

WALT WHITMAN. *Foglie d'erba 1855*. Translated by Mario Corona. Venezia: Marsilio, 1996. 426 pp.

The twelve poems gathered in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* certainly “unscrew the locks from the doors” of the English language and poetic tradition as much as they “unscrew the doors themselves” from the jambs of a formal author-reader relationship. Throughout the poems, images converge, creating a pivotal all-embracing figure: that of the poet “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.” His “belched words” are spirited air breaking open the structure of his native tongue, revealing the power of language as animal-animated force, a power that is human before being social and institutional. Though almost one hundred and fifty years old, this book is as new now as it was at the time of its first publication. Inevitably, it always feels like meeting up with a life force that the sheer act of reading has reawakened. This has happened to me once again while reading Mario Corona’s Italian translation of the 1855 *Leaves* in a bilingual edition published by Marsilio (Venice), a beautiful hardback edition with a really fitting, Whitmanian dustjacket. Corona’s is the first Italian translation of the complete first edition of *Leaves*.

Whitman’s translations in Italy have a long, established tradition, starting in the nineteenth century when in 1872 the Sicilian journalist and man of letters Girolamo Ragusa Moletti introduced the American poet to the critic Enrico Nencioni (author of the first official Italian article on Whitman in 1879) and to a small circle of literati. Luigi Gamberale, one of the group, decided to translate Whitman’s poetry to show Italian poets that, as he maintained in an article published in 1884, “the Muse of modern times, of this busy, frenetic XIX century . . . must aspire to the freer, larger, divine heaven of prose.” His two selections (1887, 1890) and his first full translation of *Leaves of Grass* (1907) offered Italian readers a coherent prose version of Whitman’s lines. Following this, a number of translations have appeared over the years, some adopting a metrical form, others closer in form and language to the original but still well within the boundaries of Italian literary tradition, with a new crop in 1992, celebrating Whitman’s centennial. All were based on the death-bed edition of *Leaves*.

Those who translate must of necessity ground their work on an interpretation of the original text and on the possibilities of their own language and literary tradition as much as on personal sensibility and interests. All three elements work together to build a unique image of the world in the text. Agreeing with Malcolm Cowley’s viewpoint that the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* is a “masterpiece,” Corona points out in his introduction that in this edition more than in the following ones, the empirical author and his persona—the poet Walt acting in the textual world—emerges as a gendered human being, using all possible techniques to conquer, seduce, and arouse desire in his addressee, a reader (or listener) potentially ranging from real to virtual. And it is this erotic charge that Corona wants first and foremost to convey in his translation, together with Whitman’s uneven expression in language and form, his mingling of styles. In this, I must say, he succeeds.

In Whitman's indirection, in the fuzziness of his language, Corona reads the poet's ability to hide what could not be said openly because the public was not yet ready. Whitman's lines alternate between the expression of feelings and emotions belonging privately to the poet and a more generalized expression, where the absence of a linguistic and experimental subject makes it possible for every reader to contribute his/her own experiences. In this way, Whitman interweaves the concrete person and the universal human. Playing sense against meaning, he keeps the latter at its most abstract and general level while making space for sense to build up as much out of what he implies and leaves unsaid as from the cumulative effect of words and images. Accordingly, what his readers can infer is due as much to their own emotions and desires as to the poet's. In what is undefined and general, they can project themselves, thus contributing new and different senses to meanings, overimposing their own images on those projected by the author. As a reader, the translator plays his own part. In Corona's case, one feels as if the translator has entered the skin of the author and his persona and has made his present our own; reading is almost like listening to two voices speaking at the same time (and not only because of the coupling of the original and the translation on the printed pages). Differing from other translators, Corona emphasizes the poet's presence in the text as well as an oral, contemporary mode of expression, and he uses these as a vehicle for his present personal, critical, and cultural awareness. His translation renders Whitman's lines in a colloquial, personal, even caressing, Italian where sudden literary turns echo the sounds and words of modernist poetry rather than nineteenth-century poetry.

Corona's translation, together with the interpretation he offers in his preface and textual notes, is a very important contribution to a fresh encounter with Whitman's text as well as a guide for Italian readers to a poet far more daring and experimental than the one who appeared in all the following editions of *Leaves*. It is a new Whitman, quite different from the political, democratic, proletarian bard introduced in Italy at the beginning of the century. Corona offers us a man, taking his chances with the contemporary Italian public. The poet of "our" 1855 edition speaks our language and is, like us, on the edge of the third millennium.

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GREGORY EISELEIN. *Literature and Humanitarian Reform in the Civil War Era*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. 215 pp.

According to D. H. Lawrence, Whitman's essential message was that of "the long life-travel into the unknown, the soul in her subtle sympathies accomplishing herself by the way . . . the leaving of his fate to her and to the loom of the open road." But "he didn't quite carry it out. He couldn't quite break the old maddening bond of the love-compulsion; he couldn't get out of the rut of the charity habit—for Love and Charity have degenerated now into habit; a bad habit."

Gregory Eiselein's book is a very full, and very interesting, examination of "the charity habit" in the United States at a critical point in the nineteenth