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Revue TIES

7 | 2022

*Speaking in Tongues:
Celebrating Walt Whitman
in Translation*

The Russian Whitman and World Literature

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ABSTRACT. *This paper examines Whitman's reception in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century and in the first two decades of the USSR. The subject has in itself been much covered by critics, but the angle here is quite specific. The aim is to understand how Whitman's reception was part of emerging conceptions of World literature, first as a dense network where texts circulated, then as constituting an international revolutionary canon. Whitman's reception was shaped by these diverging conceptions, but it also played a role in establishing them: the paper focuses on these dialectics. Whitman's reception in Russia and in the USSR is therefore considered in a broader context: the paper examines how this reception echoed that of other European countries, and how, in return, it shaped Whitman's reception as a communist poet in US Proletarian poetry and, after WW2, in Latin American poetry.*

RÉSUMÉ. L'article étudie la réception russe de Whitman au début du XX^e siècle et dans les deux premières décennies de l'Union soviétique. Si cette réception a déjà fait l'objet d'un certain nombre de travaux, l'enjeu est ici de comprendre quel rôle les lectures de Whitman ont pu jouer dans les nouvelles conceptions de la littérature mondiale qui émergent alors. Il s'agit dans un premier temps de situer Whitman dans un dense réseau de circulation des textes et des idées, puis dans la mise en place du canon de l'internationale littéraire. La réception de Whitman témoigne de ces évolutions, mais elle les a également accompagnées et dans une certaine mesure cristallisées, dans une dialectique que l'article cherche à restituer. La réception russe de Whitman dialogue donc avec d'autres lectures, européennes et américaines : si elle constitue une caisse de résonance des réceptions de l'Europe occidentale avant la Révolution, elle façonne en retour la récupération de Whitman en poète prolétarien aux États-Unis dans les années 1930 puis en poète communiste et anti-impérialiste en Amérique latine après la Seconde Guerre mondiale.

MOTS CLÉS : réception, littérature mondiale, primitivisme, littérature prolétarienne, pionniers

KEYWORDS: *reception, World Literature, primitivism, Proletarian literature, pioneers*

The impact that Whitman had on European poetic and aesthetic debates at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century was tremendous and has been thoroughly described. His very rich reception in Russian and Soviet literature has equally been the subject of several studies.¹ The aim of this paper is to cast a different light on this reception from a comparatist angle, to show how connected it was with the Western European and American receptions, and to understand what part it played in redefining World Literature in the Soviet Union and beyond.² *Leaves of Grass* began to be translated and commented in Russia roughly at the same time as in Western Europe, in the first decade of the century, but the apex of the *Whitmaniana*, as Korney Chukovsky called it (Chukovskii 1906),³ was reached a little bit later: it was really between 1918 and 1922—years of great turmoil for Russian history—that Whitman’s work and fame were ubiquitous. This interval, however short, is central to my argument, since I would like to show that Whitman’s reception in Russia was at first a remarkable space of reverberation—and transformation—of the Western European reception. I will then underline that *Whitmaniana* was concomitant with the development of the idea of World Literature in the nascent USSR: Whitman was to become central to the newly defined international canon. Moreover, Whitman’s interpretation as a communist poet crossed the Atlantic and contributed to establishing Whitman as a major reference for Proletarian writers, more than a decade before he was put at the center of the American canon. The Russian reception played a pivotal role in reshaping Whitman as a political poet and in establishing him as a key figure in transatlantic poetic exchanges.

Before the Revolution: Whitman as a primitive

The European Whitmanians regarded themselves as a cosmopolitan circle: Léon Bazalgette, the first French translator of the full edition of *Leaves of Grass*, dreamed of building the United States of Europe after Whitman’s America. He was in close contact with his British and German counterparts (especially the German translator Johann Schlaf). All these names were familiar to Russian readers, who were well aware of Whitman’s intense reception in Western Europe. Most editions of Russian translations contain a large choice of other European commentaries on Whitman (especially the 1919 edition). To study Whitman’s reception in Russia sheds light on

¹ See in particular Stepanchev 1995, Orlitskii 2018, Murray 2019.

² This article draws material from the studies mentioned above, but also from my book *Fortunes de Walt Whitman. Enjeux d’une réception transatlantique*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019. I considered Whitman’s Russian reception in connection with World Literature conceptions in an article published in French in the online review *Silène* (“Walt Whitman en Russie : plonger dans l’océan’ de la littérature mondiale”): http://www.revue-silene.com/f/index.php?sp=comm&comm_id=262 The present text was translated, with a few revisions, from this essay. An extended and much more thorough version is to be published as a book (*Comrade Whitman. From Russian to Internationalist Icon*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, forthcoming).

