

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18454/RULB.2020.24.4.30>**ПЕРВАЯ УИТМЕНОВСКАЯ ВЕРСИЯ «ПЕСНИ О СЕБЕ» В СВЕТЕ ПРОБЛЕМ ПЕРЕВОДА «ЛИСТЬЕВ ТРАВЫ» НА РУССКИЙ ЯЗЫК**

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В статье обозначен характер переводческих проблем, возникающих в отношении первой уитменовской версии «Песни о себе», до сих пор в русской культуре не представленной. Интонационная структура оригинала 1855 г., отличающаяся высокой экспрессивной насыщенностью, оценивается на фоне авторизованного текста 1881 г. Результаты такого сравнения послужат хорошей подсказкой для переводчика. Следует обратить внимание на уитменовские «экспрессивные пунктуационные приемы», с помощью которых Уитмен добивается драматического эффекта в первой версии. Примечательно, что в авторизованном тексте поэт стремится к упорядочиванию ритма и увеличению богатства звукописи в ущерб стихийности, непосредственности первой версии.

Ключевые слова: Уолт Уитмен, «Листья травы», «Песня о себе», верлибр, интонационная структура, поэтический перевод.

WALT WHITMAN'S "SONG OF MYSELF": CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING THE ORIGINAL VERSION INTO RUSSIAN

Research article

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Abstract

The paper outlines challenges that might be faced by translators of the first version of "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman into Russian, which has not yet found its rightful place in the Russian literary culture. Intonation patterns of the poem in its original version of 1855 that are oversaturated with expressive means are compared to those of the authorized text of 1881. The conclusions drawn herein may prompt fancy translation solutions. Attention should be paid to Whitman's "expressive punctuation techniques" used in the first version to achieve a dramatic effect. It is noteworthy that in the authorized text, the poet is seeking to streamline the rhythm and make sound patterns richer at the expense of spontaneity and ingenuousness of the first version.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, Song of Myself, free verse, intonation patterns, poetic translation.

Introduction

"Song of Myself" is considered the core of Walt Whitman's collection of poetry. It appeared among the first twelve untitled poems in the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass* and immediately became a standout due to acclaims of readers and critics. In later editions, Whitman revised and titled the text. In the second (1856) edition, the poem came under the name "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" and then was shortened to "Walt Whitman" for the third (1860) edition. The poem was divided into fifty-two sections for the fourth (1867) edition and finally acquired a well-known title "Song of Myself" in the last edition (1892) [1]. Despite multiple studies of "Song of Myself", little has been said about the first text of the poem, especially in Russia, and the 1855 version has never been translated into Russian. This paper aims to discuss the original version of 1855, which serves a perfect illustration to Whitman's initial design, offers an insight into his transcendentalist *I* and allows for a deeper analysis of a simple, legible style with strains of imagism and romanticism that the poet preferred to standard verse and stanza patterns. Reasoning presented below is expected to be helpful to translators and scholars of Walt Whitman and might spark due interest in reinterpretation of current approaches to translation of Walt Whitman into Russian.

Methods

Comparative typological method as one of the classical methods of literary analysis makes up the methodological framework of this research. Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Aesthetics of Verbal Creativity* remarked that "the text lives only by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue" [2, P.162]. Based on comparative method, this paper aims to study the "point of contact" between the two time-spaced versions – the 1855 text and the 1881 authorized text of "Song of Myself" – as well as variances in those texts with due regard to their functions. The research also focuses on the "point of contact" between the authorized text and its translation into Russian. The findings suggest ways to assess possible problems that might arise while translating the 1855 version into Russian.

Discussion

One cannot ignore an assumption made by reputable researchers of Walt Whitman's poetic heritage who concur that the first version of "Song of Myself" of 1855 is preferable to a better-known version of 1881 selected by Whitman as the final authorized text.

The following unanimity of opinion is noteworthy. In his persuasive introduction to a reprint of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* published in 1959, poet and critic Malcolm Cowley is reiterating "simple truths that should have been recognized long since": "... the text of the first edition is the purest text for "Song of Myself", since many of the later corrections were also corruptions of the style and concealments of the original meaning" [3]. Referring to the first edition as «the buried masterpiece of American writing» [3], Cowley gives credit to Ralf Emerson who enthusiastically greeted an odd book of an unusual format with a defiant frontispiece (instead of the author's name the book cover showed an engraved daguerreotype of the poet in a theatrical pose, wearing a casual shirt): «I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sobering certainty» [4].

Gay Wilson Allen speaks about Whitman's "departure from the uncurbed spontaneity of 1855 toward a more controlled, tighter structure, with carefully contrived symbolism" [5, P.61].

