

WHITMAN IN TRANSLATION

A TWO-DAY SEMINAR focusing on the translation of Whitman's poetry was held at the University of Iowa's Obermann Center for Advanced Studies on March 30-31, 1992. Made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and by a generous donation from Dr. C. Esco Obermann, the seminar was part of "Walt Whitman: The Centennial Project," a series of events and publications organized by Ed Folsom to honor the centenary of Whitman's death. This Centennial project, supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Iowa Humanities Board, included a major conference at the University of Iowa, the publication of a book of essays based on papers delivered at the conference (*Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, University of Iowa Press, 1994), as well as Whitman-related art and book exhibitions, poetry readings, and musical and dramatic performances. The Whitman Centennial Project culminated with the publication of *Walt Whitman and the World* (University of Iowa Press, 1995), an extensive examination of the multitudinous ways Whitman has been absorbed into various cultures around the world.

Walt Whitman and the World was edited by Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom, assisted by a team of twenty distinguished international scholars and translators. Twelve of those scholars and translators gathered in Iowa City for the seminar, where they discussed a wide range of issues, including the general and specific problems of translating Whitman's poetry, the surprising interactions between Whitman's work and the political life of many nations, and the changing nature of translations of Whitman over the past century. During the two days of the seminar, the debates were impassioned, occasionally heated, and always illuminating. Whitman's poetics served as a model for the group, which ultimately absorbed its differences into a larger unity of purpose, even while recognizing and honoring the quite distinct approaches represented by the various participants. One of the seminar participants, Fernando Alegria, in an essay recently published in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), recalled the magic of those two very intense days:

Years ago, in a first attempt to describe Whitman's presence in Latin America, I said: "Studying Whitman in the poetry of Hispanic America is like searching for the

footprints of a ghost that can be felt everywhere but is nowhere to be seen.”

At the University of Iowa’s international meeting in homage to Whitman in 1992, once again I felt the presence of this familiar ghost. It was springtime. Observing known and unknown faces, listening to foreign accents, and deciphering allusions made with fascinating ambiguity created a certain magic among us. We were participants in a chorus that, in strange harmony, expressed the frustration of not being able to communicate all that we were saying to each other.

Then I thought that just as every generation of Whitmanists conceived a Whitman model that is characteristically related to its concept of poetic art, each culture also finds a way of translating Whitman in order to integrate him into its own conception of life.

Our Chinese colleagues explained why Whitman cannot be translated into their language in the way Westerners translate him. They gave the name of the insurmountable barrier: sex. Then I understood their long metaphorical tangents, their omissions, and their strange rhetoric. Indirectly, they were telling us that each people makes of Whitman’s art an overwhelming metaphor and of his person an imposing, intricate symbol. Whitman’s followers accommodate him to the size of the dream that is, in truth, his peculiar poetic art.

Whitman, then, survives *nationalized* in the language of his admirers, translated into different realities. “As time passes,” said Gay Wilson Allen, “I am more convinced that Whitman is a symbol.”

This seminar, this “chorus of strange harmony,” would turn out to be Gay Wilson Allen’s final appearance at a scholarly meeting. After the seminar ended, he returned to his home in Raleigh, North Carolina, where—even with failing health—he kept up an energetic correspondence with the contributors to *Walt Whitman and the World* as he and Folsom worked on the book for the next three years. Gay Allen died in August of 1995, just before proofs for the book arrived. He was 92 years old. One of the most accomplished and generous scholars in the field of American literature, he will be missed by the hundreds of scholars around the world to whom he was a mentor and friend, and to the thousands of readers who still depend on the gathered wisdom and the lifetime of insight now bound in his many books. This special double-issue of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* is a tribute to Gay Wilson Allen’s career, a career in which he was still actively engaged up to the day he died.

What follows is an edited transcript of major portions of the seminar on Whitman in Translation. Following the transcript of the seminar are interviews with two remarkable translators who have carried Whitman into languages far removed from English—Zhao Luorui (Lucy Chen), whose Chinese translation of the complete *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1991, and U Sam Oeur, whose Khmer translations of selections from *Leaves* appeared last year. We also include in this issue reviews of several books that have to do with Whitman in translation. We conclude this special issue with a collection of tributes to Gay Wilson Allen.

Participants in the "Whitman in Translation" Seminar

—*Fernando Alegria* is the Sadie Dernham Patek Professor in the Humanities, emeritus, at Stanford University and a distinguished Chilean novelist, poet, and critic. He is the author of many books on Spanish-American literature, including *Walt Whitman en Hispanoamerica* (1955).

—*Gay Wilson Allen* was professor emeritus at New York University and the author and editor of many books on American writers. He was the general editor of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, and his own books on Whitman include *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (1955), *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (1975, 1986), and *Walt Whitman Abroad* (1955).

—*Carl L. Anderson*, professor at Duke University, is the author of books on American and Scandinavian literature, including *Swedish Acceptance of American Literature* (1957) and *Poe in Northlight: The Scandinavian Response* (1973).

—*Roger Asselineau*, professor emeritus at the University of Paris, Sorbonne, is the author of many books on American literature, including *L'Evolution de Walt Whitman* (1954); his translation of *Leaves of Grass (Feuilles d'Herbe [1956])* is the standard French version of Whitman's text.

—*V. K. Chari*, professor at Carleton University (Ottawa), is the author of *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (1964) and *Sanskrit Criticism* (1990); he has taught at Banaras University in India.

—*Ed Folsom*, professor at the University of Iowa, is the author of *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (1994) and the editor of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* and several books on Whitman; in 1996, he will be teaching at the University of Dortmund in Germany.

—*Ezra Greenspan*, professor at the University of South Carolina, is the author of *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* (1990) and the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman* (1995); he has taught at Tel Aviv University.

—*Walter Grünzweig*, professor and chair of American Studies at the University of Dortmund, is the author of *Walt Whitmann: Die deutschsprachige Rezeption als interkulturelles Phänomen* (1991) and the English version of that book, *Constructing the German Walt Whitman* (1995); he has taught at Karl-Franzens University in Graz, Austria, and at the University of Dresden.

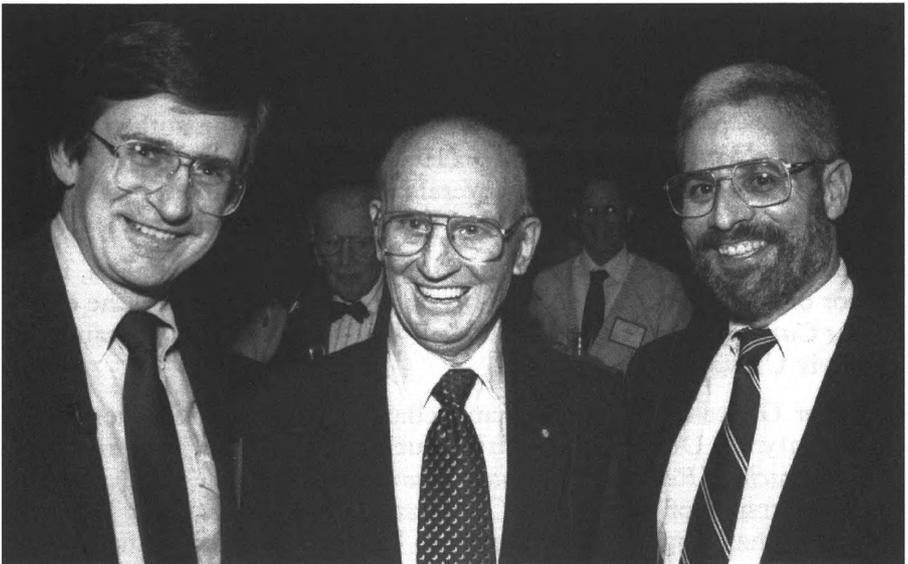
—*Guiyou Huang*, professor at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, is a translator and author of articles on American and Chinese literature; he has completed a book-length manuscript called *Cross-Currents: Whitmanism, Imagism, and Modernism in China and America*.

—*Maria Clara Bonetti Paro* teaches at Estadual Paulista University in São Paulo, Brazil; she has published essays on Whitman's relationship with various Brazilian poets and has completed an exhaustive survey of Whitman's reception in Brazil.

—*M. Wynn Thomas*, professor at the University of Wales at Swansea, is the author of numerous books on Welsh literature and of *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (1987); his Welsh translation of selected poems by Whitman is called *Dail Glaswellt* (1995).

—*Li Yeguang*, Peking University, is a distinguished scholar and poet who has translated *Leaves of Grass* and written *A Critical Biography of Whitman* (in Chinese).

The seminar opened on the morning of March 30, 1992, with greetings from Dr. Jay Semel, Director of the Center for Advanced Studies, and Dr. C. Esco Obermann, patron of the seminar. Dr. Obermann said:



Ed Folsom, Director, Whitman Centennial Project; C. Esco Obermann, patron of the Translation Seminar; Jay Semel, Director, University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies.

“I’m very pleased to have this kind of a group come to the Center for Advanced Studies. This is a multi-linguistic, multi-national, multi-disciplinary center, and this particular group certainly exemplifies those qualities.” Dr. Obermann went on to discuss the setting for the seminar. The Iowa Center for Advanced Studies is in a building on the university’s rural Oakdale Campus, and Dr. Obermann called participants’ attention “to the fact that you are indeed in the middle of an Iowa cornfield. In most parts of the world, such a setting is considered provincial. But actually, as the universe presents itself to me, I find a cornfield to be emancipatory.” Walter Grünzweig commented that Dr. Obermann’s “statement about a cornfield being emancipatory summarizes in a most beautiful way one of the main ideas of *Leaves of Grass*. That would be a great title for the seminar: *The Emancipating Cornfield*.” For the next two days, the setting certainly did provide for a fertile, free-flowing and liberating discussion.

The first session began with participants reading, in their various languages, translations of Sections 1 and 5 of “Song of Myself,” and, later, translations of the *Drum-Taps* poem, “Reconciliation.” Participants decided to open discussion with some of the problems translators face in Section 5 of “Song of Myself.” The discussion first focused on details—how to translate a puzzling image like “worm fence,” or how much leeway can be taken with matters like alliteration—and then moved to more general issues covering the art of translation and the very nature of cultural differences.

1. *The Worm Fence: Section 5 of “Song of Myself”*

Allen: Here’s a good place to begin the discussion of the difficulties of translation. What in the world do translators do with an image like “mossy scabs of the worm fence”? I’ll admit that Malcolm Cowley had to explain to me what was meant by “worm fence.” Does everybody know? It’s a real fence, with the rails joined at angles to form a kind of zig-zag. The support for the fence comes from the interlocking rails.

Folsom: How does that image get translated into the languages represented here today?

Alegria: In this particular section, it seems to me, Whitman is not eloquent. On the other hand, he is very intimate. He communicates a feeling, a great depth of feeling, without raising his voice. Jorge Luis Borges, whose translation of Whitman I just read from, always writes intimately. He tends to understate more than anything else, so he’s perfectly at ease with a poem such as this one. He was absolutely lost when he found the mention of this fence, however, so he made up something else. What he made up is a metaphor, which I think is beautiful in Spanish. He doesn’t

mention the word fence at all. He doesn't even suggest that there is a fence that the poet is talking about, writing about. He uses two words—I'll read it again in Spanish, "Y las mohosas costras del seto"—it's obviously a mistake. Whitman says "mossy," which would be *césped* or *musgoso* in Spanish. Borges says, "Y las mohosas," musty. So he's talking about a musty fence, and he uses a wonderful, classical, old Spanish word, "costras del seto," *seto* for fences. It's a perfectly classical Spanish word, suggesting "hedgerow" as much as fence.

Another difficulty that I noticed is, in several of the translations, the use of the word, or verb, "I mind," which practically everyone translates as "I remember." Borges rightly says *recuerdo*. In short, I would say that Borges found here the right poem, the perfect poem, for his own voice, his own tone.

Allen: I don't suppose the "lull" and "hum" in Section 5 cause difficulty for translators, but what about the "you" and "we"? How does the translator decide who is being addressed? Is it the soul that the narrator is talking to, or the imagined reader? What is it?

Greenspan: That is a very good question: it raises the whole issue of exactly who is being addressed throughout Whitman's poems. It's a translator's nightmare because in certain languages, where "you" must be identified as either male or female, a translator has to make a decision. In the case of the Hebrew translation, the translator uses the female form, but it seems that he does so because he's using it as the pronoun linked to the antecedent of "soul," which in Hebrew is feminine. This is a lovely way of getting around what could be a very difficult problem.

Allen: The translator does have the problem of deciding what the meaning is, whereas in English it can simply remain very ambiguous and sound wonderful and you don't have to determine the meaning.

Alegria: I'd like to mention the fact that Borges avoids the usage of the pronoun, leaves it out completely. To me, it brings back the memory of St. John on the Cross, the mystic poem, referring to *alma*, which even though it ends in "a," and one would tend to take it as a feminine noun, it takes the masculine article in Spanish, *el alma*, not *la alma*. If you read it in Spanish in the translation by Borges, you have to take the poem as an expression of the mystic image, but with very earthy connotations—the "shirt," the "tongue." You have to deal with that sort of sexy element between the lines.

Greenspan: There's one other phrase in Section 5 that I think causes translators problems. We could ask someone who actually translated this passage, someone in the room, how to translate "Only the lull I

like.” I think Whitman is a beautiful player on consonants, on repetitive consonants; it’s a familiar pattern in Whitman. How does a translator, if I’m correct, capture that sound? It’s not an incidental matter, because here Whitman is talking about the sound of the voice: the sound, in other words, is the very subject matter. Most of us who interpret Whitman think that the question of orality is very important to Whitman. So the translator is left with the problem: how do you capture the sound of the “lull I like” in a foreign tongue?

Folsom: Hmm. Welsh, a language that sounds to my ear like it is overloaded with “l’s,” probably could not avoid getting it right!

Thomas: That’s true. I’ll read a line and you can see what you think of it: “Dim ond y gosteg a garaf, mwmlial falfol dy lais.”

Greenspan: You did try to capture it!

Thomas: I tried. In fact, I could make another point about Welsh in relation to this particular passage. It is a language full of mutations. To give you a simple example, the Welsh word for the city of Cardiff is *Caerdydd*. In Cardiff is *Yng Nghaerdydd*; from Cardiff is *o Gaerdydd*; with Cardiff is *â Chaerdydd*. The initial consonants change—and in a sense the place changes—as the prepositions change. Now there is lots to be said about that when it comes to translating Whitman, actually, but the advantage of it from the point of view of translating a passage like this is that mutations make the Welsh language both supple and full-bodied. It is quite easy, therefore, to capture that sensuousness that I think haunts this entire passage.

