



## Article

# Tove Ditlevsen's Witness of Trauma as a Source of Hope

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**Abstract:** The defining life experience of the Danish writer Tove Ditlevsen (1917–1976) was domestic trauma, both externally- and self-inflicted. Born at the end of the first World War amid an economic depression, Ditlevsen grew up in a hardscrabble working-class neighborhood of Copenhagen, lived through the Nazi occupation of her country during World War II, cycled through unhealthy sexual relationships, underwent illegal abortions and unnecessary surgeries, suffered from depression and prescription drug addiction, and died by suicide at the age of fifty-eight. Instead of repressing or denying her traumatic experiences, however, Ditlevsen chose to confront, reinscribe, and transform them in her literary texts, finding and offering hope that exposing secrets to public scrutiny can lead to acceptance and healing. In her searingly candid poetry, fiction, essays, and memoirs, Ditlevsen exemplifies the efficacy of working through trauma: she confronts the fraught choices and abusive relationships by which her life was shaped candidly and unapologetically as an act of survival. In the process of bearing witness on the printed page to domestic trauma and its consequences, Ditlevsen models the vital role of literature, for both readers and writers, in documenting, processing, and overcoming traumatic experiences.

**Keywords:** Tove Ditlevsen; Danish literature; domestic trauma



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## 1. Introduction

“In the morning, there was hope” (Ditlevsen 2021, p. 3).<sup>1</sup> The opening line of *The Copenhagen Trilogy*, the three-part memoir of Danish writer Tove Ditlevsen (1917–1976), establishes hope as a fundamental organizing concept underpinning the author's unsparing, unblushing first-person account of her life. Ditlevsen's decision to foreground hope may seem ironic, given that her personal life was highly traumatic, shaped by grinding poverty, emotionally abusive relationships, drug addiction, illegal abortions, and suicide attempts. The recurrence of hope at the core of Ditlevsen's texts, both non-fictional and fictional, not only underscores how resilient and resourceful a writer Ditlevsen was, however; it also illuminates how brave and bold her approach to dealing with “quiet” or “family” trauma (Kaplan 2005, p. 1) is. To some degree, Ditlevsen's works exemplify the type of “narrative exposure therapy”, conceptualized by Honoré de Balzac in his story “Adieu” (1830) and developed since the late 1980s in clinical practice, that involves re-living traumatic events in order to overcome them (Binion 2011, p. 3). Ditlevsen's straightforward approach has even more in common with Dominick LaCapra's notions of “working-through”, by which a person attempts to gain critical, self-reflective distance from a traumatic experience, and “empathic unsettlement” that sensitizes the reader to the trauma being described (LaCapra 2014). Instead of concealing or suppressing the traumatic and problematic elements of her life, Ditlevsen chose to confront, reinscribe, and transform them in her literary texts, finding and offering hope that exposing one's darkest secrets to public scrutiny can lead to healing, while allowing readers to develop empathy by sharing in the process. In her more than three dozen books of fiction, poetry, essays, and life-writing, Ditlevsen bears frank witness to both the domestic traumas she experienced and caused and the need to hold on to hope, even when doing so opens the door to more pain. While many responses to trauma involve repression, shame, and guilt, Ditlevsen chose a different path, one that prioritizes

witnessing as a source of hope and healing. In exposing her own suffering to public scrutiny at a time when propriety demanded secrecy, Ditlevsen models an innovative, courageous way of dealing with trauma by witnessing it within a fictionalized life-writing framework.

## 2. Life Writing as Resource and Therapy

Everything Ditlevsen experienced, however banal, became material, either directly or indirectly, for her literary works. This is not to suggest that all of Ditlevsen's works should be read as autobiographical, but simply to establish that Ditlevsen's realist aesthetic drew heavily on the world and people she knew, including her neighborhood, parents, lovers, and peers. Antje Petersen goes so far as to argue that Ditlevsen "overdoes, redoes, reverses, fictionalizes, and copies herself" so freely in her texts that "there is no difference between the various [fiction and non-fiction] genres of her autobiographical writings" (Petersen 1992, p. 249). By fictionalizing her life and infusing her fiction with her lived experiences in various ways, Ditlevsen not only challenges the limits of life writing as a genre but also calls into question "the supposedly secure limits of selfhood" (McCooley 2017, p. 277). Is the Ditlevsen credited on the title page the same person as the Ditlevsen described in the text? Which of the versions of her on the page is the authentic one? Does such a self even exist? Does it matter to the text? By making it impossible for the reader to pin down the author/subject, Ditlevsen directs the reader's attention to the traumatic experiences themselves, rather than the person experiencing them.

While many of her novels, poems, and stories engage with her own life experiences in thought-provoking ways, Ditlevsen's searingly candid memoirs, published in Danish between 1967 and 1971 and released in complete English translation in 2021, caused a sensation for their brutal honesty about the traumas she had endured. In these texts, Ditlevsen chronicles the financial and emotional poverty of her childhood, the pain of her thwarted aspirations and bleak disappointments, and the devastating consequences of these experiences for her mental and physical health in adulthood. Although she famously joked to a reporter "if people only knew what she had *not* written about" (Winge 1999, p. 109), Ditlevsen's candor can feel very bleak. *New Yorker* book critic Hilton Als describes Ditlevsen's memoirs as a "catastrophe in a box", a "literature of disaster", built "brick by brick, entombing within it all the people who couldn't love her and whom she couldn't love" (Als 2021). Yet at the same time, her writing is also wryly funny, dauntless, and poignant, reflecting the author's attentive, thoughtful engagement with other people and the world around her.

