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Speaking in Tongues: Celebrating Walt Whitman in Translation

Introduction

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Speaking in Tongues: Celebrating Walt Whitman in Translation retraces the reflections engaged in the colloquium of the same title, which took place at Université Paris-Est Créteil, France, on June 13th and 14th 2019.

MOTS CLÉS : Whitman, traduction, réception, littératures nationales

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When Rubén Darío published his sonnet entitled "Walt Whitman,"[1] in 1888, he started a tradition that has been continuing for over a hundred years, and which—witness Laurent Galley's recent "Ode à Walt Whitman"[2] is still going strong in the twenty-first century. From García Lorca's "Oda a Walt Whitman" to Jean Sénac's "Paroles avec Walt Whitman," from Pessoa's unfinished "Saudação a Walt Whitman" to B. Alkvit-Blum's "Dayne grozn," Whitman, more than any other English-language poet before or after him, may be said to have attracted a considerable number of direct responses from poets, writing in English and not. As regards the former, the editors of the seminal *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* analyze Whitman's attraction as follows: "Most of the poets who address Whitman do so to satisfy a gnawing urge to talk things out with him, to relieve the itching of his words at their ears" (Perlman 23). For poets not writing in English, however, the fascination with Whitman's verse seems in great measure to have resulted from more or less accurate perceptions of his representativeness as an American, his claim to be read as an advocate of political and artistic internationalism, his innovative poetics, and, for a sizeable number of them, his ground-breaking queerness. Appearing to take at face value Whitman's only partially realized "absorption" of his poetry by his country,[3] they have frequently invoked him as America made man, appearing in so doing to equate the flesh-and-blood author of *Leaves of Grass* with the ubiquitous "rough" present in many poems.

Just as Whitman's verse has been drawing poetic responses from around the world for over 160 years, foreign translations of his poetry started to be published relatively early in his lifetime, first in reviews appearing in literary journals, then in book form. The former practice started in France, with a review by Louis Étienne appearing, in 1861, in *La Revue Européenne*. Étienne counterbalanced his ruthless indictment of Whitman with a generous selection of lines translated into French. Germany toed the line with three contributions by Ferdinand Freiligrath to the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*, in 1868, and Italy, somewhat later, in 1879, with a piece by Enrico Nencioni in *Fanfulla della domenica*. These paved the way for book-length translations of all or part of *Leaves of Grass*, usually in its final, so-called "Deathbed" version. The publication history of these translations has been complexified by other ever more numerous competing versions appearing through the years, along with the translation of once-neglected earlier editions of *Leaves of Grass*.[4] What is more, this history reflects larger changes in linguistic geopolitics, with translations into the major European languages gradually cohabiting with translations into the Asian and

[1] Rubén Darío, "Medallones", III, in Azul [1888], Madrid: Biblioteca Edaf 276 [2003]: 199-200.
[2] https://blogs.mediapart.fr/laurent-galley/blog/310313/ode-walt-whitman
[3] The 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass famously concludes with the claim that:" The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." (Whitman 1973, 731)
[4] In France alone, the Deathbed edition has so far been translated twice—Léon Bazalgette published his (in)famous Feuilles d'herbe in 1909, with Jacques Darras following suit, in 2002; two translations of the first edition of Leaves of Grass were published almost simultaneously, in 2008—Gilles Mourier's, which was first published online before appearing in book form, in 2011, and Éric Athenot's bilingual version.

African languages they had once eclipsed in the countries their speakers had colonized.[5]