³ Chukovsky uses the Latin alphabet for the word “Whitmaniana,” which might indicate a reference to Swinburne, who coined the word “Whitmania” in 1887.

the importance and the complexity of cultural circulation at that time. I would therefore like to show that Whitman was widely read and interpreted via Western philosophy and via European critics (especially the French and the British), even though the specificities of Russian primitivism brought new overtones.

The taste for “primitivism” was a major phenomenon in philosophy and art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precisely at the time when Whitman became an important debate topic in Europe. Primitivism was a response to the sense of the decay of civilization felt on the Continent. It was associated with the desire for a European “Renaissance,” sometimes with revolutionary aspirations. However, what defined the *primitive*, what was considered as a possible rejuvenating origin, differed from one part of Europe to another. Whitman as a *primitive*, therefore, meant contradictory things, depending on the references and the analogies that were operative for the cultures that received him: he was often related to the Biblical world (especially in Spain), but also to India, Homeric Greece (especially in Britain) or Germanic tribes. He was thus caught in a complex dialectics, which combined estrangement with a form of proximity: the primitive had to be reached far enough to appear as new, but it also had to be connected to the present times somehow.

In Russia, as in Britain, Whitman was often seen as the reincarnation of an Ancient Greek man. In “The Nature of the Word,” Mandelstam used both Biblical and Greek paradigms of the primitive when he referred to Whitman as a “new Adam” who offered a model of primitive poetry worthy of that of Homer:

Америка лучше этой, пока что умопостигаемой, Европы. Америка, истратив свой филологический запас, свезенный из Европы, как бы ошалела и призадумалась — и вдруг завела свою собственную филологию, откуда-то выкопала Уитмэна, и он, как новый Адам, стал давать имена вещам, дал образец первобытной, номенклатурной поэзии, под стать самому Гомеру. (Mandelstam 1993, 224-225)

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America has outdone this Europe that for the time being is still comprehensible. America, having exhausted the philological supply it had carried over from Europe, panicked, as it were, then took some thought, and suddenly started growing its own personal philology, dug Whitman up from one place or other; and he, like a new Adam, began to give names to things, provided a standard for a primitive, nomenclatural, poetry, to match that of Homer himself. (Mandelstam 1975, 515)

But mostly, Whitman was associated with Dionysus—especially in the first texts that his main translator, Korney Chukovsky, dedicated to him. One should emphasize the impact of Nietzsche on Russian thought, and Whitman’s Dionysiac power clearly had strong Nietzschean overtones. A long part of the essay “Personality and Democracy” (*Lishnost’ i demokratiia*) explained that Nietzsche himself never found the way to Dionysus and remained, with all his questions, doubts, problems, very Socratic. The real guide was indeed Whitman, according to

Chukovsky, who even made Zarathustra himself speak and recommend Whitman as the ultimate model, the closest reincarnation of Dionysus, only more astute – *kehitree* (Chukovskii 1906).

Whitman was also referred to as a Barbarian: strictly speaking, the Barbarian is the opposite of a Greek, but primitivism was less about historical accuracy than about aggregating heterogeneous references that shared, or were thought to share, some characteristics (a sense of origin or at least of beginnings, a sense of immediacy, directness, be it constructive or destructive). Russian symbolism was very much drawn towards a Barbarian imagery, centered on Asian rather than Germanic tribes—one can think of Valery Bryusov’s poem “The future Huns” (“*Griadushchie gunny*”) or Alexandr Blok’s long poem “The Scythians” (“*Skify*”). In 1919, in the preface to his translation, Chukovsky called Whitman a barbarian bard (“*varvar bard*,” Uitmèn 1919, 60), and a little later, he coined a Homeric epithet to refer to the “barbarianly straightforward” Whitman (“*varvarki-priamolinen*,” Uitmèn 1923, 58).

However, Whitman appeared as very tame in the first Russian collection translated by Chukovsky in 1907 (a chapbook published in Saint Petersburg) and in a more substantial one by the Symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont, in 1911: rhythmic regularity and rhyme gave an orderly aspect to the American Barbarian. Chukovsky later commented on his first attempt and declared it really bad (Chukovskii 1969). One of his great contributions to Whitman’s Russian reception and to the Russian poetic debate was a translation in free verse some years later. Chukovsky grew up in Odessa and was a self-taught man. He discovered Whitman while working on the docks of the city, where a sailor sold him a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. Here is his account of this life-changing discovery:

И вот однажды, когда я работал в порту, меня поманил к себе пальцем
незнакомый матрос и, сунув мне в руку толстенную книгу, потребовал за нее
четвертак. При этом он пугливо озирался, словно книга была нелегальная.
Матросы иностранных судов часто провозили контрабандой зарубежные
брошюры и книги.

