

NOTES

WALT WHITMAN IN FINLAND

The process that makes a poet well-known in a foreign country usually comprises three stages: translation, criticism, and influence on the country's native poetry. Generally speaking, this is also true of the reception of Walt Whitman in Finland. The main process, however, was preceded by preliminary flashes on the Finnish literary scene. The first was a short item on Whitman in the general history of the literature of the world written in Finnish by O. A. Kallio in 1905.¹ The book was intended for the general public, not for professionals. Kallio pays attention to Whitman's free verse meter, dismissing it as "formless and defying all rules," but he also speaks about "his strongly statured songs echoing the spirit of a big and free republic."² The first full-scale article on Whitman to be published in a Finnish periodical was written in Danish by Paul Harboe.³ He was surprisingly well versed in his subject, but his influence on Finnish poetry and criticism was minimal. The same is true of the first article on Whitman which was written in Finnish.⁴ It was published in 1917 in a respected literary periodical, but because the author was relatively unknown, readers tended to disregard his opinion despite his evident enthusiasm for the subject.

It was not until the inter-war period that Whitman really emerged as an influence in Finnish poetry, first in the Swedish-speaking literary circles of the country. Three poets were of major importance here: Elmer Diktonius, Hagar Olsson and Edith Södergran; all three were internationally oriented, unprejudiced and interested in experimentation. Diktonius and Olsson were bilingual and wrote partly in Finnish. Their influence on Finnish poets was considerable. They both contributed to the bilingual literary periodical *Ultra*, 1922, which launched Whitman into the consciousness of Finnish poets. There Olsson published her article "Walt Whitman, föregångaren" ("Walt Whitman, the pioneer"). The style of her article is highly poetical and she tries to portray an all-embracing vision of Whitman: "With out-stretched arms he stood there; with nothing beside him, nothing behind him, everything before him. . . . This man saw further into the future than many of the youngest had done. He dreamed about the golden age of brotherhood which was to become the ideal of the new generation emerging from amidst the atrocities of the war." The article is followed by Diktonius's Swedish translation of Whitman's poems, including "Poets to Come." Thus Whitman's poetry made its first appearance in the Finnish literary world.

More important for the rise of the Whitman cult was the publication of Edith Södergran's modern type of verse, first in Swedish and then in the 1920s in Finnish. Her tragic fate appealed to the Finnish poets, but even more striking were her passionate, visionary fervor and her free rhymeless metre, unprecedented in Finnish poetry. The poetess admitted to her friends that part of her inspiration came from Whitman. It has been pointed out that "in many

of her poems she used Whitman's enumerative style with non-rhyming lines of varying length. The enumerative 'I' style which she often used in her poetry is clearly an echo from 'Song of Myself.'⁵

The year 1928 saw the publication in Finnish in a respected literary periodical of a full-scale biographical and critical essay on Whitman.⁶ It contained a translation of "Proud Music of the Storm." The article clearly shows that the author was not ignorant of Whitman's importance for American poetry and for the literature of the world; he was, however, a journalist and a translator rather than a serious critic or poet and for that reason the article attracted little attention. But the work of Södergran, Olsson and Diktonius did have an impact; it influenced a number of young poets writing in Finnish who called themselves Tulenkantajat (Torch-bearers). For them Whitman was a pioneer of democracy and what they called modernism. Whitmanesque echoes are to be found in the rhymeless verse of such poets as Katri Vala, Arvo Turtiainen and Viljo Kajava, writing partly under the banner of Socialism. It seems that in Finland Whitman's position among literary circles had established itself by the end of the 1930s,⁷ but his image was still somewhat vague, as is evident in Kajava's poem "Spring," where Whitman is included among poets who had been victims of "persecution":⁸

He saw those who had spoken about life
and those who had spoken against destruction and slavery
like Whitman, Heine, Ossietzky.

From the middle of the 1930s we also have Turtiainen's comment on modern trends in Finnish poetry: "Long ago we would have needed, here in these backwoods, a great poet of life and reality like Walt Whitman."⁹ Turtiainen makes himself more explicit about a quarter of a century later: "Modernism has age-old traditions in the history of literature. Two of its greatest names in lyric poetry are Whitman and Mayakovsky."¹⁰