The disadvantage deriving from Welsh and its mutations, not only for this passage but for Whitman in general, is a huge subject that I will just touch on at this point. You may know that the English word “bard” comes from the Welsh *bardd*. (Further back it’s Celtic, but it’s Welsh for all our intents and purposes.) “Bard” in English was a word needed by the Romantics, because a new concept of poetry was coming into being, as you know—it means rhapsodic, impassioned, eloquent, inspired. But in fact the Welsh *bardd* is a maker, as suggested by the English word “poet.” The tradition of our poetry is the tradition of craft, a very, very intricate craftsmanship indeed, which I am not now going to talk about, but which arises directly from the fact that Welsh is a language full of mutations. It means you have extraordinary possibilities for patterns of sound, which gradually become codified and indeed required as part of poetry. Consequently, Welsh poetry is internally extremely rich, in terms of sound. It is also essentially the opposite of the stereotype of the garrulous Welshman that you get in English, because it’s epigrammatic. The idea of the bard as being eloquent and letting it all out—as Whitman seems to recommend—is actually *contrary* to the

great Welsh literary tradition, which is concise, epigrammatic, and written in a language that is always tightening sound. Therefore the problem of translating Whitman into Welsh is how to capture his garrulousness, allowing the language to run and to flow without the complex, clogging richness of sound, that up to a point Whitman certainly uses, but to nothing like the degree that I'm used to in Welsh.

Anderson: So in Welsh you have all sorts of set patterns imposed on the poet.

Thomas: By the twentieth century, the rules according to which a classical poet writes are extraordinarily varied but invariably strict.

Anderson: So when you translate Whitman, you have to break all the bones and invent free verse.

Thomas: That's exactly right. To be absolutely fair, I'm far from the first to do it. This liberalization (and, some would say, liberation) has been going on for almost a century. But it had to be done against the grain of a very great tradition, regarded as the quintessential poetic tradition of Wales and as natural and native to the very genius of the language.

Huang: I'd like to return to Section 5 for a moment. Most of the people here translated the poetry into an alphabetic language, more or less the same group of Germanic and Italic languages. Chinese is simply entirely different, since it's ideogrammic. As you mentioned, the "lull I like" works by alliteration. The second part, "the hum of your valved voice," also uses alliteration. However, in the Chinese translation, all these things are lost. What we can do best is to translate the sense first. If I want to make it read like poetry or to look like poetry, I really have to work at it. As I put it into Chinese, I have to work within the cell of the tiny line to make it sound like Chinese poetry: I must create a linear sense without losing Whitman's meaning. Since the languages are so different, the alliteration and other syntactical features are lost. You can only hope to retain the sense. Let's take the "worm fence"—I have three translations here. Zhao Luorui is correct; she used a very similar word, roughly equivalent to the worm fence, but the first translation by Chu Tunan is obviously wrong. In terms of my own translation, I simply dropped the word "worm" out; I don't know whether this offends anyone.

Chari: Why did you have to drop the word "worm"? You have no synonym in Chinese?

Huang: Well, I focus on the principal word, "fence."

Allen: You don't have worm fences in China?

Huang: We have this kind of fence, but we just call them fences. We don't call them "worm fences." Another problem I find here in this passage is the word "elderhand." Still another problem is the word "kelson," in "kelson of the creation." I didn't look up the word "elderhand" in the dictionary; I just translated it according to my own knowledge. It can be interpreted as "promise," a "promise of my own." "Kelson" I interpreted to be "substance." The other translations tend also to be very ambiguous.



Folsom: In the earliest translation you talked about, what does the translator do with "worm fence"?

Huang: Chu Tunan translated it as the "fence worn-out by worms."

Folsom: Like "worm-eaten fence."

Huang: Yes. Zhao Luorui calls it something like "winding fence," so she is correct.

Paro: What I like very much about Whitman's image of the worm fence is that this particular kind of fence stands only by the juxtaposition of poles, and it points in different directions. This image is a complex one: it's not just any fence. This fence has no fence post to get hold of; it stands only by combined counterbalanced forces. But in Geir Campos's Portuguese translation, what gets referred to is in fact a fence post, which is presented as bent. The difficulty of reproducing this image is that we don't have this type of fence in Brazil. I have seen it only once, and it was built by a man who had lived in Germany. In Portuguese, we would have problems trying to describe it. That's why it is a poor translation, because the translator could not grasp what was implicit in the image.

Folsom: It sounds to me as if you have a potential essay there. The worm fence is an image of two entities moving in opposite directions that hold each other up by intersecting and forming a single counterbalanced movement or pattern. As such, it's an image resonant with much of Whitman's poetry, which often works to reconcile opposites.

Alegria: Back to the problem of alliteration: Borges's translation keeps Whitman's alliteration, but makes the alliteration with different consonants: "Sólo quiero el arrullo, el susurro de tu voz suave." So he changes the specific sound, but retains the sound pattern—the translation is very well done.

Chari: I talked to the Hindi translator, V. P. Sharma, about the problems that he might have confronted. He told me that he had absolutely no problems at all, because a translation from languages as different as Hindi and English involves the finding of the suitable synonyms which would have the same connotations as the original word. All the connotations of the original word can never be translated, of course; that's the difference between "lull" and *gunjan*. But if lull invokes a certain response in you, you have to find a corresponding word in the Hindi language, and that word—*gunjan*—has the same connotations as lull has in English.

Syntactically, too, translation from one Indo-European language to another is very easy because the syntactical structures are pretty much the same. You can imitate the original structure, and that is what has been done in the Hindi translation I have. Is something lost in translation? I think something is always lost. That's why it is a translation. One language cannot be translated into another language. But *substantially* nothing need be lost, if only the translator has an insight into his own language culture and the language culture from which he is translating. I'm particularly pleased with Dr. Sharma's translation because he has this double insight: an insight into the nature of the English language and insight into the nature of his own. On the question of Whitman's free verse, what happens in the Hindi translation is that there is a general liberation of the traditional prosodic rhythms and stanza forms, but there is an attempt to reflect as closely as possible the rhythmic flow and syntax of the original English. If sometimes an end rhyme or an internal rhyme would seem to give an intenser feeling than the original, then by all means Sharma uses it. The lines, often split into rhythm units, are of uneven lengths, as in the original, but there is a greater push or urgency to the verse movement which is made possible by the nearly regular, though sometimes syncopated, beat of the syntactic segments. The translator must, at any rate, exploit the internal resources of his own language.

Thomas: I think that's very important.

Asselineau: It compensates for losses.

Chari: There are bound to be losses. If you don't want any loss, then don't translate and just read the original. This is the point. But there is a certain sense of liberation as well. After all, you're addressing the Hindi ears, the ears of the Hindi reader. This man is going to publish whatever he has translated back in India. It must finally be accepted as Hindi poetry. That is the true test, I think. A translation is poetry in its own right, as well as a translation for someone who knows both the original and the translation.

As to the soul in Section 5—whether it is masculine or feminine—the gender is no problem at all in Hindi, because in Hindi and Sanskrit, and all the Sanskritic languages, the gender doesn't pertain to the object, as in French. It pertains to the word. *Atma*, the word for “soul,” for example, is actually masculine in Sanskrit. The word for “wife” has three genders: *patni* is feminine, *kalatram* neuter, and *darah* is masculine and always plural.

Thomas: What strikes me about the latter part of Section 5, of course, is that it is more infused with the Bible—the feelings of the Bible and the rhythms of the Bible—than almost any other passage in Whitman. That raises interesting questions. How do you deal with that, for example, in Chinese, Hindi, or Hebrew?

Greenspan: That raises so many questions. I'd like to try to stick a little bit closer to the line of discussion, because the Hebrew presents another dimension to this whole question of translation. Simon Halkin does not try to capture the alliteration of the consonants in “only the lull I like.” What he does instead is to attempt to indicate the sound through rhythm. Translators can play it in a number of different ways. What he does is to use a Hebrew word which is extremely unusual in that it's accented on the first syllable rather than on one of the later syllables—extremely unusual in modern Hebrew. Modern Hebrew, which is Sephardic Hebrew, virtually always places the accent at the end. By switching the accent, what it comes out sounding like is *Rak et ha-le-tef ha-mish-a-dal a-hav-tee*. The key word *le-tef*, roughly “caress” (with *ha* the Hebrew word for our definite article), inverts the normal last-syllable Hebrew accentuation. The changed rhythm forces you to dwell on the word and the sound, equivalent to the “lull.” But it should also be said that Halkin may in addition be adding an internal rhyme—*et* rhyming with the implied combination of the final *e* and opening *t* of the consecutive syllables of *le-tef*—to approximate the English alliteration's effect. So Halkin takes a different approach; he hears the alliteration as significant, and he tries to render it in terms of rhythm as well as rhyme.

Folsom: What does he do with “worm fence”?

Greenspan: He avoids it. This is another kind of problem specific to Hebrew, because Hebrew has very limited vocabulary, being a language which did not grow organically for several thousand years. Translators have a great deal of trouble opening up the language wide enough to take in all the varieties of modern response. It puts a special kind of burden on a modern translator. What Halkin does is grammatically very interesting. Again, this a concept which doesn't exist in any Western language and probably not in any language outside of the Semitic family. In Hebrew, you can join two nouns together in a contiguous grammatical construction that brings them very intimately together. That is

essentially the construction he uses there. He doesn't try to capture the word directly; what he does is to link two nouns—literally “fence” and something vaguely like “worm”—that capture the meaning approximately.

Thomas: Following up on that point, Whitman has got a vowel here with an accent: “valvèd.” Does that come from Webster's or somewhere, or is Whitman indicating that the word has got to be pronounced in that way?

Folsom: It's a very unusual construction for Whitman, because he carefully went through the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* and took out all the “ed's.” He simply crossed out the “e's” and added the apostrophes. Later, he talks about this to Traubel, explaining that he was attempting to prevent readers from poeticizing his language by pronouncing that “ed” as an extra syllable. He had heard people read his poetry aloud and pronounce the “ed's.” So he said that if he put the apostrophes in, readers would have to give up that affectation, would have to just run the “d” onto the end of the word, as we always do in conversational English. So with “valvèd,” and the backward accent, he clearly is indicating something—I've always read it as Whitman's attempt to draw our attention to the poetic effect of the line. His unexpected insistence that we voice the “ed” makes us suddenly aware of the physical workings of our voice valve, and that, after all, is the subject of the line. The voiced “ed” fuses the sound and the sense.

Thomas: That's really what I was after. How many translators have actually noticed that and tried to reproduce it?

Anderson: If you don't keep the “ed,” you'll have three consonants stuck together. Maybe he backed away from that.

Folsom: Roger, how did you deal with these problems we're talking about in your translation?

Asselineau: It's difficult, or course, to reproduce the exact melody of the original, but at least you can try to imitate the rhythm of the original line. I'm not sure I've been successful; it's almost impossible for a language like French or, I suppose, Chinese, to imitate the melody of the original line, but at least you can try to compensate by giving your line a certain lilt, which may be slightly different, but which at least indicates that you are reading poetry, not prose.

Alegria: When I saw the word “valvèd” for the first time, I thought of the French accent. Why is Whitman using, not the acute accent mark, but an accent grave? It may be that he wanted to call to the attention of the reader a certain softness. There is alliteration, as we have said before. Perhaps he had French in mind.

Asselineau: I don't think so. As Carl Anderson pointed out, you need a vowel sound here in the middle of all these consonants. It would be too hard to pronounce if you didn't have a vowel there. That's why he stressed the "e," to indicate the vowel that has to be there.

Folsom: If he had used "valv'd," which he could have done, he would have lost or at least diminished the effect of the alliteration.

Grünzweig: I had the same feeling with this vowel. There is one other case that I can think of—the word "finalè"—where he uses the accent, I suppose in order to get the Italian sound in this particular case, but I'm not sure about that.

In any case, with the "worm fence," the very first German translator rendered it a zig-zag fence, and the second one used winding fence. With the exception of what we call our standard and classic translation by Hans Reisiger, who gets it completely wrong by calling it a hide-out for worms, all the other ones got it right. With "lull," we are lucky that German, along with the other Germanic languages, are probably the most closely related to English. I wish that it were so easy as Mr. Chari said, that you could translate things and have no problems. I find a lot of problems, though, arise precisely *because* of the proximity of the languages. Although we do have the word "lull" as *lullen*, it has a babyish quality, because that's what babies do. Now of course I realize that "lull" may be something that babies do too, but it's not so exclusively used in those terms. So sometimes the proximity and the closeness in terms of the phonetics is a problem as well. In the translation by Max Hayek—"Nur das Lullen mag ich, das Summen deiner beflügelten Stimme!"—he's got a pair of double m's with "summen" and "Stimme," so I would say his translated line strengthens, perhaps even overdoes, Whitman's alliteration.

I don't entirely agree with Fernando Alegría and Mr. Chari about the intimate quality of this section. It seems to me that there are three parts of Section 5. The first two sections are very intimate, almost playful somehow, and Mr. Chari is correct that this should not be read or translated in a declamatory tone. However, in the third part, as soon as the narrator gets "the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth," the German translation, as all the translations, again becomes public in a sense, because that is now the knowledge of generalities, of general truth and so on. There you do have a declamatory tone—certainly not in the sense that you have it in "Salut au Monde!" and elsewhere—but a certainty of the knowledge expressed.

2. Participial Whitman: The Catalog Problem

Folsom: Let's return to a question V. K. Chari raised earlier: What gets

lost in translation? Would somebody like to start with particular examples that could help us ground the issue or offer general comments?

Anderson: I have a poem I might read about this very problem. I came upon it as a translation of a Dutch poem. The name of it is “Babel.”

Simple—translating his poem,
his “I,” my “I,”
his voice, my voice.
I move into his words,
light-footed.
I have heard them in my head
or met them in my dictionary.
It cannot be difficult.
I move, uncertain, through his language,
the landscape of his thought,
through thorns and undergrowth.
I move unsure through his art,
and though I have never worn his being,
still I shall reword his words,
if I replace his “I.”
I move now through his naked poem
for there I can express
his otherness as myself;
but he exists complete,
within his own existence—
he keeps identity.
His words—his words,
his “I,” his “I.”
How could I translate “I”?

This is a poem by Louise van Santen. She’s Dutch. It appeared in the *Journal of Translation*, translated by Alastair Reid. It reminded me of the kind of discussion that one comes upon from time to time to indicate how far we must be from that Ciceronian idea (that he rejected) of a word-for-word translation, which just won’t work. The idea I have in mind is that we are all, every day, translating; we are translating our thoughts, our feelings, and so on. We are engaged, every one of us all the time, in translation. Then as you find the means to give expression adequately to what you’re thinking and feeling, and you put it all down on paper, someone else has to enter into all of that and try to reengage those same feelings and those same thoughts and put it in yet another language. The difficulties of course are myriad.