Вечером после работы я ушел на волнорез к маяку и увидел, что это книга
стихов, написанная неким Уолтом Уитменом, о котором я ничего не слышал.
Я развернул, где пришлось и прочитал безумные стихи:

Мои цепи и балласты спадают с меня, локтями я упираюсь
в морские пучины,
Я обнимаю сьерры, я ладонями покрываю всю сушу...
Под Ниагарой, что, падая, лежит, как вуаль, у меня на лице...
Блуждая по старым холмам Иудей бок о бок с прекрасным
и нежным богом,
Пролетая в мировой пустоте, пролетая в небесах между звезд...
Я посещаю сады планет и смотрю, хороши ли плоды.
Я смотрю на квинтильоны созревших и квинтильоны незрелых.

Подобных стихов я никогда не читал. Было ясно, что их написал
вдохновенный безумец, который в трансе, в бреду вообразил себя абсолютно

свободным от иллюзий пространства и времени, и далекая древность предстала пред ним рядом с сегодняшним днем, и родная Ниагара явилась в соседстве с миллионами солнц, вращающихся в мировой пустоте. Стихи потрясли меня, как большое событие. Хаосу моих тогдашних чувств вполне соответствовал хаотический строй этой необыкновенной поэмы. Словно я взобрался на высокую гору и гляжу оттуда с головокружительной высоты на муравьиную жизнь людей. (Chukovskii, 1969)

One day when I was working on the docks a foreign sailor beckoned to me and thrust a thick book into my hands, demanding 25 kopeks for it. He glanced furtively about as he did so, as if the book were a banned one. Sailors on foreign ships often brought forbidden literature into Tsarist Russia.

That evening after work I took my book to the lighthouse at the end of the jetty. It was a book of poetry written by a certain Walt Whitman, whose name I had never heard before.

I opened at random and read:

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
I am afoot with my vision . . .
Under Niagara, the cataract falling like a veil over my countenance . . .
Walking the old hills of Judea with the beautiful gentle God by my side,
Speeding through space, speeding through heaven and the stars . . .
I visit the orchards of spheres and look at the product,
And look at quintillions ripen'd and look at quintillions green . . .

Never before had I read anything like this. Clearly it had been written by an inspired madman who, in a state of trance of delirium, fancied himself absolutely free of the illusions of time and space. The distant past was to him identical with the present moment and his native Niagara Falls was neighbor to the millions of suns whirling in the void of the universe.

I was shaken by these poems as much as by some epoch-making event. The chaos of my emotions at that time was in perfect harmony with the chaotic composition of the poetry. I seemed to have climbed to dizzying heights from which I looked down upon the ant-hill of human life and activities. (Allen, Folsom 1995, 333-334)

He wrote articles about Whitman soon after—including partial translation gathered in the 1907 chapbook—and his first book-length translation was published in 1914, only to be seized by censorship. It contained an interesting preface by the painter Ilya Repin, which clearly contradicted Chukovsky's own views. Repin, though enthusiastic about Whitman, abhorred Nietzsche's philosophy. Not only wouldn't he agree to have Whitman embody Nietzschean ideas, but he actually saw in Whitman an antidote to Nietzsche's individualism. To him, Whitman was the poet of the community ("*sobornost*," a word whose root is "*sobor*," "cathedral," and which conveyed Orthodox and Slavophilic connotations). Whitman was made to fit in with a Russian grid and paradoxically read as a cure for Western liberal ills. The

tension between the individual and the community, central to Whitman's poetics and politics, was split between Chukovsky's Nietzschean emphasis on the former and Repin's stress on the latter. Chukovsky showed a sense of consistency as he translated Whitman in free verse, against Balmont and against the Russian resistance to such an absence of fixed rhythms and such a refusal of collective poetic memory.

His perspective on Whitman, however, moved gradually away from this first Nietzschean outlook and began to draw nearer to a new Russian poetic trend—futurism, which partly overlapped with primitivism and gave it a new impulse. In a 1913 article on Whitman entitled "The Poetry of the Future, the First Futurist," Chukovsky used the analogy with the Huns again. The "poetry of the future" would destroy everything and bury the past. According to Chukovsky, Whitman was a source of inspiration and influence for both Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky, though I would argue that such a relation is much more obvious with the latter—Mayakovsky's relation to Whitman has indeed been well documented.⁴ With Mayakovsky, questions of aesthetics are really intertwined with political ones. Evidently political stakes were there from the start, as Whitman was censored in tsarist Russia, but his appropriation for propagandistic purposes really came after the Revolution, when, very early, important means were given to cultural policies.

