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Speaking in Tongues: Celebrating Walt Whitman in Translation

Between Poetics and Politics. Enrico Nencioni's Reading of Whitman through Mazzini in Post-Risorgimento Italy

Marina Camboni

ABSTRACT. *Walt Whitman's image of the poetic work as a tiny ship ferried through the ocean of time is associated in the essay to that of the translator and interpreter as passeur, in the double sense of the French word. Translators as passeurs provide their linguistic and cultural tools and sensibility as vessels capable of trans-fer(ry)ing texts from shore to shore. While, for George Steiner, translators are performers who re-enact a text, I argue that translators not only perform a text but take sides, and assume responsibility for the life they transfer. In my essay, I represent the landing of Whitman's Leaves of Grass on Italian shores as a migratory process helped by a number of willing and unwilling passeurs, to begin with the British Pre-Raphaelite critic W.M. Rossetti. Enrico Nencioni, Whitman's first Italian passeur, evidenced the epochal value of the American man and informed critics of the ways his modern poetry could contribute to the shaping of a new cultural identity for the recently unified nation. Nencioni's essays and translations evidenced, as well, the transnational and transcultural scope of Whitman's Leaves by adopting the political lens of Giuseppe Mazzini, and the classical and contemporary critical tools he could command.*

RÉSUMÉ. L'image whitmanienne de l'œuvre poétique comme un petit navire qui traverse l'océan du temps est dans cet essai associée à celle du traducteur comme passeur, au double sens du mot français. Les traducteurs comme passeurs apportent leurs outils linguistiques et culturels et leur sensibilité comme des navires capables de transférer des textes d'une rive à l'autre. Alors que pour George Steiner, les traducteurs sont des interprètes qui rejouent un texte, je soutiens que les traducteurs ne se contentent pas d'interpréter un texte mais prennent parti et assument la responsabilité de la vie qu'ils transfèrent. Dans mon essai, je représente le débarquement des *Leaves of Grass* sur les côtes italiennes comme un processus migratoire aidé par un certain nombre de passeurs, pour commencer par le critique britannique W.M. Rossetti. Enrico Nencioni, le premier passeur italien de Whitman, a mis sa valeur en évidence et a informé les critiques sur la façon dont sa poésie moderne pouvait contribuer à la formation d'une nouvelle identité culturelle pour la nation récemment unifiée. Les essais de Nencioni ont également mis en évidence la portée transnationale et transculturelle des *Leaves* en adoptant l'optique politique de Giuseppe Mazzini, ainsi que les outils critiques classiques et contemporains qu'il pouvait maîtriser.

MOTS CLÉS : traduction, Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, William Michael Rossetti, Enrico Nencioni, Giuseppe Mazzini

KEYWORDS: *translation, Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, William Michael Rossetti, Enrico Nencioni, Giuseppe Mazzini*

"Liberty, let others despair of thee, But I will never despair of thee."
Walt Whitman, "Resurgemus"

Introduction

Ships Crossing Rivers and Oceans

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "Passage to India," Walt Whitman represents the poet's movement from shore to shore, whether he shuttles in a ferry between Manhattan and Brooklyn or ventures in risky voyages toward far-away Eastern coasts and the West's cultural past. In "Democratic Vistas," the poetic text becomes a time-space-connecting vessel that "voyages over wide, centuries-stretching seas," even though only a few "tiny ships," "a few inscriptions […] survive" and "are freighted to us" in the present time (Whitman 1892, 240, emphasis added). Hiding, or deleting human agency in his use of the passive voice, Whitman imagines that "miracles" buoyed these vessels and conveyed them "over long wastes, darkness, lethargy, ignorance" (Whitman 1892, 240). And yet, not miracles but human beings and power relations – migrants, cultural politics, readers of all sorts, critics, commentators, translators – like ferrymen, steer the vessels on the ocean of time, or, to use Whitman's words "transfer" them, facilitating their "entrance upon other outward contingencies" (Traubel 3, 560). The tiny literary ships survive because several human beings believe that they embody and propel in their distinct forms and words a human being's life, dreams, and affections while at the same time projecting unique points of view on the human experience.