Grünzweig: I was thinking about a very basic methodological question in connection with all of this. I’m interested to know where people stand here. The question regards the appropriateness of translations, the correctness of translations. I don’t believe appropriate or correct translations exist. For example, I would protest this basic assumption that something can get lost in translation. This implies that there is an identifi-

able, original meaning that needs to be translated in a particular way. As somebody who has studied a number of translations rather than done one himself, I have been able to enjoy all the different ways in which people have worked. I have tried to stay away from any judgments on them, although there are at least two studies in German on Whitman's translation into German that have claimed some translations are better, some are correct, some are incorrect, and so on. I think we should address this issue a bit.

Folsom: That's a good point. "Lost in translation" is an easy phrase to use in discussions like this precisely because it has become such a commonplace. My own belief is that every translation is a *construction* of the original poem and an interpretation of the poem and that certain things can be lost—in fact, always *are* lost. That is, it seems to me it is entirely possible to construct a translation of Whitman that would render him politically more active in a particular culture. It would be possible to construct another translation that would make him apolitical.

Alegria: It seems that every generation has a form of translating foreign poetry in a particular language. At the turn of the century, Whitman was translated into Spanish as a sort of poet of an elite. Then, after the vanguard movements in Europe, he was made into a political figure. Every translation is an interpretation of meaning, of form, of viewpoint, of sound, of silence. It is a fascinating task to consider all the translations of Armando Vasseur in 1912, and to analyze the Whitman that emerges. In some of Neruda's translations of Whitman, he becomes a political figure, an activist. And then someone else again takes Whitman and goes back to the idea of an elite. It all depends very much on the time, the kind of social life, the problems that poets are facing at a particular moment.

Huang: Whitman himself writes, "I too am untranslatable." Zhao Luorui tells people it is hard to translate Whitman because he himself says so. I find translating Whitman much harder than translating Emily Dickinson and William Butler Yeats. One of the important things about Whitman is his personality; he does not conform to rules or regulations. He says whatever he wants to whenever he wants to. Yeats is very careful; he wrote his poems line by line with careful grammatical construction. If you follow his grammar, very often you can do a very good translation. It's different with Whitman. He has so many nouns heaped together, and when I put these nouns into Chinese, it's just not poetry. The Chinese language, to borrow a term from a Chinese translator, is more literary, more implicit, while English is more scientific and more explicit. This difference makes the translation more and more difficult, regardless of the basic linguistic difference, which is that one language is ideogrammic while the other is alphabetic.

Folsom: I'm wondering how widespread this problem is: can Whitman's catalogs be translated into any other language and avoid sounding like something other than poetry? Isn't part of the problem that, even and perhaps especially in English, readers had to *learn* to hear Whitman's lines as poetry? Is there something essentially different in translating it into Chinese? Does the transfer of Whitman's radical poetry into another language automatically create a work that is challenging or radical in the new language? Does the resultant translation redefine what poetry is in the host language, or does the original radical poetry simply dwindle into something prosaic?

Huang: Something important clearly carries over into other languages: that's why Whitman has been even more influential in other countries than he has been in this one. A few years ago, at an international Whitman conference in Camden, New Jersey, Geoffrey Sill said that Whitman is a big influence now in China. In my own work on Whitman, I point this out, that Whitman has been very seriously studied in China. Whitman's poetry entered China at a very critical moment, and he was liked by the most important Chinese intellectuals and known by the most important Chinese thinker and the second most important Chinese writer. These two people had very close ties with Mao himself, who is a classical poet of considerable stature. In this country, many people know that, but more don't know it.



Chinese poetry is now in a dilemma. We can't go back to the old classical forms, in which Chinese Whitmanian poets wrote, in which Mao himself also wrote. The new poetry really came about after Whitman's, influenced by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. They want to go a step further, but they find it very difficult, because few people like new poetry. People have this misunderstanding that young people like free verse. In fact, that's not the case. Many young people in China still like Chinese poetry from a thousand years ago. Whitman's influence has been positive, but it has also made the development of Chinese poetry very difficult, because we cannot now go back to the old forms and cannot go further with the new forms. It's a very strange phenomenon.

When Mao's own poetry was first published in the 1950s, he wrote a letter to an editor about his poems, saying that old poetry should be taught to young people, because if they know how to write it, it will improve the quality of new poetry. Ask them, or instruct them, to write new poetry. He himself remained a classical poet until the day of his death. But his words really encouraged young people to write new poetry. He directly linked Whitman with Chinese new culture and new poetry.

Allen: Some years ago, I gave lectures on Whitman in Japan. I found out that they had great difficulty with Whitman's poems. I thought Emily Dickinson was a very subtle poet, and wondered how they would get along with her. No trouble! They understood Emily Dickinson and loved her poems. I think this must be because of the similarity of her poems to haiku. But Whitman just got lost in the cultural desire for compactness.

Alegria: Spanish, because of the structure of the language, has difficulty accepting Whitman's enumerative type of description without a verb that would create movement. The present participle, the gerund in English, is alien to Spanish, and it was one of Whitman's most common devices.

Thomas: That's a very important point. There are similar difficulties with Welsh, where there is a present participle, of course, but you can't use it in the way that Whitman does, to sustain so much. You realize how "participial" Whitman is when you translate him.

Alegria: You have to be able to put the words together, to get maybe three, four, or five words joined without using a verb, for instance. In Spanish, that is absolutely impossible. It sounds foreign immediately; it sounds like a translation, and a translation shouldn't sound like a translation—it should sound like poetry, an original creation.

Greenspan: Can the Germanic languages—the Swedish and German—capture the sound of the participle?

Grünzweig: No. I think this must be the one major problem in the Indo-European languages, where you don't have the gerund in the form that English uses. We've all got the present participle in versions that approximate it, but they mean totally different things. They're usually not used in this fashion.

Asselineau: We can use the present participle in French to copy the gerund, but it sounds very pompous and awkward.

Greenspan: There's no equivalent in Hebrew, but Hebrew has a special form that probably no other language outside of the Semitic family has. It can link a direct object in any verb; that is to say, a personalized direct object. Instead of the distance between the verb and its direct object, as in "I see you," in Hebrew you can say "I see-you." You can link the direct object right to the verb. You can put them together to make one word out of them, which gives an effect—it may not be exactly Whitmanian—but it gives a certain intimacy, which is very specific to Hebrew language poetry.

Alegria: Two of the latest translations into Spanish—Borges's, which appeared in the sixties, and Francisco Alexander's—rendered the poetry deliberately with the present participle construction and gerund. However, Borges criticized Alexander, because he thought Alexander took too many liberties and didn't pay enough attention to the structure of the language in order to follow Whitman's catalogue descriptions. What Borges is saying is, Don't be too literal; forget about following; recreate Whitman.

Asselineau: One has to respect the genius of one's own language. One cannot fault it for lacking constructions which belong to another language.

Thomas: Central to our concerns here is the question of whether the "I" form exists in a particular language the way it does in English. In "Song of Myself," the whole issue is selfhood. That concept of self is bound up with certain syntactical forms in English. In Welsh, for example, in "I sing" the "I" is lost. It's the verb ending that gives you the speaker. It conjugates. So the "I" is immediately lost. That forces you to notice how often Whitman uses the pronoun "I."

Folsom: Whitman's participial construction is vital because it allows him to construct lines that can be conjugated in past, present, or future. Often, he'll hang a participle without an auxiliary. The title "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a good example: you could say "I was crossing Brooklyn Ferry," or "You are crossing Brooklyn Ferry," or "We will be crossing Brooklyn Ferry." The subjects and the temporal settings become very fluid. When he hangs those participles without the initial auxiliary

and without the subjects, he can play past and present and future (as well as poet and reader) off each other in ways that are very difficult to accomplish in other languages.

Grünzweig: I think the translator in most Indo-European languages that I know—this is especially true in German—finds that the translation of participles becomes either awkward or creates a mono-sensation, if there's such a word. Such attempts end up doing the opposite of what Whitman's participles accomplish in English—in translation, they just define a particular meaning and exclude all the ambiguities and other possible linguistic realizations that you just described.

Asselineau: There's a loss in this impossibility of retaining the gerunds in my language. To my ear at least, English present participles have a great musical value. They sound very fine, while in other languages it's just a rather dull ending.

Folsom: That's true. They ring with their "ing" endings. You get that echo of "sing" through every participle.

Alegría: I'm not saying that in Spanish the present participle and the gerund are not used—they are. But if the poet, the translator, succeeds in creating what you are describing . . . I would use the word movement—present movement involving the reader, and so on, the movement that integrates pauses, silences, while allowing the action to continue. If there's a master at this, it's Borges.

Allen: One of the most spectacular experiments with syntax is in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," where he goes over twenty lines before he gets to the verb. There he's trying to create the feeling of space and movement, forward and across.

Thomas: That's another problem in Welsh. Especially the periodic sentence, where everything is deferred.

Greenspan: I was going to say something fairly similar to that that raises structural kinds of questions. Where Whitman can re-use the same structure, such as the repetition of pushing off of a participle, a poet working in a language that can't translate that structure directly has a major problem. It's a fascinating problem, because one can talk really from a linguistic point-of-view about the question of parallelism in Whitman. Obviously, one of the key ways that Whitman structures his poetry—we owe this insight, of course, to Professor Allen—is via parallelism of structure.

Folsom: Is parallelism of structure a difficulty in any of the languages, or is that relatively easy? Is it easy in Chinese?

Huang: No way. Sometimes you have a problem placing the subject. Where shall I put it? At the beginning of the sentence, in the middle, or at the end? In Section 3 of “Song of Myself,” for example, the line “I and this mystery here we stand” appears at the end of the sentence. “I and this mystery” are the subject of the whole three-line verse-paragraph. In Chinese, it would be more appropriate for this to go at the beginning of this paragraph. Some translators put them at the end, and it just sounds awkward and doesn’t make much sense. So parallelism is really a problem.

Anderson: Isn’t the danger, though, in taking all of that into account, of leveling the effect that Whitman was getting uniquely in English. He is stretching the norms. What we delight in very often is the newness of his way of saying things. To say, “Well, in this other language it doesn’t sound so good,” then that would result in leveling some of the effect, so some of it gets lost that way.

Thomas: Could I actually bring us to an example and see if people have dealt with it? In Section 2 of “Song of Myself,” according to my notes, which I made because these things fascinated me, I wrote, “one interesting problem is the slight but significant modification of normal English usage, which is found in ‘Song of Myself,’ and which impart to the writing a verbal energy which is almost physical.” For example, in the line from Section 2, “You shall listen to all sides and filter them *from* your self,” Whitman departs from normal English usage. We would expect the more usual “for,” but Whitman substitutes “from.” The word “from” is substituted for the more usual form. To reproduce this in Welsh would simply be to sound odd, since the Welsh word for “from” doesn’t have the same penumbra of meanings as the English preposition, which is what really allows “from” to be used in this unexpected way without sounding nonsensical. For example, in English we say “Take it from me,” whereas in Welsh a different preposition (*gen*) would have to be used here. We also say, “Take it from here,” whereas in Welsh the word *oddi* would have to be used for “from.” In consequence, a lot of the undercurrent of energy that accrues from the verbal accidental, as it were, tends to get lost in translation—in fact, in my translation I had to fall lamely back on *drwot*, the Welsh for “through you.” That’s just one example. I’d be interested to hear how other people dealt with that.

Anderson: His practice of compounding nouns to form adjectives: there’s no precedent in the dictionary, and there’s no typical way it’s done each time. It’s his own invention.

Folsom: I wondered, Walter, if that inverted periodic sentence in “Out of the Cradle,” causes an unexpected problem for the German translator. Whitman manages to delay the verb, hang it at the end of the long sentence, which is surprising and rare in English, but it’s the usual and

expected pattern in German. What do translators do with that passage?

Grünzweig: It's not a real problem, it seems to me, because Whitman has so many strange sentence formations. The word order in this sentence is so strange that, if German translators go against the established word order, which is a possibility in German poetry, it doesn't matter. German translators can recreate Whitman's transgressions—if not in the same line where Whitman violates word order, then in another. They create grammatical violations because Whitman is doing it somewhere else. Strangely enough, that's not one of the major problems in German.

3. *Local Language: Doing Away with Poetic Diction*

Thomas: Can I come back to the question that we noted earlier but didn't really follow up on. What strikes me while reading "Song of Myself" in order to translate it is that it is mostly written in what, to use an old-fashioned term, I call "the middle style." This is one of the great strengths of English, that you have that middle style that allows you to depart upwards; you can elevate it when necessary without a jarring effect, as when you change gears. It also allows you to depart downwards into slang without this jarring change of gear. In Welsh, we don't have that. We don't have a middle style. We have the high style, and we have the colloquial style. For me, that's a real problem with Whitman. This is absolutely fundamental and central, and a real surprise when you discover that some of this stuff exists through and in a style for which there is no precise corresponding form in Welsh. Is there anybody else who experienced that? Or do other languages in fact have that confident middle style? In Welsh, some modern poets have begun to write in what you'd call a middle style ever since the beginning of the century, but essentially poetry is an art form, in the sense that it has very exacting rules; it has almost its own vocabulary to it. It's an intricate, ornate, oral structure, and Whitman doesn't really fit into it at all.

Asselineau: Well, apparently you Welsh have not done away with poetic diction.

Thomas: That's quite right.

Asselineau: In most European languages, poetic diction has gradually been eliminated, so we have no real problem there.

Grünzweig: And I would suggest that Whitman may have been one of the main instigators of that movement, which is why it was hated so much. In English, we start with Wordsworth talking like the common man, although he in fact does very little of it. In theory, though, we've got it there. It becomes almost a political program. It's not until Whitman

that the practice is fully realized, however. In German, people say that it is just incredible, that you cannot use such language in poetry—not only the subject matter, not only certain images, but the very language itself, the style itself, the register itself. Subsequently, when people did start using it, there went poetic diction.

Asselineau: In French, Victor Hugo started the revolution against poetic diction. He claimed that he put a red cap on the dictionary and that there was a temptress at the bottom of the inkpot. But as a matter of fact he didn't go quite that far, and a lot of work had to be done later.

Thomas: Another problem is colloquialisms. In Wales, colloquialism is regionalism. You have to decide whether Whitman is South Wales or West Wales or North Wales. If you make him South Wales, then North Wales won't want to read him. This must be the case in some other countries. I cannot believe that there is not such a thing as a colloquialism which is essentially entrenched and specific to particular regions.

