

WHITMAN'S RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE IN THE SOVIET UNION

It's an honor to speak here to this audience in Camden. I'll try to give you a short description of the way Walt Whitman is perceived and published in our country and about his appreciation and acceptance in our Soviet poetry, in our literature. The first note about Walt Whitman published in Russian was an 1861 review, sympathetic though somewhat inaccurate, that appeared in a magazine called *Notes of the Fatherland*. The reviewer drew attention to the fact that *Leaves of Grass* has raised a controversy in Britain and that the English journals were up in arms against what he called the American "novel," *Leaves of Grass*. The reviewer probably hadn't read Whitman but still had heard something about him. He was convinced that the book must have some virtues if only of presentation, since it hadn't been passed by in silence.

Since 1861 we've had a lot of books published about Whitman; the latest presentation on Whitman was a few days ago in Leningrad where we had a Ph.D. thesis devoted to the poetics of *Leaves of Grass*, the problems of geniuses and national characteristics. Soviet Whitmania deserves a thorough study and I want to concentrate on three major issues: first, Whitman's relationship with Russia during his lifetime; second, his critical reception in our country in the twentieth century; and, finally, his role in shaping our poetry. First, Whitman and Russia: Whitman never met a Russian but he wrote a letter to one, a letter provoked by an American who was convinced that Whitman should be translated into Russian. Whitman was persuaded to write a letter to a Russian which he promised to use as a kind of an introduction to the Russian edition of his *Leaves of Grass*. Turgenev, who became interested in *Leaves of Grass*, tried to initiate the first translation of *Leaves of Grass* in the 1870's, but he didn't fulfill this project. Whitman was informed about this and he wrote to a friend, Dr. John F. Lee, about his interest in this Russian publication. In this letter he wrote:

Dear Sir,
Your letter asking definite endorsement to a translation of my *Leaves of Grass* into Russian is just received and I hasten to answer it. Most warmly and willingly I consent to the translation. And what a prayerful Godspeed to the enterprise.

This was written on December 20, 1881. The introduction began with the words: "You Russians and we Americans." He tried to see some common traits between the Russian and the American people. "They have," he wrote, "the historic and divine mission, the grand expanse of territorial limits and boundaries. Both peoples have their independent and leading positions to hold." In the concluding lines of the letter he sends the Russians "an affectionate salutation from these shores in America's name." Finally, he writes:

As my dearest dream is for an internationality of poems and poets, binding the lands of the earth closer than all treaties or diplomacies, as the purpose beneath the rest of my book is such hearty comradeship, how happy I should be to get the hearing and emotional contact of the great Russian peoples.

That contact came after his death, in the beginning of the twentieth century; it was sympathetic and emotional and it created a growing interest in Walt Whitman. The first person to really attract our attention to Walt Whitman was Ivan Turgenev, who played a leading role in the contacts of our Russian literature with the literatures of the world at the end of the century. Turgenev was at the beginning of a new, some would say modern, movement in literature, Flaubert and Henry James were his friends, and he was very sensitive to everything new he could get hold of, not only in prose but also in poetry. Therefore, he was excited to read Walt Whitman. He wrote to a friend that he was going to publish "several translations of lyrical verses by the amazing American poet Walt Whitman (have you heard of him?) with a short forward. It is impossible to imagine anything more astounding." That was Turgenev's view of Walt Whitman. Unfortunately, this project was not carried out and our knowledge of Whitman as a poet came a little bit later in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Turgenev's remarks are especially interesting because Turgenev, who started the modern trend in the development of realism (continued by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekov, and Gorky), contributed in a way to the changes in our poetry. Although Turgenev was not a poet, he wrote several poems in prose. The tradition of free verse in Russian poetry is not strong. In general, Russian poets tend to use rhyme or a combination of free verse and rhyme. This resistance to free verse affected the first translation of Walt Whitman.

One of the first to translate Walt Whitman into Russian was Konstantin Balmont, a fine Russian poet. He translated Walt Whitman in a very poetic way but did not remain close to the original. His strong imagination was working hard, and he did a free translation of Whitman using rhyme. Balmont's extraordinary but inaccurate translation reflects the difficulties in translating Walt Whitman into Russian. His translation was connected with his interest in revolution and the revolutionary attitudes which were closely tied with the name of Walt Whitman. Most articles about Walt Whitman connected him with the revolution, with the notion of new approaches of life and society.