Passeurs

One of the French words used to metaphorically define a translator or a person who introduces new works or ideas into her/his own culture is "passeur" ("ferryman"), a word that while originally referring to a ferry's pilot, also means "smuggler" and has now entered the Italian language only to refer to those who help clandestine emigrants to cross the Italian-French border. Passeurs – sometimes in the double sense of the word – are then the translators who provide their linguistic and cultural tools and sensibility as vessels capable of trans-fer(ry)ing living texts from one shore to another. Borrowing the image from musical performance, George Steiner defines interpreters and translators as "life-giving performers" in their "original repetition" or re-enactment of a text (Steiner 26). And yet, translators as passeurs must be considered life-givers not only because they re-enact, performing the text in their language, but because they take on responsibility for the life they transfer. Their translation is very often a political speech act, as well as a linguistic, literary, or economic action. In trans-ferrying art works from one "outward contingency" to another, they also take sides.

But what happens if you look at a translated or edited text from the perspective of the land of origin? When considering the role his English editors and critics had

played in the fortunes of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman pointed out that "those blessed gales from the British Isles […] gave me life again" (quoted in Thomas 1995, 11). And it is his British self, one of his most authoritative contemporary incarnations that, ferried across the Atlantic Ocean back to the American shores, greatly contributed to the continuing life of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in his own country.

The British gales and breezes also blew Walt Whitman's Leaves on to Italian shores. The Pre-Raphaelite critic William Michael Rossetti trans-ferried the poet across the Atlantic with his 1868 selection of Poems by Walt Whitman. From there, Whitman's Poems crossed the English Channel soon to be harshly apprized by the French critic Thérèse Bentzon who, in her turn, provided a few translations. Those translations made the Florentine critic Enrico Nencioni aware of an innovative man whose poetry celebrated the political religion of self and democracy.

Enrico Nencioni (1837-1896) is the focus of this essay as Whitman's first Italian passeur. He introduced Whitman to a widening audience and underscored how the man and his poetry could contribute to the shaping of a new identity for the recently unified Italian nation. At the same time, by applying classical and contemporary critical tools to *Leaves of Grass* in his critical essays and translations, Nencioni gave evidence of the transnational and transcultural scope of Whitman's poetry.

From the United States to Italy

Reaching the British Shores

Whitman's first passeurs were deeply rooted in their own time, a European time of revolutions and nation-building. In Italy, the political revolutions took the overall name of Risorgimento (Resurgence), the long, fraught process of unification which forced an increasing number of persecuted insurgents to emigrate. Although a British citizen, William Michael Rossetti, Whitman's first European editor, was the son of the Italian patriot poet Gabriele Rossetti who, in 1821, had been forced to flee Naples as a political exile, settling in London in 1824. A democratic republican and supporter of Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini, William Michael was biographically and culturally connected to Italy and to that part of Continental Europe that, from 1821 on, with 1848-49 as peak years, had seen a surge of independentist and republican movements shake the post-Napoleonic monarchical order.

Mostly based on the 1866-67 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Rossetti's 1868 *Poems by Walt Whitman* is an "interpretative" (Steiner 2) as well as an "intercultural, but intralinguistic, translation" (Thomas 2005, XVII), and the vehicle that favored the American poet's European journey. Indeed, to domesticate the poet to suit his Victorian readers, Rossetti not only selected which poems to publish, giving titles to many of them, but reassembled and reorganized Whitman's clusters. With the simple ruse of reducing *Leaves of Grass* to a generic collection of poems, he ended up

emphasizing the separateness of each poem rather than the organic unity of the *Leaves*.

To solve the poetic and ethical problem posed by his choice, Rossetti printed in the title page of the volume an epigraph from Michelangelo, in Italian: "Or si sa il nome, o per tristo o per buono, / E si sa pure al mondo ch'io ci sono" (Now, for good or bad, my name is known/ and that I exist all the world has known). Against a mass of negative criticism, Rossetti's selection was intended to prove the great value and modernity of Whitman's work as well as his own role as a ferryman, determined to help the American author to land on the English shores of the Atlantic, settle inland, and possibly find a location on the world's literary map. In his "Prefatory Note" he proclaimed Whitman "the man of the epoch" with M.D. Conway and W.D. O'Connor. What is more, and in line with Mazzini's idea that the interpreter of the contemporary epoch would promote democracy and liberty, he presented Whitman as a real "initiator" in his celebration of "Personality" and "Democracy" as universal values (Whitman 1868, 4).