Despite their realistic aesthetic, Ditlevsen's works are largely indifferent to current events; instead, they focus intently on her characters' private, everyday pain—due to rejection, depression, addiction, unhappy marriages, and unhappier divorces, among other things—and the often unethical choices they make to manage their pain, including infidelity, lies, drugs, and medical interventions. Ditlevsen's texts illuminate the fraught ethical relations by which her own life was bounded—from her involvement with one lover who gave her an illegal abortion and got her addicted to Demerol to her reliance on another who abandoned his family for her sake and persuaded all the local doctors to withhold opioids from her—and foreground the vital role of literature in documenting, processing, and coping with the "quiet" trauma of many people's everyday lives. As Petersen notes, Ditlevsen's was "a life suspended between extremes: on the one hand a bourgeois existence with husband and children and on the other, a writer suffering from depression, psychoses, and addiction to pharmaceuticals" (Petersen 1992, p. 246). Threading through Ditlevsen's works is the recurring hope that each new attempt at finding happiness will be more successful than the last and will compensate in some way for her earlier failures and disappointments. Yet while hope is often celebrated as the antidote to fear and sorrow, this obstinate, often counterfactual belief in the possibility of improvement, of wish-fulfillment, of dreams that come true, proves to be itself the source of much of Ditlevsen's trauma as well as her literary success. While the traumas Ditlevsen endured

were the wellspring of her writing, they also fed her obsessions and addictions, ultimately driving her to suicide in 1976, at the age of fifty-eight.

This article sketches out how Ditlevsen confronts trauma in several of her works, primarily her memoirs but also selected short stories and poems, in order to suggest that Ditlevsen be read as a theorist of trauma in her own right. Her work engages with long-standing debates about whether trauma necessarily incapacitates people or contains within itself the key to healing. Bessel van der Kolk, for example, asserts that “trauma, by definition, is the result of exposure to an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms people’s coping mechanisms” (van der Kolk 1997, p. 243), but Ditlevsen’s writing is itself a coping mechanism she uses highly effectively to deal with her own trauma and mediate her experiences to others. In contrast to psychiatrists like Judith Herman who argue that “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (Herman 1992, p. 1), Ditlevsen manages her trauma, whether externally- or self-inflicted, by naming and narrating it, in all its messiness and rawness, for her readers. Written while she was an inpatient in a mental hospital, decades after the events they describe, Ditlevsen’s memoirs in particular illuminate the belief, which philosophy professor Susan Brison and psychologist Richard McNally endorse, that “speaking trauma pulls it from the realm of painful obscurity and hastens the process of rehabilitation” (Pederson 2014, p. 338).

Ditlevsen’s need to work through her emotions on paper anticipates both LaCapra’s theory and Brison’s assertion that “the communicative act of bearing witness to traumatic events . . . transforms traumatic memories into narratives that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world” (Brison 2002, p. xi). From a young age, Ditlevsen was clearly a person who wrote to live, both in the sense of earning a living, but also in order to process the consequences of her own and other people’s choices on her life. Describing the healing power of the “light waves of words” that stream through her mind when she writes, Ditlevsen affirms the power inherent in subjecting her memories to the bright light of public scrutiny. As she tells it, writing was never a choice for her, but a matter of psychological survival. Ditlevsen began writing poetry in grade school that she was certain would prove her to be a child genius, but with little success. After a children’s page editor for a local magazine declined to publish her precocious efforts, the younger Ditlevsen declares, “Even though no one else cares for my poems, I have to write them because it dulls the sorrow and longing in my heart” (Ditlevsen 2021, p. 92). Still, the narrator is not dismissive of her younger self’s fantasies, affirming instead the emotional need they filled and acknowledging the ambition and ignorance they were rooted in. By witnessing her trauma and her hopes on the printed page, Ditlevsen found a new, immortal lease on life. As she exclaims at the end of the second volume of her memoirs, *Ungdom/Youth* (1969), upon seeing her first book in print: “It can’t be taken back anymore. It is irretrievable. The book will always exist, regardless of how my fate takes shape” (Ibid., p. 223). This passage suggests that telling stories was a way for Ditlevsen to make the world real and bring it under control in ways that she was not able to in her chaotic, intimate relationships.

Unlike daytime talk shows that wallow in their guests’ recounted suffering, however, Ditlevsen empowers herself and her characters by the candor with which she depicts trauma. She allows her textual victims to speak from an intimate but unsentimental perspective, narrating their experiences of shocking, heartbreaking events in a matter-of-fact way that reminds her readers of how common such experiences are. In her memoirs and essays, which generally deal with first-hand experiences that map in some way onto the events of her life, Ditlevsen is blunt in her depiction of such common domestic problems as her parents’ financial and emotional failures, her own impulsive and deliberate bad choices, and her partners’ ineptitude and self-interest. In her poetry, novels, and short stories, she transposes her pain into more strictly fictional settings, a strategy that allows her step back from the immediacy of her own life to examine the interplay of hope and trauma in mundane contexts, from hair salons to cafés, and everyday encounters between neighbors, partners, employers, future mothers- and daughters-in-law, and aging parents and their children. In all these texts, Ditlevsen does not simply and uncritically represent

her life experiences, but, to borrow phrasing used by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their work on literary and historical witnessing, she reinscribes, translates, radically rethinks, and fundamentally reworks her experiences (Felman and Laub 1992, p. xv) in order to render them useful to her readers and herself.