One of the first to write during his lifetime about Walt Whitman was a man named Popov, who portrayed Whitman as a champion of working-class solidarity and the brotherhood of all nations. Popov called Whitman a materialist and regarded him as a singer of all the healthy manifestations of human life. For him, Whitman, with his celebration of the body, of everything human, was great. Popov wrote:

His personal ideals are too high, his views too broad and his demands too severe to please the prosperous section of the contemporary public which has secured itself a comfortable life and worries neither about its neighbor nor the morrow. Whitman decisively refuses to say even a single word in defense of the exploiting classes.

He claimed that Whitman was criticized and castigated for this in his country. "It is therefore not surprising," writes Popov, "that Whitman is branded in the United States as a communist, a socialist, an

atheist, etc. Such a poet is alien to passivity and fatalism and demands that every man should struggle constantly for his rights." From the start, therefore, Whitman was appreciated as a poet of great energy, talent, and revolutionary fervor.

The real acquaintance of our Russian public with Walt Whitman started in 1907, when Kornei Chukofsky, our famous poet and researcher in the field of literature, published a book of translations entitled *Poet, Anarchist, Walt Whitman: Translation in Verses*. Chukofsky was the first to translate Whitman in free verse. He had some difficulty doing so, because the English language prefers shorter words than the Russian language. Whitman's poetic lines, long enough in English, became twice as long when translated literally into Russian. Nevertheless, Chukofsky found adequate expression for the poetic imagery of Walt Whitman and started the Whitman era in our country.

Soon a new generation of Russian poets closely connected with modernist tendencies became interested in Whitman. Among the first was Vladimir Khlebnikov, one of the most prominent writers of this school in our country. His poetry reminded us of Walt Whitman, and he even used Whitman's poems as translated by Chukofsky. He tried to combine the popular Russian folk tradition with the sophisticated verse of Walt Whitman. His use of Russian folk songs, which involved repetition of certain words, went well with Whitman's catalogues and his specific poetic language.

Then we had the school of futurists, who appealed to Walt Whitman directly and who were under the strongest influence of Whitman. The greatest poet who was influenced by Whitman was certainly Mayakovsky, whose poem "Vladimir Mayakovsky" was written on the pattern of Whitman's "Song of Myself." It was in fact almost a translation of Whitman's poem. While Mayakovsky's use of rhyme and his rhythm differed from that of Whitman, his approach to life, his imagery, his feeling of the greatness of the world and his cosmic vision were close to Whitman. Vladimir Mayakovsky, who is perhaps the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century, was certainly indebted to Walt Whitman, proving the fruitfulness of the ties of Whitman and Russian poetry.

Still, Walt Whitman's fate in our own country has not always been so happy. In 1914 Chukofsky tried to publish a second edition of his book of Whitman translations. He entitled this book *Poetry of the Coming Democracy*. The phrase "the coming" was dangerous for him to use. The book was suppressed by the Tsarist censorship because it was felt that this coming democracy was not invited in the Russia of Tsar Nicholas II. It remained suppressed until the revolution of 1917 when it was republished by the Petrográd Soviet of workers and red army deputies.

Whitman was accepted by the revolutionists as a poet of revolution, and in 1918 we had several theaters of young workers trying to make plays based on Whitman's poems. He was popular; he was accepted as one of us, as one of our colleagues, as our American counterpart. The publication of Chukofsky's translations after the revolution started a new era in the perception of Whitman in our country. He became a part of our literary tradition. Chukovsky published six editions of his translations, but no scholarly study of Whitman appeared until 1935, when Dmitry Petrovich Mirsky wrote an article, "Poet of American Democracy," and edited an English edition of *Leaves of Grass*. A complete English edition was issued in 1936; I think about twenty thousand copies were sold, promoting a new approach to Walt Whitman and increasing his popularity.

Mirsky's approach to Whitman was more scholarly than that of Chukofsky. Chukofsky saw that Whitman was at the beginning of a new democratic poetry, and he singled out six main traits of the democratic poetry of the future, as he saw them in Whitman. The future Whitmanesque poetry, Chukofsky had argued, should be optimistic, symbolic, mass-oriented, psychological, comradely, and international. Mirsky, while accepting Chukofsky's views, tried to be more scholarly and to reveal Whitman's sociological roots and his stylistic and thematic innovations. Tying Whitman to petite bourgeoisie democracy, Mirsky was the first to describe Whitman, who had been previously seen as a kind of cosmic collectivist, as a realist — a view now suspect but still interesting and illuminating. In the meantime, Chukofsky, who continued his studies of Whitman, tried to defend his own point of view. He published a new book on Whit-

man in 1944 which is important to notice; 1944 was just the time of the war against the Nazis, and Chukofsky stressed the international, comradely side of Whitman in an effort to challenge inhuman fascism and Nazism.

