

The United States in Swedish

How to Translate the Untranslatable

Introduction, Aim and Disposition

In the preface to the first collection of David Foster Wallace's non-fiction and short prose in Swedish, *Texter* (2013), the translator Alva Dahl states that the collection is doing the impossible: translating David Foster Wallace's writing. Even Wallace himself expressed his doubts as to if his writing was possible to translate, and when reading his texts these doubts soon emerge as rather understandable. Wallace's style of writing, so deeply established in American culture, so innovatively using neologisms and so connected to a specific jargon, does seem like great trouble translating-wise. The question if one even should try to translate literature logically follows after a statement about the impossibility of translation. Is it really fair to a text to translate it knowing that it actually is impossible to translate? But then, who decides what is impossible to translate? An attempt at answering these questions must necessarily spring from specific and detailed analyses of translations that investigate how a text is changed when moved from source to target culture.

I aim to analyze the translation of Wallace by comparing the last text in *Texter*, "Detta är vatten", a translation of Wallace's commencement speech to the graduating students at Kenyon College in 2005, to Wallace's original text. Even though Sweden is often called out to be "Americanized" (and it is not often meant as a compliment), just a brief look at the translation of Wallace's speech shows that there are certain parts about American culture, as I will argue deeply needed for the power of the speech to emerge, that every Swede might not understand. In the introduction *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, Emily Apter states that the chapters in her book creates "a central thesis about the interest of an approach to literary comparatism that recognizes the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability" (4), and these four aspects will be central in my analysis. By comparing Wallace original speech, transcribed and published in 2009 by Little, Brown, to the Swedish translation, I will analyze the changes in the translation

and their effects. A close reading of both texts, focusing on what has been removed, added and changed, will bring forward what connotations and effects might have been lost as well as what possibly has been gained in the transformation. First of all, I will give a brief summary of *This Is Water* and discuss how it relates to world literature. Then some information about the Swedish translation and its publication will be mentioned, also in relation to the concept of world literature. However, the major part of the paper will be devoted to the analysis of the actual translation, and speculations on possible reasons for changes in the Swedish translation will be made wherever relevant and remotely possible. The analysis will be based on a discussion about removals, specific word changes, instances of non-translation, possible untranslatability and choices with political consequences.

The analysis will thus be of a translation between a central (English) and a semi-peripheral language (Swedish), according to Heilbron's categorization (434). I will not engage Franco Morreti's theories about world literature and distant reading due to the fact that my analysis will be based on a very specific, close, reading. Since it does not concern bibliomigrancy or larger circulation patterns of travelling texts, I will not discuss Venkat B. Mani either. To avoid confusion when giving references, *This Is Water* will be referred to as TIW, and Lindberg's translation, "Detta är vatten", will be referred to as DÄV.

This Is Water

David Foster Wallace's commencement speech given to the graduating students at Kenyon College in the year of 2005 has become somewhat of a legend. It has been ranked as the number one commencement speech during all times by *Time* - beating such leviathans as Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy and Steve Jobs – and when either listening to or reading it, the widespread appraisal is not very hard to understand. For a long period of time, the speech could only be read in unauthorized, transcribed publications on the internet, but in 2009 Little, Brown published an edition of it. In this publication, the format is adjusted to the fact that the text is a speech, and there can be as little as three printed words on a whole page.