As she bears narrative witness of the plethora of traumas large and small that add up to a human life and works through her own complicity in them, Ditlevsen also models, imperfectly and believably, how to cope with such traumas. In refusing to repress or bury her negative experiences and choices, she exemplifies how, as Terrence Des Pres contends, “survival and bearing witness become reciprocal acts” in the aftermath of trauma (Des Pres 1980, p. 31). Writing about survivors of Nazi death camps, Des Pres’s focus is on the “capacity of men and women to live beneath the pressure of protracted crisis, to sustain terrible damage in mind and body and yet be there, sane, alive, still human” and to testify of their own survival; in so doing, he argues, survival becomes visible as an “experience with a definite structure, neither random nor regressive nor amoral” (Des Pres 1980, p. 10). The sociohistorical context of the traumas Ditlevsen describes is very different from the extraordinary setting of Des Pres’ interviewees; it is a context nearly every reader will be familiar with—the intimate spaces of homes and families where the everyday traumas of ordinary lives play out. Ditlevsen’s accounts of her own survival and that of her characters exhibit a definite structure of recurring self-acceptance and hopeful persistence in the face of pain by witnessing and working through the aftermath of trauma. As Sherilyn Hellberg argues of Ditlevsen’s fractured modernist novel *Ansigtene/Faces* (1968), writing about despair on her own terms allows Ditlevsen’s text to function “as a site of resistance” to the patriarchal structures of society and the literary establishment (Hellberg 2021, p. 111). Instead of being ashamed of the things she has done and had done to her, and allowing that shame to crush her, Ditlevsen owns them publicly, builds on them creatively, and uses them as a foundation for achieving healing and growth through her writing.

### 3. Rejection as Motivation for Achievement

Born as the second child of Ditlev and Alfrida Ditlevsen on 14 December 1917, near the end of the first World War amid an economic depression in her native Denmark, Tove Irma Margit Ditlevsen grew up in a hardscrabble working-class neighborhood of Copenhagen. Her life wasn’t directly blighted by war, disease, or abuse, but the grinding weight of unrealized dreams and hopes took its toll on her. In her autobiographical and fictional depictions of this period, Ditlevsen chronicles how poverty and her father’s persistent unemployment scarred her childhood, causing friction with her parents and thwarting her desire for higher education, while she turned gradually outward in search of validation in the face of her mother’s emotional inaccessibility. Mette Winge asserts that Ditlevsen’s “interactions with her mother determined the shape of Ditlevsen’s entire life and work . . . These parents had an enormous impact on her: the father who shut her out instead of supporting her and the mother who alternated between cold silence and, less frequently, a more agreeable mood” (Winge 1999, p. 99). Instead of continuing her education after primary school, as she desperately wanted and her teachers encouraged her to, Ditlevsen had to leave school after ninth grade. She entered the workforce reluctantly, marking time in dead-end jobs—as a nanny, dishwasher, stockgirl, and clerk—until she was finally able to embark on the life path mapped out for her of marrying a “stable skilled worker who doesn’t drink” (Ditlevsen 2021, p. 92), for whom she would keep house and bear children.

Yet, as she tells the story later, even as she eagerly anticipated this domestic path (albeit without learning to cook or clean, since her mother can’t teach her either skill), Ditlevsen dreamed of becoming a writer, a quest that dominates the first volume of her memoirs. Her father, who had himself aspired to be a writer but struggled instead to hold down menial jobs, provides her with books, including an edition of *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, “without which my childhood would have been gray and dreary and impoverished”, she recalls (Ibid., p. 20). When she confides in him her desire to be a poet like Maxim Gorky, however, he can’t see beyond the gendered expectations of the time; she reports that he

immediately “frowned and said severely, ‘Don’t be a fool! A girl can’t be a poet’” (Ibid., pp. 20–21). Although her mother regards books with suspicion, declaring “people turn strange from reading. Everything written in books is a lie” (Ibid., p. 7), Ditlevsen finds both comfort and safety in the words she writes. She learns to retreat into herself for emotional safety, seeking a “figurative inner room or untouched sanctum” where she can be free to dream and create (Winge 1999, p. 99). Even as a child, when dealing with her mother’s coldness and emotional cruelty, Ditlevsen would compose texts as a shield: “Inside of me long, mysterious words began to crawl across my soul like a protective membrane. . . . When these light waves of words streamed through me, I knew that my mother couldn’t do anything else to me because she had stopped being important to me” (Ditlevsen 2021, p. 6). Ditlevsen learned early on to explore her pain in words, often even imagining herself into experiences, like the loss of a child, that she had not yet experienced, in order to evoke an emotional response in herself.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Ditlevsen begins *Barndom/Childhood* (1967), the first volume of her memoirs, with an extended simile for hope, which, she says, “sat like a fleeting gleam of light in my mother’s smooth black hair that I never dared touch; it lay on my tongue with the sugar and the lukewarm oatmeal I was slowly eating while I looked at my mother’s slender, folded hands that lay motionless on the newspaper, on top of the reports of Spanish flu and the Treaty of Versailles” (Ibid., p. 3). Hope for Ditlevsen is thus, like her mother’s approval, always elusive, sweet and desirable but unreliable and dangerous. The narrator’s offhand mention of both the global influenza pandemic, which devastated an entire generation but would hardly have impinged upon the consciousness of the two- or three-year old child Ditlevsen would have been at the time, and the diplomatic resolution of World War I not only grounds her story in a particular time and place but also evokes the interconnectedness of suffering and hope that permeates Ditlevsen’s work.