From 1918: A communist herald

I will begin by another detour to Western Europe and go back in time a little, since the Russians did not invent the socialist Whitman—the British did. Kirsten Harris has studied this aspect thoroughly in *Walt Whitman and British Socialism. The "Love of Comrades,"* to which I refer for further developments (Harris 2016). To sum it up, Whitman was read intensely in Britain at the end of the 19th century, at a time of an incredible ferment of socialist ideas. Ernest Rhys himself, who in 1886 published a popular British selection of Whitman's poetry, was a socialist. Whitman was regarded as a prophet of socialism, especially of what has been labeled "ethical socialism," as opposed to Marxist socialism, which was to become more and more institutionalized. This socialist Whitman was then exported to continental Europe, in a milder version (the prophet of love and comradeship) in France and Germany, and in a much more partisan one in Russia and especially in the new Soviet Union.

Chukovsky's translation of Whitman was to become a bestseller, with 5 000 copies printed in 1918, and 50 000 copies in 1919 (a considerable number, though not an unusual circulation for State publishing houses). Some of his poems were even printed out in large formats and distributed on the Civil War front ("To the Battle We Shall Hurry," translated by Chukovsky, was distributed in Totma). The 1918 edition contained a postface by the high-ranked Bolshevik Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Education. He insisted that Whitman was a communist, and even criticized the title of Chukovsky's translation (*Poèzija griadushchei demokratii, Poetry of Future Democracy*), on the grounds that the collectivist

⁴ See Cavanagh 1999, Scherr 2009, Rumeau 2019 (107-109).

aspect in Whitman should be emphasized more than the democratic one. Chukovsky disagreed and in the following edition, in 1919, he replied to Lunacharsky's—still included—essay that socialism was alien to Whitman, and that “democracy” was a “titanesque” word that went hand in hand with the word “comradeship” (*tovarshchestvo*). As was the case with Repin's preface, it is interesting that the editions welcomed conflicting views and offered spaces for contradictory debates. Balmont's translation was also reprinted in 1922, with a different title (*Revolutsionnaia poèziia Evropy i Ameriki. Uitmen; Revolutionary Poetry from Europe and America. Whitman*) and with a preface that presented Whitman as the great prophet of the communist International (Balmont however fled from Russia soon after writing that text).

In 1918, the agitprop director Alexandr Mgebrov (famous for a spectacular production of *La Prise de la Bastille*, by Romain Rolland) staged several poems by Whitman: the show was introduced by Lunacharsky, with Meyerhold attending, and it went on tour for four years.⁵ In 1918 again, a large portrait of Whitman by Boris Grigoriev was hung in Petrograd as part of the festival for the first anniversary of the Revolution, with some lines written on panels.⁶

One poem in particular, “Pioneers, O pioneers,” was appropriated, translated and distributed. Whitman's text belonged to the Reconstruction era: it was written right after the Civil War, encouraging Americans to go westward, to reunify the country by expanding the territory and by cultivating the land. It is therefore quite paradoxical that the very same poem should have been used for international purposes. In my view, what accounts partly for this “misreading” is the fact that the poem was one of the few Whitman didn't write in free verse: traditional metric poems are more frequently used for marches or propaganda because they are easily memorized. Another reason for the success of the poem in the Soviet Union is the coincidence between the American word “pioneers” and the Russian “*pionery*,” referring to the youth preparing to become members of the Communist Party. To have the poem fit internationalist purposes, a few adjustments were necessary, however, and some stanzas were usually highlighted while others got cut. For example, in his 1886 edition of Whitman's poems, Ernest Rhys chose the following stanza as an epigraph to his preface:

Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lessons, wearied over there beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers! O pioneers! (Whitman 1886, ix)

Kirsten Harris has documented with great precision the uses of the poem by the Labour Church, a British Socialist group (Harris 2016). In the Soviet Union, the poem went through several separate editions, sometimes in Chukovsky's translation, but sometimes in other versions.

⁵ See a detailed account of the performance in Mgebrov's memoirs (Mgebrov 1932, 335-360).

⁶ See Murray 2018: 170-171.

I would like to insist on a particularly remarkable one, published in 1918 by a cooperative publishing house, Segodnia, founded by artists, among whom Vera Ermolaeva (who later joined the avant-garde in Vitebsk with Chagall). Ermolaeva illustrated the little book and painted some of the copies, which are now treasures for bibliophiles (the MOMA holds one). The name of the translator does not appear in the book, which provided only initials, M. S. They might point to the historian Simon Dubnov (the author of an important *Jewish History*), whose pseudonym was Semyon Mstislavsky, and whose daughter, Sofia, worked at Segodnia. Another hypothesis is Samuil Marshak, who became one of the finest Soviet translators from English. Even though I could not connect him to Segodnia, he is a more likely candidate, since he knew English and translated many poems in 1917, at a time when he lived in Petrograd. The cover shows a mix of futurist traits (the simplicity of the lines, the emphasis on movement) and primitivist ones (the shape of the characters, the simple natural setting). Another separate edition of the poem, in Chukovsky's translation, was published in 1923 to celebrate May 1st. It is a striking example of political appropriation, enabled by the selection of some stanzas, by the editing work and by the illustrations.

