I drømmen er ingenting forgæves. Virkeligheden, det er det, som er forgæves. Som forbrænder og forgaar.

Thorkild Hansen, Jens Munk

If there is any author in post-war Danish belles-lettres whose private life has drawn more than just superficial attention, and has even kept doing so after his death, that writer must be Thorkild Hansen (1927-1989). Notwithstanding his untimely death, Hansen's oeuvre is still very much alive. New editions of his novels and essays have appeared and a number of his diaries have been published posthumously. Furthermore, the number of academic studies of Thorkild Hansen's life and works has increased considerably. This animated interest culminated recently when the Danish scholar and literary critic, Poul Behrendt, published his biography of Hansen, entitled Djævlepagten. En historie om Thorkild Hansen. As a matter of fact, Behrendt does not claim that he has written a biography, but, as the subtitle indicates, "a story about Thorkild Hansen". In the very first sentence of his introduction, Behrendt repeats this claim once again, thus emphasizing that this voluminous work is to be understood as a fictitious portrait of Hansen.¹

This ambiguous demeanour on the part of his biographer is not surprising, as Thorkild Hansen was a master of deception with respect to his life and works. Everyone dealing with Hansen has to be cautious, as everything that seems to be solid ground in the process of understanding his work as well as his life can not be taken at face-value. Behrendt's scepticism and ambiguity towards the facts that Thorkild Hansen's life

¹Some parts of this article have appeared in my essay 'To Steer and Sail at Will', in: Danish Literary Magazine, nr. 8, 1995, p. 12. All translations from Danish to English are mine.

presents is inherent in Hansen's particular attitude toward the relationship between life and letters. Both his literary works and his career are marked by the discrepancies — and the creative tension they accomplish — between real-life experiences and their reflection in literature.

Notwithstanding the fact that Hansen's literary works exclusively deal with historical people and narratives that are based on historical documents, these works focus on individual, existential themes. Hansen was clearly interested in private life, individual experience and, thus, in intimate documents as well. Genres, like the letter, travelogue and diary, were among those he favoured most. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that he himself was not only fascinated by this kind of material from the perspective of the re-creation of historical people's lives, but also as a mode of expression of his own personality. In other words, he did not only take up writing diaries and especially travel-diaries, but doing so also gave the possibility becoming subject to the scrutiny and creativity of others. This more or less narcissistic awareness of other people's perception of him and his private life can be seen as one of the motives that urged Hansen to contrive a sophisticated double-layered smoke-screen between the writer of his literary work, the one that wrote his private documents — his diaries — and the author that created his 'life'. Thus, Hansen made things rather complicated, as Poul Behrendt's book demonstrates at length. This has led to the fact that, in recent years, Thorkild Hansen has become one of the most enigmatic of modern Danish writers.

In his literary works, Hansen was the (re)creator of other people's lives, in his diaries he was both subject and creator, as well as the created object. In his biographical study, Poul Behrendt tries to unravel the relationship between these two rôles. He examines the private documents in the same way as Hansen himself dealt with historical source-material attempting to grasp his particular version of the historical truth. In the present synoptic article, I will give a bird's-eye view of Thorkild Hansen's literary works, his private documents and Poul Behrendt's recent biography. I will focus on the problem of Hansen's conscious construction of something I would like to call an 'auto-mythography', that is, an all-encompassing image of both the fictitious persons he created in his works, as well as an impression of his own personality. I will conclude with a critical discussion of the way Poul Behrendt has solved the problem of writing a biography of a person.
who himself constantly explored the balance between fact and fiction, in life as well as in letters.

The path of life

Thorkild Hansen is one of the great travellers in twentieth century Danish literature. Like his renowned countryman, Johannes V. Jensen, he travelled for two reasons, to encounter new aspects of reality and register them as the reporter he felt himself to be, and, at the same time, to look at the effects the changing surroundings had on himself. Thus, the outward journey was reflected in an inward exploration, as well. For both authors, the experience of travelling and the discovery of hitherto unknown aspects of human life, as well as the effects of these encounters on the self, was of great importance to their view on literature.

There seems to be, nevertheless, at least one aspect in which Thorkild Hansen and Johannes V. Jensen differ fundamentally. Before Jensen died, he had destroyed most of his private archive, consisting of letters, diaries and notebooks he kept during his travels, whereas Hansen preserved them and published a number of diaries and a quite craftily contrived autobiography during his life. Furthermore, several volumes of diaries and

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3This took place in the spring of 1940, just before the German occupation of Denmark, cf.: Leif Nedergaard, *Johannes V. Jensen*, 1993, p. 558. That not all of Jensen's material was lost, appears from Niels Birger Wamberg's chapter on Jensen in his bicentenary book on the correspondence between a number of authors and the publisher Gyldendal: *Digterne og Gyldendal*, 1970, pp. 263-289.
collections of published and unpublished writings have appeared posthumously.\(^5\)