Although some of her novels address recent historical events, Ditlevsen’s memoirs make only fleeting mention of the geopolitical turmoil she lived through, including Denmark’s occupation by Nazi troops during World War II and the country’s fierce, often violent resistance movement to which her second husband contributed. Instead of depicting the collective traumas these events caused her country, Ditlevsen’s narrator focuses on her own attempts to escape from the socioeconomic milieu she was raised in, establish herself as a writer, negotiate sexual and emotional relationships, and deal with debilitating prescription drug addiction. Her persistent hopes, first of attaining her mother’s affection and her father’s approval of her writing and later for the promised fulfilment of marriage and motherhood, raise her expectations so high that the banality of reality is inevitably a disappointment. Yet the rejections Ditlevsen experiences motivate her to attain her goals anyway, despite the disapproval and disdain of those closest to her.

While her memoirs are spare and unsentimental, Ditlevsen’s short fiction vividly illustrates the volatile cocktail of unrealistic ideals and disillusioning reality that marked the author’s young adulthood. In the story “The Umbrella”, the newlywed protagonist Helga conflates her disappointed hopes for the completion that she thought marriage would bring her with an enduring desire to acquire an elegant silk umbrella, like one she remembered seeing in her childhood. Helga married in haste but soon realizes that her husband “had been a stranger to her for quite some time—ever since the day she had gone to him with such high expectations, and departed with such deep disappointment;” to cope with this bitter insight, she saves up and finally buys the coveted umbrella, which she idealizes as “something to hold tightly, to admire, to believe in, to acknowledge” (Ditlevsen 2022, pp. 14, 16). Although a banal object, the umbrella represents Helga’s ambitions for her marriage and her future life; in it, she hopes to find the emotional fulfillment that her marriage has failed to provide.

Helga’s ecstatic joy at finally owning the coveted silk umbrella lasts only a few hours. When her husband comes home, he immediately breaks it over his knee, invalidating both Helga’s fantasy of emotional fulfillment and her hopes for future happiness. In



shock, Helga reflects somberly that “she could never be the owner of an umbrella. It was only natural—it made sense that it was ruined. She had set herself up against a secret law steering her inner world. Few people, even once in their lives, dare to make the inexpressible real” (Ibid., p. 18). The secret law governing Helga’s life seems to be that we will not get the things we hope for, and that self-denial is our best defense against disappointment. This devastating opinion is articulated without even a hint of cynicism, but with resignation and sorrow, emotions that Ditlevsen herself was intimately familiar with and which she conveys in many of her works. At the same time, however, simply by writing the story and making the inexpressible tensions of Helga’s life visible, Ditlevsen undermines its apparently hopeless message. By working through her character’s sense of inadequacy and self-defeat, Ditlevsen draws the poison from such negative self-talk and opens up a space of possibility.

Ditlevsen navigates the tension between rejection and motivation particularly poignantly in her poetry. In one of her most haunting poems, “Der bor en ung pige” (There lives a young girl), from her 1955/59 collection *Kvindesind* (A woman’s mind), Ditlevsen’s narrator, plagued by the existence of “a young girl within me who will not die”, answers her earlier self’s accusation of having mismanaged their life with the confession, “I have sold your dreams for a house and for bread/and pulled you down into pain that looks something like happiness” (Ditlevsen 2001, p. 147, my translation). As in Ditlevsen’s own life, the source of the speaker’s trauma is her inability to realize her youthful aspirations for joy and her guilt over having aspired to make the inexpressible real. The reader’s empathetic unsettlement is activated by the speaker’s obvious regret and discomfort about the cost of her choices. Yet in saying those words to her younger self, the speaker is able to achieve a measure of inner peace and hope, realizing that “there lives a young girl within me that never can die, / until I myself tire of believing that I once was her” (Ibid.).

#### 4. The Bitterness of Successful Conformity to Social Norms

One of the recurring obsessions of Ditlevsen’s life, which competed with her determination to become a writer, was her relentless pursuit of advantageous marriages, often at the cost of her happiness. Proving Tolstoi’s point at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, each of Ditlevsen’s four marriages was unhappy in its own way, as were her parents’, her aunts’, and her brother’s marriages. In her memoirs, poetry, and literary texts like the abovementioned story “The Umbrella”, Ditlevsen works through the problems of marriage by means of repeated depictions of marital relationships that constrain, even suffocate, the participants in them, like the pair of shoes half a size too small that torture the newlywed female protagonist of the story “Break Time”, discussed below. Neither happiness, pleasure, nor harmonious companionships seems to be the goal of these relationships. Instead, sex, marriage, and even motherhood function as tools for securing a partner, not for emotional fulfillment or sexual gratification, but for social and financial stability.

In the world of transactional intimate relationships Ditlevsen describes, love is subordinate to security, even an obstacle to it. For example, in the story “Erotoman”, when a young man tells his girlfriend after sex that he loves her, the girl starts crying, not from sentimentality but from frustration that he has placed this emotional burden on her. She speculates “whether she might love him after all and whether she—in a while—someday—might also be able to tell him that, so that it wouldn’t be so embarrassing and lonely for him to have those three words floating aimlessly around the room. She cried a little more to prolong the sweet, passionless moment, and because there was so much to cry about, now she finally had begun” (Ditlevsen 1968, p. 49, my translation). In this story, emotions are equated with weakness and self-indulgence, unsuited to the important business of establishing one’s place in the world.