Through his selection and ordering of Whitman's poems, Rossetti also conveyed his own republican and revolutionary sympathies, indirectly addressing contemporary readers in Europe. Indeed, while including and giving prominence to the war poems in "Drum-Taps," Rossetti headed his selection of poems with the 1860 "Chants Democratic" cluster, which Whitman had already expunged from the 1867 edition of the *Leaves*. "Starting from Paumanok," with its focus on the American Persona, opened the cluster while "To a Foiled Revolter or Revoltress" ended it with an invitation to fight for liberty and democracy, resisting oppression till victory is gained. This poem, written by Whitman with the 1848-49 European revolutions in mind, together with his war poems, had appeal for the readers of Rossetti's selection in war-torn Europe.

To Italy through France

In 1872, Nencioni, the pioneer of English and American literature in Italy, read Thérèse Bentzon's "Un poète américain - Walt Whitman," a review essay of Rossetti's *Poems by Walt Whitman*, published in *La Revue des deux mondes*. A writer and a feminist, in her essay Bentzon addressed her bourgeois elite readers in a nation still grieving for its human, territorial, and power losses during and after the Franco-Prussian war and the bloody events of the Paris Commune. She was doubtlessly alluding to the Commune when, writing of « Chants Democratic », she complained not so much of their lack of form as of the fact that the last three poems in the cluster were inspired by the French and European revolutions. Referring to Whitman's "France, the 18th Year of These States," Bentzon commented: "L'an 1793 [...] lui a inspiré un appel à la révolution, douloureux à lire après les derniers événements, dont il semble avoir été le sombre prophète." Yet she found it moderate compared to "To a Foiled Revolter or Revoltress" (Bentzon 573, 575). Nonetheless, she praised the "Drum-Taps" poems, perceiving in them a harmonious correspondence between form and content. She also provided partial translations of some of them and a complete version of "Come Up From the Fields Father."

Bentzon painted a very negative image of the poet, represented as an egotistic, macho man. She ridiculed his formless "poetry of the future," in whose modernity she saw only an "énergique mauvais goût" and whose realist poetics was the opposite "du naturel et de la vérité." Even the French language, she claimed, would refuse "la traduction de certain morceaux érotiques" (Bentzon 566-567, 572, 573). Notwithstanding the Frenchwoman's negative criticism, Nencioni read and treasured Poems by Walt Whitman and used it for his essays and translations, even though he also acquired the 1881-82 edition of the *Leaves* and Ernest Rhys's 1886 *Leaves of Grass*: *The Poems of Walt Whitman*, now among his papers at the Marucelliana library in Florence.

In 1870, the debacle of Napoleon III, the protector of the Pope, had made the conquest of Rome possible, and with it, the complete unification of Italy as an independent nation-state. Among intellectuals and writers, the more patriotic and liberal aspired to contribute to the building of a unifying cultural identity centered on the common people and the country as a whole. Most of all, they wanted to free it from the shackles of obscurantism and the subservience of science and literature to a reactionary Catholicism. They were, however, divided. While poets like Giosué Carducci insisted that its future be rooted in Italy's classical culture, others, like the novelist Alessandro Manzoni, wanted to open it to modern European literatures. Nencioni belonged to this second category of intellectuals who, rejecting the isomorphic fit of literary tradition, language, and nation (Apter 244), promoted a national but not nationalist literature. In this, he clearly shared Mazzini's idea that Italian literature should be both national and European, for each literature contributed "a *radiation* [...], an element in the universal problem, a word to the law of continuous progress whose interpreter is humanity" (Mazzini n.d. 2,12, emphasis added).

Nencioni may also have endeavored to interpret the sacerdotal role Mazzini had assigned to the literary critic, whose mission was "to free the *unknown* of the coming literary Epoch, translate, and promote it" (Mazzini n.d. 2,10). He discovered in Whitman the poet who had been capable of freeing his own time's literary unknown and engaged in a dialogue with the American poet that nourished his Mazzinian vision of a politically unified nation in a democratic world of nations and his ideal of a modern, humanist, art to be developed in post-Risorgimento Italy. While he used classical poetics and contemporary art criticism both as a tool to evaluate Whitman's poetry and as a critical filter to his poems, he adopted Mazzini's authority and political perspective to interpret and point out the epochal value of *Leaves of Grass*.