Grünzweig: I think that it's different in Germany. I don't know of any German translation that goes into regionalism. We've got this fictional High German that's used. Sometimes they use regionalisms in order to get some of the specific idioms that appear in individual passages of *Leaves*, but basically it's High German.

Greenspan: In Hebrew, there is also an ethnic dimension. There are two different modes of pronunciation of Hebrew. The modern pronunciation, ironically adopted by the Ashkenazi Jews, who essentially established modern Zionism, actually follows the mode of Sephardic Jewry. Why this is the case is another question which doesn't seem relevant, but the result is an ironic situation in which a Russian-born, that is to say an Ashkenazi Jew, whose first language I believe was Yiddish, actually translates Whitman into Sephardic Hebrew, which is not native ethnically or even linguistically to him, because he needs to find the classical mode of Hebrew in his own mind. Since the State of Israel adopted Sephardic Hebrew, that's what is used. He's writing against his own history, in a manner of speaking.

Thomas: This all raises the question of how, through Whitman, you discover the genius of the language you're translating him into, which is the opposite of Ed's question. What does Whitman *gain* in translation? To give you one example of what I mean by that, I mentioned the problem of the pronoun "I," which dissolves in Welsh. That's the down side. The positive side is that, in Welsh, by having the prefix *ym*, you make everything self-reflexive. Whitman is tremendously self-reflexive. There's a very economical way in Welsh of evoking this wonderful dimension of self, of experiencing it with verbs and even sometimes with adjectives. That is the way in which Whitman is really made for the

Welsh language. Another example is the sensuousness of Whitman. Built into Welsh, and I'm sure in other languages as well, is synaesthesia. In Welsh, you hear a smell; that's colloquial—you hear the smell. That wonderful peculiarity allows the translator to render the full-bodied sensuousness of Whitman.

Folsom: Does the reflexiveness work even in a line like “I sing myself”?

Thomas: Not there. You could do it there, but it would sound clumsy. You've got to be selective. But when he writes, “abase myself,” the translation could be *gostwng fy hun*, which is the long form, or *ymostwng*, which is the dynamically compressed form. Built into this latter word is this tremendous sense of a physical action that relates to what involves yourself. There you can use the self-reflexive prefix beautifully.

Grünzweig: Let's not forget that “I sing myself” sounds strange in English, too. It's just that we're now so used to Whitman that we don't consider it strange anymore.

Folsom: That's important: Whitman's poetry sounds far less foreign to us now than it sounded to English readers at the time. That is, to most mid-nineteenth-century American readers, *Leaves* sounded something like a bad translation, like clumsy English, a failed attempt at poetry. Part of the problem is that, as it enters other languages, it's simply out of phase with the cycle that it has already gone through in English—from sounding challenging, odd, ungrammatical, and then eventually sounding amazing, innovative, and ingenious. We've learned to read it, to interpret it and understand it—we've grown accustomed to its pace—so we now hear it far differently than earlier readers did.

4. Who Is “You”:

The Problem of the Second Person Pronoun in Whitman

Thomas: We haven't discussed the matter of the second person singular at all. It doesn't exist in English, and that makes a world of difference—for example, with intimacy.

Folsom: What does a translator do with “you,” which is one of the pivots on which “Song of Myself” works? In English, when Whitman says “you,” he is addressing a crowd—all readers—and at the same time he's intimately addressing a single reader. What the second person pronoun in English allows is that continual slippage between addressing *en masse* and addressing a single solitary individual. The English “you” goes both ways simultaneously.

Chari: “You” in Indo-European is a plural form: *tu* in Hindi, *tvam* in Sanskrit, is the singular “you”; *tum* in Hindi, *yuyam* in Sanskrit, is the plural “you.” In the Hindi spoken language, the distinctions are sometimes observed and other times not observed, depending on one’s status or the degree of intimacy between people. I could say *tu* or *tum* to you; the latter would be a more respectful way of addressing you. In the Hindi translation that I have here, the word is translated as *tum*, which could be both singular and plural.

Alegria: It’s no problem in Spanish, either, because you have *tú*, which can be used as a singular pronoun, but you can also use it to address a crowd, as in a political speech.

Paro: The same in Portuguese.

Grünzweig: The difference is most radical in German. However, since Whitman was read as the democratic poet, it was useful to just use the familiar form *du*. Thus, in contradistinction to the regular, differentiated use of the pronoun, you get a much more democratic or anti-hierarchical use of the language. The very fact that we do have this differentiation enables us to bring across very strongly what many consider to be Whitman’s egalitarian message.

Folsom: Is the use of *du* fairly universal in the translations?

Grünzweig: Yes.

Folsom: So you increase the intimacy in German but you lose the sense of addressing a crowd?

Grünzweig: I was differentiating between the polite form and the familiar or democratic. If you address crowds, German does not really differentiate in spoken language between the polite and the more familiar form. But it is automatically also implied that it would be a more familiar

address, and thus also a more intimate address. Socialists and communists who have known each other in college address each other by *du*. Even today on the first of May, when a socialist leader addresses a group of comrades, so to speak, although he speaks to a number of people, everybody feels addressed in the familiar form.

Greenspan: What form would he use?



Grünzweig: Ihr and euch.

Folsom: That's my point: a German translator can decide on the familiar form of "you," but the translator still has to choose between *du* and *ihr*, between the familiar singular and the familiar plural. The strength in German is that Whitman gains in intimacy, but the weakness is that in German Whitman's "you" loses the ambiguity between plurality and singularity.

Grünzweig: Yes, but when the individual agitator speaks in the second person singular, the agitator always means the people as well. You don't get a lot of intimacy, in spite of the fact that he uses the second person familiar singular. In fact, the Handbook of the Young Communist, which was published in the 1930s, always talks to the individual, but it means really the Communist movement. "You" are supposed to do this and that as a young Communist.

Chari: The context will tell you what kind of usage of "you" it is. That is the only way you can tell a plural "you" from a singular.

Greenspan: But there are certainly many ambiguous cases: "I love you, whoever you are." How do you translate that?

Asselineau: You never know whether it's singular or plural, except when he says something like "you, reader." Always remember what Tocqueville observed about how Americans loved oratory so much that even when speaking to one person, they tend to say, "Gentlemen!"

Alegría: The translation in Spanish of the line that you mentioned would be singular: "Tú, quienquiera que seas, te amo." It has a collective meaning. You are using the second person singular.

Paro: In the North, people say *vosi*.

Thomas: So you've got the same problem I do.

Paro: In that particular case, yes. *Tú* would be from the South. But since the central part of Brazil is more powerful, it decides the language use. But in Portugal, the *tú* would be used.

Huang: In the Oriental languages, at least in Chinese and Vietnamese, it's easy to distinguish. When I say "you" in Chinese, it's an individual. If I am addressing an audience, I have another word. After "you," you add another word to include an audience of many people. If Whitman happened to be addressing one of his seniors, for example his father, in Chinese it would be a different word. It's almost like "you," but there are more strokes in the Chinese ideogram. It's very appropriate to use another word. If you ask how to say "thou," I can very readily find a Chinese word for it. The problem is trying to find different words for "you" in the second person singular and "you" in the second person

plural. That's the only difficulty, but it's not really a problem.

Thomas: Another difficulty in Welsh is the possessive, because you can have mutations of the possessive. I'll give you an example—I don't know if others have similar difficulties. In Section 4 of "Song of Myself," there is a line, "My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues." The initial "my" governs the whole run. In Welsh, you can't do that. It's a problem, because Whitman uses the possessive a great deal, and sometimes runs them together. That leads you to really big questions—it leads you to Wittgenstein, actually, and the idea that every language is a picture of the world in itself. We're not just talking of the details, but of the essential problems of getting Whitman's world into another language, and what happens in the process. It changes.

5. *Is There a Text in This Grass?: Stability and Instability*

Chari: The most fundamental question raised this morning was, Is there an identifiable original? This is a tremendous question. It presupposes a whole theory of language and interpretation. Is every translation a construction? The question can be answered only when the nature of the meaning is defined. Is every reading an interpretation, and does meaning change under interpretation? I would like to argue for the stability of the *Leaves of Grass* text. There is an identifiable structure of meaning. The Hindi translator, my friend Dr. Sharma, supposed that there was a text in front of him—you might question that as well: is there a text in the class of five readers reading *Leaves of Grass*? But Dr. Sharma nonetheless went to the text and translated it word for word. He tried to capture the spirit, the rhythm of the original utterances.

Another question is related to particular difficulties in translating Whitman. I am not denying that there are passages that are difficult to understand and interpret. If the difficulty is in understanding and interpreting, the same difficulty will be reflected in translation. The problem of translation is tied up with the problem of interpretation. But I would be inclined to deemphasize the problematical nature of the text and of the whole question of translation. I would like to say that, at any rate in terms of what I have in front of me, *Leaves of Grass* is easily translatable word for word, rhythm for rhythm—the catalogs, the parallel structures, and so on. The question of "worm fence," for example, presented no difficulty at all for Sharma. This translator, mind you, has not read Derrida; he's in the foreign service and somewhat out of contact with what has been happening in criticism this past twelve or fifteen years. He found no difficulty at all. Now the "worm fence" is not a barrier; it is not a fence—it is a *moving line*. That's how this man translates it. *Elder* and *mullein* are the words he adopted right from English: elder is elder

and mullein is mullein because there are no synonyms. And why not? One-fourth of English consists of foreign words and adaptations. So this is what he does.

The translation of catalogs presents no problem: they're not alien to any of the Indian languages because the primary language is Sanskrit, which employs catalog techniques: the Upanishads, the Vedas, include catalogs. Consider this passage, for example: "It's not for the sake of the father that the father becomes lovable. It's not for the sake of the mother, it's not for the sake of the son, it is not for the sake of the country, it is not for the sake of the Gods that the Gods have become dear to you; it is for the sake of yourself that all these things become dear to you." This is the structure of the Whitman catalog. All the various individual items are there, but there is an emphatically formative concluding statement at the end. The statement at the end modifies the details of the catalog, and that's what Whitman called "the push of its perspective" in the 1855 Preface, in the second paragraph, which I think holds the key to Whitman's catalog technique. So this was not seen as a difficulty, as alien to the host language. Syntactical parallelism is easily translated: in Section 5, you have the structure, the syntax, and it's easily translated into corresponding structures in the Hindi language.

Folsom: I think you lay out the range of views from interpretation as an act of construction to interpretation as a stable and straightforward rendering. I find that many of the things you're saying are quite compelling, although the explanation you gave of "worm fence" seems to me a very free translation rather than a transliteration of the text. That is, to turn the worm fence into a wave motion strikes me as an interpretation of that image, an image that could have many other interpretations: I could also see it, for example, as a joined and broken motion, as much as I could as a wave motion.

Grünzweig: In the context, it's just a particular term used by American farmers. It doesn't have any metaphorical meanings, strictly speaking. It's a very realistic thing.

Chari: Fences are not standing there as a wall. It is a fence optically, and that is the sense in which it should be taken; even the wave is a fence. That's what I meant.

Grünzweig: I find that interpretation suggestive, but I'm not sure how you could prove to me that this is the way all of us have to read it: you're like the Pope, telling us how to read the Bible.

Huang: This is really the first time I have heard people say, "This is done word by word, rhythm by rhythm." I am not a great translator, although I have published translations of several books, and I have translated a fair amount of poetry myself. I find, with Whitman, it's really a

kind of universe you do a lot of lingering in; another poet can appreciate it very much. The translator continually confronts problems in understanding; in Section 2 of "Song of Myself," for example: "The smoke of my own breath, / Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine." I don't have a problem with most of that, but when I come to the words "love-root" and "silk-thread," not only I but all the other Chinese translators are puzzled because we don't see this kind of plant in my country. We don't know what it is. We can translate it word for word, but what's a "love-root"? We can put a Chinese word there, but no one will understand it. What's a "love-root"? What's a "silk-thread"? China is a country of silk, but we don't know what silk-thread is in this context. This is why translation always has gains and losses.

Thomas: Have you got what might be called a landscape of sex in Chinese? You must have terms that in a sense belong to the landscape but that signify sex. That's what you've got in those lines. Have you got any terms like that?

Huang: No, no.

Thomas: You mean the body is never invoked in terms of a landscape in Chinese writing?

Huang: Not that I know of.

Thomas: So then the whole question of sexuality is different in your country.

Huang: Sexuality in China is really a very different thing because people don't talk about sex openly.

Thomas: But neither does Whitman talk about it openly. How do they do it when they talk about it secretly? There must be greatly erotic poetry in Chinese.

Huang: You can hardly find any poetry of sex, of the woman-man relationship, until the late 1970s.

Thomas: Really!

Huang: You find a man saying goodbye to a man-friend, but you don't see any man saying goodbye to a girl, to a woman.

Alegria: What would you do with a poem like "I Sing the Body Electric"?

Huang: That's a good question. When Zhao Luorui got ready to translate *Leaves of Grass*, she said no one in China had done scholarship on Whitman's sexuality. If you go to China and talk about sex to people, you'll find that the topic is totally offensive. Young people are more open in their attitude toward sex, but if you talked to older people, or

certainly people in Whitman's time, I'm sure they would have covered their faces and turned away. The Chinese language is more euphemistic: when you talk about sex, you just make it euphemistic.

Chari: It's a question that relates more to language, which in turn is a reflection of its culture. Luckily, for the Indian reader, sex is no problem. Sex has been exhibited on the temple walls and talked about, and it is a source of excitement, legitimate social excitement. So there is no inhibition, but I can appreciate the Chinese cultural attitude also. I think the more sex is hidden, the more enjoyed it is.

Huang: "Love ceases to be apparent when it ceases to be a secret." I'll give you a fine example. In China, after Tianamen Square, the university authorities said a boy student and a girl student should not walk hand-in-hand on campus. That indicates how improper sex is considered to be in China.

Chari: Happily, in terms of the sexual language, nothing in Whitman is alien to the Indian imagination, including the body parts. The body parts are systematically enumerated and celebrated in a certain context in Vedic poetry. Nothing shocks me—I've never been shocked into recognition by Walt Whitman. After all, literary understanding is recognition; it is not a shock of cognition, it is a shock of recognition.

Huang: Well, Whitman is translated and studied differently in different countries. In China, his politics are more important; literature comes second; his sexuality is suppressed. In all the Chinese scholarship I have read about Whitman, nobody writes about his sexuality or homosexuality. I would say that Whitman's poetry is anti-Confucian. By that I mean that Whitman sings women and men equally. Confucius had the idea that man is always superior to woman. That leads to a very mediated reception of Whitman in China.