Contrary to idealized depictions of the past as a time when sexual activity was always confined to marriage, sexuality is a highly visible, pervasive part of Ditlevsen’s texts, both as a threat to social respectability and a tool for social mobility. In the second volume of Ditlevsen’s memoirs, *Youth*, the narrator reflects at length on the illicit sexuality of local

girls who fall pregnant in their teens and of another idolized neighbor—the owner of the silk umbrella—who is driven from their apartment building by outraged matrons for entertaining gentlemen guests in her rooms. The narrator is smart enough to notice that her own parents' marriage took place only two months before her brother was born, though, and she is initially determined to preserve her virginity as leverage in pursuit of her goal of marrying a man with reliable employment. The self that the young Ditlevsen shapes in her early poetry is a mature, sexually active persona, informed by the casual sexuality of the people around her and her own desire for intense emotional experiences, but it is out of step with her actual life experiences. Her first publication, which appeared in the journal *Vild Hvede/Wild Wheat* in 1937, was the poem "To My Dead Child", which was inspired not by the birth or loss of a child, neither of which Ditlevsen had yet experienced, but by a fleeting romantic encounter with a young Danish man on his way to fight in the Spanish Civil War.

Yet despite Ditlevsen's strategic efforts at finding a husband, marriage for economic stability and social mobility initially eluded her. As she tells it in her memoirs, most of the men she meets were unemployed, a widespread problem in 1930s Denmark. At age seventeen, she gets engaged after a two-week courtship to a collections agent, which delights her mother, who "thinks Aksel looks stable", but the relationship founders, in part because their initial sexual encounter is unsatisfying—"I clench my teeth and lie listening to his warm, kind, reassuring words. The whole thing isn't so bad, and he doesn't utter any animal-like sounds"—but, more importantly, because his parents warn her off, cautioning that "he'll never be able to support a wife" (Ditlevsen 2021, pp. 172–73). Although she protests that she can support herself by writing poetry, she concludes that her fiancé isn't "suited to be a lifelong mate to a girl who wants to break into high society someday" (Ibid., p. 174). While her girlfriends sleep around and play men off against each other, Ditlevsen is determined to take hold of the brass ring, even if she doesn't love the man she marries, in order to insulate herself against the financial misery of her childhood.

With this goal in mind, young Ditlevsen decides, before even meeting him, to marry Viggo F. Møller, the editor of *Wild Wheat*, who is thirty-three years her senior and who arranges for the publication of her first volume of poetry, *Pigesind* (A Girl's Mind). Their courtship aligns with the outbreak of World War II, which features in Ditlevsen's memoirs primarily as an inconvenience that threatens her dreams. Even after England declares war on Germany in 1939, she is preoccupied by her own affairs, wondering: "Will my poetry collection come out now? Will daily life continue at all? Will Viggo F. marry me when the whole world is burning?" (Ditlevsen 2021, p. 222). A confirmed bachelor, Møller is a reluctant suitor who needs persuading—Ditlevsen learns to hide everything about herself that is ordinary, "everything that could make him have misgivings about marrying me . . . the fact that I use lipstick and rouge and that I like to look at myself in the mirror and turn my neck around almost out of joint in order to see what I look like in profile" (Ibid., p. 223). They marry twenty days after the German invasion of Denmark, but he soon proves to be a distracted, impotent, and yet jealous husband.

Like her first sexual experience, Ditlevsen's first marriage turns out to be an emotional disappointment, even though it opens some professional doors for her. Even as a new bride, she sleeps alone in the living room, since her longstanding bachelor husband can't get used to sharing a room with another person and is allegedly unable to consummate their marriage (Winge 1999, p. 100). Incapable of cooking and uninterested in cleaning, Ditlevsen turns to her mother for emotional companionship and spends her time working on her first novel. Even though Møller had initially provided Ditlevsen access to the publishing world, she keeps the novel, a fictionalized account of her childhood, secret from her husband to avoid getting his advice about it. As she describes it, her novel is the only thing that is hers, especially since the prosperous Møller turns out to be a penny pincher who begrudges her every purchase.

Informed perhaps by this unsatisfying relationship, the lack of sexual and emotional intimacy between marital partners is a recurring theme in Ditlevsen's texts. In the story

“The Little Shoes”, for example, Ditlevsen’s female narrator Helene reflects on the six months since she has last had sex with her husband. She recalls how, the last time, “it was as if with all his strength but in vain, he had tried to force the old feelings to appear, and afterward he had looked at her for a long time with a mute, reproachful stare” (Ditlevsen 2022, p. 142). Her husband’s sexual indifference is one of the factors that nourishes Helene’s depression, aggravated by the perceived “sexual superiority” of her housemaid Hanne, who is younger, coarser, and more physically uninhibited. Many of Ditlevsen’s poems, particularly in the collection *Lille Verden: Digte* (1932) [Small World: Poems], explore erotic themes, including women’s sexual desire, jealousy, and infidelity.