May 31, 2019 marked the bicentennial of Whitman's birth. As befits such a momentous occasion, commemorative events were organized around the world. Many such events in the US insisted on Whitman's consubstantial bond with America, somewhat relegating his impact on world poetry to the background. University conferences were held around the country. The Library of Congress hosted a string of public events as part of "a yearlong initiative in 2019." The description of the project, however, may somewhat strike scholars or poetry enthusiasts as slightly perplexing, with Whitman being oddly referred to as "one of America's Changemakers."[6] To what extent he changed America remains debatable. It may be argued that with each new critical theory arising in academic studies, with each new juvenilia being unearthed in pre-*Leaves* newspapers or with each new controversy surrounding his work or some of his no-longer acceptable pronouncements, it is America which keeps changing the way we approach Whitman and how relevant we still find him or not.[7] As will be seen in the following pages, his "changemaking" did not benefit or affect America only. The New York Public Library, for its part, held a months-long exhibition. Its title, once again, appeared somewhat limitative—"Walt Whitman: America's Poet."[8] And on May 31, 2019, a handful of scholars, students, and visitors gathered on the Long Island homestead where Whitman was born, on the very day he would have turned two hundred years old. Besides a jocund Walt-lookalike slicing a monumental cake, and two senior Whitman scholars giving not-too-formal papers, the real highlight of the day was the thrilling performance of *More Or Less I Am*, a show mixing poetry and song, by Compagnia de' Colombari.[9] The identification of Whitman with America, or at the very least with a certain idea of America, was yet again tangible in

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[5] A complete translation of Leaves of Grass into Arabic was published in Baghdad, in 1976, (cf. https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/writings/song-of-myself/resources). For translations into Farsi, Malay, Kurdish, Khmer, and a few other languages, see the Walt Whitman Archive (https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/writings/song-of-myself/about).

[6] Cf. https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-19-041/celebrating-200-years-of-walt-whitman-with-series-of-exhibits-events-and-digital-crowdsourcing-to-showcase-collections/2019-04-16/

[7] For the evolution of Whitman studies from, say, Roger Asselineau's trailblazing The Evolution of Walt Whitman to Matt Miller's insightful Collage of Myself, see: https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/index.html. Among some of the recently-discovered Whitman's juvenilia are Life and Adventures of Jack Engle (serialized in 1852), unearthed by Jachary Turpin, in 2017, in the New York Sunday Dispatch, and Manly Health and Training (first published on October 10th, 1858, in the New York Atlas and rediscovered by J. Turpin). As for scandals around Whitman's oeuvre, the most serious—and sadly irrefutable—may have been the accusation of racism levelled at him in 2013 by a music graduate at Northwestern (for an analysis of the accusation and its fallout, see: https://daily.jstor.org/should-walt-whitman-be-cancelled/).

[8] See https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/waltwhitman

[9] An online version, filmed during lockdown, can be viewed on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0dsnw7QPMg
Sadly and understandably, it does not quite deliver the thrills of the bicentennial live performance.

the main sign hanging outside the site, which read: "19th-century birthplace of America's Poet of Democracy."[10]

Europe, when it came to celebrating Whitman's bicentennial, seemed to care more about his legacy as a poet, both inside and outside the confines of the English language. On October 24-25, 2019, Lomonosov Moscow State University held a conference devoted to "Poetic Experience and the "Language Experiment."[11] On the campus of Université Paris-Est Créteil, France, a conference bearing the title of this *TIES* issue was held on June 13-14, 2019. Speakers came from various European countries (Russia, Serbia, France, Spain, and Portugal), from North Africa, Japan, and from the Americas. The aim of the conference was to address Whitman from an international perspective and endeavor to offer a plurilinguistic approach—not so much America's Whitman as Whitman as a poet for the world. Of special interest to the speakers was the practice of writing poems in languages other than English addressing "Walt Whitman" (whoever that moniker may refer to—the poet? his persona? both? readers?). Equally important was the impact of Whitman's poetry—in English or in translation—on the development of national poetic traditions around the world. To what extent have Whitman's innovative free verse and subject matter influenced poets outside the US? The conference also examined the position enjoyed in their own national cultures by translations of Whitman carried out by poets and/or scholars.

