"The Face, the Body, the Voice"

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Walt Whitman has the power to unsettle poets and readers. Reading Whitman is almost like becoming Whitman's lover. It was Álvaro de Campos who took notice of this more radically in his "Salutation to Walt Whitman." In this poem, Campos celebrates him sensually, kisses his portrait, and speaks of a "love erection," although "abstract and indirect deep in his soul." Other great poets, in a loving celebration, have sung him in verses that seemingly adopt— unreasonably, as the always restrained lover Borges would say—the style of his poems: García Lorca, in his "Ode to Walt Whitman," and Vicente Huidobro, in his epic "Altazor." It is symptomatic that this loving celebration reveals Whitman's figure itself—the face, the beard, the body, the voice—disclosing true shudders of desire.

This shuddering does not come from a fascination with Whitman's life. It matters little to write a biography of the great American poet (1819-1889), author of one of the most compelling books of poetry ever written, the bulky *Leaves of Grass,* "a song of the great collective individual, the common man or woman," that has now made its appearance among us with a compilation titled *Folhas das Folhas de Relva* (*Leaves of Leaves of Grass*). "Whitman is to America what Dante is to Italy," said Pound in unequivocal recognition of his vitality. Paradise is the word that emerges when one speaks of this vitality, and when Borges, in a classic text about the poet, shrewdly mentions that "to move from the paradisal orb of his verses to the insipid chronicle of his days is a melancholic transition."

Whitman himself used to point out that his life was only "a few faint traces" of which he knew little or nothing. In reality, the fascination with the figure of this poet arises from his radical poetics. A true inventor, he affirms the foundation of the real on the word: the book is the poet. The final farewell—the key—of *Leaves of Grass,* is his saying that it is not a book: "It is I you hold and who holds you," and he springs with desire into the arms of those who read it—that is, of those who *touch* it.

This is what is fascinating about him—the other side of modernity, that which reinvents happiness. Whitman breaks with the metaphysics that imposes yet weeps over the distance between the world and language. Álvaro de Campos, a genius tortured by metaphysics, captured the great Whitman question most precisely: "In your lines, at a certain point, I don't know if I'm reading or living./ I don't know if my place is in the world or in your lines."

Leaves of Grass realizes, within the book and *as* a book, "one of the few great things of modern literature: the figure of oneself." This grand mythic figure establishes an intimate relationship with every reader, present and future, merges itself with the reader, and affirms itself as sensorially present. Thus, for those who apprehend Whitman's poetics, to read *Leaves of Grass* is to kiss and be kissed by Whitman himself. The mediation of the portrait in Álvaro de Campos would not even be necessary. Poetically, the revolutionary euphoria of Whitman's poetics abolishes the issue of representation as detachment.

The current Brazilian edition of *Leaves of Grass* is a selection of poems intended to either promote or vulgarize the book to the "non-erudite reader" (a singular contradiction: Whitman is precisely the poet who writes to the non-erudite reader, to the reader who is all Readers). Without a doubt, what is lost in it is the Whitmanian intention, which gives *Leaves of Grass* its form as a Book of Books, a Book physically present that says it is the poet himself. When leafing through these beautiful poems, it is worth keeping in mind that the original is not a compilation of loose poems: it is a book, which, like any book, wants to be an archetype, and this itself is a fundamental theme of Whitman's poetry. If this collection can be justified by its purpose of promoting Whitman's work, the same cannot be said of the translator's option to break his originally long and captivating lines into two, three short verses in the translation. The rhythm, now choppy and modest, makes Whitman's exclamatory, emotional, and *rhetorical* fluency disappear (rhetorical as in the original Greek sense of *rétor,* to convince, dissuade, or persuade the interlocutor, as Paulo Leminski rightly notes in the introduction to the edition). It also considerably reduces the level of emotion so intimately linked to the feverish pace of the long line, which imitates the intention of the text, its euphoric sensual affirmation, rhetoric of love, and recurrent metaphor of the word's embrace. This metaphor traverses and shapes his country from end to end.

