation in scale but introduce their own form of cultural excess by inserting new, humorously incongruous images.

These variations show how Andersen’s too-muchness can either be flattened, transferred, or reimagined. As a locally embedded reference, the Round Tower invites multiple translational strategies: it can be footnoted, neutralized, replaced, or transformed. Each choice reflects not just a solution to a translational problem but a stance toward literary excess – whether to trim it, relocate it, or reinvent it.

### **Intertextual Excess: Translating a Song Across Languages**

Another compelling example of translational variation occurs in “The Swineherd,” a fairy tale that includes the recurring song:

“Ach, Du lieber Augustin / Alles ist væk, væk, væk!” (Andersen, 2024)

This adaptation of the well-known German song “O, du lieber Augustin” is already a hybrid creation in Andersen’s Danish original. He changes “O” to the more German sounding “Ach,” and replaces “hin” (the original German word for “gone”) with the Danish “væk.” The result is a curious linguistic mash-up: a song that seems German but is unmistakably inflected by Danish. This hybridization may reflect the polyglot culture of the Danish Rococo court – satirized in the tale – but also dramatizes the entanglement of source and target languages typical of translation itself.

Crucial to my argument here is that the song functions as the fairy tale’s *book*. It is not necessary, but it is there – and it is what lingers; it is the element that my daughter hums the next day after we have read the story at night. The question, then, is what translators do with

this intertextual reference. This particular allusion generates a striking degree of translational variation.

Caroline Peachey writes: “Ach! du lieber Augustin / Alles ist weg, weg, weg!” (1846, p. 129) – and in doing so, she simply Germanizes the song by replacing the Danish *væk* with the German *weg* (though notably not *hin*), thereby removing the localized Danish adaptation and restoring a more recognizably German form. Charles Boner, by contrast, chose a different approach. He replaced the lines entirely with a familiar English nursery rhyme: “O dear, what can the matter be? / O dear, what shall I do?” (1846, p. 72) – a song also known as “Johnny’s so long at the fair.”

French translators took similar liberties. One version replaces Andersen’s song with the refrain of a well-known French children’s song: “Ah! Vous dirai-je maman / Ce qui cause mon tourment?”<sup>4</sup> (C..., 1848, 226) – the melody better known in English as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” Another version substitutes with a French satirical song: “J’ai du bon tabac / Dans ma tabatière! / J’ai du bon tabac: / Mais tu n’en auras pas!”<sup>5</sup> (Brandon, 1853, p. 21). These alterations preserve the tone and function of Andersen’s intertextual joke but thoroughly indigenize it, rendering it recognizable and culturally legible for the French reader.

Interestingly, in the Lorck edition, the reference is brought back to the original version of the song. It reads: “Ach, Du Lieber Augustin, / Alles ist hin, hin, hin!” (Andersen(?), 1853, p. 10) The original version of the song, however, runs slightly differently: “O, Du Lieber Augustin / Augustin / Augustin / O, Du Lieber Augustin, / Alles ist hin.” If this really is – as stated – the *Vom Verfasser besorgte Ausgabe* (the edition prepared by the author himself), the return to the proper German version of the song suggests Andersen’s awareness of its source and his willingness to undo his own playful distortion when addressing a German readership. This self-correction highlights the author’s active negotiation with his own excessive elements, choosing in this case to align with the familiar rather than emphasize hybridity.

Clara de Chatelain seems to pursue a direct, literal translation: “Oh! Dearest Augustine, / All’s gone clean away!” (1852, p. 13) – a version that retains the reference while neutralizing its musicality and tone. Her solution appears comparatively subdued, perhaps signaling a more literalist or cautious approach to textual excess. Once again, we see how Andersen’s surplus – the unnecessary inclusion of a multilingual song – produces a wide range of translational responses.

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<sup>4</sup> “Ah! Shall I tell you, mama / What causes my torment?” (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> “I have good tobacco / In my snuffbox! / I have good tobacco: / But you shall not have any!” (my translation).

### When Too Much Is Too Much

But can too-muchness ever become too much? Andersen himself seems to have posed this question in two closely related texts: “The Corpse” (1830) and “The Travelling Companion” (1835). The former was written when Andersen was still finding his voice as a fairy tale writer; the latter represents a more refined and internationally oriented version of the same basic story. “The Corpse” opens with a lengthy, highly specific description:

About five miles from Bogense, in a field close to Elvedgaard, one can find a hawthorn that is remarkable for its size and can even be seen from the coast of Jutland. In the old days, there are said to have been two, and it is claimed that Frederik II visited this place to see this remarkable sight, and that on this occasion they were trimmed in the shape of two crowns. (Irons, 2024)