Between 1879 and 1891, Nencioni penned six long critical essays and lectured extensively on Whitman. His essays include the first Italian translations of *Leaves of Grass*, mostly from the "Drum-Taps" cluster. He knew that Whitman's war poems would find their way into the hearts and minds of the Italians by first of all appealing to their own experience as a people who had long fought for their union and independence. Indeed, the poems in "Drum-Taps" offer an emotional and pictorial narrative of the American Civil War from the point of view of an observer and a

participant who is not a warrior. If war itself is a universal experience, and the main theme of epic poetry, a war for a unitary state in which civilians are also involved was what Italians and a Northern Unionist like Whitman certainly shared.

Nencioni's Whitman: Reading Whitman through Horace

"Walt Whitman" (1879), the essay in which Nencioni introduces the American poet to Italians, is a rhetorical tour de force with a destructive first part and a constructive second part. While in the first part he acknowledges and pays respect to the backward-looking classical tradition that at the time hegemonized Italian poetry, in the second, he aligns himself with W. M. Rossetti, with the Italian Macchiaioli and the early French Impressionists, to suggest a suitable and forward-looking interpretation of Whitman.

American literature is the "youngest" and "lowest" among the literatures in the English language, Nencioni begins, and, since poets are a nation's voice, America has as yet no recognizable voice. This much stated, he bluntly declares his critical standpoint and his evaluation of Walt Whitman. There is a difference, he argues, that distinguishes the poet *qua genius* and the inspired poet, the man, that is, whose lines express a *divus afflatus* (divine inspiration). Whitman is endowed with *divus afflatus*, he admits, but does not possess the poet's *genius* (Nencioni 1879, 1).

The rest of the essay develops along the lines traced by this categorical distinction, whose source Nencioni indirectly reveals when, at the end of the essay and as a way of introducing the two poems from "Drum-Taps" that he translates, he defines Whitman as "a true American Tyrtaeus." Horace is the powerful critical filter through which Nencioni not only classifies "Drum-Taps" as a genre but evaluates Whitman's poetry. Horace refers to Tyrtaeus in his *Ars Poetica*, when he gives a synthetic summary of the history of poetry and, after the divine Orphaeus and Amphion, lists Homer and Tyrtaeus as the poets who "animated the manly mind to martial achievements with their verses" (Horace lines 391ff.).

Mistakenly but productively, Nencioni associates Whitman with the Greek forerunner of nationalist war poetry. And indeed, Tyrtaeus had in elegiac verse exhorted the Spartans to fight and die for their state and city – rather than for individual glory like Homer's *Iliad* heroes. Even if Whitman was not a warrior poet, like Tyrtaeus, he is still the describer of "the great voluntary enlistments, tremendous marches, desperate battles" rendered with "great *sincerity*" (Nencioni 1879, 1).

Conforming to the classical tradition, Nencioni attributes the title of poet only to the man who "harmonizes reason and phantasy" (Nencioni 1879, 1), whose poetry is the product of *ingenium* (talent) and ars, that is, of artistic technique and stylistic refinement (Horace, lines 289-294). It is exactly the lack of refinement and measure in Whitman's work that rules out his being a *true* poet, and Nencioni duly exposes Whitman's lack of restraint in his "laughable nomenclatures, similar to lists of oddities, or whole pages taken from geographic dictionaries." The poet's identification with Columbus or Washington he also finds outrageously excessive.

Furthermore, even though Whitman's strophe has its own "special harmony, grandiose and musical," to Nencioni it is not "properly *verse*."

All this notwithstanding and giving credit to W.M. Rossetti's definition of Whitman as "the greatest of American poets, and indeed, one of the greatest now living in any part of the world [...] a giant" (Rossetti, n.d., XXVI), Nencioni also considers Whitman a great man in Cicero's sense. Indeed, in his use of the expression "*divus afflatus*," which he shapes after Rossetti's "*poetic afflatus*" (Rossetti n.d., XXVI), Nencioni directs us to their common source, the *divinu adflatu* which, according to Cicero, distinguishes the great man for "no great man ever existed who did not enjoy some portion of divine inspiration" (Cicero 2: line 167 ff.).

Nencioni perceives in Whitman the Neoplatonic poet who renounces the prestige of an accredited poetic tradition to go back to "Orphic songs without a tradition," to the primitive "barbaric" times before civilization, when Orphic creation and biblical prophecy overlapped. By tapping these sources, he claims, Whitman had created the free rhythm of the living and thinking "Personality" of the present and future times, the New Man in whom individual and society are tightly interwoven, as it manifests itself in the cities and the natural, titanic, landscapes of America.