Whitman is flesh and blood, but in China he is kind of pale. He is only a political and literary writer, and not a man like ourselves. You can translate Whitman's sexual and homosexual imagery, but the reason that Chinese critics don't write about his homosexuality is that the critic himself might feel embarrassed. People will say, that person is writing about sex, Whitman's sex. This is anti-Chinese, anti-Confucian. This aspect of Whitman scholarship has been I think deliberately suppressed. Even today nobody would write about it.

Thomas: What's interesting about that is that this problem goes back much further than communism, by the sound of it.

Huang: Yes, I think the problem really started with Confucianism and then communism contributed to the suppression of Whitman's sexuality. The most important Chinese Whitmanian poet, Guo Moruo, did write some poems like Whitman. In one of his most important poems,

he describes the female body, and he describes a woman's breasts as grapes. That is a most shocking thing to the Chinese. That's why, when it was published, he was severely attacked, as Whitman was. Later on, Guo Moruo became a communist and no longer wrote poems like that.

Li Yeguang: Guo Moruo began to approach Whitman through Takeo Arishima's writings when he was in Japan in 1919. He said that he felt Whitman's "poetics of shaking off all the old restrictions" were in harmony with the "spirit of the shattering whirlwind" during the May Fourth movement of 1919. Guo Moruo always acknowledged Whitman as the one foreign poet who influenced him most, and he said that what he learned above all from Whitman was "his boldness, forcefulness, free style, and openheartedness."

6. *Recreating Leaves of Grass:*

When We Read a Translated Poem, Whose Poem Are We Reading?

Alegria: I would like to change the nature of the conversation. I brought a translation of mine, which I found some years ago, of "I Sing the Body Electric." It was published in a magazine in El Salvador, of all places. People questioned the language which I used, the Spanish . . . some people wrote me about it. I told them that not every translator sets out to translate Whitman, but rather to recreate the language, using his own means. In that sense, you can be saying one thing, while suggesting another that belongs to the poetic conception of Whitman. The lyrical discourse can be recreated: I don't mean interpreted, I mean recreated. I'll give you an example in Spanish. The great Spanish poet from Spain, León Felipe, published his translation of *Leaves of Grass*, but not as a translation—he didn't use the word interpretation either. He indicated in his verse prologue that he was taking all sorts of liberties, that he was going to give you *Leaves of Grass* in his own poetic discourse. I think that there might be more than two ways to approach the text in a different language: not just a literal translation, not just a free translation, but a recreation of the poetic discourse on a different basis—the personal basis of the poet who is serving as a sort of interpreter of the original creation.

Asselineau: You're suggesting the possibility of transposing completely an original poem and changing it practically into a poem of your own? Nothing guarantees that the translator will not have transformed the original intention of the poet he translates. We have a saying in French, "a mistress cannot be both beautiful and faithful." A translator must find a middle way. He must be as faithful as possible to the text, and when absolutely necessary, he may take the liberty of transposing because of impossibilities in his own language of remaining absolutely faith-

ful to the original text. Then, as I said, it's not the work of the foreign poet that you're presenting to the reader, but your own work.

Alegria: In the case of León Felipe, he starts out with a poem of his own, a brief poem, in which he says, I'm not going to translate Whitman; I'm going to express him. From that point he moves on.

Asselineau: Well, it's Felipe's poetry, not Whitman's.

Alegria: Right.

Li Yeguang: Chinese translations of Whitman are unavoidably marked with the influence of the times and the society the translator lives in as well as the translator's own preferences. However, the condition is improving. Especially in recent years, the scene of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" has begun to take shape. What is inspiring is that the translators are all conscientious and serious, trying to be true to the original, and under no circumstances do they intentionally delete or distort Whitman's work. Of course, because of the abstruseness and subtlety of the original work, and what with the translators' different faculties of comprehension or different abilities in commanding the language, the various translations of some poems are rather diversified and therefore bring about different effects. This problem has aroused attention recently. Some translators, particularly the younger ones, began to query and dispute each other and even raised critical objections to the translations of some well-known scholars. So discussions were organized in translation circles to push this new trend forward in a sound way. A successful forum on literary translation was held in 1991 in Beijing, for example.

Anderson: With these considerations in mind, I thought it would be interesting to take a look at the work of three Swedish translators, each of whom I'm sure was persuaded that he was being true to the text, and that he had found the answer in each line to being authentic. Yet you see, when you look at the same poem translated by different translators (you can only indicate this of course by retranslating a translation back into the original language), it's an impossible situation. Let's look at the first line of "Song of Myself"—"I celebrate myself and sing myself"—in translations by K. A. Svensson (1935), Erik Blomberg (1937), and Rolf Aggestam (1983). (Aggestam was using the 1855 edition of *Leaves*, so his line is shorter than the others.)

Jag firar högtidligt mig själv och sjunger mig själv
(I celebrate my self ceremoniously and sing my self)

Jag sjunger mig själv och lovsjunger mig själv
(I sing my self and sing praises unto my self)

Jag firar mig själv
(I celebrate my self)

You can see the first translator has the right idea. He's concerned, it seems to me, about pitching the celebration at a sufficient level. He inserts the word "ceremoniously" in order to assure the reader that this is what we're now doing; we're on a very high plane indeed. The others do not do that. You notice how there are these variations that creep in almost unavoidably. Each translator is fully persuaded that he's got the right way to do it, that the tone is correct and so on, yet it will come out different each time.

Grünzweig: I find this first line extremely instructive. It shows the various attitudes the translators carry to the text.

Anderson: The first translator inserts the word "ceremoniously," *högtidligt*, but the second translator was also aware of the need to be elevated in his diction, and so, instead of saying simply "sings," he says *lovsjunger*, which is a kind of pact-singing or praise-singing.

Grünzweig: Doesn't it have a more religious connotation?

Anderson: Well, ceremonious or ritualistic. He's not content with simply "I sing myself." And who's to fault him? He was pitching it at his level. This is *his* translating of what he found in Whitman. I think we could quibble, but that's really all it would amount to. How can we say he is wrong and the other person is right? "Celebration" is different things in different cultures. It's a question of how you would pitch this thing. I think you do discover that translations change over time, that the language becomes more pliant, more open, less stale in the usages. The whole code of the language is being changed over the century while these translations are coming out.

Alegria: But does the word "ceremoniously" have a negative connotation?

Anderson: No, no. Not at all. It's meant to take a position, standing almost as a preacher might.

Huang: It sounds very redundant.

Anderson: Yes, it is redundant. For me, I think it's wrong. If he had asked me, I would say, No, don't put that word in.

Grünzweig: But I think psychologically it's very understandable, because "I celebrate myself" is too nakedly egotistical. It is so radical; it is the type of American radicalism (I realize that I'm offering a dangerously generalized cultural analysis) that Europeans usually were afraid to fol-

low all the way. So they insert things, code words, which are part of their own tradition.

Anderson: And a curious thing about this is that the first real interest taken in Whitman was in large part because of a rebellion *against* this kind of overly formal tradition.

Thomas: It isn't always a political or cultural matter. For example, I translated this line into Welsh, in terms not unlike the second translation here. I could easily have said "Canaf fy hun," which is quite literally "I sing myself." I used "'Rwy'n fy llafarganu i fy hun," which in a way is to "chant myself." The reason was not political; I wanted a weight, a syllabic weight, that in terms of the Welsh is necessary. It's a matter of sound, of presence. The opening line doesn't have presence, which it does have in the original, unless you build more substantial sound.

Anderson: Ironically, it was precisely that kind of weight given to poetry traditionally in Sweden by the turn of the twentieth century that the modernists were rebelling against. They were trying to eradicate that, bring the language into the realm of spoken language and get rid of the staleness. Yet here, as late as 1937, this man is continuing to use that poetry: elevated language, ceremonious, weighty.

Folsom: That raises the issue of the connotations of "celebrate" in English and how those connotations have changed from the mid-nineteenth century to our own time. I think one reason that some students today have problems with that line is that they now hear "celebrate" to be the equivalent of "party," or "have a good time." They've lost any sense of the ritualistic underpinnings of that word, which were much more a part of the connotation of the word in the mid-nineteenth century. You can track the shift in connotations over the century by looking in old Webster's dictionaries. As for Whitman, he was aware of the etymological origins of "celebrate," which relate to "return to." Technically, we can only celebrate things we return to, like birthdays and anniversaries. You can't celebrate school being closed because of a snowstorm. But students today do; students say "Let's go celebrate," and "celebrate" just means "have a good time." One of the reasons I think so many students hear that line as overly egotistical is that they no longer hear the connotations that are in fact being restored by the Swedish translator here, and by those earlier translations too, which overdo it, turn it into pure ritual. Whitman again hits a middle style, a middle point, where we hear both the slangy *and* the ritualistic connotations of "celebrate," where we hear that echo of ritual return, as in "I keep returning to myself," "I keep bringing all of this back to myself again and again." It's very interesting, because as we read the poem today, we've got built into the text a historical shift in connotations; that shift means that in

English we hear it differently now than it would have been heard in Whitman's day, so what in the hell do you do if you're translating the poem today? Do you try to go back and pick up a connotation that's fading in the English language, or do you just render it the way it feels in English now?

Anderson: You see more of this, I think, if we look at what the Swedish translators did with "I loafe and invite my soul." Again, this is a very daring kind of thing to be saying. In a puritanical, Lutheran society, people don't go around bragging about loafing, but here Whitman is doing exactly that. The second translator, Blomberg, felt there ought to be something done with that line to make it more palatable or more understandable: "Jag går här och strövar fritt med min själ," which is what amounts to "I go hereabouts and ramble freely with my soul." "I'll work it up a bit," I suppose is what went through his mind.

Folsom: Blomberg makes it an active line instead of a passive one—for a protestant, perhaps there's less guilt involved in rambling than in loafing.



Anderson: And then the third and most recent one from 1983 reads, “Jag firar och bjuder min älskade själ att komma,” or “I celebrate and invite my beloved soul to come.” You wonder what was going through the translator’s mind that he felt the need for that.

Maybe we could glance at three Swedish translations of Section 11 for a moment: “Where are you off to, lady? for I see you” — what do you do with the word “lady” in translation? The first one, a 1930 translation by Artur Lundkvist, does what is polite, or was polite, for a long time in Sweden, when addressing a young woman: you say *fröken*, which means “miss,” as in “Excuse me, miss.” Nowadays, you think twice before you say something like that; it’s a little condescending, a little sexist—you used to call the waitress over with *fröken*. The second translator, Svensson, says, “Vart vill du hän, kvinna?” or “Whither are you going, woman.” This is an attempt to get around the problem, but it doesn’t. The third one, Aggestam, goes all out with “Vart skall ni ta vägen min sköna”—“min sköna” means “my beautiful one.” You can understand what he’s struggling with, and decide, in accord with your notion of what Whitman wanted us to know, whether he is successful.

Folsom: Is there a Swedish word that would transliterate to “lady”?

Anderson: Dam. But that would connote pretentiousness, I think. There’s no one satisfactory word.

Greenspan: I’m not sure there’s a satisfactory word in English.

Grünzweig: The reason “lady” works is because Whitman means it in a slightly joking way. If we’re talking about the lady in terms of “my lady” of earlier centuries, which *Dam* connotes, it wouldn’t work either.

Folsom: Of course, we hear Whitman’s use of “lady” in the context of his later comments in *Democratic Vistas*, where he talks about “this fossil and unhealthy air which hangs about the word *lady*.” We’re able to retro-fit that comment to this passage and see that, in effect, Whitman is reprimanding the woman for that isolated behavior that “ladyness” suggests.

Anderson: Look for a moment at the line, “The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.” I just want to mention something that we touched on earlier—the diction that is now undergoing change, has been undergoing change. Curiously, the first translation is by the man, Artur Lundkvist, who led the way in Sweden for acceptance of Whitman and championed him by writing frequently a kind of criticism that was intended to foster poetry going in that same direction. But even such a person uses the word *ej* for “not”: “De andra såg henne ej”—literally, “The others saw her not.” There are three words for “not” in Swedish. He chose the one that is slightly elevated, not the one that is used conversationally, which is now the only one that you would use even in

writing very serious poetry and serious prose, with perhaps some special exception. He was constrained at his time still, despite the liberating influences that he saw in Whitman. While he was urging people to follow Whitman, he still felt obliged to use *ej* instead of *inte*. That is what the third translator permitted himself by 1983: “The others saw her not,” “De andra såg henne inte.” This marks one of the many different things that translators have to deal with. The second translator is using, in addition to the old *ej* for the negative, the plural form of the verb *sågo* (“De andra sågo ej henne”), which has disappeared in Swedish. It constitutes a kind of sign that this is now poetry being written seriously, which ought to be read with the same kind of seriousness. It’s no longer possible to use such a form of the verb; it has disappeared entirely out of conversation. So usages change and account for differences in translations over time. To attack the poor translator each time is unfair. We need to ask at what level is he pitching his translation, and why?

7. *The Issue of Correctness*

Thomas: To make a very simple point, we’re finessing this question of whether there can be a correct Whitman. One thing is damn sure: there can be an *incorrect* Whitman. That’s a point worth making in the face of some cultures and the problems they have, because you can go wildly wrong. Can’t you, Roger?

Asselineau: Oh, yes. One example is an amusing series of French mistranslations of line 9 of Section 15 in “Song of Myself”: “The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and looks at the oats and rye.” In one rather erroneous translation—“Le fermier s’arrête devant les bars dans sa promenade au premier janvier et regarde les pains d’avoine”—the translator thinks that “bars” are bars where you can get a whiskey, and that “First-day” is New Year’s Day, and that “loafe” is the singular of “loaves of bread.” There are three mistakes in one verse. There are other translators who make similar errors, although the most recent translator, Jacques Darras, was almost accurate: “Le fermier quaker s’arrête aux barrières dans sa balade dominicale pour regarder les avoines et les orges.” The “fermier quaker” responds to the Quaker notation of “First-day”; “aux barrières”—he means fence, actually, or gate; “balade” is too familiar, but never mind; “dominicale” is saying that the “First-day” is Sunday; he mistakes “orges” (barley) for rye, but never mind, a small detail. Léon Bazalgette, the earliest French translator, strangely enough was right, for very often he makes mistakes, but his translation of this line is impeccable: “Le paysan qui se promène en flânant le dimanche s’arrête á la barrière pour regarder l’avoine et le seigle.” And my own translation, of course, is correct.

These same errors reoccur in Spanish translations, Italian translations, Swedish translations, and Dutch, where one translator is led down the wrong path by assuming that “bars” are where you get drinks—thus he believes the setting must be a city where there would be bars, and the “First-day” must be Monday, when the bars would be open. So you see some of the minor problems that a translator has to face. Sometimes the difficulty, at least for French translators of Whitman, is that they’ve learned English in England and don’t know American usage. They’ve never been to the States either, so they’re unfamiliar with certain customs. That increases the difficulty.