This introduction assumes a high degree of local and historical knowledge, inaccessible not only to foreign readers but likely to many Danes as well. It offers no immediate narrative hook or character but instead builds a kind of excessive documentary realism. The tone is almost comically specific, and this continues for nearly an entire page before the actual story begins. The surplus of detail does not enchant but overwhelms, tipping into monotony to become noise. In rewriting the tale as “The Travelling Companion,” Andersen strips away this elaborate scene-setting. The revised story begins:

Poor Johannes was so wretched, for his father was very ill and did not have long to live. There was no one but the two of them in the small living room; the lamp on the table had burnt low, and it was quite late in the evening. (Irons, 2024)

This version introduces a protagonist, a conflict, and a setting in one concise paragraph. Gone are the digressions into geography and history. The language is simple, direct, and emotionally resonant. It opens a space of identification rather than exclusion. The comparison of the two openings and Andersen’s revisions suggests a principle of excess: it must be carefully calibrated. Andersen’s too-muchness is most effective not when it overwhelms with irrelevant particulars, but when it offers moments of imaginative generosity – flourishes that invite wonder without alienating the reader. In “The Corpse,” the literary surplus creates distance; in “The Travelling Companion,” it is distilled into narrative clarity. Excess, in this sense, should not be confused with verbosity. It is not the sheer volume of detail but its

poetic or affective function that matters. The most resonant forms of Andersen's too-muchness introduce absurd specificity, comic contrast, or unexpected lyricity. These moments open up the text rather than close it down. They become, to borrow Tagore's term, forms of careless expenditure – generous but strategic in their superfluity.

### **The Ethics of Excess**

This brings me to a final reflection on the function – rather than the purpose – of excess in Andersen's tales: what does it do? A shared feature among the examples I have considered seems to be that, in translation, these excesses position the texts within a negotiation between the local and the international. Local place markers and borrowed references from the international popular culture of Andersen's time create hybrid texts that both point to their culture and language of origin and, at the same time, invite interpretive choices on the part of the translator: does one produce a text that signals itself as a translation, indigenize it to appear locally authored, or position it in an in-between state as a cultural hybrid? Considerations of – and transgressions across – linguistic and cultural boundaries are playfully embedded in the tales themselves and are brought to the surface through the act of translation.

These negotiations recall Venuti's distinction between instrumental and hermeneutic models of translation. As he argues, translation can never be a neutral transfer of a fixed meaning or form; it is always an interpretive act shaped by the translator's choices and by the cultural and historical conditions of reception. Andersen's textual excess makes this hermeneutic dimension visible. His surplus of local references, digressions, and tonal nuances compels translators to decide what to retain, modify, or omit – showing that every translation is, in practice, a reading and a rewriting. In this sense, Andersen's too-muchness exposes the interpretive labor that all translation entails. Each act of rendering his tales across languages requires a willingness to engage with what exceeds comprehension or utility – an openness that is not merely aesthetic but also ethical. It is in this openness that Andersen's practice begins to resonate with what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the ethical dimension of Tagore's *bajey khoroch*. She notes:

He theorizes the imaginative creative bond that travels across national boundaries as *bajey khoroch*, wasteful spending, a powerful metaphor for what in the imagination goes above, beyond, beneath, and short of mere rational choice toward alterity. The uncertain intimacy

open to ethical alterity is ‘wasteful.’ The world is in bad shape with the loss of emphasis on the humanities. This message of Tagore – that what goes across is not immediately profitable or evaluable does not give us greater numbers, etc., that it is “value-added” in an incommensurable sense with no guarantees – this lesson is hard to learn, in the face of the will to institutional power, through knowledge management. (Damrosch & Spivak, 2011, p. 472)

Spivak argues that this “wastefulness” is precisely what makes literature ethically significant. It is not utilitarian or easily reduced to function. It exceeds purpose and, in doing so, gestures toward the other. Andersen’s fairy tales, especially as they travel through translation, can be seen as a model of such literary generosity: they overflow, not to instruct or persuade, but to invite wonder and ethical encounter with cultural and linguistic otherness.

To return to the anecdote that opened this essay: it is the superfluous details – the windows that do not open, the dog that barks at everyone, the duck or perhaps ducklings – that remain in memory. Andersen’s too-muchness may not be an invariant – indeed, it seems to be the very cause of variation – but it is remarkably persistent. It endures as the trace that compels rereading and reimagining across cultures and generations. In this sense, Andersen’s excess can be seen as a literary practice of generosity – one that affirms literature’s ability to move through and beyond cultural specificity, opening spaces for shared imagination and ethical encounter. By affirming what cannot be reduced to utility or transfer, Andersen’s too-muchness ultimately enacts its own quiet form of contra instrumentalism.

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