In her memoirs, Ditlevsen works through the complexities of her own first marriage and its traumas. She describes how, although grateful that Møller has deigned to marry her, she quickly realizes that marrying Møller to fulfill her mother’s expectations and get a leg up in the world had come at a terrible emotional cost. Ditlevsen transforms this straightforward realization into a powerful metaphor in her story “Break Time”, whose nameless young newlywed female protagonist sits alone in a café instead of going home to her much older husband, thinking longingly of her active working life before her marriage. As soon as she sits down, she kicks off her shoes and rubs her aching feet, confessing to the reader that she has never told her husband that the shoes he bought for her while they were dating were the wrong size and that she has continued to buy the same size ever since to preserve the illusion of his infallibility. Like Ditlevsen’s attempts to conceal her own ordinariness from Viggo F. Møller, the story’s protagonist doesn’t want to risk disillusioning her husband about the girl he has married. “To him, she was twenty years old, fine and light and clean in mind and body. . . . That’s how he eventually turned her into a liar, which she wasn’t by nature” (Ditlevsen 1982, p. 39).<sup>2</sup> The pretense required to conform to her partner’s expectations has a crippling effect on her, but she doesn’t know how to assert her own identity other than loitering aimlessly in the café while her husband waits impatiently for her until she finally squeezes her feet back into the cramped shoes and goes out to meet him and resume her too-small life. The shoe metaphor that nearly every reader can identify with serves as a direct conduit to empathic unsettlement.

Unlike the protagonist of “Break Time”, Ditlevsen refused to stay in her ill-fitting first marriage, which ended in 1942, but, as she reports in her memoirs, she then lurched from one unhealthy relationship to another. She leaves Møller for the provocative Danish writer and artist Piet Hein (1905–1996), who calls her “Kitten”, puts her up in a boarding house, and promises to marry her when she gets a divorce, only to abscond to Jutland with a wealthy young woman instead. She then gets pregnant by an economics student named Ebbe Munk who offers her little besides a love of literature and a drinking problem. Ironically, given her determination to gain financial security through marriage, they have to live off her income from writing while Ebbe volunteers for the Danish resistance movement during the war. They marry in 1942, but after their daughter Helle is born in 1943, Ditlevsen loses her libido and Ebbe starts cheating on her. When she gets pregnant again, she is determined to get an abortion, over her husband’s protests, even though it is illegal, dangerous, and difficult to arrange, so that “things will return to normal” (Ditlevsen 2021, p. 291).

The desire to be seen as normal is a persistent motif in Ditlevsen’s memoirs, which the narrative allows her to examine and finally disarm. When she tells Ebbe that a mutual friend said no normal man would find her attractive, he replies, “So who’s normal?” (Ibid., p. 267). In her own recollection of this moment, she rejects his unconventional, inclusive validation and, after the birth of their daughter, Helle, congratulates herself on them being “a normal, regular family”, to which Ebbe replies, “Why do you want to be normal and regular? Everyone knows you’re not” (Ibid., p. 269). Rather than celebrating the differences that made her a pioneering woman writer in Denmark, Ditlevsen’s first-person narrator then reflects, with the benefit of the author’s decades of hindsight, “I don’t know how to answer him, but I have wanted that as far back as I can remember” (Ibid.). In admitting publicly that the desire to conform and receive social validation has been a driving force in



her life, Ditlevsen is finally able, though witnessing, to achieve enough distance from the choices she made in the service of that goal—like the illegal abortions of her second and third pregnancies—to begin to process their cost. She does not comment on the morality of these choices, but engages instead in ethical reflection about the factors that motivated her choices.

### 5. Confronting Addiction and Abuse

As the narrator of the memoirs makes clear, Ditlevsen's quest to achieve "normality" was a fool's errand, since the usual state of her marriage and family is chaotic at best, so her memoirs are heavy with dramatic irony. She reports how, after her first abortion, she and Ebbe maintain a relatively harmonious co-existence until the end of the war, when Ditlevsen attends a ball, where she meets and ends up sleeping with a young doctor named Carl Rydberg, despite her aversion to his looks. When she finds herself pregnant again, uncertain of whether Ebbe or Carl is the baby's father, Carl performs her second abortion. During the operation, he sedates her with Demerol, a highly addictive pain management opioid that she almost instantly becomes dependent on, as it makes her feel "relaxed, lazy, and happy as never before" (Ibid., p. 309). The narrator's phrasing creates a deliberate opposition between the complicated relationships in Ditlevsen's life and this new source of uncomplicated pleasure. Nina Aron points out that when Ditlevsen murmurs during the operation, "I'm in love with you", she is speaking to the drug, not the man beside her (Aron 2021). The quest to maintain this euphoric feeling as her new normal motivates Ditlevsen to leave Ebbe for Carl, whom she marries in November 1945. When Ebbe complains she's in love with someone else, the narrator wonders, chillingly, "What if I told him the truth? What if I told him I was in love with a clear liquid in a syringe and not with the man who had the syringe? But I didn't tell him; I never told that to anyone. It was like when I was a small child and a secret was ruined if you told a grownup" (Ibid., p. 314). In this case, her secret was the hope that opioids could make her happy forever and remove the pressure to conform that had caused her so much pain. Yet in telling this secret on the printed page, with its unavoidable empathic unsettlement, Ditlevsen is able to begin working through this haunting confession and its consequences for her life.

As the narrator reports with no attempt at self-justification or moralizing self-condemnation, Ditlevsen spends the next five years of her life in an opioid haze facilitated by Carl's unethical injections and prescriptions. She agrees to raise Carl's child by another woman, and they eventually have a child together, both decisions calculated, as she explains bluntly, "to bind Carl to me even more" (Ibid., p. 317) and preserve her access to the drugs. Rather surprisingly, motherhood never appears as a normative factor in Ditlevsen's identity; her writing and her addictions leave little room for her to care about anything else. The narrator is startlingly frank about her neglect of her children, even before but particularly after her descent into drug addiction.