Sculley Bradley and Harold Blodgett in their preface to *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* note that the "poems of the 1855 edition likewise give the impression of being a spontaneous first expression of an overwhelming and sudden discovery affecting the poet's theory of man's personality and the nature of existence" [6, P.xlvii]. Having studied all the versions of «Song of Myself» from notebooks of 1847-1848 to the 1881 edition, they inferred that «... the poet never altered the poem fundamentally, restricting himself to changes in diction and rhythm» [6, P.26]. The nature of Whitman's revisions was clearly defined by G.W. Allen: «... Whitman's gains in rhythm and elimination of eccentric diction were often at the expense of the vigor, pungency, and originality of his first version» [5, P.47]. The above suggests that a quarter of a century later Whitman reconsidered the role of this piece in *Leaves of Grass*. As envisioned by the poet, "Song of Myself" should essentially serve as a miniature image of the entire text space of *Leaves of Grass* that has grown dramatically over time; it should be open to the text space (note a missing full stop at the end of the authorized version) so that the latter would not be perceived as a chaos of poetic abundance. Whitman's strive for a well-organized structure could be evidenced by the third and fourth stanzas of the first part of the poem – those eight lines were missing from the first version. Indeed, Whitman's intention to "sing oneself" expressed both in the title of the poem and at the end of the first line required a logical inference that Whitman shaped as a lyrical digression. The poet presents himself in time and space and claims that he is starting a song of great importance ("creeds and schools in abeyance" [6, P.26]) and hopes «... to cease not till death» [6, P.26]. Thus, the nature of revisions is explained by Whitman's conception: the finalized text of «Song of Myself» shall carry an absolute scale of values or, in Whitman's terms, «your sole and exclusive standard» [6, P.99]. This attitude demanded a certain emotional restraint from the poet. The topic of the Civil War (1861-1865) that undoubtedly had a profound impact on Whitman's works would have sounded out of tune in the first version; however, it found its way to the authorized text of 1881:

Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events... [6, P.29]

The translator of *Leaves of Grass* first needs to understand that the source of "great power" that "makes us [readers of the first version] happy» [4] was Whitman's state of mind, the emotions he experienced back then that predetermined his eccentric style, spontaneity, liveliness, simplicity, and lucid exposition. The poet seems to be stunned with his sudden discovery: «... physiology from top to toe <...> Life immense in passion, pulse, and power...» [6, P.3]. He hurries to pour his heart out, hence his unfettered spontaneity, reconciling spirit, and unconditional trust in the reader that find both graphic and syntactic embodiment in the text.

Unlike other versions, the 1855 text is divided into sections that are not numbered, thus ruling out any possibility of deliberate text fragmentation – the reader perceives the text as a whole.

Each stanza represents a complete sentence consisting of separate clauses (poetic units graphically split into lines) most often linked with a comma, rarely with a semicolon, a question mark, or an exclamation mark. Thus, we come to the question of verse boundary pauses coinciding with strong syntactic pauses (there are no enjambments in Whitman's vers libre). Such a verse structure is not accidental for the poet who is seeking soulful communication with the reader. Overlapping of verse intonation with syntactic intonation contributes to deep and insightful interaction [7, P. 173, 176]. When analyzing the rhythm and syntactic structure in free verse, Mikhail Gasparov remarks that «the verse intonation almost fully coincides with the syntactic intonation, if there is a punctuation mark at every verse boundary» [7, P.176]. Over half the lines in the first version demonstrate such coincidence (~55%).

Let us compare the intonation patterns of the first version with those of the authorized text. There is every reason to believe that Whitman often deliberately accentuated syntactic omission of verse boundaries in the first version. In order to emphasize the integrity and continuity of the line, he repeated the coordinate conjunction *and* (thus, the line is read without pauses), and consequently, there was a strong syntactic pause at the verse boundary:

I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss and fruits
and grains and esculent roots [6, P.686]

At musters and beach-parties and friendly bees and huskings and house-
raisings [6, P.689]

Buying drafts of Osiris and Isis and Belus and Brahma and Adonai [6, P.699], etc.

It can be reasonably argued that the lack of punctuation in the examples above fails to meet standard rules applied for enumerations in English. Just like in Russian, a serial comma is recommended to be used to separate items in an enumeration and avoid ambiguity [8]. The authorized text has conjunction *and* replaced with commas in respective lines, which is indicative of intonation segmentation within the line and weakening of the syntactic pause at the verse boundary. The resulting verse flow becomes more sluggish, original liveliness and immediacy in perception are lost.