The last thing he himself had prepared for publication before he passed away happened to be a newspaper column on Johannes V. Jensen.\(^6\) In this essay, which appeared a few days after Hansen's death, he discussed the reasons why Jensen, fully conscious of what he was doing, burned the core of his personal documents, and therefore did not leave much material about his private life behind. According to Hansen, Jensen argued that he wanted his works to speak for themselves and did not like to divert the interest in his work towards his personal circumstances. In this respect, Thorkild Hansen could not have differed more from Jensen. Hansen valued the importance of the private document, both as a source for understanding the individual author's works and also as an art-form in its own right. As he stated in his article on Jensen, there are numerous writers who became world-famous precisely because of their diaries, autobiographies, and so forth, and not, in the first place, as a result of their literary production. On the occasion of André Gide death in 1951, Thorkild Hansen wrote in an obituary — first published after Hansen's own death — the following words:

André Gide is dead. We know what that means. At last he is finished with it, his great novel, [...] the best novel he has written: his destiny.\(^7\)

The tendency of this statement is clear: life is not only the stuff great art is made of, but living is an art in its own right, and does not necessarily have to become manifest in novels or other literary texts.\(^8\) Hansen cherished the


private document because it often offered a more immediate, honest and pure form of literary art that thereby could shed light upon the author's literary works as well. The difference between Jensen and Hansen could hardly be made more apparent than in the words the latter wrote in one of his newspaper articles from Paris, discussing André Gide's diary: "this is the inmost kernel of his oeuvre, and it is here that he achieves his finest art". \(^9\)

In the eyes of Thorkild Hansen, Flaubert, too, was one of the writers who were at their very best when writing personal, non-literary prose, especially letters. Although Flaubert had created some of the greatest novels of the nineteenth century, many critics have argued that Flaubert offered his most intense, direct, and 'real' prose in his letters. In Hansen's opinion, the private document shows in a less mediated fashion what the real substance of art is, that is, the lived life on which it rests and from which it takes its nourishment. Hansen uses Flaubert and others as his witnesses à charge, while Johs. V. Jensen acts as the opponent, representing the opinion that the works of an author are of greater importance than the man who wrote them.

As Thorkild Hansen points out in the first of several posthumously published pieces, the irony of Jensen's case is that he, in destroying his personal documents, stimulated what he least of all intended. Now that the actual material either was destroyed or in private custody, ample space was given to much speculation and interpretation. Thus, Jensen became exactly what he had wanted to avoid, an enigmatic figure that drew at least as much attention to his personal life as to the works he had created.

Hansen did not make the same mistake as Jensen had done, but his actions provoked the same effect, not by destroying his notes, letters and diaries, but by editing, re-arranging and processing them in great detail. That is to say, he saved them, then edited them thoroughly and subsequently destroyed the originals. \(^10\) Before he passed away, he already had published *De sode piger. Dagbog 1943-47* (1974), a number of travel-diaries from different periods of his life, and he had prepared the second two-volume set of his diary for publication. The latter appeared a


Thus, in contrast to Jensen, we seem to have in Hansen's case one of the best documented private-lives in modern Danish literature. However, as it turns out, these documents can not be taken at face-value, because they were only published after meticulous editing and selective destruction of the original notes. The question that arises is, how are these diaries to be valued, as private documents or as fictitious ones, and, as a consequence of this, in what way can this material be of use in literary criticism.

**Pictures of the Self**

Unintendedly, but perfectly coincident with Hansen's preoccupation with the relationship between life and letters, the last book published during his lifetime was the autobiographical picture-book, *Søforhør* (1982). The dust-jacket of this sturdy volume shows a close-up photograph of the author sitting at the oars of a rowing-boat, looking the potential reader straight in the eye. The picture suggests an atmosphere of intimacy; the stage for a straightforward, face to face, dialogue, is set. The vast sea is visible behind the back of the rowing author. No one else is near who possibly can overhear what is to be discussed, and neither the author nor the reader can leave the scene. Both are, literally speaking, in the same boat. And the text that follows apparently lives up to expectations. It turns out to be a frank dialogue between the writer and an anonymous inter-
viewer, where no questions are held back or intimate details are concealed. At times, the interview gives the impression of a confession. But what puzzles the reader is the fact that the identity of the interviewer is never revealed, notwithstanding the fact that he or she proves to have an exceptionally detailed and intimate knowledge of the private life and works of Thorkild Hansen. The reader begins to suspect that the author has faked the interview and simply written the entire text himself, questions as well as answers.