I started studying Walt Whitman under the guidance of Morris Mendelssohn, who spent some time in the United States and then came to our country as a student of American literature. His book on Walt Whitman is published in English; it is available also in Chinese, as I understand. When I was studying in his seminar, he read Whitman in English to us. He was fond of Whitman and Mark Twain, and he thought that these two great writers were at the beginnings of the modern American literature. He started his studies at that time and in ten years, in 1954, he published his Whitman book, which was quite an event in the studies of Whitman in our country. Starting from Mirsky's notion of Whitman's realism, Mendelssohn argued that even before the Civil War (1861-1865) Whitman had initiated the realistic movement in American poetry. In Mendelssohn's view, Whitman put an end to the half-century reign of romanticism in American literature. Mendelssohn traced the development of Whitman's poetry, trying to define the specific characteristics of his rhythm. He wanted to see the closeness of the rhythm of his poetry to the rhythm of the poetry of Native Americans. Using all the studies of the poetry of American Indians, he concluded that the specific rhythm of Whitman was close to that of Native American poets. He also noted the role of American preachers in determining the character of Whitman's verse.

For a time there was a competition between Chukofsky and Mendelssohn which ended in 1966 when Chukofsky published a revised book on Whitman entitled *My Whitman*, to be distinguished from Mendelssohn's Whitman. Actually, he came to a kind of a pact with Mendelssohn's Walt Whitman, recognizing Whitman's realism but bringing added attention to what he called his "cosmic traits." Published just before Zhukovsky's death, this book remains one of the major books in our studies of poetry.

Recent Soviet critics have tried to revise the view that Whitman was a realist, saying that he was a romantic. Also, better translations

of Whitman have appeared. Twenty poets were invited to collaborate on a complete translation of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The book, published in 1982, contributed greatly to the popularity of Walt Whitman. All in all, since the revolution twenty-eight editions of Walt Whitman have been published in our country. The number of books published in Russian is 391,000 — an amazing number for books of poetry. He was translated in twelve languages beside Russian. Our country is a multi-national country and we have a lot of literatures; we have about one hundred languages. Although we have a long way to go to make Whitman read by *all* the ethnic groups in our country, Whitman is now available to most people in the Soviet Union.

Now I would like to say a few words about Whitman and modern Soviet poets. I think that Whitman is perceived in our poetry mostly through the eyes of Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky's poems and his poetic language, very close to that of Walt Whitman, plays an essential role in establishing ties between Russian poetry and Whitman. Mayakovsky mentioned Whitman several times in his poems when he spoke about democratic America. One of his famous poems, which is close even in its title to Whitman, is "150 Millions," published in 1920. This poem includes the line, "I am a free American citizen. The earth is full of various Lincolns, Whitmans, Edisons." In another poem, "The Fifth International," Mayakovsky stressed the international brotherhood of democrats and poets. There he mentioned Whitman the democrat. Mayakovsky lived up to the heritage of Whitman by his poetry which in its urbanistic and global approach to life was very close to Whitman.

Now there is a school of free verse poets who are close to Whitman not only in Russian poetry but also in the poetry of some of our republics. Among these poets I would single out a Lithuanian poet, Eduardos Megulitas, whose poetry was translated into Russian and made him one of the most popular poets of the Soviet Union today. He tries to use both free verse and the globality which is so characteristic of Walt Whitman.

Whitman was always popular in our country; he is in a way assimilated in our poetic culture, which makes him popular with our readers

despite certain differences we have with his poetry. I heard here a very interesting discussion about the way to teach Whitman in secondary schools. In our country we have only two foreign writers, Shakespeare and Goethe, who are taught in secondary schools. Also, we have an anthology of foreign literature for our school children that includes some Whitman poems; the most popular is "O Captain, My Captain."

In view of the Soviet Union's long-standing interest in Whitman, we can safely predict a prolonged life for Whitman in the Russian language, in Russian literature, and in our Soviet culture.