Whitman's "Orphic songs," Nencioni adds, also paint with a magnetic force "the immense American panoramas." Unfolding "the world in front of his readers' eyes," true to himself and the America he lives in, Whitman is a realist poet, who paints "the life naturally destined to Man" with its "patriarchal, primitive, unerasable feelings" (Nencioni 1879, 1).

Once more, Nencioni's association of painting with writing takes us back to Horace and his famous *ut pictura poesis*. In the line from which the expression is taken, Horace observes that in poetry, as in painting, some works of art should be seen from a distance and appreciated as a whole rather than in a close-up inspection of minute particulars. Nencioni was ready to follow his advice. In the 1850s, he had worked with another former schoolmate and lifelong friend, the painter Telemaco Signorini, to create an interpretive language that could apply both to poetry and painting (Balloni, Camboni). From Signorini, the theorizer of the Macchia painters and early Italian impressionism, Nencioni had learned how to appreciate contemporary experimental painting, a fact that allowed him to perceive the painterly modernity of Whitman's poetry. It is not surprising, then that from the beginning, Nencioni's criticism of Whitman's poetry is strongly marked by a close association of the visual and the verbal codes.

Nencioni found support in Horace's and Signorini's theoretical convergence for the second part of his essay, where he posits that emphasis on Whitman's lack of form only reveals the critics' misapplication of a distancing perspective viewpoint. Critics, he argues, should appreciate what Whitman's poetry offers, which is not formalized verse but images of a larger and more complex reality. If rather than selecting a few faulty lines, literary critics read all the poems in the text, they would be captured by the magnetic force emanating from them.

His selection of poems and lines seems largely dictated by their visual quality. He translates the most painterly sections from "First, O Songs, for a Prelude" (entitled "Manhatta (New York) all'armi," after Rossetti's "Manhattan Arming") and from "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown," titled "The Wounded" by Rossetti, and faithfully translated "I feriti." Skipping the first four lines, Nencioni's "Manhatta" begins where Whitman shows New York's citizens from various walks of life as they abruptly break with what they do in time of peace to enthusiastically turn to war. In Whitman's poem visual dynamics and historical turning points, however, are tightly intertwined. Not so in Nencioni's translation. While Whitman uses verbs in the simple past, historicizing the beginning of the war and distancing its image from the writing present, in his prosaic but faithful translation, Nencioni uses only the present tense, enhancing the visual dimension of action but missing the historical perspective of the original.

"The Wounded" ("I feriti") must also have been chosen for its realism and powerful visual quality. Decidedly skipping the first section with its emphasis on nature's empathy with the sound of the low spirits of the defeated army marching in the dark woods, Nencioni begins his translation from the lines beginning with "I see a sight." Apart from a few misleading word choices, Nencioni's sensitive prose is capable of rendering the visual impact of Whitman's lines and the devotion to the nation and sacrificial death of common men that overwhelmingly dominates the poem.

Space, and spatial imagery, is finally chosen by Nencioni to underscore how Whitman's poetry approaches truth by enmeshing the finite, experiential fact in the infinite horizon of universal process and progress, which in his interpretation is signaled by the use of the absolute superlative form "*la più*": "Ma la fattura del Vero," he writes, is "nella Natura e nell'Uomo, *la più* illimitata, *la più* ardita, *la più* inconcepibile a noi avvezzi alla vecchia legge e alle vecchie regole" (emphasis added). The American poet, he tells his readers, has in his free verse revolted against enslaving political and literary forms, and shown all humanity the path toward liberty and progress. Whitman is unequalled, he states, although there are writers who come close to his representation of the wide horizons open to contemporary humanity. They are Victor Hugo with his *Légende des siècles*, Shelley in the first act of *Prometheus*, and Swinburne in his *Songs Before Sunrise*, a collection of poems inspired by the Italian Risorgimento.