This peculiar book, as well as nearly all the other works of Hansen, has caused a lot of debate among critics. Studies of Søforhør have affirmed the idea that it might be an autobiography in disguise and, nowadays, the book is widely regarded as such. The form of a self-arranged interview, the great amount of photographs, and the apologetic nature of the text sooner

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point in the direction of biography, legend or even hagiography, than of what ordinarily is understood by the epitaph 'autobiography'. Furthermore, the pictures in Søforhor, over one hundred often full-page photographs, are so dominant by their presence that the text is sometimes reduced to the level of mere subtitling. Nevertheless, the photographic material has a clear function, as it imparts an impression of objectivity and reliability to the text. Of course, the pictures demonstrate, as the questions only imply, that there is someone else in the boat (the photographer). Their function is to validate the questions.

Hansen states in the text that all his works are basically of a documentary nature. In a provocative fashion, he even makes it clear that he disliked fiction, and that he regarded himself sooner as a historian or a reporter, than as a fiction-writer. But, as the chosen guise of his autobiography illustrates, the balancing of fact and fiction was a game of hide and seek with the reader. The contents of Hansen's inquiry of himself in Søforhor turned out to be a fully controlled mixture, vacillating between reality and fantasy, between truth and lie, dynamics that are at the core of modern (auto)biography.

In more than one sense, though, it is true that Thorkild Hansen was a documentarist. He recorded human endeavour and individual people's characters, as well as his own. Reading his impressive production, one becomes increasingly aware of the fact that, in creating other, often historical, people's lives, he also tried to come to an understanding of his own individuality. In attempting to disentangle the mystery of human existence in general, he also sought to shed light on the complex inner world of his own personality. Just as he managed to split himself into the rôles of both the interrogator and the subject of enquiry in his autobiography, he let the characters in his novels also act as disguises for himself and vehicles for the existential quest that occupied him all his life. The seeds of this fascination were sown in the years that Hansen lived in Paris.

Apprenticeship in Paris

As Albert Camus — one of his lifelong guiding-stars — had done before him, Thorkild Hansen went to Paris at the age of twenty. With a scholarship and an agreement with the Copenhagen newspaper *Ekstra Bladet* to send articles home, he plunged into the center of contemporary existentialist thought in late 1947. Notwithstanding the fact that he had already written his first book — a critical study on the Danish author Jacob Paludan[^14] — it was in the Paris years that his career as a writer was shaped and started to take off seriously. The diaries that cover these five years in the French capitol testify that he served a sophisticated apprenticeship there. He studied and became thoroughly acquainted with contemporary, as well as, classical French culture and literature, resulting in a book of critical-philosophical essays in 1953, *Resten er stilhed*.

In this work, dedicated to the French industrialist, Jean Seillière, who had become his maecenas, Thorkild Hansen demonstrated what he had learned during his stay abroad. The essays in this book consist of double-portraits of great French writers contrasted with each other. Hansen analyzed literary works from a biographical point of view, as clues for understanding the personalities of their creators. In doing so, he tried to trace the spiritual and intellectual disposition of writers such as Montaigne, Proust, Stendhal, Baudelaire, and Gide. Here Hansen revealed one of his major concerns, one that runs through all of his books as a continuous thread, namely, the relationship between existence itself and its artistic expression in literature.

This preoccupation was stimulated by his assumption that life could best be understood as an abstract reflection of actual existence distilled in writing. To understand someone else was, for Hansen, identical with finding and unravelling the patterns of the other person's life, patterns which Hansen often recognized as remodelled and remoulded universal stories or, rather, myths. One might say, that myths are narratives about, and explanations for, nature's and life's unpredictability, a form of defence

against the meaninglessness of existence. For Thorkild Hansen, as his novels prove, literature was essentially a sophisticated version of the elementary human craving for systematic explanations of *fatum* or destiny. His point is that once we have come to an understanding with destiny, we can really start living. Thus, the acceptance of what life has in store for each of us is clearly linked to Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*.

This central notion of writing in order to find the meaning of existence, and to save it from oblivion, is already present in Hansen's earliest diaries. Thus, he for example writes in *De søde piger*, on October 20, 1945:

I have a passion to save, maintain, and register. I am sure that every lived minute is of importance for I know that it is prey to oblivion and destruction. [...] Therefore these lines. Therefore this book.\(^\text{15}\)

This quotation seems to show that Hansen, long before he went off to Paris, where he read, among others, Nietzsche and Camus, was already engaged with existentialist notions and ideas. The Sisyphean idea of life being rich and meaningless at the same time is part of Hansen's thought right from the beginning and it resounds in everything he has written since. That this *credo* already appears as early as 1945, may be explained by the fact that Hansen had arranged and probably re-written the material in the diaries, before publication in 1974, nearly three decades later, although he himself always claimed that he had not undertaken any major alterations in the text.\(^\text{16}\) We simply do not know because he himself destroyed the originals.

