

“To Foreign Lands” – Translation as Interpretation. A Backtranslation Workshop

TO FOREIGN LANDS

*I HEARD that you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle, the New World,
And to define America, her athletic Democracy;
Therefore I send you my poems, that you behold in them what you wanted.*

This poem was originally published in the 1860 edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and found its final form as an “Inscription” in the 1871 edition. It exists as a manuscript with interesting alternatives that did not find their way into the printed versions. While the poem suggests Whitman's international orientation, there are a number of questions that immediately occur after an initial reading. Where has the speaker “heard” that foreigners asked about the “New World” and to whom is he reacting with his poem? Who has “ask'd” and where? What does it mean, that the New World is a “puzzle” and how can one “prove” a puzzle – rather than, for example, *solving* it. How can one “define” a country and is the center of this definition the “Democracy” (with a capital D)? How can a democracy be “athletic”? Finally, why would the speaker's gift of his poetry to foreign lands, which obvious should provide some sort of an explanation to the puzzle, supply readers with material in which they will “behold” what *they* “wanted” – so were they not really interested in America? Or is it, using a second meaning of “wanted” – what they lacked and urgently needed? Democracy? Whitman-type poetry?

In this workshop, we will attempt an interpretation of this poem through its multiple translations. The idea is to investigate, how the addressees, the international readers, have read the text through the most intensive reception of a work of literature, its translation into a foreign language.

At first, following an introduction to Whitman and his poetry, we will read the poem itself, look at its interesting manuscript format, then the 1860 edition, where the word “America” was missing (the words “the new race” being its place), finally the 1870 edition. We will look at the meaning of key words like “athletic”, “puzzle”, or “prove” in a 19th century American dictionary and thus try to get a preliminary understanding of the poem.

In a second step, we will look at translations of the poem in Czech, French, German, Hungarian, Portuguese-Brazilian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian, Spanish, and, of course, Italian. We will compare these translations through the method of “backtranslation” – meaning we will retranslate (as best we can) these translated versions into English. Thereby we will be able compare the translations and establish a typology of translation “solutions” (for example the word “puzzle”, which has variously been translated as “enigma”, “mystery” and “riddle”). In doing so, we will concentrate on *nodes* where the differences in translations are particularly obvious.

These nodes are the basis for the third phase of our work, namely an attempt to interpret the poem through our findings and to re-read our original “spontaneous” reading based on our insights. Translations *are* interpretations and collectively they open up what I call the “interpretive potential” of a poem with the semantically relevant “nodes” at the center. Probably, we will not agree on a single reading in the end, but we will at least understand much better the poem's multi-layered structure.

In a final step, student participants will produce a new Italian version of the poem based on the insights gained in the course of the workshop. The translated poem, as well as the work that led up to it, will be presented at the 11th International Whitman Week of the Transatlantic Walt Whitman Association in Dortmund in June 2018.

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