But it was not until after the Second World War that a kind of Whitman boom made itself felt among Finnish-speaking poets, critics and scholars. There are evident reasons for this boom: better English-Finnish dictionaries, an improved knowledge of the language and literature of the English-speaking countries, grants for studying at American universities, visiting professors of American literature at Finnish universities. The primary instigator, however, was the approaching centenary celebration of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. This led in 1954 to the publication of the first comprehensive Finnish translation of Whitman's poems, by Viljo Laitinen,¹¹ a university student who was only 22 years old, and who published the poems at his own expense. Considering his age, Laitinen's achievement was an impressive one. He had a sharp ear for Whitman's rhythmic flow, and his diction is clear. But the translation is devoid of subtlety in the choice of words, and there are downright mistakes in the translation of single items: "the drunkard's stagger" ("Song of the Open Road") for example, refers in Laitinen's version to a way of speaking rather than a way of walking, and when he comes to the phrase "music rolls, but not from the organ" ("Song of Myself"), the translator does not think of *organ* as a musical instrument but rather as part of the body! Laitinen had a

tendency to make omissions, as for instance in the long enumerations of "Starting from Paumanok," section 16.

Literary criticism followed in the tracks of the translation. Professor Lauri Viljanen, one of the leading literary critics in Finland, published a review of Laitinen's translation and also extended his sympathetic attention to Walt Whitman. He applies the expression "portal figure" to Whitman and Baudelaire, because, as he points out, "their production gives rise to new highways leading far ahead." His explanation of Whitman's enumerative style is also worthy of note: "Enumeration [in Whitman] does not express subsequence, not even travelling, as is the case with Baudelaire and Rimbaud, for instance, but a powerful experience of simultaneity. In reading the poems 'Salut au Monde!' and 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,' time and space do not mean anything; all continents and all races live in Walt Whitman when he gives expression to his mystical feeling of unity and vocation."¹²

The centenary celebration of *Leaves of Grass* also prompted a translation and literary assessment of Whitman by Ville Repo, who had been studying at Emory University, Georgia, in 1948-1949. He had already distinguished himself as a translator of Elizabeth Bowen, Tennessee Williams, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot before his work on Whitman. In 1956 he published a comprehensive article on Whitman together with his translation of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."¹³ This was a poem which Laitinen had already rendered into Finnish, but Repo was a more experienced translator, more adept at solving typically Whitmanesque verbal problems. In his article Repo assumed a partly biographical and partly psychiatric role which led him to naive moral lecturing. In reading Whitman's poems in praise of democracy and a healthy life, Repo tended to see masks where others saw Whitman's own face. He also thought he had found the source of Whitman's style: in the King James Bible, not in the poet's own creative mind.

The 1950s saw a deepening interest in Whitman not only in translations but also in scholarly studies. Harry Järv, in his article on Whitman as the poet of Democracy,¹⁴ analyzed the characteristic features of Whitman's style and his achievement as a verbal master. The present author has discussed Whitman's poems from a narrow stylistic point of view.¹⁵

In the next decade we again meet the most outstanding Finnish Whitman enthusiast, Arvo Turtiainen (1904-1980), poet and translator, who had published his first collections of poems in the 1930s. Before starting his work on Whitman he had produced a translation of *Spoon River Anthology* (1947), which instantly became very popular in Finland. He was unable to publish his Whitman translation by 1955, as he had probably planned; when it was finally printed in 1965, it was still not a complete edition but nevertheless was clearly a more comprehensive and more mature translation than Laitinen's. Turtiainen seems to have known his predecessor's work and observes a kind of division of labor: although both of them translated "Song of Myself," "Song of the Open Road," and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," it was only Laitinen who translated "Starting from Paumanok," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Song of the Redwood-Tree," and "The Sleepers," whereas only Turtiainen translated *Children of Adam*, *Calamus* and *Drum-Taps*.¹⁶ Turtiainen was deeply conscious of the obligation and also the difficulty involved in his Whitman translation. In

his preface he expressed the opinion that a good Whitman translation would require as many years as Whitman himself had spent on the writing of his poetry. Unfortunately Turtiainen was unable to produce a complete Finnish edition of Whitman's poems before his death, and the work remains unfinished.

Turtiainen's translation attracted a great deal of attention and critical discussion of Whitman. Hannu Launonen wrote a good introduction to Whitman's poetry and to Turtiainen's translation of it in one of the major newspapers.¹⁷ His contribution was to place Whitman against a historical and cultural background: "Democracy in Whitman's America had critics and exponents but no voice of its own; Whitman wanted to be that voice." He sees "Song of Myself" as "the first attack against Victorian abstinence in America," and so he relates Whitman to D. H. Lawrence in Britain. Launonen appreciates the enthusiastic and congenial attitude of the translator towards his poet. He notices, however, that Turtiainen's work is often an interpretation rather than a translation and proceeds to point out a few mistakes. Another review, written by Harry Forsblom,¹⁸ is more reserved in its praise of Whitman. The critic seems to empathize with both the admirers and the antagonists of the poet. He, too, comments on errors in Turtiainen's translation.