One of the riddles that neither *Soførhør* nor the posthumous diaries dealing with his years in Paris solve, is the precise reason why Thorkild Hansen terminated his stay in Paris rather hastily. In any event, his close relationship with his French maecenas had come to an end when Seillière began to divert his interest to others.\(^\text{17}\) When this became apparent to Hansen as well, he suddenly, in 1952, married a Danish girl he had met in

\(^{15}\text{Thorkild Hansen, }\emph{De søde piger}, 1974, \text{ p. 144.}\)

\(^{16}\text{cf.: Thorkild Hansen, }\emph{Soførhør}, 1982, \text{ p. 185.}\)

\(^{17}\text{Poul Behrendt, }\emph{Djævlepagten II}, 1995, \text{ p. 176 f.}\)
Paris but hardly knew intimately at all.\(^{18}\) That very year, the couple settled down in Copenhagen and Hansen began a career as a newspaper critic. In the following years, he led a regular middle-class life, knowing that his family's subsistence depended on him. The flamboyant life he had led abroad was inevitably over now.

In the course of the Fifties, writing reviews and literary essays became a treadmill. Hounded by ever-piling stacks of novels and ever-new deadlines to meet, he wrote feverishly. At the same time, he felt that his prose was in danger of losing its flavour, as well as that he had drifted away from what he saw as his goal, of becoming a writer of literature.

It was by mere chance that, in 1960 and 1961, he took part in two archaeological expeditions to the Middle East. Experiences on these trips lead Hansen to new material for his own literary production, material that, in effect, also offered him the possibility of breaking away from the life of books and reviews that he was by now sick and tired of. During these journeys — the first one to the small island of Failaka in the Persian Gulf and the second to the Aswan-region down the Nile in Egypt — he was involved in excavating and preserving historical monuments. The paradoxical impression made by tiny archaeological objects, remains of human cultures that had disappeared long ago, that were cautiously sifted from unmeasurable amounts of desert sand, never left him and became one of the pivotal themes in his coming oeuvre. Hansen developed a love for the all-encompassing detail, for the tiny and seemingly insignificant things he came across that represented entire worlds of thought in a nutshell. Thus, often neglected details became anchor-points in his books, giving vitality to initially trivial realities. By doing so, Hansen managed to make the past tangible and brought concealed motifs to the fore, a kind of writing he labelled 'concrete'. These experiences were depicted in the two travel-diaries *Syv seglsten* (1960) and *En kvinde ved en flod* (1961).

In the Middle East, Hansen also came across one of his other favourite themes, travelling, as opposed to modern mass-tourism. He disliked the latter, not because he favoured elitist travel, but because he saw the negative effects of it. Mass-tourism was as empty as much modern living,

\(^{18}\)Finding the circumstances and reason for this, is one of the implicit aims of Poul Behrendt's investigations.
and one of the effects of it was that hordes of people, in pursuit of authentic values, endangered the existence of the indigenous peoples who still seemed to own those values, exploiting and disturbing their lives and cultures. In Thorkild Hansen’s opinion, travelling implied not encountering other peoples and surroundings, but, first and foremost, the encounter of the individual traveller with himself. The changing surroundings function as mirrors of the self. This craving for authenticity could, in Hansen’s perception, only be reached, and only be worthwhile, when the individual was willing to pay the price for this confrontation, that is, to suffer the hardship it implied. Therefore, he travelled preferably to the frontiers of civilisation, such as the Arctic and the deserts of Africa. For him, suffering meant experiencing the forces of nature and life in their pure state in heroic solitude.

Hardship and writing were connected notions for Thorkild Hansen and therefore he disliked the aura of genius that so often is ascribed to writers of fiction. He himself looked at writing basically as hard labour. He had learned how difficult it was to earn a living as a writer, starting his career as a critic and journalist. Step by step he had worked his way out of the newspaper business and, eventually, became a self-supporting author. The two journeys to the Middle East had offered him the raw material for what was to become his major breakthrough as a popular prose-writer. This took place in 1962, when his novel *Det lykkelige Arabien*, a historical-documentary novel about a Danish scientific expedition to Yemen in the eighteenth century, appeared.

This book, richly illustrated and based on extensive use of historical sources and documents, like most of his later works, caused some bewilderment among contemporary critics and readers. It was hard to tell whether it was entirely fictitious or not. Thus, it often happened that, for example, in public libraries, the book was labelled and catalogued as a historical work. Later criticism has established that *Det lykkelige Arabien*, as well as the following historical novels, were to be regarded as documentary fiction. The English translation is entitled *Arabia Felix*, and was published in 1964.

