

Walt Whitman Quarterly Review

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Whitman, Walt. Dail glaswellt (Leaves of
Grass) trans. M. Wynn Thomas [review]

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Volume 13, Number 1

(Summer 1995)

pps. 93-96

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE:
Whitman in Translation

Stable URL: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr/vol13/iss1/8>
ISSN 0737-0679

As to the content, Zhao did strive to achieve faithfulness, though the result sometimes turns out to be less than desirable, as some Chinese critics have already pointed out. One example, “For You O Democracy” (201), may suffice here: in “I will make divine magnetic lands,” “lands” is translated as “country” or “nation” with “magnetic” as its qualifier and “divine” as a supplement; in “I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks” of the second stanza, Whitman seems to have used “make” in the sense of “create,” while Zhao’s Chinese version uses it as an accusative verb, making the line wordy and redundant; Zhao’s rendition of the last line, “For you, for you I am trilling these songs,” translated back into English, is: “For you, for you, I am publishing these songs in a trembling voice.” Had it been translated as “chanting (or singing) these songs with a trill” it would sound more musical and clear-cut. It is only to be expected that such a massive translation would encounter some criticism in China after its publication. Just as Whitman’s poetry is not all great or flawless, some of Zhao’s versions are not entirely above question either. What is admirable is Zhao’s collegial and graceful response to the criticism of her work, one good example of which is her “Translation, A Difficult Business,” an essay she published in *Chinese Translators Journal* (No. 4 [1991], 53-58) in response to a criticism of her translation of *Leaves of Grass*. Zhao agrees with some of the things her critic points out and dismisses others she thinks impertinent; however, she candidly admits that she learned a lot from her critic’s article and that it is important for translators to discuss translation techniques.

Zhao spent more than ten years on the weighty project of translating Whitman whole, the completion of which is itself an admirable achievement. I admire Zhao for courageously taking up and finishing the translation of *Leaves* single-handedly, especially considering she did it while in her seventies. Zhao’s work is solid proof that Whitman commands great respect in China in the late twentieth century. Despite criticisms, the appearance of her new translation marks a high point in Whitman’s reception in China, and it offers the Chinese reading public a better chance to know the nineteenth-century American bard.

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Dail Glaswellt: Detholiad o Gerddi Walt Whitman. [Leaves of Grass: Selection of Walt Whitman’s Poems]. Translated and edited by M. Wynn Thomas. Cardiff: Yr Academi Gymreig. 93 pp. [In Welsh.]

“I too,” Whitman declared, “am untranslatable.” His barbaric yawp has nonetheless sounded across the roofs of the world in many languages throughout this century, and that *crochlais barbaraidd* can now also be heard in Welsh.

It is surprising, in a way, that this should be the first Welsh translation, since Whitman’s poems have some strong affinities with Welsh cultural and poetic traditions. Whitman’s passionate faith in “the common people” has an obvious parallel, with some of the same origins, in the egalitarian concept of *y werin*, the idealization in the 19th century and after of “the folk” as the principal sustainers of Welsh culture. The public role of the poet, articulating his

society's values in praising their realization by individuals and communities, has been not just an aspiration but an actuality in Wales from the earliest times to the present day, and in the modern situation, with not only the language but the very identity of Wales under constant threat, Welsh poets have seen themselves as called to imagine Wales much as Whitman felt called to imagine America. For the Welsh poet as for Whitman, the poet is primarily a celebrant, of the natural world as well as the human. Whitman's kind of rhetoric and rhythms can be heard in Welsh preaching, with its incantatory rising to the intense fervour of the *hwyl*. There is even a similarity in the use of incremental techniques—Whitman's catalogues and the Welsh multiplication of metaphors known as *dyfalu* show the same delight in amplification, the same basis in a radial rather than a linear concept of poetic construction.

On the other hand, there are ways in which Whitman is at odds with Welsh traditions—not least in the Welsh reverence for tradition itself. No Welsh poet could see his mission as the creation of a new Bible for a new nation, and the freedom of Whitman's long, irregular, rhymeless verses is as decidedly un-Welsh as his brashly assertive American Romantic Ego. It is instructive to compare Whitman to his contemporary Islwyn, of all Welsh poets the one who tended most to share his concern with the relation of body and soul, the natural and the divine, and to break with traditional style in creating a visionary poetry. It is impossible to imagine Whitman abandoning his early mode for the strictness of traditional metres, as Islwyn did, or becoming, like Islwyn, a Calvinistic Methodist minister. Impossible, too, to imagine Islwyn translating Whitman, or, at the beginning of this century, the poet who might best have accomplished this, T. Gwynn Jones. The modern Welsh poet most influenced by Whitman, Waldo Williams, was nevertheless quite dissimilar in religious vision, social role, and style.

Given the bilingualism of modern Welsh-language authors and readers, Whitman did not have to be translated to influence Waldo Williams and others. Why translate him, then? Professor M. Wynn Thomas of the University of Wales, Swansea, a distinguished Whitman scholar and one of the foremost critics of Welsh literature in both languages, raises the question himself in introducing his translations, but I prefer to postpone it until the end of this review.

Professor Thomas has made a judicious choice of seventeen poems for this small collection. Central, and of course essential, are "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." To these are added the 1871 version of "There Was a Child Went Forth" as a prefatory poem, followed by the first five sections and the conclusion of the 1855 "Song of Myself," then the 1856 "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Two short poems from the Calamus group are followed by "Spontaneous Me," providing a balance between Whitman's poems of "adhesive" and "amative" love. "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" provides in its turn a counterweight to the exuberant affirmations that precede it. There are five poems from the *Drum-Taps* group, three brief sketches of cavalry and camp followed by "Vigil Strange I Kept" and "Reconciliation," and the selections conclude with "A Noiseless, Patient Spider," "Sparkles from the Wheel," and, delightfully, with "After the Supper and Talk," with Whitman taking his reluctant leave *Yn barabllus hyd y diwedd*

yn deg, "Garrulous to the very last."