Wallace's speech circles around the power of clichés and the danger of disregarding these banalities on routine. Or as the author himself says in the beginning of the speech, it circles around the fact that "the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about" (TIW 8). Wallace emphasizes the importance of choosing what to pay attention to by telling "didactic little stor[ies]" (TIW 16), and argues for the fact that how we create meaning is "a matter of personal, intentional choice, of conscious decision" (TIW 28). He then goes on to exemplify how we all, as human beings, have a self-centered default setting, and that this default setting ultimately leads to total and complete loneliness if not actively opposed. In order to concretize this, Wallace gives examples from the everyday life of an everyday, educated American and explains how the basic self-centeredness has to be actively opposed in non-inspiring milieus such as the supermarket or the freeway. He does this by imagining the lives of the people surrounding him in boring and annoying situations, such as the checkout line in a supermarket, much in the same way as the narrator in Adonis poem "Concerto for the Road to Dante's Church" ponders over who might have sat on a seat on an airplane before. Adonis leads the reader's mind to wonder with the words, "Perhaps in your seat, someone who is now dead had / sat, or a child who dreams of being a pilot, a football player, or a woman who does not stop / crying." (297). This way of imagining to enter other people's lives is a crucial way for Wallace to make his point about arrogance and empathy. As he puts it when giving an alternative of how to experience a horribly slow and crowded supermarket line, "if you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line" (TIW 89).

This is connected to another crucial concern in Wallace's speech, namely arrogance. Time and again, he emphasizes the fact that much of what we tend to be so automatically sure of that we do not even think about is actually wrong, and our conviction that we all are the center of the world and the most "vivid and important person in existence" is perhaps the most widespread of these misconceptions (TIW 36). Wallace challenges his audience to rethink these default preconceptions, and in that regard he would have been rather proud of the protagonist of Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother*. In Kincaid's novel, the narrator understands her limited

knowledge about the world she lives in and states that “[a]t that moment I realized that there were so many things I did not know”, and then goes on to enumerate the things she does not know about her immediate surroundings (28). However, Wallace might be less enthusiastic about the fact that Kincaid’s narrating protagonist Xuela does not seem to be able to show much empathy towards anyone. She does not appear to be “able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day” at all, which Wallace argues is the most important kind of freedom (TIW 120). Xuela does perform unselfish acts, as when she helps her everything but thankful sister with an abortion, but in the end she is never connected to other characters deep enough to truly care for them. Moreover, Xuela is an example of another phenomenon Wallace concludes his speech by telling the dangers of, namely “the worship of self” (TIW 115). According to Wallace, atheism does not exist in today’s society, and hence the only choice we human have is what to worship, a choice he reiterates the importance of. The worship of self will ultimately and always result in complete loneliness according to Wallace, and this might be said to be the case with Xuela. Of course, The audience Wallace addresses in his speech and the protagonist of Kincaid’s novel have completely different conditions to relate to, but in the abstract sense the theory still holds.

As can be seen by this brief summary of Wallace’s commencement speech, it is a text connected to what can be called rather large and universal themes, such as loneliness, empathy and worshipping. That the speech has spread across both national and cultural borders might thus not come as a surprise, since themes this big seem to be a common trait for travelling literature, or so-called world literature. To mention just a few examples connected to Wallace’s speech, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s novel *A Grain of Wheat* circles around such large questions as loneliness and how to handle death, most vivid when the betrayed Gikonyo ascertains that “[t]o live and die alone was the ultimate truth” (115). Another world wide read novel sharing at least some themes with Wallace’s speech and also with what Wallace has often discussed in other forums, namely what good literature and art is capable of, is Gao Xingjian’s *One Man’s Bible*. Here, we are straightforwardly told that:

The magic of literature lies in willingness on the part of the author and the reader. Unlike political frauds that even the unwilling are forced to accept, literature may either be read or not, there is no coercion. You do not choose literature because of a belief in its purity; for you, it is simply a means of release. (197)

The second person narration in Gao Xingjian's book, alternately used throughout the novel, creates a second connection to *This Is Water* due to the conversational, almost speech-like, appeal created by the use of it. The discussion of literature's profits becomes almost like an imperative on the reader, and imperatives, even though disguised and complicated, can certainly be found in Wallace's speech as well.