In order to convey the intonation patterns of the original, the translator needs to preserve the repetition of conjunction *and*, thereby convey an emotional tone quite different from that of a simple enumeration. We reckon that the translator must follow the original by diverging from the norm of the Russian language and skip commas. Biblical texts in Russian abound with such examples, the brightest of which runs as follows: *Слава Отцу и Сыну и Святому Духу, и ныне и присно и во веки веков* [Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; Both now and ever and to the ages of ages] [9].

By experimenting with punctuation in the first version, Whitman usually achieves the desired outcome. When omitting commas in a series of homogeneous parts of a sentence, he creates an elusive effect of revitalized rhythm and meaning. Indeed, let us compare:

Disorderly fleshy and sensual... eating drinking and breeding [6, P.680]

and

Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding [6, P.45]

These corrections lead to a certain degree of monotony of the line and undoubtedly prove Whitman's obvious attempts to order or streamline the rhythm. To preserve the intonation pattern of the line, the translator of the first version will have to abandon commas, i.e. resort to a beyond-the-norm solution. The flexibility of punctuation in the modern Russian language may serve as an excuse for the translator. Although Russian punctuation is largely determined by syntax, it also relies on rhythmic and intonation fragmentation in a sentence. Along with mandatory rules, various punctuation options are acceptable. By discarding commas, Whitman emphasizes what he deems crucial in his poetry: his verses should be read at a speed of a line.

The above examples prove that the translator of the first version needs to pay special attention to Whitman's expressive punctuation techniques, including frequent ellipses that are absent in the authorized text. The poet used them to denote a caesura or rhetorical pause (to achieve a dramatic effect). The first version was replete with ellipses: 361 ellipses in 1336 lines. Most of them were replaced with commas (almost 80% in the authorized text). Let us analyze the repercussions of such a replacement:

¹ My respiration and inspiration... the beating of my heart... the passing of blood and air through my lungs [6, P.662]

² I too am not a bid tamed... I too am untranslatable [6, P.709]

³ Houses and rooms are full of perfumes... the shelves are crowded with perfumes [6, P.662]

⁴ I am a free companion... I bivouac by invading watchfires [6, P.691]

⁵ Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me... I stand indifferent [6, P.679]

In lines 1 and 2, ellipsis acts as a caesura (rhythmic pause). Although division of the line reduces the syntactic effect of the verse boundary, there is something else that is important for the poet: the rhythm and intonation of these lines must correspond to his state of mind. Commas in the authorized text downplay intonation expressiveness and emotionality. Lines 3, 4, and 5 illustrate a rhetorical (semantic) pause. By creating a time gap between the events described in the sentences, ellipses provide for a change of action lending a dramatic effect to what is happening. Commas "blur" the impression produced by the authorized text. In some cases, ellipses are replaced with a dash in the authorized text:

¹ I am satisfied... I see, dance, laugh, sing [6, P.664]

² Prodigal! you have given me love!... therefore I to you give love! [6, P.678]

³ It is middling well as far as it goes... but is that all? [6, P.698]

⁴ It is time to explain myself... let us stand up [6, P.703]

⁵ There is that in me... I do not know what it is... but I know it is in me [6, P.709]

⁶ It is not chaos or death... it is form and union and plan... it is eternal life... it is happiness [6, P.709]

In lines 1 to 4, ellipsis means a rhetorical pause. When replaced with a dash, an emotional pattern changes completely: a dramatic effect is lost, while a causal relationship emerges bringing rationality (prudence), emotional restraint at the expense of spontaneity and ingenuousness of the first version. Moreover, an ellipsis replaced with a dash in line 2 leads to redundancy (*therefore*). Note to the translator: an ellipsis used in English as a rhetorical pause conforms to one of its uses in Russian – in both cases it can indicate a transition (often unexpected) from one thought to another, a time interval between events [10]. An ellipsis in lines 5 and 6 is used to show a rhythmic pause. When replaced with a dash, it illustrates Whitman's intention to streamline the rhythm. The same goes for ellipses replaced with conjunctions. Indeed, let us compare:

People I meet... the effect upon me of my early life... of the ward and city

I live in... of the nation

and

People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I

live in, or the nation [6, P.664]

It is hard to escape a conclusion that through experiments with punctuation in the first version, Whitman was seeking to create an expressively rich intonation structure. By reflecting on punctuation, the translator shall be fully aware of any changes that might interfere with intonation patterns both in general and in each case in particular.

