



Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass / Grashalme: Zweisprachige Fassung der Erstausgabe von 1855*. Translated by Walter Grünzweig and a team of translators at TU Dortmund University. Aachen: Rimbaud, 2022. 226 pp.

The trouble with translating *Leaves of Grass* into German begins with the title. Even Whitman knew that, asking Traubel in 1889 for the “literal translation of ‘Grashalme.’” “I prefer the ugly to the beautiful words if the ugly word says more,” he explained. A German has to choose: is this a book containing grass or is the book itself disappearing behind the botanic metaphor? In Whitman’s German afterlives, the latter, *Grashalme* (grass blades), has reigned supreme until the publication of the first full-length translation of the deathbed edition by Jürgen Brôcan (2009). An accomplished, skillful work in its own right, it is the first to settle on the more literal, and quite a bit more “ugly,” *Grasblätter* (grass leaves). Consequently, Brôcan’s Whitman is a sort of proto-modern lyricist—unbothered by the fact that New York’s Flatiron building on the book’s cover was hardly even an architectural fever dream at the time of Whitman’s death.

Holding in hand the collaborative translation of the 1855 edition, one might, then, suspect a certain conservatism to have crept back in: here we get the more traditionally “beautiful” *Grashalme*, once more, coupled with a dark-green linen cover with golden lettering, reminiscent in design and size of the original 1855. Such suspicions, though, would be incorrect: instead of merely attempting to painstakingly recreate the famous original, this volume is a daring, radical document that, in its impact, brings us closer to Whitman’s strange, unorthodox pamphlet-book than mere historicism ever could.

This impression is confirmed by flipping to the frontispiece. Our old engraved daguerreotype Whitman has been banished to the back of the book. In his place is a Whitman, who—stripped from his yellow-leaved print past—looks us straight in the eye, rendered in the thick, expressive brushstrokes of the multi-talented Armin Mueller-Stahl (known to most American audiences as an accomplished character actor). Whereas the original Whitman almost reclines in a kind of aloof challenge, this one leans forward to engage the reader. It is a daring, powerful beginning that renders strange again those now-familiar opening pages and thereby recreates some of their original impact. Mueller-Stahl’s Whitman, editor and lead translator Walter Grünzweig emphasizes, wants to build a “relationship” (*Beziehung*) with the reader. It is a breath of fresh air that carries through the pages to come.

The nature of this relationship, in German, has to be qualified: is “Song of Myself” a whispered conversation between confidants? A prophetic tome? Or perhaps a speech to the masses? *Grashalme* breaks with the mold of tradition by asserting the latter. Here, Whitman’s “you” is translated into the informal plural. But instead of sounding like a leftover of the Eastern Block—where those translations were the norm—it feels youthful. We can almost sense Whitman saying “you guys” (as he may have done, had he been born a few decades later).

Much of this impact has to do with the revolutionary method that underlies the edition: a multiyear, collaborative effort by dozens of student translators from TU Dortmund University’s prestigious American Studies program. I had the pleasure of sitting in on one of these sessions and was struck by the decidedly Whitmanian and creative chaos at play. The resulting document is multivocal, not lacking a coherent style or creating artificial distance from the original. Like Whitman’s American slang, this voice invites readers to *hang out*—in the famous opening stanzas this Whitman loafs around (*rumliegen*), gets inebriated (*berauscht*), and finds sexual gratification (*befriedigt*). By contrast, Brôcan’s Whitman saunters (*schlendern*), is poisoned (*vergiftet*), and finds himself pleased (*zufrieden*). The Whitman of Grünzweig’s team translation is more raw, less polished. There could not have been a better stylistic fit. In *Grashalme*, we discover a dance taking place between Romantic vocabulary and the sociolect of the multitudinous, diverse Ruhr Valley. It creates some friction—a friction that, I would argue, is a constitutive part of Whitman’s 1855 edition, where a line about the “blab of the pave” hangs out with one celebrating “the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!”

Coming on the heels of a number of wonderful, recent publications by the Aachen publisher Rimbaud aimed at resurrecting and making available the many Whitmans beyond the deathbed edition, this *Grashalme* not only includes the prose preface and all of the original twelve poems in a bilingual edition, but re-renders key design features of the original printing (such as its font choices and its columned preface), making this by far the most textually and visually appealing of Whitman’s German-language editions.

*Grashalme* recreates the textual feel of the original almost to a fault. It is a bit perplexing, then, that Grünzweig’s team decided, for instance, to make Whitman’s name omnipresent on the cover and in the edition instead of leaving intact the radical print gesture of the original, where Whitman omits his name from the cover and title page. Additionally, while the text of the poems on hand meticulously follows the 1855 original, titles are supplied via the 1856 edition, which creates odd hybrid titles like “Leaves of Grass. Poem of Walt Whitman,

an American” (i.e., “Song of Myself”). It also leads to poems that do not exist: ellipses-filled 1855 verse with the titles of the 1856, where those ellipses had been removed. The reason provided is the wish to preserve the “autonomy” of these pieces, which could have been achieved by following the more established practice of providing deathbed titles in square-brackets. Or simply by truly embracing the weirdness of the original design of the book object.

The closing pages, authored by Grünzweig, which ingeniously follow the design of Whitman’s preface, are a wonderful addition and will undoubtedly serve as a primer both for *Leaves* as well as its German reception for years to come. It is a shame it hasn’t been provided as a bilingual text, as well. In it, Grünzweig also briefly explains his instructional method and advocates for translation as a “radical play of interpretation.” The book at hand is a powerful demonstration of the viability and vibrancy of such collective efforts and one of many crowning achievements of Walter Grünzweig’s long career as a translator and teacher of Whitman. I rarely enjoy reading “method papers”—but I believe that the method here is worth documenting and replicating, even in the constraints of more rigid curricula. Whitman had to rely on notebooks, newspapers, and lectures to make good on his promise to contain multitudes. Grünzweig’s method has multitudes in its DNA. In that sense, there could not be a better edition of *Leaves of Grass* for German audiences—be they experts or mere dabblers in Whitman.

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