These big themes can in fact be seen as elements that hold the rather unruly category of world literature together (if one does not want to say that they unite the even more all-encompassing category of literature altogether, that is). Gabriele Schwab, when discussing how readers "experience literary objects" in her *Imaginary Ethnographies: Literature, Culture and Subjectivism*, claims that:

the abstract theoretical ideas we carry (mostly unconsciously) shape our ways of thinking and being in the world. The practice of a deliberate temporary bracketing of preconceived theoretical knowledge, however, is the basis of a truly generative reading experience that can be called an event. (9)

This statement goes well in line with a central theme in *This Is Water*, and actually has verbatim relation to a section of the speech where Wallace says that "[i]f your complete freedom of choice regarding what to think about seems too obvious to waste time talking about, I'd ask you ... to bracket, for just a few minutes, your skepticism about the value of the totally obvious" (15). Even though Wallace does not talk about world literature or reading here, the core idea of bracketing ones preconception is the same as in Schwab's text. The idea of rethinking set values can also be found in Stephen Greenblatt's "Cultural Mobility: an introduction", where he states that the aim of the essays in the book his article is published in is to "reorient traditional understanding and to serve as a framework for new research in many fields" (2). One central idea in Wallace's speech, that of questioning what might seem like obvious truths and widening ones perspectives, thus appears as connected to much of the aim and core ideas of world literature studies today.

In fact, the very same idea can also be recognized in much of postcolonial studies, for example in Robert J.C. Young's "World Literature and Postcolonialism". Here, Young claims that postcolonial literature "always seek[s] to go beyond itself to impact upon the world which it represents", and that this literature "always makes a statement about something in the world, often disturbing our current assumptions and perceptions as it does so" (217). Wallace undoubtedly seeks to go beyond the limits of literature, most obvious in his speech where he is talking to a group of adaptable young students, but also in his fictional work. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace explains how he likes to remember a quote from a former teacher who said that "good fiction's job [is] to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable" (21), which presupposes that fiction makes an impact on the world it represents. In his speech, Wallace very much disturbs the comfortable graduating students with questions that fundamentally challenge their way of viewing themselves in relation to the world.

The Swedish Translation

The Swedish translation of *This Is Water*, "Detta är vatten", was first published in *Glänta*, a magazine and small publishing house that prints around 2000 copies of their magazine that is released four times a year¹. The translation was thus published for a rather limited audience, and it is not unbelievable that it might not have reached very many Swedish eyes. However, five years later the same translation (made by Stefan Lindberg) appeared in the already mentioned *Texter*, the first publication of a collection of Wallace's non-fiction and short stories in Swedish. *Texter* is published by Natur & Kultur, a publishing house with a clear popular educational aim that focuses mainly on teaching material. Most of the texts in this publication are translated by Alva Dahl, who also translated Wallace's first novel *The Broom of the System* into Swedish in 2012.

That *This Is Water* is a piece of world literature might not seem obvious at first glance, since world literature many times is connected to literature that has travelled to Europe from further away as well as more "exotic" places than the United States. However, as David Damrosch suggests, "a work only has an *effective* life as

¹ Publishing facts taken from an interview with the magazine's editors, "En glänta för diskussion"

world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture.” (4). This goes well in line with what Khairallah argues about transcultural works, namely that a work, even if it is not transcultural “by intention, vision or scope, [...] acquires this characteristic through its ability to cross cultures and to play an active part in their literary worlds (234). This is certainly the case with the Swedish translation of *This Is Water*, since it is de facto published in two different places in, by different publishing houses and in different media in the target culture. Trivedi’s refutations of Damrosch’s wide definition of world literature can be disregarded in this case, because Trivedi’s arguments about the haphazard nature and approach followed by Damrosch’s way of viewing it simply is not true in the case of Wallace’s speech. Trivedi claims that Damrosch’s broad definition is:

far too laid back and user-friendly a definition, for it involves no rescue or recovery or discovery, no widening of horizons and no reaching out, but a mere passive responsive capacity and readiness to whatever is washed up to our doorstep by the tides of global market forces or the quirks of literary transmission and translation.
(24)

That the publication of Wallace’s writings in Swedish is not something that merely is “washed up to our doorstep” in some random way due to capitalistic reasoning is proven by the sole fact that the Swedish translation is published by different publishing houses, neither of them with a clear goal of making money; *Glänta* is financed by governmental grants, and Natur & Kultur has an outspoken educational and inspirational aim to “inspire to reflection and engagement through support, inspiration, education and learning”². Trivedi’s bleak outlook thus seems to miss the power individual publishing houses can have, which in this case is everything but haphazard or steered only by money.