Det lykkelige Arabien is a mixture of historical travelogue and thriller, against the backdrop of an exotic region of the world. In the years 1761-1767, the Danish court sent a team of explorers to Yemen. The humblest member of the crew, the surveyor and cartographer, Carsten Niebuhr, who eventually reached as far as Bombay, is the only member who survived. Niebuhr survived as a result of his ability to adjust himself to the changing surroundings he encountered during the long and dangerous journey. As it turns out, he is a cultural chameleon, who lacks cultural prejudice and selfishness. Seen from an existentialist point of view, one might say that Niebuhr experiences what life is all about by not forcing it into the direction that he wants, but just riding the tide, so to speak. He had no high expectations of life and let destiny rule. As Hansen formulates it in the novel, "he didn't want to be anything at all or, expressed in a single word, Niebuhr wanted to be happy". This is a characteristic example of Hansen's reasoning: by not striving to reach definite goals in life, one reaches exactly the highest possible aim, the luck of being in tune with fate, of existing without any other reason than mere existence itself.

Just as bare as the deserts of the Middle East in his first novel are, so void are the landscapes in his next one. This book, Jens Munk, is likewise a historical travelogue, but the scenery has now shifted to the ice and snow of the North. Like the deserts of Africa, the nature of the Arctic surpasses the notion of beauty. The Arctic is merely the playground of the unbridled and cyclical powers of nature, a suitable backdrop for man's heroic battle for survival. In the nearly uninhabitable winter of the Arctic, the Danish captain Jens Munk and his crew were forced to hibernate in the winter of 1619-1620. Only Munk and two other crew members survived this ordeal.


Though Jens Munk, just as Carsten Niebuhr, survived, his life nevertheless falls apart in Thorkild Hansen's régie. When Munk years later dies, he does not pass away as peacefully as Niebuhr did. Munk ends his life resentfully, because he had all his life striven to regain his family's good name and re-establish its wealth without having reached either one of these goals. In the agony of death, he hallucinates being aboard his ship again, which seems to symbolize that he, like the mythical Flying Dutchman, is condemned never to find peace. While Niebuhr had come to an understanding with life's meaningless Sisyphean nature, Munk has to toil on forever in anguish,\(^23\) unable to accept what fortune had in store for him. He wanted something else of life, something more, and therefore according to Hansen's reasoning, did not get anything at all.

Thorkild Hansen based these two historical novels on the two main character's diaries. In the case of Jens Munk, Hansen also drew on two of his own publications, the travel-diary *Vinterhavn* and a more or less scientific report of Hansen's explorations and excavations *in situ*. Even the *objective genre* of the scientific report is, in some ways, remodelled by Hansen and thereby becomes a less reliable source or, to put it more clearly, a fictitious text.\(^24\)

The lonesome hero and the mob

Jens Munk's misfortune as an individual foreshadows, in Hansen's novel, the ill course Denmark as a nation embarked upon in the early seventeenth century, as well. The once powerful Danish empire fell rapidly into decline. In Hansen's following novels, a trilogy about the Danish slave trade, personal destiny is — again — connected to general history. In the first volume, *Slavernes kyst* (1967), he focusses on how the slave traders got hold of their merchandise. The second volume, *Slavernes skibe* (1968) depicts the voyage across the ocean, while the last volume, *Slavernes øer* (1970), describes the history of the Virgin Islands under Danish rule.


This so-called 'slave trilogy' starts in the seventeenth century and ends in the nineteenth, when slavery was abolished. It is the result of intense and wide-ranging historical research, and field-research. Reading the first sentence of this impressive series, "We had a fortress in Africa", one involuntarily remembers the opening lines of that other great novel about Africa in Danish literature, *Out of Africa* by Isak Dinesen. But Thorkild Hansen's trilogy is in contrast to Dinesen's depiction of the vicissitudes of aristocratic European settlers in Africa, a crass accusation against European colonialism and the atrocities that were committed in its name.

The 'slave trilogy', is again inhabited by a wide range of contrasting characters and tragic heroes. The most important of them are the marooned slave leader, King June, and the Danish governor who came to declare an end to slavery on the Virgin Islands, Peter von Scholten. Especially the latter is a truly tragic hero. Although he represents a good cause, the abolition of slavery, he nevertheless becomes a tragic hero on a personal level. Von Scholten, like Munk before him, can not conquer his invisible and invincible enemies, the ideologies, social structures, and political elites of his days. And thus, it is again the individual's perspective, the personal interaction with the forces of history, that Hansen focusses on. 25

In some ways, Peter von Scholten has much in common with the central character in Thorkild Hansen's next and last documentary novel *Processen mod Hamsun* (1978), dealing with the prosecution of the Nobel prize-winning Norwegian writer and Nazi-sympathizer, Knut Hamsun. In this book, also a trilogy, Thorkild Hansen focussed on the question how this world famous writer could become a traitor to his own country. Hansen investigates, as well, whether or not the more than eighty year old man was treated fairly when he was tried for high-treason after the Second World War