Whitman's parallelism that the poet employs to streamline the rhythm deserves special mention. The first line of the poem in the authorized version is arranged following the principle of internal parallelism:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself [6, P.26]

The first line is then counterbalanced by the next line (unlike in the first version):

And what I assume you shall assume [6, P.26]

At the same time, its communicative destiny gets blurred since the intrinsic energy of the statement that appears in the short line of the first version is lost: *I Celebrate myself*. Capitalized predicate shall be seen here as a means to underline or highlight the idea, as an emotional emphasis.

Let us consider the most typical cases of lexical changes. A revision that resulted in alterations of sound patterns (euphonic changes) can be illustrated with line 21 (except as otherwise specified, the number of the line conforms to the first version):

The feeling of health... the full-moon trill... the song of me rising from

bed and meeting the sun [6, P.663]

Full-moon in the authorized text is replaced with full-noon:

The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed
and meeting the sun [6, P.27]

Whitman thus enhances the euphonic effect, makes sound patterns richer. The sonorant sound [ŋ/n] stands out in the consonant structure of the line as it repeats eight times and occupies mostly (with one exception) an initial and/or final position in the word, making the verse more melodic. However, the above changes affect the imagery: instead of romantic trills pouring through the moonlight, there are trills at noon. (Note that this example demonstrates a streamlined rhythm as well.)

Examples of rhythm reordering and tendencies to a stronger euphonic effect constitute the bulk of variances. Describing the changes in Whitman's aesthetic views, Roger Asselineau in his *Evolution of Walt Whitman* assumed that over time Whitman's verses became more melodic, compact, closer to traditional poetic diction: if the "essential character of the first edition" was "close to the primitive magma", it had the "appearance of a flow of lava", in the course of successive editions, Whitman was "introducing order and logic into the chaos of original poems" [11].

The essence of variations is illustrated by line 17:

The sound of the belched words of my voice... words loosed to the eddies
of the wind [6, P.662],

which in the authorized text was transformed as follows:

The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the
wind [6, P.27]

Note that Whitman employs elision as he omits *e* before *d* in past participles. Besides, the poet removes ellipses and repetition of the word *words*. Ordering of the rhythm is detrimental to simplicity and lucidity of exposition. No wonder, a translation becomes challenging. Indeed, this line in the first version was rather straightforward in terms of topic-comment relation for the translator (the translation below is proposed by the author of this paper):

Звучание извергнутых моим горлом слов... слов, стихнувших в
кружении ветра

An ellipsis in the Russian translation (just like in the original) suggests a time interval between the events. The topic-comment relation of this line in the authorized text blurs the poet's message: what does the word *loos'd* refer to? To the world *sound*, probably? It is notable that Kornei Chukovsky, one of the most prominent translators of Walt Whitman into Russian, broke Whitman's "rhythm of thought" (the term introduced by G.W. Allen) and offered the following translation of this line into Russian:

Мой голос, извергающий слова, которые я бросаю навстречу ветрам [12, P.49]

Alterations introduced in line 52 are indicative of Whitman's attempts to disguise his original, bold, outspoken imagination:

As God comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps at my side all night and close
on the peep of the day [6, P.664]

The poet hereby confirms his persona's full trust in God and intimacy with Him. But this was young Whitman. Whitman in the authorized text is different, most probably a quarter of a century later he heeded the warnings of critics:

As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night,
and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread [6, P. 28]

The translator seems to have two ways to tackle this challenge: either to be loyal to the poet and the original, or to cushion the effect and protect Whitman from the likely attacks of the readership.

The most debatable lines are perhaps an erotic scene between the body and soul (lines 78-79). Alterations in the authorized text are insignificant but clearly define the general trend of revisions. For example, line 82:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that
pass all the art and argument of the earth [6, P.665]

The same line in the authorized version is more compact and melodic:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all
the argument of the earth [6, P.30]

At the same time, it is emotionally weaker, since the persona feels no more joy. Besides, art as one of the elements in the subordination structure is missing – an earnest confession for the poet.

A certain trend in corrections can be also illustrated by line 78:

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning [6, P.665]

The same line in the authorized version has no specific time reference:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning [6, P.29]

It is telling that such revisions are systemic in nature: *November sky* is replaced with *winter sky*, *of a Sunday* is replaced with *on a First-day*. Abandoning any specific time reference, Whitman seems to say that it is insignificant for the poem that carries an absolute scale of values.

Conclusion

The author of this research deduces that comparison of the 1855 version of "Song of Myself" with the finalized text of 1881 shall orient the translator towards conveying expressive intonation patterns of the original driven by Whitman's state of mind at that time and proves that the poet resigned himself to the shattered rhythm and eccentricity of style for the sake of expressivity, which in fact must be reflected in the translation.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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