Lunacharsky was not the only political figure to be interested in Whitman. Among the Bolshevik literati, Alexander Krasnoshchyokov stands out.⁷ In 1924, he was falsely accused of corruption, arrested and put on trial, one of the first trials set as an example. While Krasnoshchyokov was imprisoned (at a time when one could still receive books), he asked for a copy of *Leaves of Grass* and worked on his own translation.⁸ Unfortunately, the translation appears to be lost, but it remains fascinating that a Soviet banker would translate Whitman while serving time. Krasnoshchyokov is also a striking example of how political stakes and transatlantic migrations converge in the act of translating, so central to the idea of World Literature.

From 1922: Whitman and Soviet World Literature

While Whitman was appropriated politically, his fame went beyond strict propagandistic uses and is to be also understood in a context of profound changes in literary approaches and theories.

1922 was a great Whitmanian year in the USSR. At the end of *Doctor Zhivago* (written much later, in the 1950s), Boris Pasternak included the fictional notebooks of his main character. In an entry dating from 1922, doctor Zhivago writes: "The seemingly incongruous and arbitrary jumble of things and ideas in the work of the symbolists (Blok, Verhaeren, Whitman) is not a stylistic fancy." He adds: "This new

⁷ His life is in itself a fascinating narrative: he grew up in a shtetl in Ukraine and then emigrated to the United States, where he studied law at the University of Chicago and became a member of the IWW. He later came back to Russia during the Revolution and was a prominent political figure, first at the head of the Far Eastern Republic and then as the founder of the State Bank.

⁸ The information appears in Bengt Jangfeldt's biography of Mayakovsky (*Mayakovsky. A Biography*. Trans. Harry D. Watson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.)

juxtaposition of impressions is taken directly from life” (Pasternak 1965, 52).⁹ Whitman was thus associated with poets who changed the relation between art and life drastically, who intended to grab modern life in its most chaotic aspects and not to shape it and transform it through prosody or other poetic devices. The association between Verhaeren and Whitman, though not specific to Russia, was particularly common (Lunacharsky also stressed their common points).

But mainly, and this is more specific to the early years of the Soviet Union, Whitman was associated with the rise of “World Literature” and the development of new conceptions of it, whereby the idea of circulation and translation was just as important as the idea of building the canon of the Revolution. As Jérôme David explained (David 2012), two adjectives were used, “*vsemirnaia*” and “*mirovaia*.” the former was more associated with the study of literary networks (*internationally*), and the latter with establishing a canon (*internationally*). These uses roughly correspond to two successive—though at times overlapping—trends, as Soviet World Literature went from a “*vsemirnaia*” conception in the 1920s to a “*mirovaia*” one later on. Whitman was intrinsically associated with the “*vsemirnaia*” phase, with an emphasis on the circulation of ideas and poetics. In 1921, after reading the *Nation and Athenaeum*, Chukovsky wrote in his diary:

Новые матерьялы о Уоте Уитмэне! И главное — как сблизились все части мира: англчане пишут о французах, французы откланкаются, вмешиваются греки — все нации туго сплетены, цивилизация становится широкой и единой. Как будто меня вытащили из лужи и окунули в океан!

Отныне я решил не писать о Некрасове, не копаться в литературных дрязгах, а смело приобщиться к мировой литературе. (Chukovsky 2003, 186 - 30/03/1921)

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New materials on Walt Whitman! And more important, how closely knit the world has become: the English write about the French, the French respond, the Greeks intervene – all nations are inextricably interwoven, civilization is spreading and becoming one. I feel I’ve been dragged out of a pond and dunked in the ocean!

I’ve decided to stop writing about Nekrasov and rooting among literary wrangles and to throw in my lot with world literature. (Chukovsky 2008, 85)

Even though the adjective used here is “*mirovaia*,” it was really the idea of a literary network, through which Whitman circulated, that fascinated Chukovsky.

