

Gay Wilson Allen

KORNEI CHUKOFSKY, WHITMAN'S RUSSIAN TRANSLATOR

Kornei Chukofsky has long been recognized as the major translator of Walt Whitman in Russia. In fact he also translated Mark Twain, Shakespeare, and other British and American authors, for which Oxford University awarded him a D. Litt. degree in 1962. I do not read Russian and have had to depend upon friends who know the language and articles in English for my information on this talented man, who is responsible, I am told, for making Whitman as familiar to Russian readers as their native authors.

In planning my anthology of foreign criticism of Whitman in English translation, published in 1955 as *Walt Whitman Abroad*, I asked my former student, Stephen Stepanchev, Professor of English in Queens College (CUNY), to write an essay on Whitman in the Slavic countries, and he informed me of Chukofsky's importance. I had already selected Count Mirsky's essay, "Poet of American Democracy," to represent Russian criticism, which the late Samuel Putman had translated for me. From Stepanchev I learned that Chukovsky had used it as an introduction to his ninth edition of selections from *Leaves of Grass*, a confirmation of my having chosen wisely (or luckily).

A few years later I enjoyed a rather extended correspondence with Chukofsky himself, during which he sent me other essays of his in English. In an article published in 1969 in *Sputnik* (an English-language magazine) he told of how he began to learn English, which led to his discovering Whitman when he was seventeen. He had gone to an Odessa bookshop to buy a book on astronomy, which he did not find, but bought instead a self-tutor in English. After studying this book he was able to read Longfellow's *Evangeline* and Poe's *Raven*. At the time he had no regular employment and supported himself by odd jobs and working as a stevedore on the docks. He had become alienated from his parents and had left home. He had time for reading, and read he did, including Darwin and Schopenhauer, and one day he discovered Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, which made a great impression on him. In view of Carlyle's influence

on Whitman, this book may have helped to prepare the way for *Leaves of Grass*.

Another day on the docks a foreign sailor offered him a thick book in English for 25 kopecks. Chukofsky describes the effect of this purchase:

That evening after work I took my book to the lighthouse at the end of the jetty. It was a book of poetry written by a certain Walt Whitman, whose name I had never heard before.

I opened at random and began to read:

*My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
I am afoot with my vision . . .*

Never before had I read anything like this. Clearly it had been written by an inspired madman who, in a state of trance or delirium, fancied himself absolutely free of the illusions of time and space . . .

I was shaken by these poems as much as by some epoch-making event. The chaos of my emotions at that time was in perfect harmony with the chaotic composition of poetry. I seemed to have climbed to dizzying heights from which I looked down upon the ant-hill of human life and activities.

Later in life he could not understand why these verses from "Song of Myself" affected him so profoundly, but he felt that they were directed to him personally — which of course was exactly what Whitman intended. Chukovsky carried *Leaves of Grass* with him to the docks and to the beach, where he helped a blind fisherman mend his nets. There were passages he did not understand, but when he came to "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" he felt, he says, "that I was rich."

My correspondence with Chukofsky began in the 1960s. He knew some of my books, and in 1967 Stepanchev informed me that in the

notes to one of his latest translations he had warmly praised *Walt Whitman Abroad*. I am not sure who started that correspondence, but I think I sent him a copy of the collection of my essays called *Walt Whitman as Man, Poet, and Legend*, for which my wife had supplied a checklist of Whitman publications from 1945 to 1960, and Chukovsky began sending clippings and bibliographical notes for her. One was an article on Turgenev's attempt to translate "Beat! Beat! Drums!" The manuscript of his translation had recently been found in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris by a Pushkin scholar. Chukofsky was fascinated by it, analysed Turgenev's choice of words, and his difficulties in imitating Whitman's rhythms. Then he tried to make a new translation of his own. It would be tedious for me to try to reproduce all of Chukofsky's criticisms, especially since I can't pronounce (and therefore *hear*) the Russians words, but I will give one example of the many problems.

"'Beat! beat! drums! bugles! blow!'" says Chukofsky, "contains seven syllables in all and it rings energetically and courageously. But in Turgenev's version there are sixteen syllables. That is slow and flabby." In his own translation of this line Chukofsky tried to reduce the number of syllables to the extreme limit, and came up with eleven syllables instead of Turgenev's sixteen. But he did not feel that his translation had the force of Whitman's impassioned words. Evidently Turgenev intended to translate more of Whitman's poems, calling him "that astonishing American," but later he wrote to a friend that "my translation of Whitman is on the rocks." Apparently he found the differences in the two languages too much for him.

Chukofsky's first reaction to Whitman's poems may have been personal, but they also soon took on political significance for him, as they did for other idealistic youth. They seemed to him to give a new vision of what human beings and human society could be. It was the Communist dream, stronger and purer before the Russian Revolution than after it, when the envisioned utopia had not been achieved.

But Chukofsky never used Whitman for propaganda. His continued admiration was for his poetry, which he could never translate to his satisfaction. He probably agreed, too, with Count

Mirsky, whose essay he had used for an important edition of one of his major translations, that Whitman's ideal democracy had not been attained in the United States and was a projection into the future, as he explained in the prose work *Democratic Vistas*.