Grünzweig: It is of course true what you’re saying, that there are incorrect translations, but I want to emphasize that what we call “incorrectness” can also indicate different receptions. From the point of view of somebody who looks at translations as receptions of a particular culture, for example, the particular “error” with the word *bar* is very revealing. It reveals more than anything a certain European image of America. While I see what you’re saying, I think what you’re implying is that there is a correct way to translate Whitman. I cannot agree with that, because there isn’t. Translation is always an interpretation. At best, there may be an approximation, a mediation between two cultures. I think a translation is most successful when there is a give-and-take, when there is a dialogue, but I think we cannot really speak of the possibility of doing a correct translation of the text.

Asselineau: I think that you must at least translate the denotation of the words. The connotations, of course, are another matter. There, the translator has full liberty to try to render the connotations to the best of his ability. But he must at least give the true denotations of the words. Otherwise, he betrays the original. Jules Renard, the French novelist and diarist, once defined translation as “that strange habit some people have of rendering one language they do not know well into another which they don’t know any better.” But, whatever our limitations, we still need to respect the fact that each line has a meaning which has to be rendered in precise language.

Grünzweig: That is a very pragmatic point of view, and I agree with it. But look at modern translation theory—and you can say you don’t give a damn about it, and I might agree with you—I’m just suggesting some of the other approaches that are taken these days. I think that we would find ourselves, if we were at one of those large translation conferences, quickly labeled as a minority of very conservative people. We’re holding onto the notions of correctness, of intentionality, and so forth.

Thomas: I don’t see that it follows. When Roger says that those readings were incorrect, he’s using the word “incorrect” in a very particular, specialized, limited sense. It doesn’t follow from that that there is such a



thing as a correctness in translation, in your sense of the word “correctness.” It just doesn’t follow. If there is such a thing as learning a language so that that language really makes sense, there must be such a thing as incorrectness in the way that Roger just demonstrated. That is not the same as to say that there is a single permissible translation. It doesn’t follow. The two meanings of “correctness” are not even in the same category.

Grünzweig: Yes, that’s right. I guess my concern is that we should not diminish the “reception” aspect of the act of translation. Every good translator is going to attempt through the translation to introduce a genuine piece of American culture into a foreign country. Historically, all the translators of *Leaves* have been trying to do that, but the result of, say, eleven translations in German points to the fact that none of them really has managed to do it adequately: they are all limited and flawed in demonstrable ways. Each of them reproduces, for better or worse, and to some degree, an image of America that is interesting mainly because it reflects the changing views of America in European societies.

Thomas: But when you move away from this fundamental distinction between basic linguistic correctness and interpretation, even within interpretation I would find it personally very hard not to distinguish between what I would call good translations and bad translations. Again, I not mean to imply that I think there is a single correct translation to which some are approximating and others are failing to approximate. It’s a very complex matter. You must feel this yourself: there are some

translations that are bad translations. You can use synonyms such as “they lack life,” or something like that, but the bottom line is, they’re not good. On the other hand, there’s a whole band of translations that are *good* translations, and they may be quite different from each other.

Grünzweig: Good in the sense of being appropriate, you mean. But what do we do when one of the worst ones is the most powerful? Because one of the worst German translations, in that sense of appropriateness or correctness, turned out to be one of the most influential ones and put Whitman on the map. What I’m most interested in, I guess, is describing how the various translations are different, why they’re different, and in what ways they function differently.

Folsom: The question ultimately is, to what purpose are we putting each translation? If the purpose of reading and studying translations is to understand the receiving culture, as Walter is suggesting, then there are *only* differences—the “quality” or “correctness” of any particular translation is hardly relevant, because every translation, as a cultural document, is equally revealing. If, on the other hand, your sense of the purpose of the translation is accuracy of translated vocabulary or accuracy of poetic form, then you’ll have a different standard for these translations, and you will be able to sort them out and rank them. Part of what I see as the attractiveness of Walter’s approach is that it offers some very interesting cultural uses for what might otherwise be dismissed as hopelessly bad translations. They have their own cultural power, and they’re doing a kind of cultural work. We may not like it, or we might be able to say a particular translation is bad, but it still may have a powerful effect in the host culture. An unsuspecting reader will read it and absorb that particular version of Whitman *as* Whitman, and that version then gets into the culture and has an effect.

Grünzweig: I don’t think Whitman can ever be translated “correctly.” I’ve studied in an extensive way eleven book-length translations by people who—like the three Swedish translators we looked at earlier—were all absolutely convinced that they were doing the sorts of things that we are trying to establish here as being the measure of a good translation. I’ve studied all these guys, and I found out that each of them “failed” in that sense. Some better, some worse, but each of them, including the standard translation by Hans Reisiger, failed to render Whitman “correctly” because they were so incredibly influenced by their own versions of America, by the power and the logic of their own linguistic contexts, and by many other things.

Anderson: Chapman’s Homer is renowned as a great translation, but to translate Chapman back into Greek, the language of Homer, would create a travesty. It proves your point that it depends on what the transla-

tor is trying to do and wants to do, the context that he's doing it in, the language that's available to him, the cultural situation, everything.

Alegria: Let's take one of the examples that Roger offered today: the case of the translator who takes "bars" to mean taverns. Such a translation creates a change, obviously. Is it a major change, an essential change? To me it is. It's a seemingly small detail that has implications that change the meaning of the whole poem. I take the poem and the work of a translator as the work of a builder. For every structure there is a beginning stage, and mistakes made at this stage can be fatal. Somebody forgets to build a stairway and there is a bedroom on the second floor without a stairway to get downstairs. That's a major mistake, of course. It ignores the plans that the architect designed. In that sense, I would accept the difference between a correct and an incorrect translation, because an incorrect one creates something wholly different from the original conception.

Huang: Some people say translation is a competition between two cultures. I use my language to reproduce your ideas. Are you translating Whitman for those who do not know English? That is the most simple reason to translate, the most basic purpose of a translation. But if your concern is correctness, then just leave the original alone: don't translate. What is a good translation? A good translation to me is the one that is closest in meaning, in style, in form to the original. We need to stick first to the meaning of ideas, and then as near as possible to the form, to the original style. I believe that there are some better translations and worse translations, and there are always errors in translations, but we can never use an absolute term such as "the correct translation."

Li Yeguang: My strategy is first of all to get the spirit as well as the form. I sometimes put a rhyme at the end of some lines, because to the Chinese, Whitman's poetry seems a little loose, a little sloppy, compared to traditional Chinese poetry.

Asselineau: Well, translating is a challenge. One criterion that's used by common readers is, Is the translation legible? Does it read well, or does it sound gawky?

Huang: I've occasionally made additions, even added lines; otherwise, Whitman's poems looks very un-poetic in Chinese. When people see that, they think it's prose and they don't want to read it. What I do—and not only with Whitman poems—is I read carefully to figure out the meaning. When I get the sense, I write it down first. Then in Chinese I work it into a better form as much as possible. So, to me, the translation of the ideas is more important than the translation of the structures or

forms. Zhao Luorui is more or less faithful to Whitman's original—some people accuse her of being too faithful and others of mistranslating. But I believe that I'm doing the right thing by trying to make it like Chinese poetry while keeping Whitman's ideas.

Chari: Professors Huang, Grünzweig, and others have talked about cultural differences, but I think these have a tendency to be exaggerated. You simply go to "Song of Myself" and breathe in the same air that the poet is breathing. Where is there anything that is uniquely, peculiarly American or cultural that is so different from me? I suppose that is in fact the message of Walt Whitman—you'd call it an interpretation, so let it be! There are cultural differences—linguistic and other barriers—but there is an underlying level, a foundational level, on which poetry speaks to you.

Asselineau: I don't think Whitman's Americanness really matters. He claimed it did; he was proud of his Americanness. He said, for example, "I am very aware that my *Leaves* could not possibly have emerged or been fashioned or completed from any other era than the latter half of the nineteenth century, nor any other land than democratic America." But to this, André Gide answered something like, "Wherever Whitman might have been born, he would have written very much the same thing as he did." The essential message would have been there. It doesn't depend on his Americanness; it is something much more general and universal, something that corresponds to man's condition, to man's situation, to the cosmos—that's the essential subject of *Leaves of Grass*. "Men against the sky," as Edwin Arlington Robinson put it.

Allen: Well, I think Gide's wrong on that.

Greenspan: I think so, too. It's startlingly different in different places. You step off a plane in Italy and the sky looks different from when you step off a plane in Cedar Rapids.

Asselineau: The backdrop, yes, but in front of it you have someone who is man, universal man.

Chari: "I Hear America Singing" is a beautiful poem to me. If it were only America he were singing, I'd have no reason to be reading Whitman. Everything in the poem comes from universal experience except the word "America," which I could jolly well substitute with Paris or Berlin or New Delhi.

Grünzweig: This is very interesting. I read Whitman precisely because I want to find out about America, because I want to enter into a dialogue with American culture. The intention, I believe, on the part of most German translators was indeed to get in touch with a foreign culture, in this case with American culture, which was to them one of the most

fascinating ones.

Allen: I once claimed Whitman was an international poet and not an American poet. But yet, the wording, the imagery, the sentiment, all insist he is. I guess the safest thing to say is that you're both right.

8. Ideological Translation

Anderson: In addition to what Walter just said, about people reading Whitman out of curiosity about America—in Sweden, at any rate, they read him because they were urged to read about the new era of social life. Social democrats persuaded people to read Jack London, and Frank Norris, and then Walt Whitman. These writers could tell people about the “new order of life.” So it was to learn about themselves and what their life was going to be that they read Whitman. The poetry was something they converted to their own needs.

Grünzweig: I agree totally with you; for a lot of the German leftists starting in 1905 up to the 1930s, America was really one of the experiments that they believed would soon lead to a socialist society, and the socialist writers—including Sinclair, London, and Whitman, strangely enough—were representatives of that future order.

Maybe I can best demonstrate what I've been calling the “reception” theory of Whitman translation by looking at how Max Hayek, a social democrat, translated Whitman's *Drum-Taps* poem, “Reconciliation.” In 1914, the social democrats internationally bought into the war. In one country after the other, they failed to oppose the war. Why this is so is a complex matter, but what is relevant here is that in Germany and Austria, Whitman then became of paramount importance to them because he suggested to them a fantasy of how to reconcile themselves with the war. The wound-dresser role, especially, offered a possible model of how to participate in the war without doing anything evil in it—in fact, to try to help as much as possible. All of the Whitman war poetry that the social democrats translated in effect had that sort of a function. In this particular poem, the reconciliation is in fact a reconciliation not so much with the enemy but with war itself. Whitman's line, “That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world,” embodied the old and very reactionary, dangerous, and conservative theory that war cleanses everything. Perhaps Whitman did not mean it that way: I don't know, I don't care. But I know how the social democrats read it, because they explained it in great detail. This particular poem can be read, then, from that point of view; the socialists would say, “War is terrible; however, it seems as though it's unavoidable, and in the last resort we're all human and we can overcome the horrors of war by understanding each

other.” But the enemy needed to be dead first, before you could accomplish this reconciliation. So this becomes a very problematic reading for me. Other groups, like the anarchists, and other translators like Gustav Landauer, strongly opposed this type of reading and used war poetry by Whitman that would be clearly and unequivocally pacifist. Hayek’s translation of “Reconciliation” appeared in a social democratic theoretical weekly in, I think, 1916. In this regard, the second verse is interesting, because Whitman says “Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost.” That “utterly lost” was obviously a little too strong for the social democratic newspaper during the war, because Hayek’s translation—“Schön ist, daß der Krieg und sein Gemetzel endlich völlig dahin sein müssen”—suggests that war “will eventually pass away.” War will eventually sort of disappear, rather than be “lost,” because loss would be defeatism in 1916 in the German press.

Thomas: That’s a brilliant commentary, in light of the complexity of translation. I have never before seen the possibility in the poem of that reading.

Grünzweig: I have, unfortunately, become very distressed about this poem that I used to like. When I now reread Whitman’s line, “Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,” I wonder how much time do we have to endure war? Isn’t more immediate pacifist action required? Then the line about death as a cleansing agent—this is something that is a male fantasy and has been for a long time. I’m very worried about that, as I am about the fact that it’s easy enough to feel sorry for a man after he’s dead.

Thomas: The point is that, as we know, historical knowledge even allows the possibility of that reading. That complicates it further. It is actually possible to read the historical Whitman in that way.

Grünzweig: In any case, it would not be a poem that would fire up anti-war demonstrations.

Folsom: That’s right. And it’s a poem that, in your reading, reveals itself as very much related to “This Compost.” It expresses a belief in the natural process of cleansing, of turning the debris back into something beautiful. The advice seems to be, “Be patient. Be patient.”

Grünzweig: That’s exactly the social democratic ideology, of course: It’ll all come out in the end; we don’t really need a revolution. Socialism will come about eventually on its own.

Thomas: These are fundamental problems when Whitman is translated into political philosophy. It’s there in “Song of Myself.” That’s a real problem with Whitman.

Chari: But the final message, I think, is most beautiful. “For my enemy is dead”: there the enemy is by implication a friend, someone with whom he is sympathizing or empathizing. So the dominant sentiment is one of sympathy.

Grünzweig: It is a beautiful pose, which had always been for me the final message of the poem, until (I think this is a classic case of deconstruction) I took a different viewpoint and asked myself, Is it really useful to take as a given the fact that there must be dead enemies? That the deeds of carnage must be inevitable? Wouldn't it be more useful to try to have reconciliation *before* the enemy is dead?

Folsom: The opening phrase of the poem, “Word over all,” also presents some interesting cultural problems in German. To translate the phrase as “Wort über alles” of course calls up a strong echo of “Deutschland über alles”: it's a nice case of a literal translation being infected in the host language by an unrelated usage. You cannot begin a poem of reconciliation in German with that phrase. So post-World War II translations begin to circumvent the phrase with things like “Wort der Worte,” or word of words. What has formed, then, is a specific cultural block to a literal translation.

Allen: This moves us into the whole matter of how Whitman gets translated into other cultures. We might state the issue this way: Is Whitman translated for the power of his language or translated for his perceived ideology? No doubt both happen. Does anybody want to address generally the way that happens.

Huang: In my understanding, as I've already said, Whitman was translated into Chinese primarily for his ideas. First, this democracy thing is very interesting to the Chinese. It's totally new. China looked at the two superpowers and saw the Soviet Union was practicing socialism and America was practicing democracy. One Chinese poet said both democracy and socialism are good, but he welcomed Mr. Whitman's democracy ship, which was crossing the Pacific Ocean, carrying Whitman's ideas. People say China needs democracy. People need rights.