In 1922, Chukovsky’s translation was reprinted, but this time for a new publishing house, the “World Literature Edition,” founded by Maksim Gorky, who

⁹ “Беспорядочное перечисление вещей и понятий с виду несовместимых и поставленных рядом как бы произвольно, у символистов, Блока, Верхарна и Уитмана, совсем не стилистическая прихоть. Это новый строй впечатлений, подмеченный в жизни и списанный с природы.” (Pasternak 2003, 60)

had established a programmatic catalogue. Chukovsky, along with Yevgeny Zamyatin, was responsible for the English and American series. The translation of Whitman's poems was again accompanied by several pieces of European criticism, suggesting a vast network of commentators. The following 1923 edition was illustrated by a futurist painter, Evgeni Belukha. The American and Russian flags were intertwined in a design that didn't only signify the international aims of the revolution but the literary connections that were developing over the Atlantic.



Cover of Uot Uitmèn, *Poëziia gidušchei demokratii*, trans. K. Chukovskii. Moscow, Petrograd: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1923.

Several entries in Chukovsky's diary suggest how popular Whitman had become, even though Chukovsky noticed that it was not the poet, but only the prophet who fueled people's enthusiasm, not the aesthetic quality of the text, but its moral and political stakes. Here is his account of the meeting of the "Whitmanian circle":

Был вчера в кружке уитмэнианцев и вернулся устыженный. Правда, уитмэнианства там было мало: люди спорили, вскрикивали, обвиняли друг друга в неискренности, но — какая жажда всеосвящающей «религии», какие запасы фанатизма. Я в последние годы слишком залитературился, я и не представлял себе, что возможны какие-нибудь оценки Уитмэна, кроме литературных,— и вот, оказывается, благодаря моей чисто литературной работе — у молодежи горят глаза, люди сидят далеко за полночь и выработывают вопрос: как жить. Один вроде костромича все вскидывался на

меня: «это эстетика!» Словно «эстетика» — ругательное слово. Им эстетика не нужна — их страстно занимает мораль. Уитмэн их занимает как пророк и учитель. Они желают целоваться и работать и умирать — *по Уитмэну*. (Chukovsky 2003, 225-226, 18/03/1922)

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Went to a Whitman Society meeting yesterday and came back ashamed of myself. True, there wasn't much Whitman-like about it—it was mostly quarreling, yelling, and mutual accusations of insincerity- but what a thirst for all-concerning “religion”, what reserves of fanaticism. I've become far too literary in the past few years: I can't conceive of Whitman in terms other than literary. And now, thanks to my purely literary efforts, these young people sit up till all hours, eyes burning, deliberating how to live. One of them—from Kostroma, I believe—kept assailing me with the words, “That's aesthetics!”, “aesthetics” being a term of abuse. They have no use for aesthetics; they are passionately involved in morality. Whitman interests them as a prophet and teacher. They want to kiss and work and die “according to Whitman.” (Chukovskii 2008, 103)

A few days later, he mentioned a performance based on Whitman's poetry (in all likelihood, Mgebrov's staging), played by workers who brought beautiful leather armchairs from the “Assembly of the nobles” (“*Blagorodnoe Sobranie*”) and started to jump on them, claiming that it corresponded to the “ascension in the airs” in Whitman. Chukovsky left quite discouraged by such a misunderstanding.

Not only was Whitman's poetry handed out in small or large formats, adapted to the stage, but it was also an inspiration for the avant-garde cinema, the “kino-eye,” especially for its main advocator and director, Dziga Vertov. As Jacques Rancière argues, Vertov's 1929 *Man with a Camera* probably owes a lot to Whitman's catalogues (Rancière 2011). In a more propagandistic movie, *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), the Whitmanian impulse is very salient. The camera travels over various parts of the world (especially the USSR but also the Western world), which is exactly the movement in Whitman's “Salut au Monde” or in a part of “Song of Myself.” In “Salut au monde,” the catalogue is systematically introduced by the anaphora “I see:” “I see” (“*Vizhu*”) is precisely the main intertitle in Vertov's *Sixth Part of the World*. The catalogue, which had been central to the debate on Whitman's poetics, finds an equivalent in the “kino-eye” and its refusal of montage.¹⁰

While the 1920s really marked the apex of Whitman's fame in Russia, he remained a poet much published and studied through all the Soviet years. Chukovsky's translations were constantly reprinted. The 1935 edition contains a preface by D. S. Mirsky, the “Prince of Russian literature.”¹¹ Just like Chukovsky,

¹⁰ For more on the Whitman / Vertov connection, see Singer 1987 and Kunichika 2012.

¹¹ Mirsky emigrated to England after the Revolution and became a professor at Oxford, where he wrote an important history of Russian literature. He came back to the USSR in the 1930s, which was a terrible decision, and he died in a Gulag camp in 1937. The preface to Whitman is available in English in Allen and Folsom 1995, 320-332.