No goal of popularizing—and no theoretical option concerning translation itself—seems to justify the abrupt choppings-up of the original lines, which unnecessarily betray the literary intention of the American poet. Simply compare the current Brazilian translation with Borges's translation, which faithfully

maintains the original versification and rhythm, even though he knew that the "longitude" of Whitman's verses is not in itself so much a fundamental virtue of the poet as it is the "delicate verbal adjustment, affection and differences" of his long enumerations. Where are, as the poet Álvaro de Campos put it, "the leap-verses, the jump-verses, the spasm-verses" to the Brazilian reader, be this reader erudite or not? Where are the "hysterical attack verses" that "drag the wagon of our exalted nerves onto the floor, disorderedly, barely allowing us to breathe, bursting from living?"

One acknowledges this position perhaps to open a much-needed discussion on translation of poetry among us while not preventing the welcoming of these *Leaves*. Leafing through them is, in any case, indispensable.

Translated by Patrícia Anzini and Reginald Gibbons

Notes

1 In the original, "Nunca me havia passado pela cabeça a ideia de traduzir a poesia de Whitman . . . a língua original do poeta já me bastava para entendê-lo e amá-lo bem." Campos's statement can be found in an interview he gave tothe Brazilian newspaper *O Diário de Notícias* on May 31, 1964, and which was titled "Meu Encontro com Walt Whitman" ("My Encounter with Walt Whitman"). Except where otherwise noted, all translations into Brazilian Portuguese are our own. The original quotations in Portuguese always come in the endnotes.

2 Whitman, Walt. *Fôlhas de Relva,* trans. Geir Campos (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1964).

3 Whitman, Walt. *Folhas das Folhas de Relva,* trans. Geir Campos (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1983).

4 In the original, " . . . esta é uma tradução de poemas escolhidos das *Leaves of Grass* de Walt Whitman, e que, parodiando o título de *Flores das 'Flores do Mal',* bem achado por Guilherme de Almeida para a sua tradução de poemas escolhidos das *Fleurs du Mal* de Charles Baudelaire, não teria por que não se intitular *Folhas das 'Folhas de Relva*." Guilherme de Almeida (1890-1969) was an acclaimed writer and influential figure during the Brazilianmodernist period. He would take eight years to translate twenty-one poems of Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal.* His translation was published in 1944 by *José Olympio.*

5 See "A Voz Oceânica de Walt Whitman," available in gavetadoivo.wordpress.com/2011/07/08/a-voz-oceanica-de-walt-whitman/

6 In the original, "uma superinterpretação de poemas e fragmentos selecionados de *Leaves of Grass*" . . . a subinterpretação aproxima a tradução do autor, a superinterpretação aproxima-a do leitor." Geir Campos, trans., *Folhas das Folhas de Relva* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1983), 140.

7 In the original, "o que o original tem de estranho" and "retirar-lhe as características exóticas." Geir Campos, trans., *Folhas das Folhas de Relva* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1983), 141.

8 In the original, "nenhum objetivo divulgatório—e nenhuma opção teórica da própria tradução—parece justificar esses cortes breves do verso original, que traem, sem necessidade, a intenção literária do poeta americano." Ana Cristina Cesar, *Crítica e Tradução,* ed. Fernando Paixão (São Paulo: Ática/Instituto Moreira Sales, 199), 253.

9 "Saudação a Walt Whitman" was written in 1915 by Álvaro de Campos, one of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms.

10 In the original, "Onde estão, para o leitor brasileiro, erudito ou não, os 'versos saltos, versos pulos, versos espasmos?" Ana Cristina Cesar, *Crítica e Tradução,* ed. Fernando Paixão (São Paulo: Ática/Instituto Moreira Sales,199), 253.

11 In the original, "O senhor acha que se o verso de Whitman não tivesse sido dividido a aceitação do público à Folhas das folhas de relva (sic) teria sido menor?;" "Acho que o 'conteúdo' não depende da 'forma' do verso em Whitman . . . .(sic)." Campos sent his letter to Bonetti Paro in 1993. The scholar herself sent me a digitalized copy of Campos's letter by email in 2018.

12 Campos's 1983 translation was the object of the second chapter of my unpublished 2018 doctoral dissertation (Northwestern University) titled "'Welcome, *American* Brother': Cultural Encounters between Walt Whitman and Brazilian Writers."

13 "Udigrudi" is a mocking reference, and an exaggerated transcription, of the way Brazilians mispronounce the word "underground" in Portuguese.

14 Cesar's review has been published in *Crítica e Tradução* (São Paulo: Ática, 1999), a book edited by Fernando Paixão that compiles most of her work on translation and cultural and literary criticism.