

An English Translation of “Forunderligt at sige”

By Jenny Rebecca Rytting

The Grundtvig carol translated here¹, “Forunderligt at sige,” has a complex textual history.² It derives from H. A. Brorson’s carol “Mit hierte altid vanker” (“My Heart Always Wanders”), which was printed in his first hymnbook from 1732 and is included as the seventh of a group of Christmas carols in the first part of his major work, *Troens Rare Klenodie (The Rare Jewel of the Faith)*, published in 1739. This 11-verse carol is original to Brorson, although it was influenced by the slightly earlier Danish hymnwriters Thomas Kingo (1634-1703), Elias Naur (1650-1728), and Laurids Thura (1657-1731) (see Koch, L. J. (ed) (1951), *Hans Adolph Brorsons Samlede Skrifter*, I, Copenhagen, 32, footnote to Introduction).

Grundtvig’s first attempt at reworking this carol appears as number 183 in volume 1 of his *Sang-Værk til den Danske Kirke (Song-Work for the Danish Church)* from 1837, and includes 6 verses, representing numbers 3-7 and 10 of Brorson’s original (GSV I, 383-384). In this initial version Grundtvig followed Brorson’s wording relatively closely. The carol was reprinted with extensive changes as number 73 in Grundtvig’s booklet *Kirke-Psalmer udgivne til Prøve (Church-Hymns Given Out on Trial)*, which was released circa January 8, 1845 (see reprint in GSV VI, 68-69). This little book of 114 pages, better known simply as “Prøveheftet” (“The Trial-Booklet”), was sent out in preparation for a new church hymnbook for the (Protestant) Danish state church. However, the Danish Constitution of June 5, 1849 dissolved the state church and created a Protestant national church in its stead, and plans for the new hymnbook were put on hold.

The Danish Hymnbook that was eventually authorized preserved Brorson’s original text with the omission of verses 8 and 11 and the adoption of only one of Grundtvig’s alterations from 1845. In 1939, however, a short version of Grundtvig’s 1845 text was introduced into the thirteenth printing of the *Højskolesangbogen (The Folk High School Songbook)*; it remained there through the sixteenth printing in 1974 but was removed from the seventeenth printing in 1989. This 3-verse version (consisting of verses 1, 5, and 6 of Grundtvig’s 1845

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text) may well have been the result of a desire to increase the number of texts by Grundtvig without taking up too much space, and was presumably put together by editors Ejnar Skovrup, Ernst J. Borup, and Uffe Grossen. But unfortunately neither this matter nor the transformation from Brorson's hymn to Grundtvig's two adaptations of 1837 and 1845 has been fully researched. Ultimately, while Grundtvig's chosen six verses appeared in his hymnbooks, and the 3-verse version in the above-mentioned editions of the *Folk High School Songbook*, neither of these ever appeared in any of the royally authorized Danish church hymnbooks.

This translated version follows the 3 verses printed in the *Folk High School Songbook*, although the Danish text given here preserves the original spelling from Grundtvig's 1845 edition. The translation replicates the formal structure of the original so that it can be sung to Carl Nielsen's musical setting, composed in 1914 and published in 1919 in his book *Salmer og aandelige Sange. Halvhundred nye Melodier for Hjem, Kirke og Skole* (*Hymns and Spiritual Songs: Half a Hundred New Melodies for Home, Church, and School*). According to Lisbeth Larsen of the Danish Royal Library, most of these new hymn tunes had been written at the behest of minister Valdemar Brücker, and this one was among Nielsen's favorites. She quotes a letter he wrote to his wife Anne Marie in February of 1914 in which he says that it is "the most beautiful I have yet composed" and "so straightforward that, when you hear it for the first time, it seems as if you have known it since your childhood." In this letter Nielsen also claims that both melody and harmony came to him all at once and of their own accord, but Larsen notes that organist Paul Hellmuth nonetheless helped with the harmonization. Regardless, she asserts that both Grundtvig's text and Nielsen's music are "simple, tranquil, and reflective of the Gospel Christmas story."³

³ Larsen, Lisbeth (2009), "Forunderligt at sige," *Det Kongelige Bibliotek*, <http://www.kb.dk/da/nb/tema/fokus/mdrsang/cnforunderligt.html>. (12 Nov 2012), my translation.

Danish text:

1. Forunderligt at sige,
Og sært at tænke paa,
At Kongen til Guds Rige
I Stalden fødes maa,
At Himlens Lys og Ære,
Det levende Guds Ord,
Skal huusvild blandt os være,
Som Armods Søn paa Jord!
2. Selv Spurven har sin Rede,
Kan bygge der og boe;
En Svale ei tør lede
Om Nattely og Ro;
De vilde Dyr i Hule
Har hver sin egen Vraa:
Skal sig min Frelser skjule
I fremmed Stald paa Straa?
3. Nei, kom! jeg vil oplukke
Mit Hjerte, Sjæl og Sind,
Ja, bede, synge, sukke:
Kom, Jesus, kom herind!
Det er ei fremmed Bolig,
Du den har dyrekøbt!
Her skal du hvile rolig,
I Kiærligheden svøbt!

(GSV VI, 1956-64, 68-69)

English text:

1. How wonderful to sing of,
And strange to think at all,
The sovereign of God’s kingdom
Is born within a stall,
All heaven’s light and honour,
God’s living word, e’en he,
On earth shall homeless wander,
The son of poverty.
2. The sparrow, with her nesting,
Can build herself a home;
We find the swallow resting,
At night she needn’t roam.
The wild beasts abide in
The burrows where they stay.
Shall then my Saviour hide in
An unknown stall on hay?
3. No, come, I’ll open to thee
My heart, my soul, my mind.
I’ll pray and sing and sue thee,
“Come, Jesus, come inside!”
For here thou art no stranger;
This home thou dearly bought.
Rest now within this manger
In swaddling love has wrought.

Abbreviations

GSV I-VI: Th. Balslev m.fl. (udg.) (1944-64), *Grundtvigs Sang-Værk. Samlet Udgave*, I-VI, København.

Bibliography

Works by Grundtvig

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Larsen, Lisbeth (2009), “Forunderligt at sige,” *Det Kongelige Bibliotek*, <http://www.kb.dk/da/nb/tema/fokus/mdrsang/cnforunderligt.html> (12 March 2012).’