Analysis of the Translation

Lindberg’s translation of *This Is Water* has taken many and great liberties, of which only a small fraction will be exemplified and discussed below. First of all, Lindberg has

² My translation of Natur & Kultur’s memorandum of association, the original text in Swedish is to be found at <http://www.nok.se/Om-oss/stiftelsen/> May 19, 2014.

removed whole large and crucial sections of the speech. Some of them seem to be removed because of their emphasis on the speech genre and specific (American) setting of Wallace's text, but this cannot be the explanation for the largest of the removals. Lindberg has, for some reason, chosen to cut twenty-two pages from the speech³. This could of course be due to lack of room in the forums he chose to publish his text in, but when considering the fact that he published a page long homage to Wallace right after his translation in *Glänta*, this explanation seems rather unlikely. The large chunk Lindberg has removed so happens to contain crucial parts to the text, not surprisingly since nearly every part of such a compressed text as a commencement speech necessarily is might be called central. This particular removed section accomodates some meta-comments about what an American commencement speech should consist of, but it also contains the introduction to what can be said to be the main argument of the speech: the importance of choosing what to pay attention to. This is a reoccurring subject in the speech, but by removing the first instance where it is mentioned, Lindberg removes a vital part and creates a text that is far less coherent, emphatic and convincing in its arguments than the original.

Another removal can be found right in the beginning. Wallace starts the speech with a little anecdote about fish and water, and then goes on to humorously explain that "[t]his is a standard requirement of US commencement speeches, the deployment of didactic little parable-ish stories. The story thing turns out to be one of the better, less bullshit conventions of the genre" (TIW 5-6). These sentences have been completely removed from Lindberg's text, an infringement with consequences. An element of humor has been excised, and the result is a preachier, less self-reflective text. A possible reason for this removal might be that Lindberg, again, wants to play down the allusions to the very specific and American setting and context of Wallace's speech, in order to perhaps make it easier to relate to for a Swedish audience. However, this reasoning fails since Lindberg has kept the title of the speech, which leaves no doubt about where and in what context it is originally set, as it explicitly says

³ The amount of pages might not be adequately telling here, due to the earlier mentioned fact that the American edition of Wallace's speech has a special layout where there can be very few words on a single page. However, the cut itself is still telling.

“Commencement Speech to the Students at Kenyon College, May 21, 2005”⁴ (DÄV 291). A second instance of the same sort of encroachment is to be found in the very end of the speech, where Lindberg has taken the great liberty to change the ending. Instead of concluding the text with the commencement speech proper “[w]hich means that yet another cliché is true: Your education really *is* the job of a lifetime, and it commences – now. I wish you way more than luck”, Lindberg simply leaves this part out and cuts the speech where it was not yet done according to the original author (TIW 136-137, emphasis in the original). Lindberg thus, once again, leaves out a part of the speech connected to clichés, which so happens to be a central subject of Wallace’s speech and arguably important for the speech’s so called message.