Last but not least, Professor Rafael Koskimies, the leading Finnish literary critic of the mid-twentieth century, has shown a deep understanding of Whitman's poetry and its significance for world literature.¹⁹ He considers Whitman as the father of free verse meter and of "much more that was later called symbolistic and expressionistic poetry." He points out that Whitman had a predecessor in the Norwegian poet Henrik Wergeland: "They both found their most intimate way of expression in unrestrained verse." Accurate knowledge was not important for Whitman: "He wanted to depict and outline a popular ideal, his own type of Americanism, which clearly differed from the structure of European class society."

Once Whitman's status in world literature had been clearly defined in Finland by the end of the 1960s he became canonized, as it were, at Finnish universities and in literary circles. Whitman is no longer a strange bird that attracts mere curiosity. He is duly recognized in academic surveys of world literature,²⁰ and Finnish radio has made him familiar to the general public.²¹

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NOTES

1 O. A. Kallio, *Yleisen kirjallisuuden historian pääpiirteet*, Kuopio 1905. For this reference and many others I am deeply indebted to Professor Sirkka Heiskanen-Mäkelä, Department of Literature, University of Jyväskylä, and to Mr. Urpo Kovala, who is in charge of a computer-based bibliography of translations of Anglo-American literature in the same department.

2 All translations from Finnish and Swedish into English are my own, unless otherwise stated.

3 Paul Harboe, "Walt Whitman," *Euterpe* (1905), 129-131.

4 Valvanne Väinö, "Walt Whitman," *Sunnuntai* (1917), 3.

- 5 F. Fleischer, "Walt Whitman i svenskspråkig litteratur," *Nordisk tidskrift för vetenskap, konst och industri*, 38 (1962), 136.
- 6 Oskari Nousiainen, "Walt Whitman, Amerikan suurin runoilija" ("Walt Whitman, the greatest American poet"), *Jousimies* (1928), 78-80.
- 7 See Viljo Kajava's biographical and critical sketch of Whitman, "the first American poet," in *Kirjallisuuslehti* (1935), 336-342; translations of Whitman's poems, mainly from *Drum-Taps*, by Katri Vala and Elias Siippainen in *Tulenkantajat* no. 40 (1933); nos. 51-52 (1936); no. 53 (1937).
- 8 Viljo Kajava, "Kevät," *Rakentajat* (1935).
- 9 Arvo Turtiainen, "Itsetuholla suuruuteen," *Kirjallisuuslehti* 22-24 (1936).
- 10 Arvo Turtiainen, *Tilanne* 1 (1961).
- 11 Walt Whitman, *Ruohonlehtiä* (*Leaves of Grass*), translated by Viljo Laitinen (Turku: 1954).
- 12 Lauri Viljanen, "Walt Whitmania suomeksi," *Parnasso* 6 (1954), 278-280.
- 13 *Parnasso* 5 (1956), 195-205.
- 14 Harry Järv, "Demokratins diktare," *Horisont* 2 (1955).
- 15 Niilo Peltola, *The Compound Epithet in American Poetry* (Helsinki: 1956).
- 16 Walt Whitman, *Ruohoa* (*Leaves of Grass*), translated by Arvo Turtiainen (Helsinki: 1965).
- 17 Hannu Launonen, "Minun puheeni ei ole ruikutusta," *Uusi Suomi* (January 2, 1966).
- 18 Harry Forsblom, "Laulu itsestään," *Helsingin Sanomat* (January 30, 1966).
- 19 Rafael Koskimies, *Maailman kirjallisuus IV* (Helsinki: 1965), 126-130.
- 20 See, for instance, *Kansojen kirjallisuus* 8 (1976), 504-522.
- 21 See *Helsingin Sanomat* (July 1, 1976).

MORE LIGHT ON THE EARLIEST FRENCH REVIEW OF WHITMAN

Since the publication of my article, "The Earliest French Review of Walt Whitman," in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 6 (Winter 1989), I have been referred by Roger Asselineau to information which makes clear the fact that the French translation of *Leaves of Grass* announced by the New York *Saturday Press* in 1860 was a literary hoax. That information can be found in the 1943 Harvard doctoral dissertation of Oreste Pucciani, recently published under the same title in book form, *The Literary Reputation of Walt Whitman in France* (New York: Garland, 1987). Basing his own claims on an article by Charles Cestre ("Un intermède de la renommée de Walt Whitman en France") published in the *Revue Anglo-Américaine* 13 [December 1935], 136-140, Pucciani discounts the authenticity of the proposed 1860 translation.

Had I known of those two works, my confusion regarding the mysterious circumstances surrounding the article I cited and its announcement of a forth-