The question of Hamsun's guilt, and the reconstruction of the events before and during the trial, are presented with great caution, and Hansen never jumps to conclusions. Although the novel does not condemn either the solitary genius Hamsun, nor the general public's feelings of revenge after the war, its publication provoked a deluge of debate in Norway, not always treating Hansen's novel fairly. The response to *Processen mod*...
Hamsun demonstrated once and for all that the treason and the subsequent trial of Hamsun represented a national Norwegian ideological and psychological trauma.26

Apart from the particular circumstances that had led Hamsun astray into sympathizing with the Nazis, Hansen was struck by the fact that Hamsun, notwithstanding old age and increasing deafness, had still been able to compose an illuminating autobiographical book, *Paa gjengrodde Stier* (1949), a memoir that, among other things, revealed how Hamsun had been humiliated by the fact that, after the war, he was treated as mentally deranged.

**Telling a lie is half the truth**

*Processen mod Hamsun* became the last of Thorkild Hansens voluminous documentary novels. In 1996, his widow, Gitte Jæger, and her literary executor, Lars Peter Rømhild, edited and published a collection of Hansen's diary-notes from the period when he worked on the book about the Hamsun trial and the aftermath of it, i.e. the vehement reactions its publication provoked. This selection of diary-entries, *Mellem Brøndkjær og Nørholm. Dagbog fra Hamsun-årene 1975-1978*, bears evidence of the parallels that Hansen saw between the lack of understanding that Hamsun was confronted with and the way he himself was treated after *Processen mod Hamsun* was published.

From 1943 onwards, Thorkild Hansen kept diaries, recorded what he saw and experienced, people he met, books he read, and so on. In this way, he worked to keep the two aspects of his writing separate. This by no means implies that the diaries that appeared under his own supervision were published unmediated. On the contrary, they were thoroughly edited and re-arranged. This becomes also apparent when we compare the diaries prepared by Hansen himself and the recent posthumous volumes of travel-diaries and diaries, which have been edited by others, such as Øer (1993) and *Mellem Brøndkjær og Nørholm* (1996). Both lift a corner of

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the veil that still lies over Hansen's working methods and the reasoning behind the diaries. That is, what caused Hansen to publish these basically private notes at all, especially because there often lay a rather long timespan between the moment of writing and actual date of publication.

Øer is a good example of Hansen's way of proceeding. In Søforhør he hinted that he still had an unpublished diary from a journey to some islands off the Greek coast. Here, he also gave a reason for the fact that this manuscript had not yet been published, namely, "until further notice it is maturing in a safe-deposit box. One must also have reserves to see us through when the hard times come".27 Before he passed away, Thorkild Hansen did not touch the contents of his safe-deposit, because no (financial) adversities occurred. When Øer came out, it was in a more or less authentic shape and could therefore be of interest in the comparison with the earlier published diaries as for example De søde piger.

Usually Thorkild Hansen let his diary-material 'mature'. When he for example plunged into a deep marital and creative crisis in 1971, he took out his notes from a journey to northern Canada which he made in 1964, in connection with research on the book on Jens Munk, and generated from these notes the book Vinterhavn (1972). Hansen's remarks in Søforhør demonstrate clearly that he himself conceived the travel diaries as being raw products from which books could be distilled after thoroughly editing and sharpening the contents. In Hansen's opinion, the fact that the spontaneously jotted impressions needed a firm restructuring and re-writing, by no means reduced their trustworthiness and authenticity. On the contrary, it was precisely the literary intensification and concentration, that were the aims of his working method. Rearranging and processing the textual material would eventually give it its artistic validity. Hence, it was not in the first instance the spontaneous experience that interested Thorkild Hansen most, but — as the earliest published diaries demonstrate — a certain aesthetisized version of it.

The differences between the self-edited and the posthumous (non)-edited diaries are striking in this respect. The two diaries that Øer contains, are clearly taken from the safe-deposit box: one can not help observing that they lack Hansen's usual editorial hand. The texts are

curiously unsubstantial; in a sense, without real meaning. Only once in a while does the reader see a glimpse of Hansen's style and his typical criticism of modern society and culture. These sections give an impression of the main existential and critical themes in Hansen's oeuvre, but they are very rare indeed.

This textual sogginess goes for the posthumous diaries in *Mellem Brøndkjær og Norholm. Dagbog fra Hamsun-årene 1975-1978*, as well. One of the problems of the stature of these documents is that they only contain a fraction of the original material. The reader is struck by how many entries must have been omitted, without the editors accounting for these gaps.28 We know this, because Hansen has claimed that he kept his diary very meticulously, writing basically every single day from the early 1970's.29

The diaries edited by Hansen himself, *De sørde piger* and *Et atelier i Paris*, demonstrate the author's interest in his own and other people's psychological idiosyncrasies, always on the search for the driving forces behind their acts and behaviour. In the novels, one can see this in his modes of representing real people such as Jens Munk, Peter von Scholten, Carsten Niebuhr, and others. Hansen brought them to life by means of fiction. But in the diaries and in *Søforhør*, he gathered the bits and pieces that, put together, comprised his own existence. The important thing for Hansen is the way in which he recounts his life and times; not the factual correctness of the story, but the appeal it has on the audience. Telling only part of the truth is, in his work, often more exciting than telling it all.