It is almost required that reviewers note what they regret has been omitted from such a book—and so, for the record and as suggestions for future editions, I would argue for "This Compost," "The Dalliance of Eagles," and "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," while remarking also that the excerpts from "Song of Myself" call for more and, eventually, a full translation. But Wynn Thomas has amply fulfilled his stated aim of presenting some of Whitman's best poems while also representing his range of experience and style. The introduction is a model of its kind—a concise, lucid, and balanced exposition of the poet's national and international reception and status, of the influences of Emerson, Whitman's working-class roots and newspaper experience, and the popular culture of the period, of his revolutionary aspirations and style. It is characteristic of Thomas to point out that despite one's impression that the actual man is present in the poems, Whitman was a master at hiding behind a persona, and to deal with the vexed question of his sexual orientation by quoting a short passage from "Song of Myself" and then showing how it can be variously interpreted. The introduction is supplemented by informative and illuminating notes on each poem. All in all, this small volume is at least the equal of any comparable presentation of Whitman I have seen in England or the States. For Welsh readers who wish to meet him first through their own language, it is an ideal introduction.

Whitman goes into Welsh more readily, I should think, than would Emily Dickinson, but poetic translation is never easy, as Wynn Thomas recognizes in calling his attempts imperfect and noting some of the problems caused by linguistic differences. To cite an example of my own, *crochlais* does not really convey Whitman's "yawp," but I can't think of any Welsh word that would, and Welsh orthography doesn't permit simply taking the word over into the language while retaining its sound. (*Fy nghleber*, on the other hand, serves quite well for "my gab"!)

As a translator of Welsh poetry, I am often surprised by the ranges of choices English gives me where only one or two words could be used in Welsh: Thomas notes the reverse of this experience, the hindrance he felt at lacking the resources he sometimes needed.

Anyone who has attempted to render *cywyddau* and *englynion* would hesitate to dispute Thomas's statement that Welsh naturally lends itself to economy of expression. It was, however, unlikely as it may seem, the terseness of Whitman's American English that struck me most often in comparing original and translation: "under your boot-soles" becomes *o dan wadnau d'esgidiau*; "if you only would," *pe na bait ond yn dymuno*; "the even-handed battle," *y frwydr rhwng dau lu cyn gryfed a'i gilydd*; "the dooryard," *yr iard o flaen y drws*; "her castaways," *ei thrueiniaid a longddryllivwyd*. In the last two examples, some boldness in taking the English word into Welsh would have been preferable, I believe, to academically precise translating. Thomas points out special difficulties with participial phrases and adjectives (to which I would add the differences between English and Welsh genitive forms), and he rightly stresses the need to retain appropriate rhythm and melody. His adept handling of cadences keeps the Welsh lines moving with ease even when they are longer and, it must be said, at times slacker than in the original.

If the Welsh Whitman cannot claim to be “not a bit tamed,” the taming is relatively slight. Wynn Thomas’s choices of language are consistently intelligent and sensitive: it is genuine poetry and authentic Whitman one finds here, so much so that it begins to seem as natural in Welsh as the literal translation of *Leaves of Grass* into *Dail Glaswellt*. If I were reviewing for Welsh readers, I would quote “Cymodi” without reference to “Reconciliation” as in itself a beautifully realized poem and as a sample of the quality sustained throughout.

But why translate at all, when Welsh readers have the original available in their local bookshops and libraries? There are some practical reasons, unmentioned and perhaps taken for granted by the translator. A fair number of plays have been translated from English for Welsh-language theatre, a good deal of popular fiction such as romances and mysteries for adult readers and of stories for children, but very few standard literary works for those most at home in Welsh. The steady expansion in recent years of Welsh-medium education makes it particularly desirable that such translations be available for students at higher secondary level and beyond.

Wynn Thomas argues cogently, however, that there should be other motives than utilitarian for translating. He undertook his work, he says, from love for the Welsh language and its literature—and it is in extending the experiential and technical potential of the language and its poetry that translation of already accessible works can be finally justified. Thomas hints at one possible effect in remarking that while translating one poem he felt that it “was a means for me to acquaint myself anew with the hiding-places of the passion that conceals itself in the Welsh language . . . a passion that has been ignored to a considerable extent, regrettably, by Welsh poets.” Thanks to these translations, Whitman has now vigorously entered Welsh poetry, and future poets in Welsh may find that, as has long been the case for American poets, one essential element in their rites of passage is coming to terms with him.

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RANGANATH NANDYAL. *Henry Miller in the Light of Eastern Thought*. New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1991. 99 pp.

Henry Miller is still known to the general American public primarily as the author of “dirty books,” but he has been highly regarded as a serious writer by such formidable authors as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Edmund Wilson, Karl Shapiro, and Norman Mailer. For some years his books were banned from publication in the United States. Dr. Ranganath Nandyal’s book on Miller should help to underscore his importance. And it should also be of interest to Whitman scholars and students. Miller was strongly influenced by Whitman, who, like Miller, was strongly influenced by Eastern thought. Of course they were both banned at one time for their sexually explicit writings. Ranganath Nandyal discusses influences and parallels in the Eastern thought of both writers. I recommend his book to all Whitmanians.