The third volume of Ditlevsen's memoirs, from 1971, is titled *Gift*, which can be translated directly as either "poison" or "married", but which translator Michael Favala Goldman renders as *Dependency*. All three options apply well to Ditlevsen's situation—being married was fairly toxic for her, the first three times at least, and she seems to have been just as addicted to irredeemable, co-dependent relationships as to Demerol. Aron explains,

Her relationship with Carl is darkly codependent: manipulative, transactional, and unstable. And Ditlevsen's single-mindedness about drugs, the way the aperture of life closes in around highs, is of course bleak. Gone are time's recognizable units: 'An hour could be a year and a year could be an hour,' she writes. For Ditlevsen, life takes place almost entirely in her bedroom. She is unfit to be anything to anyone, and it's bitterly sad. (Aron 2021)

Ditlevsen stays with Carl as long as he supplies her with drugs. Her addiction obscures his many failings as a partner and a parent, caused in part to his own unstable mental health. Carl is emotionally abusive, and they only ever have sex when she is high, but

she pretends to herself that their relationship is healthy and stable, even though she also realizes that she and Carl have nothing in common but her addiction. For several years, Ditlevsen blithely goes on with her life, writing a book each year to support her family and letting the nanny raise her children, but this life is a sham. Writing years after the fact, the narrator admits that she was attempting to create what she describes as “a civilized frame around our life, a dream that I had always harbored deep down” (Ditlevsen 2021, p. 330), as the elusive hope of normality lures her on, like a Pied Piper, once more.

Ditlevsen’s addiction to opioids and the false hope they provide leads to new, physical traumas. Withdrawal symptoms between injections stop the flow of words through her mind, bringing with it financial pressures, aggravated by the panic attacks that Carl’s occasional twinges of conscience about supplying her with Demerol evoke. Attempting to self-medicate, she tries drinking chloral and getting prescriptions for methadone, but she wants opioids more than anything else. To overcome Carl’s reluctance, she feigns a persistent earache and ultimately agrees to the violation of her body through unnecessary surgery on her ear to ensure access to additional pain meds. The night before the operation, Carl gives her an injection and she thinks, unapologetically, “This is how I always want to live. I never want to return to reality again” (Ibid., p. 337). As Ditlevsen’s frank narrative style makes clear, her irrational hope of being able to escape reality forever leads instead to searing physical pain and permanent hearing loss. A stranger to her children and temporarily unable to eat or write, Ditlevsen gradually realizes what her addiction is costing her, but she insists, to herself, that “no price was too high to be able to keep away intolerable real life” (Ibid., p. 339). It is only after Carl starts trying to cut back on her injections and replace them with water that Ditlevsen finally confesses the extent of her addiction to her actual doctor. Although her hope in calling him had been to get a new opioid prescription, she instead gets herself admitted to rehab and Carl to a mental hospital.

With exquisite narrative timing, Ditlevsen exposes how the loss of the drug that had given her such a compelling but illusory sense of peace and tranquility, paired with her separation from an emotionally and physically abusive husband, opens the door to a renewed, but constrained, lease on life. Although the nurse chides her for waiting until the last minute to seek help, Ditlevsen describes her experience of rehab in largely positive terms, despite the considerable physical and mental trauma it entails, because of the hope it provides. With sound medical care, she is able to replace her groundless trust in opioids with boundless hope for the future, sure that when she has gained enough weight and overcome her addiction everything will be fine. Her doctor warns her that when she gets home and experiences adversity—“like we all do—the temptation will return;” he advises her never to see Carl again and never to touch Demerol, methadone, or anything like them again (Ibid., p. 355). Although cautious from sad experience, the doctor expresses his hope that Ditlevsen will be the rare patient who fully recovers from her addiction.

Ditlevsen’s narrative reinscription of her memory of this hopeful moment serves as the culmination of her three-volume memoirs. Nearly a decade before the first Alcoholics Anonymous groups were established in Denmark in the late 1970s, Ditlevsen’s narrator is confident in her ability to overcome her addiction through sheer willpower, that is, until she passes a pharmacy one day. Looking into its windows and feeling the desire for opioids rising in her, she realizes that “the longing was inside me like rot in a tree, or like an embryo growing all on its own, even though you want nothing to do with it” (Ibid., p. 357). All her bright hopes notwithstanding, the narrator recognizes that she is and will always be an addict. As she ruefully confesses in the last line of her memoirs, “the shadow of the old longing . . . will never disappear completely for as long as I live” (Ibid., p. 370). The narrator’s striking equation of drug addiction with an unwanted fetus, paralleled by Ditlevsen’s repeated abortions discussed earlier in the text, exemplifies the author’s ability to cauterize her pain by exposing it to the light of public scrutiny. By working through her trauma, she hopes to build up the strength not to act it out again.

Before this final public witness of her own persistent weakness, Ditlevsen prepares the reader for it by describing how she soon relapses, forging prescriptions for methadone

pills. Around the same time, she also falls in love, with Carl's friend Victor Andreasen, a newspaper editor and government official, whom she marries in 1951. Without a hint of empathy, she describes how he immediately abandons his wife and four-year-old daughter to commit himself to her. Yet her and Victor's awareness of their problematic ethical and moral situation is evident from his declaration, "We have the law of love on our side", and her response, "That law ... gives us the right to hurt other people" (Ibid., p. 364). This utterly selfish exchange echoes the infamous line from Erich Segal's bestselling melodramatic 1970 novel *Love Story* (and its film adaptation starring Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw the same year) that "love means not ever having to say you're sorry" (Segal 1970), with its problematic ethics and traumatic consequences.