Mirsky resisted the idea of a communist Whitman and stood for a democratic and even “bourgeois” version of his poetry. It is quite fascinating that even though he was mainly read as a precursor of communism, Whitman triggered debates and, even in the 1930s, was a subject to contradictory readings. Such a plurality of interpretations was uncommon in Soviet criticism of the 1930s. Equally uncommon is the steadiness of Chukovsky’s career as a translator, a critic and a writer (he is very famous for his stories for children) until his death, in 1969. Not that he was unaffected by State brutality (his son-in-law was arrested and executed in 1937) nor completely exempt from criticism (Nadejda Krupskaya, Lenin’s widow, attacked him in 1929). But overall, he did not experience the hardships and the conflicts with censorship that most Soviet authors endured at some point or another.

Transatlantic crossings

This Red Whitman crossed the Atlantic and made a comeback in his own country in the 1930s, where he was then far from being the canonical poet who emerged after F. O. Matthiessen’s watershed *American Renaissance* (1941). This political reception was not completely new, however. Whitman was read before at meetings by Eugene Debs, while Horace Traubel, the most famous of Whitman’s disciples, published a book of socialist poems, with tributes to Whitman, Debs and William Morris. But this leftist turn was spectacular after the Russian Revolution.

Indeed, in the early 1920s, Whitman’s fame in the young Soviet Union found an echo in the United States. In 1923, a *New York Times* reader was shocked because at a dinner party celebrating Whitman’s birthday, the poet was “Found to Be the ‘Patron Saint’ of Bolshevist Circles.” In the 1930s, in the context of the Great Depression, the emphasis on a communist, or at least a leftist Whitman, was even stronger. Whitman’s poems appeared on several occasions in the communist review *The New Masses*. Mirsky’s preface was translated into English and published in the first issue of the Marxist literary journal *Dialectics* (1937). Socialist and communist poets themselves addressed Whitman as the prophet of their cause. “Night Letter to Walt Whitman” by Genevieve Taggard (1936) lamented the barren lands and the loss of Whitmanian profusion and hope in the US. More specifically, the poem “Pioneers, o pioneers” was quoted, devoid of its nationalist accents, as in Stephen Vincent Benét’s “Ode to Walt Whitman” (1935), which addressed Whitman to show him the failure of his predictions and what became of his “tan-faced children.” The poem was also quoted in Archibald MacLeish’s collection of photographs “commented” upon by poems, *Land of the Free* (1938). In another “ode” to Walt Whitman, by the Proletarian writer Mike Gold, it was really infused with a combative communist rhetoric. Gold had traveled to the USSR and edited communist journals in the US, in particular *The New Masses*, between 1927 and 1931. His ode to Whitman was precisely a rewriting of “Pioneers, O Pioneers,” in the context of a strike, as evident from stanza 4 onwards:

O Pioneers, our foreman was a nervous little rat—
And all day like a third degree

Down in the basement hell with democracy
 Commercial madhouse from 8 to 6
 I knew the clatter speedup and gangrened air
 Electric bulb sweat and coffin fears—
 Above us the macy gimbel millionaires
 Plotted bargains in young greenbaums and kelleys—
 Hell hell hell and low wages
 And little salesgirls puked among the rayon—
 Such was our life, O Pioneers—

Whitman's poems appear as "lies" confronted with such grim realities. But a miracle occurs, with the strike, and the end of the poem strikes a different note as it addresses Whitman directly:

See, see new skyscrapers for Manhattan
 Communist factories for human love—
 A pure ocean, and sunlit homes not tenements—
 Streets for sun and friendship
 And no more Tuberculosis avenues—
 And no more hell in a basement—
 Son of Walt Whitman, to strike is to dream!

O Pioneers we build your dream America—
 O Walt Whitman, they buried you in the filth
 The clatter speedup of a department store basement
 But you rose from the grave to march with us
 On the picket line of democracy—
 Sing sing O new pioneers with Father Walt
 Of a strong and beautiful America
 Of the thrushes and oceans we shall win
 Of sun, of moon, of Communism and joy in the wind
 Of the free mountain boys and girls—
 It will come! It will come! The strikes foretell it!
 The Lenin dreams of the kelleys and greenbaums
 Deep in the gangrened basements
 Where Walt Whitman's America
 Aches, to be born— (Gold 1935, in Perlman, Folsom, Campion 1998, 169-171)

The open-road pioneers, the settlers of the great Western fields, turn into the urban Jewish workers and the poem calls for "communist factories for the human love." It should be added that there was a very strong tradition of reading Whitman as a socialist or a communist poet in American Yiddish poetry (most of the Yiddish poets involved, from Joseph Bovshover to Israel Jacob Schwartz) had emigrated from the Russian Empire.¹²

¹² See "From Heine to Whitman. The Yiddish Poets Come to America" (Levinson 2008, 130-141).