"Walt Whitman," an essay that initially pointed out the negative aspects of Whitman's poetry, ends with a positive image of the man who shaped a new discursive space for the representation of the contemporary world. Consistently, and notwithstanding a repeated emphasis on Whitman's not being a "true poet," Nencioni's essays of 1881, 1883, and 1884 are further illustrations of the New Horizons opened in literature by the American Whitman, the prophet of democracy in the world. And indeed, Nencioni's second essay, "Nuovi orizzonti poetici" (New Poetical Horizons), expands on the idea that Whitman's poetry, just like Goethe's, Shelley's, Byron's, Swinburne's, and, most of all, Victor Hugo's, shows "a powerful wing and wide horizons" (Nencioni 1881, 2). As an example, Nencioni translates a

few sections from "Salut au Monde" and contrasts the wide social and natural horizons visible in Whitman's *truly* realist poetry to the narrow-minded European Realist and Verist movements or the asphyxiating atmosphere of decadent bourgeois art, an art of the closet.

In "Il poeta della democrazia" (The Poet of Democracy, 1883), Nencioni's focus falls on Whitman's "humanity." Whitman's free verse, he writes, does not simply model itself on the American titanic landscapes but adheres to the modern individual whose "sentiment of the Infinite" and "consciousness of Humanity" breed less egoism and more brotherhood (Nencioni 1883, 1). He is "the prophet of a new society and a new art" and, "aesthetically and politically," the "most audacious and radical poet, who addressed *fiery* words to the masses" (Nencioni 1883, 1). Like Giuseppe Mazzini and Victor Hugo, he continues, Whitman unites humanity and the single man. Since in his poetry, moreover, body and soul are never separated, he is close to Mazzini's religious vision of the ideal artist as epitomized in his critical writings on Dante.

It is not a surprise that Nencioni's fourth essay on Whitman is simply entitled "Mazzini e Whitman" (1884). There he quotes at length from "Years of the Unperformed," transforming Whitman's lines into a single paragraph where the original "I see *men* marching" becomes "I see *workers* marching" (emphasis added), singling out the political and universal aspects of Whitman's democratic poetry. He also translates the first section of "Give Me the Splendid Sun" with the title Rossetti had given to it "Manhattan Faces" to illustrate the inner fight between aspirations to merge with nature and the febrile desire to be part of the chaotic energy of the modern vibrant city.

Nencioni, Whitman and Mazzini

Mazzini and Whitman: a revolution in politics and art

To understand the relevance and scope of Nencioni's "Mazzini e Whitman," it is necessary to co-textualize it.[1] It is, in fact, the third instalment in a series of three articles centering on Mazzini's literary ideas, successively published in book-form under the title of *Scritti letterari di Giuseppe Mazzini*. Nencioni used it both to call attention to Mazzini's international relevance as a literary critic and to promote Whitman's work as an embodiment of the Italian's theories. Mazzini's literary criticism, Nencioni argues in the book, has not only been appreciated by British,

[1] An expanded version of Nencioni's lecture on Mazzini given to a large audience at the Philological Circle of Florence on March 3l, 1884, the articles, entitled "Gli scritti letterari di G. Mazzini," "Mazzini, Carlyle e Swinburne," and "Mazzini e Whitman" were all published in Il fanfulla della Domenica, respectively in the issues of 6, 13, 20 April 1884, (6. 14; 6.15; 6.16). Subsequently woven into a single essay, they were published in book form in 1884 with the overall title Scritti letterari di Giuseppe Mazzini. In 1912, the essay was again used to introduce the two volumes of Mazzini's Scritti letterari, (Milano 1912), proving the early twentieth-century relevance of Mazzini's thought and Nencioni's criticism.

French, and German intellectuals and poets but his original views on art and society, as well as his opposition to the French concept of "art for art's sake", took shape through a constant dialogue with them. While Mazzini influenced Swinburne's *Songs after Sunrise*, Nencioni continues, his view of art and its function in society is opposite to the heroic and elitist vision of Carlyle. Closer to Mazzini's humanitarian stance is, instead, Whitman's democratic poetry. Mazzini, Nencioni adds, invited artists to turn away from time-worn neoclassical themes and forms, and represent their own times and people, and the distinguishing events of their epoch. And Whitman, with his emphasis "on movement, action, the tremendous audacity of the masses," with his poetic longing for nature yet passionate embrace of the city and its crowds, gives literary body to the ideas of the Italian founder of Young Italy and Young Europe (Nencioni 1884, 1).