Having parted ways with three husbands already before marrying Victor, Ditlevsen is well versed in how people hurting other people in the name of love, but she soon learns that love can also motivate people to hurt the ones they love for their own sake. As the 1901 Viggo Stuckenberg poem after which Ditlevsen's 1959 radio drama *To som elsker hinanden* (Two people who love one another) is titled laments, "Two people who love one another can do each other more harm than the most bitter enemies" (Stuckenberg 1901, p. 55). When Victor notices that she is still addicted, despite her assertions to the contrary, he confiscates her pills and threatens solemnly to leave her if she ever writes herself another fake prescription. Ditlevsen reports that she cried out, "Don't you love me anymore? I asked, sobbing. Yes, I do, he said. That's why" (Ditlevsen 2021, p. 368). When Victor later finds out that she has persuaded an on-call doctor to give her a shot of Demerol for a feigned earache, he throws the doctor out and promises to leave her, but, as Ditlevsen reports, "He didn't. He never did. He fought against his terrible rival with a constant vigor and rage that filled me with horror" (Ibid., p. 369). The tension between Victor's desire to help Ditlevsen and her own desire for the oblivion of opioids threatens to destroy their relationship, but, as Ditlevsen notes, Victor took aggressive action to resolve this tension by denying her access to drugs. While they were living in Copenhagen, he called every doctor he could find to prevent them from giving Ditlevsen any prescriptions or injections, but she kept finding new doctors, so they moved to a small town where he could forbid all the local doctors from having anything to do with her. Writing about her forced liberation from her addiction years later, Ditlevsen doesn't praise Victor for his intervention on her behalf, but neither does she complain about it. She simply describes the situation, without moral or ethical judgments, letting it stand on its own for the reader to process.

## 6. Conclusions

Ditlevsen chooses to close her memoirs on the optimistic, though somewhat melancholy, note of confessing her lifelong susceptibility to her addiction, leaving the resolution to her ongoing trauma open-ended. While Ditlevsen's five years as an addict take up more than fifty pages of her memoirs, the twenty-one years of her marriage to Victor Andreasen fill just a few lines. This decision seems more likely to stem from her lack of hope at escaping from her problems through drugs than from a lack of drama in their relationship. She reports laconically, "It was impossible for me to get the drug, and slowly I adapted to life as it was. Victor and I loved each other, and having one another and the children was enough for us. I started writing again, and whenever reality got under my skin, I bought a bottle of red wine and shared it with Victor" (Ibid., p. 370). She doesn't mention the child they had together nor her increasing penchant for ascribing Victor's least flattering traits to the male protagonists of her novels. When the third volume of her memoirs appeared in 1971, Ditlevsen couldn't have known that Victor would leave her that same year and file for divorce, which was finalized in 1973. Instead, her last book, the novel *Vilhelms værelse* (William's room, 1975), functions as a sort of sequel to the memoirs, showing the dark side of her rescuer in "a wild and violent hybrid text" that foregrounds a "grotesque-satirical description of the last convulsions of a marriage" (Andersen 1997, quoted in Winge 1999, p. 110). This novel drove Victor to a mental breakdown, but it also gave Ditlevsen a venue to announce, obliquely, her plan to exit the stage, which she did by her own hand on March

7, 1976 (Rehling 2002). The narrator confides, of the main character's struggle to find peace, "At long last she allowed herself to love the world, but only because it was going to be obliterated along with her" (Andersen 1997, quoted in Winge 1999, p. 110).

Yet the memoirs themselves stand, alongside Ditlevsen's many poems, essays, novels, and stories, as an indelible witness to the trauma she lived with, observed, caused, and suffered from during her life. Regardless of genre, Ditlevsen never pulls her punches, directly contradicting the warning of her narrator in "The Little Shoes" that "you can't control your circumstances. You can't control your fate. All you can do is avoid people whose words stir things up, secret things, that absolutely must not be stirred up" (Ditlevsen 2022, p. 152). As an author, Ditlevsen chose to be precisely such a person who stirs things up, who works through secret things as a way of stripping them of their power to shame and hurt. By saying things out loud that must not be said and exposing them to light on the printed page, Ditlevsen is able to confront her own traumas and those of her characters so that they can be acknowledged and addressed. Her communicative act of bearing witness to these traumas as a way of connecting with her readers illustrates Brison's argument that the act of witnessing "reintegrates the survivor into a community, reestablishing bonds of trust and faith in others" (Brison 2002, p. xi). Ditlevsen's community is her readers, who know she can relate to their own pain, and for whom she models ways of working through trauma.

Taken as a whole, Ditlevsen's work demonstrates how literature can provide an ideal space for working through trauma by facing it head on. Few, if any, of Ditlevsen's protagonists are unscarred by their lives, and she regularly places them in situations that showcase the ubiquity of domestic microtraumas. In Ditlevsen's story, "A Young Girl Becomes a Grandmother", for example, the protagonist reflects, while enduring the searing pain of having her hair permanented to please her husband, on how she was raised to be pretty, coquettish, and shallow, none of which prepared her to transition to a mature phase of life. Facing the arrival of her first grandchild, she finds herself trapped in clothes that are too youthful, a voice that is too juvenile, and habits of thought that deny her agency, but she cannot find a way out. Many people have had similar feelings and experiences of helplessness, voicelessness, and self-denial, but they generally keep them to themselves, suffering in silence. Ditlevsen will have none of such shameful discretion, convinced that opening the curtains to let in the light will make a positive difference. Her texts reveal that since everyone labors under the burdens of their own experiences, good and bad, there is no way forward but through.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as Ditlevsen (1967a, 1967b, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Originally published as Ditlevsen (1944).

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