After WW2, interest for a radical Whitman faded considerably, except in The Soviet Union and its satellite states—but even then, Whitman became more a monument of World Literature than a vibrant source of debate and inspiration. However, Whitman the “camerado” reappeared more committed than ever in Latin America. During the Cold War, he was indeed often resuscitated and enrolled against his very own nation. One of the most famous examples is the communist Chilean poet Pablo Neruda’s use of Whitman, especially in “Let the Woodcutter awaken” (“*Que despierte el leñador?*”), written in 1948 to denounce the Marshall plan—it later became a “canto” in *Canto general*. Whitman was summoned to sing the reconstruction of Stalingrad and the achievements of the Soviet leaders. Neruda’s appropriation of Whitman for radical political purposes was even more spectacular in his last poem, a call for “Nixonicide” and a “praise of the Chilean revolution” in 1973 (*Invitación al nixonicidio y alabanza de la revolución chilena*).¹³ There was of course already a longstanding Latin American tradition of reading Whitman as the bad conscience of his own nation (as in a sonnet by Rubén Darío addressed to President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904), but one might argue that Neruda’s propagandistic use also came from the Soviet versions.

Towards a more national vision of Whitman

While Whitman retained subversive strength in Latin America, he did lose some of his polarizing energy in the Soviet Union. He was less and less a revolutionary poet and more and more a “national” one. Indeed, in the 1930s already, and even more so after WW2, nationalism competed with the internationalist rhetoric. The conception of “world literature” changed, as it came to designate the accumulation of works considered as world masterpieces rather than the study of the circulation and interaction of literatures in an international network. Whitman was thus more and more often compared with Pushkin, as in Maurice Mendelson’s 1965 study on Walt Whitman.¹⁴ More recently—and quite some time after the end of the USSR—the parallel was drawn again with two monuments across the Atlantic. In the years 2000, the same sculptor, Alexander Bourganov, created a bronze statue of Pushkin for the campus of Washington University, and one of Whitman for the campus of the State University of Moscow. Bourganov has become quite an official artist, he is hailed as “national artist of Russia” and his works fill Moscow’s public space. Several of them are linked with American history, more specifically in connection with Russia (he built a monument to John Quincy Adams for the US embassy in Moscow, one to Lincoln and Alexander II together, another one to Reagan and Gorbachev

¹³ I developed this Latin American Communist reception elsewhere. See Rumeau 2019, 479-528 and Rumeau 2020.

¹⁴ Mendelson succeeded Chukovsky as the main Whitman scholar. His study was translated in English and published in 1976 by Progress Publishers, a Muscovite Publishing House specializing in translations in Russian as well as translations from Russian in several foreign languages.

shaking hands). The symmetric Pushkin and Whitman are part of this bilateral monumental project:



Alexander Bourganov, *Monument to Pushkin*, 2000, bronze, Washington University Campus, source Wikimedia; Alexander Bourganov, *Monument to Whitman*, 2009, bronze, MGU (State University of Moscow, Faculty of Philology), © Delphine Rumeau.

Both poets stand in front of a Corinthian column, a neo-classical setting which is extremely strange for Whitman, but which seems to be one of Bourganov's favorite devices (a similar column stands on the Lincoln/Alexander II monument). Whether the column is a personal mark or whether it was really conceived as a meaningful ornament for both Pushkin and Whitman remains unclear. Whatever the intention, the effect is one of symmetry between two poets, who thus appear to be branded as national poets, acting ambassadors. Obviously, Bourganov's works and the Russian state's cultural policies do not sum up contemporary Russian conceptions of World literature, let alone Whitman's interpretations by academics or poets. My point here is rather to underline the discrepancy between the official national Whitman, erected as Pushkin's counterpart, and the much more global Whitman studied in academia and still addressed by Russian poets.¹⁵

¹⁵ The topic of a roundtable at the Whitman's symposium at Moscow State University in October 2019 (organized by the Russian Whitman scholar Tatiana Venediktova, held in a room overlooking Bourganov's monument and containing a portrait of... Pushkin) was: "Isn't something happening to the status and function of a national literary classic in the age of globalization and intensified intercultural transfer?" Kirill Korchagin's talk at the symposium illuminated the connections of a number of Russian contemporary poets (I. Golanskoy, T. Zulfikarov, S. Timofeev, N. Azarova) to Whitman.

To study Whitman's reception in relation with evolving conceptions of World literature in Russia and in the USSR—first as a dense network where texts circulated, then as the constitution of an international revolutionary canon—sheds light on complex dialectics. Whitman's reception was shaped by these diverging conceptions, but it also played a role in establishing them, as well as dense transatlantic networks of interpretations and political appropriations.

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