To judge from *Søforhør*, Thorkild Hansen regarded himself as a man who had managed to fullfill the life that was destined for him. In a somewhat nineteenth century fashion, he had accepted the life and career that was written in the stars for him. Thus, he complied with the fundamental conditions of traditional autobiography, that is, in retrospect to become conscious of the crucial phases of one's personal development,

and in this way deduct patterns which lead to an understanding of one's own individuality and personality.

In Søforhør he employs 'outdated' notions like fortune, destiny, and luck, which seem to be surprisingly accurate in Hansen's case. One of the questions that Hansen elaborates in this so-called interview, is the balance between mere luck and determination in life. The sequence in which he tells about the way he got on his first archaeological expedition to the Middle East is especially noteworthy.\textsuperscript{30} Meditations of this kind reveal that Hansen was never a great philosopher, but a wonderful story-teller with a good eye for human interest.

**The literary gum-shoe**

One might say, though, that Hansen, judging from Søforhør, was an extremely lucky man. He was a successful, self-made, man, who had been able to obtain exactly what destiny had in store for him, just as he had depicted in the case of Carsten Niebuhr in Det lykkelige Arabien. That is to say, if we take the 'story' of Hansen's life, as it is presented in the diaries and Søforhør, at its face-value. The reader grows suspicious when the later published material is taken into account. Maybe Hansen wanted so strongly that the diaries with his 'ideal' view of his life, that he urged the material into a certain direction.

Poul Behrendt has recently come up with a voluminous book entitled Djævlepagent. En historie om Thorkild Hansen (1995) in which he acts as a literary detective who tries to unravel Thorkild Hansen's earliest years in Paris. This huge, two-volume, work differs quite fundamentally from what one in more general terms would want to call a literary biography and, for that matter, does not have much in common with a novel either.\textsuperscript{31} It seems, moreover, to be quite difficult to determine what kind of genre we are dealing with. One of the paradoxes he reader is confronted with is the fact


that Behrendt's book has the formal appearance of a scholarly biographical study. It contains numerous notes, references, historical and factual commentary, resumés of interviews and discussions, as well as a number of photographs. All of these are phenomena that do link the text more clearly to a non-fiction than a fictitious genre and, thus, contradict Behrendt's claim that his work is not a biography.

The question here is, of course, whether or not this kind of work is of any interest for the scholarly study of literary biography at all. Behrendt uncovers a number of uncomfortable details in Thorkild Hansen's life in Paris, such as speculative money transactions, some blackmarket trade and petty forgery, but the main objective of this book seems to be to demonstrate the elaborate ways in which Hansen tried to conceal his homo- or bisexual life in these years from his parents and friends back home in Denmark. Although the notion may revolt us, the kind of investigation Behrendt has undertaken in Djævlepagten is of some importance to scholarly approaches. It can not be denied that we are depending on it, in order to be able to determine how, and to what extent Thorkild Hansen fabricated the image of his life. We need this rather grubby gum-shoe work to judge the degree of artificiality involved.

Conceived as the 'story' Djævlepagten claims to be, the resemblances between Behrendt's approach and Thorkild Hansen's working-method are strikingly related. Thorkild Hansen appears in Behrendt's régie more or less as a character in a novel, in the same way as Hansen had recreated characters as Peter von Scholten, Carsten Niebuhr and Knut Hamsun. All these characters were tragic historical personae, whose existence was not primarily placed in the context of historical circumstances, but above all understood within the framework of timeless, mythological correspondences. Thus, Behrendt reconstructs the story, or maybe more precisely, the legend, that Hansen had adopted to understand his existence with. Another similarity between Hansen's and Behrendt's method, is the extensive use of documentation and source-material.

In his diaries Thorkild Hansen created an image of himself, as if it was a character in one of the novels. The borders between the two modes of narration he operated with — novel and diary — are vague and permeable. Therefore, his diaries are formally constructed in accordance with the classical Bildungsroman, that is, they are organized around fixed thematic
structures with personal development as the clear back-bone of the narrative, focussing on existential crises and so forth, always striving for the goal of individuation.