In 1969, the 150th anniversary of Whitman's birth, Chukofsky declared (in the same *Sputnik* article):

Whitman's poetry has exerted a powerful influence on many Soviet poets. A poem addressed to me by Boris Pasternak in the thirties ends with:

. . . and a big bear hug
For your gift of Whitman.

I have never limited myself to merely translating Whitman; in extensive critical articles introducing every volume of his poems I have tried to interpret him and reveal his significance for the reader. In these articles I point out Whitman lines which in one way or another are reflected in the poetry of Mayakovsky and Kliebnikov.

The appearance of fundamental works on Whitman by the Frenchman Roger Asselineau and the American Gay Wilson Allen helped me to a better understanding of the poet's life and work. Today I know a thousand times more about him than I did in 1901, when, as an unsophisticated youth, I read the "Song of Myself" in the Black Sea port. But I cannot deceive myself into thinking Whitman evokes the same fiery response in me today as he did then. Try as I will, I cannot feel my heart lift with joy as I did when I first beheld the whole world through the inspired eyes of Walt Whitman.

But even if Chukofsky had lost some of the wild enthusiasm of his youth for Whitman, he by no means lost interest in the American poet. In 1967 I sent him the first three volumes of Whitman's *Correspondence* edited by Edwin Miller (all that had been published at that time) and Chukofsky replied:

You cannot imagine what joy and gratitude I experienced on getting the *Correspondence* volumes of W.W. What wonderful editorship. Edwin Haviland Miller is a genius of editorial work.

I have pounced on these letters at once and will have to rectify a few mistakes I had blundered into for lack of information (one of these being my misunderstanding of W.W.'s letter to J. F. Lee, 1881). [What qualifications the Irishman, Dr. John Fitzgerald Lee, had to make a Russian translation is not known, but Whitman was thrilled by the suggestion of a Russian translation, and wrote that he had intended his poems not for America only but for all nations.]

On October 28, 1969, I was shocked to read in the *New York Times* that "Kornei I. Chukofsky, a translator and author of children's books whose name was known in virtually every Soviet household and schoolroom, died today after a long illness. He was 87 years old." The *Times* obituary continued:

"The whitehaired Mr. Chukofsky wrote dozens of books for and about children, often in an idiom that he conceded was almost untranslatable from the Russian. But he was also a serious and prolific translator of English and American writers. Most Russians who have read Walt Whitman have read him in the Chukofsky translations."

The *Times* correspondent was wrong about the "long illness." A few weeks later, on December 9, 1969, Chukofsky's devoted friend and secretary, Tanya Litvinova, daughter of the famous foreign minister Maksim Litvinof, wrote me that he had died in a Moscow hospital after a brief illness from hepatitis. The *Times* correspondent also failed to say that at the time of his death Mr. Chukofsky was not in good standing with the Soviet authorities. Boris Pasternak was a good friend of his, and Chukofsky refused to abandon him when *Doctor Zhivago* was denounced by the Government. An article in *Time* magazine on Pasternak's funeral said that he was the principal speaker; beside his grave, Chukofsky praised him for his courage in writing the truth as he saw it. So far as I know no official action was taken against him, but Mrs. Roger Asselineau tells me that a few

months later she tried to buy copies of his Whitman translations in Moscow and no bookstore would admit having copies.

One reason for Tanya Litvinova's writing me was to tell me that Mr. Chukofsky had taken to the hospital a letter I had written him in September, evidently intending to answer it in the hospital. "On the back of the envelope was written in his own hand 'Prof. Allen,' but I don't know whether he had been able to answer it." He had not.

On January 20, 1970, Mr. Chukofsky's secretary wrote me again, enclosing two pictures of her friend and asking if I would be so kind as to send her copies of the letters he had written. She hoped to edit a collection of his letters. Of course I sent her photocopies immediately and said I would be interested in owning the edition. Her reply is undated, but it was evidently written several months later. I quote it verbatim:

T. Litvinova
Moscow, A-47
10, Gottwald-str. 82

Dear Mr. Allen,

The seven letters written to you by Mr. Chukofsky have arrived safely and we all say *spassebo*.

You would certainly be among the first to get the collection of letters and any other publication of the kind, should such a thing happen. It certainly ought to. But you must make up your mind to live a long and patient life if you want to see it come about.

So here's wishing you many, many years and as few disappointments as possible.

Yours sincerely,
T. Litvinova

P.S. A great man of course. But if you could only know what FUN he was. Part of greatness?

I understood what she meant by wishing me a long life because some time during the spring or summer of 1970 (I don't remember the exact date) I had read a short paragraph in *Time* reporting that the Soviet department of publications had announced that an accident in a government printing plant had completely destroyed the type for an edition of Kornei Chukofsky's letters, and as a consequence there will be no edition of his letters. It sounds like the American cliché, "the roof fell in" on them; and evidently, figuratively, it had. Possibly the new spirit of *glasnost* in Russia may yet permit the publication of Kornei Chukofsky's letters. I hope I live long enough to see it take place.