"Ardor for Liberty"

In associating Whitman and Mazzini, Nencioni is pointing in the right direction. As Larry J. Reynolds has argued, "the revolutions of 1848-49 had shaped or were shaping Whitman's conception of himself as an artist" (Reynolds 143).[2] In a lecture given at the Brooklyn Art Union in 1851, Whitman had not only listed "Kossuth in captivity and Mazzini in exile" among the "great rebels and innovators" but referred to recent events in Italy, finding in them a revolutionary spirit and aspirations to liberty and freedom from bondage: "In Naples, in Rome, in Venice, that ardor for liberty which is a constituent part of all well-developed artists and without which a man cannot be such, has had a struggle—a hot and baffled one." Kossuth and Mazzini "*are* heroic beauty," "the best beloved of art," he continued, they are living poetry, that which the painter, the sculptor, can only express in description (Whitman 2014, 246). Concluding his speech, Whitman quoted 18 lines from "Resurgemus," further linking his emergent poetic voice to the European revolutions. In the poem, he points to the sufferings of the European revolutionaries who fought and died for liberty and independence, but he also celebrates the revolutionary energy which unshackles people from bondage and rises Phoenix-like from the death fields of war. The very title of the poem, with its etymological affinity to the Italian "Risorgimento," bears evidence that Italy was very much in his thoughts.

The Radiation of a Poet to the World

Whitman was certainly familiar with what Margaret Fuller had written of Mazzini in the NewYork *Daily Tribune*, where he first published "Resurgemus." He also read contemporary American and British papers and may well have come across the critical writings Mazzini published in *The Westminster Review* and the *People's*

[2] On Young America and Whitman's association with it, see Eyal, Erkkila 30 ff.

Journal.[3] Late in life, Whitman declared that Mazzini was "a great and lofty spirit," "one of the most significant and suggestive characters of our century" who "dealt in essences—went right to the fountainhead." He owned a picture of Mazzini's and a selection of his essays which he considered "a household book" and a copy of *The Duties of Man*, which was sent to him in 1870 by a British working-class admirer (Traubel 5, 409-10; Traubel 4, 349).[4]

In an 1841 essay, published in the *Westminster Review*, Mazzini had contrasted Carlyle's conception with his view that "Art is eminently a social manifestation, an element of collective development [...] whence the artist draws his mission" while the individual is only an "able epitomist" (Mazzini 1841, 364). Indeed, for Nencioni, Whitman may well have represented Mazzini's "able epitomist," the combiner of the individual and the mass appearing at the acme of time, and "the predestined translator of a sacred language, that is to become hereafter the language of all" (Mazzini 1841, 364-365).

In the essay, Mazzini's representation of the artist, moreover, offers a manifest linguistic connection to – as well as a perfect blueprint for – Whitman's ideal poet. He writes that

> [The Artist is] the radiation of the universal life of a people at a certain epoch, concentrating itself in one great individuality, thence to re-descend on the faithful in tongues of fire [...] the Artist is a being of love, and what is love but if it be not the power of sympathy with the life of another [...] Whenever a man has this power, he is a Poet [...] a poet to the world [...] he can communicate to his brethren his impulse and his activity. Then he is an apostle, an evangelist. His lyre belongs to all, is for all. His name is Million. (Mazzini 1841, 364-365; emphasis added)

The word "radiation" embodies a nodal concept and is part of the transnational narrative that over the years, and across the Atlantic, connected G. W. Hegel's philosophy of history to Mazzini and Whitman. Early in his political career, Mazzini had found in Hegel's *Philosophy of History* a confirmation of his Vichian idea that the Italian Resurgence participated in human progress in history and art and theoretical support of his notion that the Italians' fight for freedom and independence was an instance of the struggle of the spirit in its historical existence (see Gallo and Körner).

But what about Whitman? He had certainly felt an early political closeness to Mazzini in the context of European revolutions, but it is only in the early seventies, when he was also taking notes on Hegel's philosophy, that he admitted reading his essays.[5] He first used the word "radiation" in "Democratic Vistas," when stating

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[3] « Resurgemus » was first published in the *Tribune* in 1850. F. Stovall has persuasively demonstrated Whitman's acquaintance with Mazzini's essay on George Sand printed in 1847 in the *People's Journal* of London and reprinted the same year in *The Harbinger* (May 29, 1847). See Stovall 214-15.

[4] See Thomas Dixon's letter to Whitman of 9 April 1870, published in the Walt Whitman Archive.

[5] It is possible that Whitman read, or re-read, Mazzini's writings around 1870, when he was taking notes on Hegel and the German Idealists for a series of lectures. See Greer 2009-2018; Bauerlein.