What this habit of removing parts from the speech several times also does is to change the address created in the original text. For one, after describing a frustrating everyday experience at the supermarket, Wallace goes on to address his audience by saying that “[e]veryone here has done this, of course – but it hasn’t yet been part of you graduates’ life routine, day after week after month after year. But it will be, and many more dreary, annoying, seemingly meaningless routines besides”, before he states that this is where the work of choosing what to pay attention to comes in (TIW 73-74). This part is nowhere to be found in Lindberg’s translation, and one instance of a direct address of the reader, or audience, is thus lost. Other examples of the same phenomenon that can be mentioned can be seen when Lindberg has translated the section “[y]ou get to decide what has meaning and what doesn’t.” (TIW 95), into “to consciously chose what has meaning, and what doesn’t”⁵ (DÄV 295). Even though a structure with the same addressing to the audience/reader used in the English original indeed is possible in the Swedish language, Lindberg has chosen to change the sentences which results in a removal of the addressing aspect. Smaller instances of this phenomenon can be found throughout the speech, as when Lindberg leaves “please”s out (TIW 88), or removes sentences like “I have learned this the hard way, as I predict you graduates will too” (TIW 34).

⁴ My free translation of Lindberg’s Swedish text.

⁵ My free translation of Lindberg’s Swedish text.

Lindberg also removed a crucial rhetorical means when he chose to leave the sentence “[t]he answer, not surprisingly, is that it depends what kind of knowledge we’re talking about.” out (TIW 47). Wallace’s use of the first person-plural here creates a connection between speaker and audience (or writer and reader), it insinuates that the speaker is in the same situation as the audience and that they all face the same problems. Simply put: it creates a kind of community. By changing these instances of addressing the audience, of creating a “we”, Lindberg’s text again obtains more of a preaching quality. The narrator of his text seems more to be speaking *to* his readers from some point above them, rather than as a part *of* them. The consequences of such changes for the reading experience can unfortunately not be dealt with in this limited forum, but can only be imagined to be rather extensive. For those who now argue that such changes might be due to Lindberg’s wish to play down the speech aspects of the text, I simply refer to Lindberg’s explicit title again.

And then we have Lindberg’s seemingly unmotivated and sometimes tortuous word changes. A specifically interesting example to analyze here is the translation of the verb “to worship” throughout the text. Wallace talks much about the act of worshipping in his speech and, as earlier mentioned, claims that “[t]here is no such thing as not worshipping” and argues that we can only chose what to worship (TIW 99). Hence, worshipping can be said to be a central subject of the text, and one would think that some care would have been put down as to how to translate this crucial word and concept. But here Lindberg surprises again. In all but one place, he has translated “worship” into the Swedish word for “believe”⁶, and there is a clear distinction of degree here. Lindberg’s word choice is much less powerful than the original “worship”, and it is important to note that there actually is a corresponding verb in the Swedish language that the translator could have used. In fact, Lindberg uses the equivalent translation (in whatever degree a translation can ever be equivalent, that is), so his choice is thus not consistent. When Wallace continues to deal with the concept of worshipping, he explains that the default worshipping we do not actively choose is dangerous because it is “the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value

⁶ My translation of the Swedish verb “tro”.

without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing" (TIW 114). Here, Lindberg has chosen to use the equivalent Swedish word for "worship"⁷ and thus shows an awareness of its existence (DÄV 296). The reason for the deviation in the translation is hard to speculate on; perhaps Lindberg felt that the closest translation would have created a clumsy and repetitive text. But on the other hand, if the original text uses the same word several times, there is probably a reason for it.

Further choices of interest can be found where Lindberg has chosen not to translate words at all. When describing the frustrating scenario at the supermarket, Wallace mentions the annoying "ADHD kids" (TIW 70), and this is a denomination Lindberg has left, only hyphenated and with the Swedish noun ending "-en" added, resulting in "ADHD-kidsen" (DÄV 293). Even though it is safe to say that most Swedish readers (and probably all who have enough interest in David Foster Wallace to read a translation of his text) understand the word "kids", the use of it has a somewhat exotifying effect. It is not a Swedish word, and thus calls attention to the fact that the text is a translation from both another language and another culture. This happens in many translations, and can be seen in the way the translator of Moa Martinson's novel *Kvinnor och äppelträd* into English has chosen to keep the Swedish affirmative word "ja" untranslated in the English version (see for example *Women and Appletrees* 5). Here, as well as in the earlier examples, Swedish equivalent words do exist, even though the connotations of them might not be the exact same. But it is not only the case that the denotation of the word had changed had the Swedish translator used a Swedish word here, the connotations the word "kids" can be argued to differ between English and Swedish too. In Swedish, the word does not only signify young people, it also might signify that it is *used* by young people. There is a youthful sense about the word in Swedish that is not as present in the more neutral use of it in English. This is perhaps connected to the fact that it is an imported word not yet part of the "standard" Swedish vocabulary, and that such novelties often are connected to young people. The exotifying effect might not be as striking as the "ja" in Martinson's novel, since "kids" actually is a pretty widely used word in Swedish and because English is a language we are used to being influenced by, but the effect is still there and worth discussing.