One thing that makes Whitman very palatable to the Chinese is that they perceive him as a pantheist. China is godless. We have no religion, somehow. It's imported to China from other countries, India and other countries; China itself doesn't have a religion. Whitman brings a pantheistic democracy: he has a universal love of grass, the simplest thing, and many other things—he loved me, he loved women, he loved men, he loved everybody. I think it's the pantheism that interests many Chinese poets.

Alegria: Getting back to what I said this morning, I believe that each generation has its own reading of Whitman, not only in the United States,

but also abroad. In the case of Hispanic poetry, I would say that most people read Whitman for ideology. So Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* have become several things throughout the years. I'd like to tell you an anecdote, which I think reflects very clearly what I'm trying to say.

I was attending a meeting in Mexico City—a political rally related to a political struggle in a Latin American country. All of a sudden one of the speakers began to attack Whitman. He offered Whitman as an example of imperialistic poetic discourse. Who defended Whitman? A Cuban, a revolutionary Cuban, Roberto Fernandez Retamar. He practically ran to the stage as soon as this guy finished, and he started a passionate defense of Whitman. The issue was the Spanish-American War, of course. The first fellow said Whitman expressed support for the United States and imperialism and manifest destiny and so on. He made Whitman a beatnik version of Teddy Roosevelt or something like that. So Fernandez Retamar got up and went to the stage and gave the reading that Whitman gets in revolutionary Cuba by the readers who are still with Fidel Castro. José Martí, you know, is the initiator of this cult of Whitman in Spanish. Martí attended one reading of Whitman's in New York in 1887; that was the beginning. He wrote a letter to *La Nación*, a Buenos Aires newspaper, describing the reading. He idealized Whitman. He created the myth of Whitman as the bard, philosophically correct, socially involved in the political struggles of the world, and so on. That is the Cuban reading of Whitman again today.

Paro: The absorption of the political Whitman in Brazil is a complicated issue. In Brazil, before the 1940s, the three most commonly used translations of *Leaves* were Bazalgette's French translation, Luigi Gamberale's Italian version, and Armando Vasseur's Spanish. Most of the intellectuals at that time didn't read English, but they could read the other languages perfectly well. We started having translations in Portuguese in the 1940s. But early in the century Whitman is mentioned many times in Brazilian publications, mainly after the week of modern art that occurred in 1922, which was similar to the Armory show in America. It was an attempt to forget the old canons and move toward a literature that would be more in accordance with modern times and liberty. Whitman's literary reception was different in the more traditional literary center of Rio de Janeiro, then the capital, than in São Paulo, an emerging industrial center with lots of Italians, where Whitman's reception is more closely linked to Futurism—the modernists, as they were known at that time, were called Futurists. Although they were uncomfortable with the name, they saw it as a sign that they were forward-looking, and they used Whitman as a sort of shield to protect them against the attacks of those who accused them of being behind the times. Strangely enough, the traditionalists, or *passadistas*, people who looked towards the past, also wanted Whitman on their side, because he was so

well known. The social and political Whitman was more important in São Paulo than in Rio, where he was praised for other qualities. What Fernando Alegría says about the spirit in Spanish modernists is present in Brazil as well, where the spirit is there in the 1920s, even though his gospel would not come until the 1940s with the Brazilian translations.

Allen: I sometimes feel all alone when I read Whitman. What I like is the poetry, the imagery, the language, the rhythms. I don't give a damn about the ideas.

Asselineau: Neither do I.

Chari: I couldn't agree with you more.

Asselineau: The first French translator, Léon Bazalgette, did his translation for political reasons. He was a large-hearted socialist. He loved Whitman singing democracy and all that. But Gide reacted strongly against that. Bazalgette's translation appeared before the war, and Gide and his friends published their version of Whitman after the war, in 1920 or something like that. They didn't accept Whitman as the bard of democracy. They were interested in Whitman as the poet, as the singer himself, and incidentally, the homosexual. In France, of course, after the first World War, and even during the first World War, a number of leftists were great admirers of Whitman. In particular, there was a poet—Marcel Martinet—who is now almost forgotten and who was a regular contributor to *L'Humanité*, the socialist paper. He admired Whitman very much, and he wrote poems in which you can feel the very strong influence of Whitman. He even imitated some of his catalogs, very successfully I must say. He was a very interesting man, much admired by Trotsky. Trotsky thought he was much more sincere than the communist militants he had met in France. During the war, this man followed Whitman's example: he was a nurse in hospitals. Whitman's influence, in this respect, was very strong in France. Who else have I forgotten?

Grünzweig: In fact, I think, for a whole Swiss group during the First World War—a multinational group of Germans and Austrians, exiles of France and so on—Whitman was sort of hovering over the battlefields of the world. I would say that French-German relations, cultural relations, immediately before the war and during the war, could be said to be under the star of Whitman, so to speak. It was Whitman, this American poet, about whom they talked very frequently.

Chari: In India, Whitman's reception is far from ideological. It seems most Indian readers of Whitman don't give a damn about the ideology. But I'll give you something that you'd like to hear. Two cases: One is a South Indian poet who died in 1920, Bharati, the national poet of Tamil literature. He was in very close contact with the French culture through what was a French colony in India at that time. He was very much

enthused by the French revolution and the slogan, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. It was in the context of the Indian struggle for independence that he took up Walt Whitman and hailed him as the prophet of democracy. Another thing that interested this poet powerfully was Whitman's innovative style. For the first time, he introduced experimental free verse into Tamil poetry. The other case is a Bengali, Kshitindranath Tagore (a cousin of Rabindranath Tagore), who read *Leaves of Grass* in the year 1891 and wrote an essay, in English, about Walt Whitman, in which he picked up, not the mystical elements, but precisely those ideological elements—the philosophy of democracy, freedom—as applied to the sociopolitical situation in India.

Anderson: You've given me a clue to something I've been puzzling over. The first person to translate Whitman into Swedish was a woman, Andrea Butenschön, married to a diplomat, who spent time in India. On her return, she came to be known as a kind of scholar of Indian culture and Sanskrit. She published a translation of Whitman in 1905. I have not an inkling of an idea how she came about doing that, except now I can put two pieces together. In 1913, she translated Tagore into Swedish, the year before he won the Nobel Prize. Maybe there's a link between that act of translation and the one in 1905; her interest in Whitman may have come to her through India and this 1891 essay by Tagore's cousin.

Chari: Yes, Tagore in fact reflects Whitman's free verse in his *Gitanjali*, which won him the Nobel Prize. There are syntactical parallels and very close parallels in language and in the cosmic sentiment as well. He doesn't say much about democracy there or Americanism, but it's the other side, the cosmic side, of Whitman, that Tagore picks up. His cousin, however, emphasized the ideological element.

Greenspan: Let me address briefly Whitman's very complicated reception in the Jewish world, which also has political overtones, and let me quickly break it into two parts. It's not really an artificial distinction. First, the non-Zionist reception. Whitman was a siren for traditional Jews, or rather the generation after the breakdown of the tradition, when the ghetto walls came down. Whitman was a siren voice of individual freedom, and one hears his echo in many places—many Yiddish poets in Europe, Yiddish poets in America. At the same time, he was also adopted by Jewish socialists, both in the United States and in Europe. You get the strange combination of his being both the voice of individualism and the voice of socialism.

On the other side of the world, there's an interesting marriage of what I think are very different spirits. Whitman exerted profound influence on modern Israeli culture. One of the most famous poetic manifestos was written by a leading Zionist poet in the late 1920s, Uri Tsvi

Greenberg, who was trying to articulate a new philosophy of culture for a country that had not yet been formally born, writing in a language—modern Hebrew—which, in a manner of speaking, did not yet have its own modern culture. Of all the poets of the world, when Greenberg looked for an analogy to what he was trying to do in Israel, the voice that he found was Whitman. The structural and historical congruities that he found between Whitman's (I think especially) 1855 America and 1929 pre-state Israel (that is to say, Palestine) were absolutely striking. What's interesting about this also, to me, is that Greenberg was on the far right politically—very far right. So, as the socialists were trying to claim Whitman as the voice of the modern collective, so Greenberg claimed Whitman for the far right.

At the same time, there is a very strong socialist reception of Whitman in Israel, since Israel was at least through the early 1970s essentially a socialist state, politically virtually monolithic, with one political party running the country right until the revolution of 1977. The socialists very readily accepted Whitman as one of their own. I think a nice little testimony of that was the fact that the D. S. Mirsky introduction to the original Russian Soviet translation of Whitman, which I believe was done in the early 1930s, was actually translated into Hebrew from the English, not from the Russian—a translation of a translation—and put into the literary supplement to one of the socialist newspapers in Israel. Whitman was, from all of these different points-of-view, a central figure.



To add one more dichotomy, Whitman obviously was a major voice for the secular part of the country. I think one of the most interesting and prophetic voices in Israeli culture has been the usually scholarly voice (and this is the voice that is generally heard) of Gershom Scholem, certainly one of the finest Jewish scholars of the twentieth century, who, in an essay—I believe it was before the Six-Day War, probably in the early 1960s—spoke about and to a certain extent lamented the secularization of the Jewish tradition in modern Israel. There had always been a small minority within the country of Orthodox Jews and ultra-Orthodox Jews that protested the very fact of the existence of a secular state. That right-wing, of course, has grown much stronger in the twenty-five years since. To get back to Scholem, though: he predicted the downfall of the old socialist ideology, about which I think he had very ambivalent feelings. On one hand, I think he was happy to see an essentially secular

ethos deteriorating; yet, on the other hand, he wasn't quite able to see what would replace it. What I think he sensed would replace it, though, was essentially a new ideology, which would combine religious with secular elements. This is an extremely problematic notion. In any case, in talking about this problem, again of all the poets in the world whom Scholem could draw on, the one poet whom he specified in this context as being instructive to the current moment in Israel was Walt Whitman, about whom he spoke as being the poet of absolute secularism. And so you get a very peculiar and curious mishmash of views. Whitman's boast about containing multitudes really fits the Jewish-Israeli context very nicely.

Thomas: I'd like to follow that excellent summary with some comments about Whitman in Britain. I'm feeling at a great disadvantage, because I think Harold Blodgett has already done excellent work on the reception of Whitman in Britain. I'm taking it for granted that you know how important Whitman became, for example, in socialist circles at the end of the last century. That seems to me very widely known. The one point I wanted to make is what seems to me to have happened to the interest in Whitman in Britain during the course of *this* century. I want to float a theory. The theory runs something like this: the translation of Whitman into Victorian English had proved too successful for the poetry's long-term good. By the end of the Victorian period, Whitman had become a naturalized Briton, insofar as his poems were successfully translated into British political terms. His popularity in Britain kept pace with the liberalization of British social and political life which accompanied the extension of the franchise and the great education acts. As the Liberals ossified into part of the ruling middle-class establishment, Whitman's liberation politics appealed briefly to the idealistic humanists of the pre-war socialist movement. But by World War I, their Independent Labour Party had, in an atmosphere of bitter class tension, been superseded by a much harder Left whose political base was the working-class, whose key instruments were the unions, and which had little time for the likes of Whitman. By this time, too, a generation of radical writers and intellectuals had come somewhat wearily to feel that it knew Whitman by heart. For many of them, he must have seemed rather like a ghost of their younger selves, selves they had outgrown and that had been overtaken by history. Since Whitman's reputation in Britain was inextricably linked to the politics, social campaigns, and causes of a particular period, it inevitably declined as the issues changed.

The case of D.H. Lawrence provides, therefore, for me an interesting variation on this theme. As is known, the young Lawrence always kept a copy of *Leaves of Grass* literally by his side, usually stuffed into a pocket. What is perhaps less well-known is that the young Lawrence may well have originally heard of Whitman in the light of discussions

he'd heard at the socialist group to which he briefly belonged in 1906. If so, the highly idiosyncratic readings of Whitman he offered in major essays, notably in *The Symbolic Meaning* and *Studies in Classic American Literature*, represent a consciously clean break with that politicized Whitman of the late nineteenth century, to which the younger Lawrence had presumably been introduced. In other words, the mature Lawrence managed, unlike his contemporaries, to invent a Whitman for his own time and in the image of his own needs by rejecting the Victorian Whitman he'd first known and by producing a new cultural translation of the poetry. Lawrence sees Whitman's poetry as symptomatic of a malaise in American society, as you know, an approach to the work that has most interested those academics in Britain involved in the teaching of American studies (and Whitman, of course, has become a key figure in American studies).

But the poetry scene in England—and I use the word England advisedly here—during the twentieth century has, very crudely speaking, been divided between the nativists and the Americanists. Whitman has on the whole appealed to neither. The nativists lump him in with all the other American poets, whose influence on English literature has been so baneful. The Americanists, such as Bunting and Tomlinson, are always comparing him to Eliot, Pound, and Williams, the modernists whose work they see as completely superseding his. The notable exception to all these rules is Geoffrey Grigson, who has cheerfully and provocatively rubbished virtually every American poet *except* Whitman. Grigson is an admirable maverick, and it is mostly to British mavericks, cultural marginals, and committed oddballs that Whitman has appealed during this century. One such was Hugh McDiarmid, who translated Whitman into his own distinctive brand of Marxism; another is Tom Paulin, the very interesting Ulster/Northern Ireland poet, whose latest collection of essays, *Minotaur*, is studded with references to Whitman. His Whitman is a rugged non-conformist and populist, representing in many respects a retrieval for our times of the political Whitman of the late nineteenth century.

To the last point: McDiarmid and Paulin have another feature in common: neither of them is English. That brings me to the last issue, which interests me most, and about which at this stage I know unfortunately least, namely the ways in which Whitman has been translated into the many and very different countries of the British islands. It's a subject hitherto ignored by Whitman scholars, and it is in urgent need of proper investigation. There have been short essays on the Irish Whitman, his contribution via Yeats to Irish literary nationalism, his possible influence on *Ulysses*, and so on. But I think a lot remains to be explored—for example, the fascinating fact that Whitman at almost the same time appealed to the Anglo-Irishman Dowden and to the young nationalist Yeats. Blodgett notes them, but he doesn't see the very in-

teresting cultural contradiction there. What about the response to Whitman in Northern Ireland? Has he been translated into Scots Gaelic? Isn't it shocking that no substantial study exists of Whitman's importance to Scottish writers, although they were among the first to publish several book-length studies of his poetry? And of course there's my country of Wales: I've just written an essay on Whitman and Welsh-language literature. My theory is that in this century Whitman has been by and large completely ignored, except by oddballs, and I think there are illuminating reasons.

Greenspan: Is there real evidence or is it just inference that Lawrence may have been introduced to Whitman through socialist circles?