"That Something a Man is [...] The *radiation* of this truth – is the key of the most significant doings of our immediately preceding three centuries, and has been the political genesis and life of America" (Whitman 1892, 213-14; emphasis added). The word appears again in a poem first published in the 1881-82 edition of the *Leaves*, "A Riddle Song," as a figure of the artistically unassailable life energy present in man, as well as of human progress. But it is in his note on Poe that Whitman aligns himself with Mazzini when he maintains that "the foundation" of a work of art and its "radiation" lie in its power "to free, arouse, dilate," in other words in its energizing, life-giving power (Whitman 1892, 252).

It is exactly its life-giving power that projects the artwork into the future so that, like a prophet, the poet addresses his future readers above all, while his text embodies the human transforming force of progress. Mazzini thought that "fiery souls" like the artists "positioned by nature at a great altitude [...] as Prophets send their powerful voice [...] a voice that [...] to the applause of the present prefers to be heard by posterity. It was for posterity that Dante wrote" (Mazzini 1847, 158-159). For the Mazzinian critic Nencioni, Whitman's pioneering work not only opened the way to future poets but prophesied a new order of events as he sang the modern man's life, his titanic and audacious enterprises as traveler and discoverer in a cosmopolitan democracy.

War and Peace

The Italian translation of Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, in 1891, and the debate the book sparked offered Nencioni the occasion to write his last – and longest – essay on Whitman, "Il poeta della guerra Americana," this time entirely devoted to "Drum-Taps." Whitman, he claims once more, is "the poet of the American war," "a (real) *man*," and the pioneer of a new society. As for the American Civil War, "unique in human history," it is "a titanic battle" fought in an immense setting, and the high cost in human lives is a fit price paid for the abolition of slavery, and "the indivisibility of the Republic" (Nencioni 1910, 205, 207).

Nencioni's essay provides a representation of the "antagonism between North and South." Initially a pagan titanic war, it soon becomes a "sainted, fecund, useful" war, the perfect antithesis to Napoleon's "very unjust, very bloody, and useless" wars described in *War and Peace*. Like Whitman, Nencioni considers the Northern volunteers to be as great as the volunteers of the French Republic of 1792, while Abraham Lincoln, "the first hero of the epoch," shares his martyrdom with the many soldiers who fought in the war (Nencioni 1910, 207). Nencioni translates "First, O Songs for a Prelude," the "Wound-Dresser," and "War Dreams" to point out how Whitman realistically portrays all facets of war and its tragedy, and how he sides with the common people, helping soldiers in his role as a nurse in war camps and hospitals. He also detects a touch of Rembrandt in "A March in the Ranks Hard-pressed." Nencioni believes that the North's greatness lies in its resistance "to the hardest trials remaining pure and heroic" (Nencioni 1910, 218).

Concluding his essay, Nencioni first translates section 14 from "By Blue Ontario's Shore" then turns to "The Wound-dresser" to produce a portrait of the

poet as a modern-day *Pietà* holding in his/her lap not one son but the million wounded, dead, or dying soldiers. Because they obeyed God's will in dying for democracy, they are all saviors, and not uniquely of the American Union but of humanity.[6]

In a final gesture, in his closing paragraph, Nencioni addresses Italian artists. Instead of admiring contemporary European decadent literature, he argues, Italian poets should read Whitman, a man who could produce images and poems of global, humanitarian scope, and move out of a narrow, nationalist perspective.

Conclusion

Criticism and translation, Nencioni has shown us, add more life to the original text in at least three ways: by facilitating their "entrance upon other outward contingencies," as Whitman wrote; by uncovering aspects hardly visible to the native reader or in different "contingencies," and by transforming a national experience of reading into a trans-national experience of translating. In the first case, the ways and means translators use to "ferry" the foreign text into their country and language are highlighted, including, to better adapt it, the emphasis laid on similarities and useful differences. In the second and third cases, words and whole poems, images, stories, and experiences become connecting links, openings, and potentialities in the text that display how much an author's work is, consciously or unconsciously, collective and 'trans-national' – at least as much as trans-temporal – before being personal and consciously "national."

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[6] On the Pietà as a symbol for the sacrifice of both soldier and nurse in « Drum-Taps »", see Athenot's Préface to his recent French translation of the poems.

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