⁷ My translation of the Swedish verb "dyrka".

Culture-wise, there are also the instances where a Swedish reader of Wallace's translated speech just might not understand the references made or the connotations connected to subjects mentioned. These examples might sound like meticulous details that hardly can have any effect on the reading experience, but in fact they do. For example, Wallace puts quite a lot of focus on the handling of plastic bags when grocery shopping. Wallace describes how "you have to take your creepy flimsy plastic bags of groceries in your cart" (TIW 72), and Lindberg's translation here is quite verbatim. However, that is not the point. The point is that there is a crucial difference between Swedish and American plastic bags. Compared to the American version, Swedish plastic bags seem like luxury, velvety sacks you want to use as pillow cases. The much harder, flimsier and noisier American bags invoke an unpleasantness that simply cannot be understood if not experienced. Thus, if a Swedish reader who has not had to interface with American plastic bag reads Lindberg's translation, a connotation the majority of the source culture's readers understand is lost no matter how good the translation is. As Damrosch argues, "[l]acking specialized knowledge, the foreign reader is likely to impose domestic literary values on the foreign work" (4). Even though this particular example does not concern literary values, and despite the fact that Damrosch talks about something as "exotic" as a T'ang Dynasty poem and not a difference in degree regarding plastic bags, the theory is applicable here as well. A Swedish reader of Lindberg's text who has not experienced American plastic bags is likely to impose the value of the Swedish plastic bags on the foreign text, which actually changes the meaning of it, if only in slight ways.

A second reference in Wallace's speech that every Swedish reader might not fully understand is found when Wallace asks his audience not to dismiss his speech as "some finger-wagging Dr. Laura sermon" (TIW 127). This name is not translated at all in Lindberg's text, not surprisingly since Dr. Laura is the name of an existing person. The existing person's real name is Laura Schlessinger, and she is well-known in the United States as a radio host who frequently talks to the public about moral and ethics in a conservative manner. Even though it is not impossible that a Swedish reader knows who Dr. Laura is and what she stands for, or has even heard her show, it is also not unlikely that the reader has no idea who this person referred to is. In both cases, it is definitely the case that a reader raised in Sweden does not have the same so-called

“deep” knowledge and relation to Dr. Laura as a person who has grown up in the United States and thus been exposed to Schlessinger’s presence, either through the actual shows she has hosted, or through advertising. Just as the aforementioned case with the plastic bags, this sort of reference loss is of course not unusual in translation. An explicit example of how words are left untranslated and the references or connotations of them most likely are lost (if the reader is not either very knowledgeable about the source culture or does some research) can be found in Mo Yan’s novel *Red sorghum*. The English translator of Mo Yan’s book has chosen to leave the word “kang” (a kind of bed) untranslated throughout the novel (see for example 356). However, this is not the same kind of non-translation as Lindberg applies, since the alphabets used in Chinese and English are different and that a sort of translation thus is performed even though the word it is translated into is not a word in the English dictionary.