Thomas: There is circumstantial evidence. Lawrence was an odd guy; he kept moving around, he had his own intellectual itch, and as soon as one idea began to appeal to him, it would be dropped. But very briefly in 1906, he attended meetings of a socialist group or fellowship in the Nottingham area, I think. And we're certain that Whitman was one of the subjects discussed in that particular group.

Folsom: I'm struck by another aspect of the British reception of Whitman—early on, he was read and interpreted by two very distinct groups: there was the Rossetti circle and the Bolton circle, which had very little to do with each other. They're really a Southern and Northern reaction to Whitman, a vaguely aristocratic and a vaguely working class reception of Whitman. They read him in significantly different ways.

Thomas: That's quite right. They were worlds apart in terms of the issues of the day. One proviso to add is that I think it would be mistaken to suppose that Whitman ever really appealed to the working people in Britain. If you look at the Bolton group, they were really lower middle class. There's no evidence that Whitman ever really appealed to the masses, even in Britain.

Alegria: While we're discussing the political aspects of Whitman's reception, let me say a few words about the attitude of communist poets writing in Spanish in relation to Whitman. I'd like to give three examples. The first would be a Colombian poet, León de Grief, a man who wrote in the 1930s or 1940s (I heard him reading in the 1950s) and a member of the Communist Party. The second one obviously would be Pablo Neruda. The third one would be the Cuban, Nicolás Guillén, perhaps the best-known Cuban poet in this century, a black poet. These three members of the Communist Party are great admirers of Whitman, but they are not imitators or followers of Whitman. Nicolás Guillén is the most typical of the three in the way he writes, using folk rhythms and African tradition in poetry, dance, and song. Many times he men-

tions Whitman, but he never imitates Whitman's poetry. Neruda was very happy to say that he was Whitman's comrade—not a disciple, not a follower, but an equal to Whitman. The greatest tribute that he paid to Whitman is in his poem to Lincoln, "Let the Wood-Splitter Awake," where he says, "to my comrade, Whitman." De Grief, I would say, is the most militant of the three, and also a great admirer of Whitman, but never considers himself a disciple. There are the matters of the political attitude and the art of writing, and these writers establish a clear distinction between the two.

Anderson: Is Whitman's use of "camerado" something that tipped these people off to a kinship they felt with him?

Alegría: Yes, surely. In the case of Neruda, obviously it is the use of such words as "camerado," but also the historical significance of Lincoln.

Asselineau: So in a way, these poets responded only to the political side of the poet; they ignored the cosmic poetry, the religious poetry.

Alegría: They gave him an emeritus position in the communist movement of the twentieth century.

Li Yeguang: In China, with the founding of the People's Republic, Whitman's influence on communist poets is demonstrable. On November 25, 1955, a conference commemorating the centenary of the publication of *Leaves of Grass* was held in Beijing. Zhou Yang, in a speech at the conference, said, "In Whitman's poetry, democracy, freedom and equality are his fundamental ideas," and in Shanghai that same month, Ba Jin said that "Whitman's poetry is still a great inspiring impetus to the Chinese people who are marching towards Socialism today." But then political campaigns in China were held one after another which seriously affected the study of foreign literature, and Whitman became quieter and quieter in China's closed cultural life. From the late 1950s to the late 1970s, his influence was small, but for the past fifteen years his work has been widely discussed and translated again.

Thomas: This whole question of how communism has translated Whitman or regarded Whitman fascinates me. I sense among my friends on the left that a big shift has occurred. As I said, at the end of the last century and the beginning of this, Whitman was regarded as the proto-socialist poet in certain circles. If I now speak to my friends on the left about Whitman, their instinctive reaction is to talk of him as if he were the imperialist American poet. It's a complete change. He's the American expansionist, really. They acknowledge a lot of sentimental talk about brotherhood, but they say it's really the evolution of American brotherhood that you get in Whitman's poetry. And there's some truth in that. I just wanted to ask a question, for information. Is there no mistrust of

Whitman? Is he not translated in that way, too?

Alegría: In the case of Borges, the answer would be absolutely no. Borges is beyond the political argument. He said something like this: “Those who object to the presence of political ideas in the work of art usually do so because they are opposing the ideas expressed in such and such a work. In other words, ideas contrary to my own ideas.” That was the explanation he gave for his being apolitical. In my opinion, he is one of the most political persons I have ever known. He struggled against Peron, he was put in jail by Peron for one day. Peron took away Borges’s post as director of the public library in Buenos Aires; instead, he named him director of a chicken something. So Borges was a political person, no doubt about that. But he simply was not interested in the political implications in Whitman when he translated the poetry or wrote his brilliant essays on Whitman.

Asselineau: In France, I don’t think there is any anti-American attitude among the translators or admirers of Whitman. I don’t think they held any mistrust of him as an imperialist. On the contrary, they regard him as a liberator and as the champion of individual liberty.

Folsom: Perhaps there’s too much labor involved in the act of translation to translate someone you really find distasteful. The act of trying to translate Whitman into another language in order to demonstrate his imperialism would quickly come, I would think, to be a very tedious task, and perhaps an impossible one unless someone were really obsessed with making that case.

9. *The Calamus Question and the Question of Death*

Folsom: We’ve touched upon the issue of the *Calamus* poems a couple of times. Whitman claimed that the *Calamus* poems were among the most political of his poems, and yet we’ve seen that they, along with *Children of Adam*, are sometimes suppressed in the very cultures that emphasize Whitman’s politics. Guiyou has addressed the situation in China. I’m curious; my sense is that in Spanish, there was far less concern or suppression of the *Calamus* and *Children of Adam* poems than in other languages.

Alegría: I have the impression that it was sort of taken for granted. I mean, no one was scandalized at the thought that Whitman might be homosexual. It was something, not to be expected, but not to be surprised at, either. It may be because the Latin American and Spanish modernists were very much into French decadence at the turn of the century. So it didn’t come as a surprise to them. And then, one of the greatest Spanish poets, Lorca, who followed Whitman and adored

Whitman, was a homosexual.

Asselineau: And you have so many words in Spanish for homosexual.

Alegria: Right. Lorca's ode to Whitman devotes a half page to different names for homosexuals used all over the Hispanic world.

Asselineau: Well, in France, Bazalgette, the first translator, as I've said, was a good socialist. He camouflaged the homosexuality of Whitman when he translated *Calamus*. He tidily transformed all allusions to males in those poems. He feminized *Calamus*, in other words, so that the champion of democracy should be clean and impeccable in this respect. But then those who admired Whitman as a poet, Gide and all his friends, on the contrary, insisted on the homosexuality. They retranslated *Calamus* in order to show the latent homosexuality in the poems. Ever since, of course, *Calamus* has been translated correctly. There is no indignation at this; after all, we have a number of prominent homosexuals in French literature.

Greenspan: In the context of Israel, I don't know of any debate about his sexuality or homosexuality. I don't see it, for example, in the Halkin translation of 1952. That was not an issue, as far as I know, of his early politics. They had other issues to worry about. I don't believe it's an issue today, except on the fringes. AIDS has now entered Israel, and I'm sure there is going to be an increasing awareness of matters of homosexuality. I think, abstractly, in a society where the center is very strong, as it has been in Israel (it's no longer quite as strong as it was), and where attentions are focused on political issues (defined, I should say, in a very narrow sense—I don't mean to claim that there is no such thing as sexuality as a political issue, but in the Israeli context, I don't think it is, certainly it hasn't been yet), there's just virtually no commentary that I know of.

Thomas: This whole discussion raises the issue of how, when a new translation of an author is made in any language, that translation is sometimes an engagement with the existing translations of the same author. Roger gave the very interesting French example, where Gide had to redress Bazalgette's repression of the homoerotic nature of *Calamus*. What I wanted to ask on the back of that was a question. When I was in Russia speaking about Whitman two years ago, the impression I got was that it was quite difficult just at the moment to talk about Whitman in Russia, because Whitman is in some respects compromised by the way in which the communists had appropriated him. To put it very simply, he was admired by the Stalinists and so on and was translated in a broader sense by them, accepted by them, and regarded therefore as a heroic poet of true Soviet communism. That means that the young generation are in a very curious position with regard to Whitman. What I was going

to ask of the two Chinese representatives was, has this not happened in China? In other words, has it not been the case that Whitman was very much, as it were, the people's poet of Chinese communism? There's been a change, hasn't there, in the atmosphere there? Don't the younger generation feel some misgivings about taking up Whitman? Does he not belong to the old guard, and is he not therefore unavailable to the younger generation?

Allen: I have the same question about Russia, which hasn't been answered yet regarding the responses by the communists and the post-communists. Kornei Chukovsky, the Russian translator, was not himself a very good communist, but was nevertheless accepted by them. In the last year or so, his translations have become very hard to obtain. I was wondering if the reaction against communism has been accompanied by a reaction against those responses to Whitman, and if there's going to have to be another reception there or maybe a rejection of Whitman as the anti-communists take over.

Alegria: To me, that seems obvious. Each generation has its own Whitman, and they have to discover him, to give him ideological content. In Russian, you see the name of Whitman, and immediately you see the name of Neruda, and right next to them is Mayakovsky. There will have to be a re-adaptation, a re-discovery of another Whitman.

Thomas: Could I ask a question about another subject, one that I think we've overlooked, because perhaps we find difficulty in handling it. It's not the sexual issue, actually; it's what Whitman makes of death in his poetry, which I don't think I've ever fully understood. I wonder whether that poses problems for other cultures, or whether they somehow understand it. Take "Out of the Cradle"—it's a strange poem, isn't it? It tells of an attraction towards death; I know we've interpreted it all sorts of ways. In the end, we always clean it up, but there's something odd there.

Huang: That's a difficult issue for me. When I came to this country, some friends of mine at Texas A&M told me that, because of their faith in an afterlife, Christians are not afraid of death. To the communists, it's again a political issue. Communists must be materialists. When we are alive, we are material. When we die, we cease to be. Nothing persists. That's why they do not believe in any ghosts or any religion or anything spiritual. So that is that. Death is the end of life—that's it. Whitman can be fit into such a frame of mind.

Thomas: What about the fact that Whitman seems to be attracted to death? Surely that is anti-communist, too. He's yearning for death, it seems to me—the almost swooning wish sometimes to die.

Folsom: “. . . to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.”

Alegria: There is another element to take into account here. It is the cosmic projection in Whitman that contradicts a central yearning for death in other poets. The last thing that Neruda wrote before dying in 1973, after seeing what happened in Chile of a political nature and all that, were a number of poems dealing with death. They were sensual poems in a sort of pantheistic way. He says, all I have to do now is lie down, accommodate myself. That's it.

To anybody who reads English and American literature, Whitman would be immediately described as a poet of life; he had a cosmic approach to life and death.

Allen: I think it should be realized that Whitman's attitude changed. He came around to a sort of conventional Christian attitude toward death in the later poems. In the earlier poems, death was just a part of nature.

Thomas: That's true. Could I just ask one further question on top of that. The Spanish situation interests me particularly here. To outsiders, the stereotype of Spain itself is that it possesses a great culture in the cult of death. There is a great sensual writing about death that's part of Spanish culture. Are you saying that Whitman is not really connected with that tradition for readers in Spanish? You said that he's thought of as a life-affirming poet.

Alegria: I think it is a matter of intonation. When Whitman begins to write about death, one gets the impression, in the Spanish translations at least, that the voice becomes eloquent, loud, cosmic. On the other hand, if you read the Neruda poems, written when he was dying, there is a sort of an intimacy of the individual, who begins to relate to death through the process of recreation into nature. So Neruda begins to speak about the roots that are going to be touching him, the water that is going to pass by him, and so forth. It's a difference in sound, in resonance. There is nothing cosmic about Neruda's poems about death. In the case of Whitman, in the Spanish at least, one associates the cosmos with the individual—death is moving into something larger.

Folsom: One of Whitman's most amazing comments is in *Democratic Vistas*, where he says the great poet of democracy will be the one who can "compose the great poem of death." He knew that whoever (religious institutions, governmental institutions, or poets themselves) controlled the portals of death and its powerful mythologies would hold the power in the culture.

10. *Unfinished Business*

Thomas: There are so many fascinating questions we've only been able to touch on. One of them is how even newness itself is culturally spe-

cific. What a remarkable notion that, as a translator, you work on Whitman, and your translation then brings free verse into your language for the first time. You recreate in your own language what Whitman did in English, moving from the strict to the free. But Whitman's innovations are never fully and positively available in your culture; you can't fully bring it off. Eliot made this point, didn't he? The way in which newness happens is in keeping with what's existing in our culture. It's a fascinating problem.

I'd also be interested in knowing more fully just how we all went about translating Whitman. How many of us worked from prose, as did Guiyou—that is, translated Whitman into prose immediately, and then worked from there? What other methods have translators used? There are translators of Whitman who actually can't read him very well in English and rely upon intermediaries to do the basic translation and then work it out from there. In fact, as you know, paradoxically some very good translations have resulted from that very procedure.

I'd like to be able, too, to hear from others about felicitous discoveries that you made in the process of translating Whitman's poems. The act of translating, of course, teaches us a great deal about both Whitman's poems and our own language and poetic traditions. When I translated "Reconciliation," for example, I was very aware of and very moved by the strong pacifist tradition in modern Welsh-language culture, and Whitman's poem taught me about some wonderful possibilities in my own language that I had not seen before. In line 4 of the poem—"For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead"—if I allow myself to translate the second "dead" as "corpse," then a wonderful contrast emerges in Welsh, because two words that sound almost identical actually stand for, respectively, "enemy" and "corpse": *gelyn* is enemy, *celain* is corpse. This wonderful discovery came to be for me the very center of the poem.



Anderson: I've noticed, too, that in many translations of Whitman, a line will have disappeared, or a section will have been skipped. Does that mean the translator thought it was insignificant, or does it mean that it's just too difficult for him to tackle? The sections of "Song of Myself" that *don't* get translated in various cultures might tell us as much about the translator and even the culture as the translated sections do.

Greenspan: I think there is another dimension. We really haven't talked about what stands behind the translation itself. We've talked about the reception of Whitman into a language, but we really haven't talked about the reception of a translation into a culture. I think it's coming out in this conversation, how the translator may or may not feel free to go ahead and write something that might be shocking in a culture, and then say, "I'm just the intermediary; it's not really my language. I'm not responsible for what I say." Then there is the added dimension of how that is in turn received.

Allen: All of this discussion has made me feel something I have suspected for a long time. Whitman is actually a symbol in almost all the cultures. He is a symbol somehow so deeply embedded in many of these cultures that he never disappears, but just keeps on changing meaning.

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