Whitman's resonance in the writings of poets across continents, from the nineteenth century until today, has been made possible by notable operators who are critics, translators, poets, sometimes all of these at once. The reception and translation of his work in Europe (Italy, Spain, Slavic countries and Russia) is widely appraised in the present volume. According to **Maria Camboni**, one of the major Italian figures of these late nineteenth-century *passeurs* was Enrico Nencioni, whose poetical and political vision clearly echoed Whitman's. Nencioni, in the wake of Giuseppe Mazzini, encouraged a political reading of the American poet's work which seemed fit with the emergence of the idea of Italy as a unified nation at the time. Through his numerous translations and essays, Nencioni, contributed to increasing the number of Italian readers of Whitman. Being a connoisseur of modern experimental painting made him sensitive to Whitman's "painterly modernity" while never neglecting his orphic and prophetic vein. **Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan's** essay focuses on the translations of Whitman's poetry by two major Spanish poets and lifelong friends: Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), and Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958). The comparison led by Guerrero-Strachan between the creative translations by these two writers reveals much about the crucial differences in their interpretations, each of them absorbing Whitman's poetics into his own. While Unamuno's interest for poetry in English is rooted in his search for the unadorned language of confession, Jiménez sees Whitman as a

[10] The sign can be seen on the following link: https://nutfieldgenealogy.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-walt-whitman-homestead.html

[11] The program, in Russian, can be perused on: https://discours.philol.msu.ru/archives/7446

pioneer of the Spanish *modernismo*. Although he has often been mentioned in literary volumes dedicated to Slavic poetry, the full scale of his influence on poets of the twentieth century has been largely underestimated, an oversight which two essays seek to remedy here. **Bojana Aćamović** examines the essential role of translations of Whitman's poetry for the writers of the Young Bosnia circle in the years 1908-1913 across Bosnia and Herzegovina. Whitman was inspirational, both politically and formally, to this generation of young poets and artists who were seeking new forms of expression in the tumultuous pre-war years. Whitman's presence in the poetry of Aleksandar Ristović, one of the greatest Serbian poets of the end of the twentieth century, is clearly shown in **Marko Avramović's** essay in its multiple forms, ranging from the appearance of the bard's figure to the adoption of his characteristic poetics. Ristović's reverence for Whitman's poetry became more and more explicit as his work progressed with a clear emphasis on "the inevitability of human earthly existence and the equality of all humankind."

Examining the reception of Whitman in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, **Delphine Rumeau** sets the larger European context which enabled *Whitmaniana* to flourish. The nascent idea of a World Literature denoted the simultaneous desire for a cultural *Renaissance*, and the birth of revolutionary ideas. Rumeau contends that Whitman bore many contradictory faces in the eyes of Russian poets and translators: an Ancient Greek, a Nietzschean figure, a new Adam, and, naturally a revolutionary prophet, all of which contributed to his international stature.

In the Americas, Northern and Southern, Whitman's permanence has taken the form of an on-going dialogue across languages and generations. **Delfina Muschietti** assesses the legacy of Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman on a large "constellation" of poets ranging from Sylvia Plath to Bob Dylan and Alejandra Pizarnik. Such heritage is visible in poets of the 60s, namely in their "deconstruction of subjectivity, identity, genre, body and name." For Muschietti, both Borges and Dylan share the archetypal vision of "the poet as singer," which they recognize in Whitman, while adopting and adapting his experimental strategies each in his own manner. This long-standing dialogue between poets and Walt Whitman is also to be found in Dominican poet Pedro Mir's *Contracanto a Walt Whitman* (*Countersong to Walt Whitman*) published in 1952, which takes place in a long tradition of addresses to Walt Whitman by Latin American poets as shown by **Jonathan Cohen** a critic, translator and poet himself. Inviting us into the subtleties of translation and back-translation (Cohen translates Mir, who himself translated Whitman...). Cohen argues that, whereas Whitman believes in the power of poetry to counter the excesses and the corruption plaguing America, Mir has a more active approach, using the poetic voice to call for a popular uprising for social justice and equity.

To complete this overview of Whitman in multiple voices, **Emma Morita**'s minute analysis of six different translations of five lines from *Song of Myself* into Japanese–published between 1920 and 1998)–yields results which bring new perspectives both on Whitman's text and on the translation process. Morita's systematic approach enables her to shed light on lexical and grammatical phenomena

all the while viewing the text and its translations as complex cultural objects. In some cases, the choice of overspecification by translators "do not always derive solely from the translators' personal decisions, but also reflect the influence of editorial policies dictated by commercial considerations."

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