Translations with political consequences are also present in Lindberg’s text. First and most striking of all, Lindberg has chosen to translate the English word “spouse” to the Swedish word for “wife”⁸ (TIW 89, DÄV 295). Since “spouse” does not reveal the sex of the person in question, Lindberg’s translation concedes far more about the speaker than the more neutral “spouse” does. Because we know that the author of the text is a man, the choice to translate “spouse” into “wife” makes the translation heteronormative in a way the original is not. More information about the speaker/writer is simply left out when using the word “spouse” than when using “wife”, and there is a point in leaving such information out since it can be seen as a way to defy the heteronormative norm in our society. Furthermore, it is interesting in itself that Lindberg has chosen to interpret Wallace’s use of “spouse” as if there is no doubt about the fact that it is a woman he is talking about.

A second instance of political translation issues can be seen when looking at how Lindberg has translated Wallace’s use of the word “men”. Since this English word can, but must not, be gender specific, the translator faces a choice here: should “men” be interpreted as meaning “a group of males” or as the more all-encompassing “a group of people”? Wallace uses this word when describing the dangers of the worship of self, and says that:

⁸ My translation of the Swedish word ”fru”.

[t]he so-called “real world” will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called “real world” of men and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self. (TIW 115)

There is some rather straight-forward social criticism involved in this sentence, and depending on how one interprets “men”, there is possibly also some gender criticism present. When reading at Lindberg’s text, the possibility of interpreting gender criticism disappears due to his choice of translating “men” into the Swedish word for “people”⁹, which is gender neutral (DÄV 296). This was most likely a problematic choice for Lindberg, if I dare speculate a bit, since the Swedish language does not contain a word that can mean both a group of males or simply people in general in the plural form, but by going for the more general choice Lindberg eliminates a possible political statement. This example emphasizes the power a translator of any text has as well as the consequences the choices necessarily made can have.

Conclusion

What can be concluded from my analysis of a text travelling between two Western cultures often regarded as very similar is that the translator is faced with endless choices that affect the translated text and its possible reading. Thus, even works that might not automatically be regarded as examples of world literature can be telling examples of the difficulties posed when translating texts between different cultures. Brought up in this essay are only a small portion of the interesting instances connected to translation problems in Lindberg’s translation of Wallace’s speech, and had there been more space in this particular forum many more telling examples could and would have been discussed. This should serve as an argument good enough to claim that even works of literature that travel between traditionally “close” cultures should be regarded as works of world literature.

As Doris Bachmann-Mendick wisely points out in her article “Cultural Misunderstanding in Translation: Multicultural Coexistence and Multicultural Conceptions of World Literature”, “every effort at translation [...] will have to face

⁹ My translation of the Swedish noun “människor”.

cultural misunderstanding, but this can be also productive” (6). However, in order for these misunderstandings to be productive, they have to be explicitly discussed in the translation itself or by the reader of the translation. If that is not the case (which it is not in Stefan Lindberg’s translation discussed here), too much is left to chance when it comes to the interpretation of the text. As far as I can see, the only productive result of Lindberg’s, in my eyes rather poor and awkward translation, of Wallace’s text is the fact that it might reach people who otherwise would not have read it. However, because of the poor quality of the translation it is questionable if this fact is actually doing Wallace’s text and his bigger authorship a favor. This opinion, of course, might possibly just be due to my own narrow perspective and my inability to find productive examples of cultural misunderstanding in this specific text.

I do not argue that translations should not be read, but I want to claim that they have to be made with excruciatingly thorough care, and that the cultural misunderstandings (that will be there no matter how good the translation) always and forever have to be discussed in order for the text not to lose on the translation. Some aspects of a text might be not untranslatable, but at least close to impossible to understand for a reader who is not a part of the source culture. And this is, of course, fine. It can even be a very fruitful experience to read a text where you do not understand everything. What is *not* fine is when these possible misunderstandings are not discussed, and when a translated version of a text is regarded as the original. Since I suspect that not everyone who reads a translation writes a 15 page long comparative essay about it, this becomes a problem. Unfortunately, I do not have the possible solution to the problem, but it is my strong conviction that more attention has to be paid to translations in order to find it.

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