Behrendt's work is mainly concentrated on a phase in Hansen's life when he had barely begun writing at all. His sources are Hansen's diaries, interviews with people associated with Hansen, letters to his friends and relatives, and so forth. The diaries are rather unreliable sources. Furthermore, Behrendt does not take the novels into account at all. This is peculiar, because the novels at least are available to all of us, and we have, thus, the opportunity of keeping a critical eye on what Behrendt is doing and checking his findings. This elementary scholarly requirement is not met by *Djævlepagten*, and probably never can be met, due to the fact that the original material either was destroyed by Hansen himself or is in the custody of his heirs and publisher. Writing about Thorkild Hansen's life seems to be a kind of shadow-boxing.

One of the substantial results of *Djævlepagten* is, that Behrendt elaborately proves that Thorkild Hansen's diaries and travel-notes have to regarded in the same way as his novels, i.e.: as fundamentally fictitious texts and not as some sort of factual documents. Behrendt formulates his findings as follows: the diaries do not deal with "what has been, but with what should have been". It is nevertheless a pity that the scope of his analysis is limited to the diaries and does not include the novels as well.

Behrendt's book is an interesting mixture of *paparazzo*-journalism — literary voyeurism if you like — and biography. But the amount of new material that is uncovered in *Djævlepagten* is too limited from a scholarly perspective. And, one might add, wasn't Behrendt's main conclusion — that Hansen largely edited and to some extent wrote his diaries anew — already clear from the start, if one compares *De søde piger* with *Øer* and *Et atelier i Paris*? Taking recent scholarship in to account, one can only reach the conclusion that Behrendt's results are not so spectacular as they initially appear to be.

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Maybe the best description of *Djævlepagten* would be to call it a 'mythography', i.e. an attempt to clarify how Hansen himself had engineered the image of his life in concordance with the myth that he wanted it to resemble and, thus, traded reality and everyday existence for the mirage of living in a higher mythological unity.

The bottom line is that the only circumstance that makes Thorkild Hansen's life in Paris more interesting than most other people's lives is the fact that he later became a rather famous author. To judge from the cryptical words he wrote in his posthumously published essay in the newspaper, *Politiken*, a week after he passed away, he must have been well aware of this rather banal fact:

> of all human beings writers are the least interesting ones, ridiculously self-absorbed, sordid, envious, pussilanimous, in most cases bad company. The truly great writers are those who live in their characters.34

**Private private-life?**

On a symbolic level, Hansen merged with the characters he had created in his novels and the personality he meticulously had staged in his diaries. The paradox in Thorkild Hansen's *oeuvre* is, that he not only created a number of characters in his novels, but created his own character in the private-public genre of his diaries, as well.

Thorkild Hansen's sudden death, during a sailing trip in the Caribbean, may be regarded with due symbolism. For him, sailing the seas was identical with putting one's existence in the hands of the unpredictable forces of nature and destiny. He had in *Jens Munk* pointed to the fact that the chemical composition of seawater was identical with that of human tears,35 a circumstance that was no surprise to him. It corresponded with his all-encompassing view of existence as part of a mythological complex or system. To understand this, and to make the system work, meant for

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Hansen hard work. Never did he present the characters in his novels, nor his own personality in the diaries and autobiography, in a spontaneously and unprocessed manner, but always in a contrived aesthetic one. This meticulous reckoning and constructing is denied by the opening lines of *De søde piger*: "Fine. I have decided to send it out without fiddling around too much with it." We now know that this was not the case at all. Hansen had worked long and with great care on the raw-material of his diaries and remodelled it into the form that he wanted it to have, so that it would fit with the myth that he wanted to create about himself. He, thus, developed a unique double private-life and a similar double private documentation about himself. When Hansen started working on his diaries, he ordered his friends and relatives to return the 'intimate private-documents', i.e. letters and so on, he had sent them earlier. By doing so he wanted to assure that no disharmony would be perceived between the image he wanted to create and the actual circumstances as they had taken place in reality.

Poul Behrendt argues that Hansen, due to the fact that he displayed and exploited his private life, made thereby a deal with the devil himself, hence the title of his book:

he was forced to erect a particular, intimate, privatelife, which did not coincide with the privatelife that had to be published and displayed to others.

The question still to be answered is, whether it will ever be possible to write a comprehensive biography of Thorkild Hansen. The answer will probably be no. The real issue here is not the question whether or not it is

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36 Sometimes reality seems to fit into the systematic patterns Hansen wanted it to have. It is for example quite astonishing that Hansen, in his diary *Mellem Brondkjaer og Nørholm*, in 1978 pointed at Max von Sydow as the actor to play the part of Knut Hamsun if the book ever was made into a motion picture. In the meantime, Jan Troell’s film, *Hamsun*, has been made, with Von Sydow playing the title-role.

37 Thorkild Hansen, *De søde piger*, p. 7.

possible to write a 'life and letters' biography of Hansen, but whether someone will be able, and willing, to write a so-called 'forfatterskabs-biografi', a thorough analysis of Thorkild Hansen's works.
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