

# Katia Vandenborre

---

## “Barbaric Yawp” in Dutch

---

Rocznik Komparatystyczny 4, 281-286

---

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Katia Vandendorre

Université libre de Bruxelles

### “Barbaric Yawp” in Dutch

Until 2007 Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” had long stood out only in two different Dutch translations, as the title of Rob van de Schoor’s article—“Walt Whitman twice translated” (2007)—suggests. The first one is a selection of poems that Maurits Wagenvoort (1859-1944) translated into Dutch at the end of the 19th century; the second one is the first complete edition of *Leaves of Grass* in Dutch, which came out in Amsterdam in 2005 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the first American edition. A whole century separates these two translations, which are naturally very different not only in terms of style and language, but also in terms of meaning and interpretation. Interestingly, the “barbaric yawp” sounds different in the two versions, which is the reason why I will focus on both of them and examine the semantic echo of the “barbaric yawp” in relation to the historical and cultural context.

When Maurits Wagenvoort published *Natuurleven* (“Natural life”) in 1898, there was no Dutch translation of Whitman’s poetry, even though the American poet had already been known in the Netherlands for more than two decades. His name appeared for the first time in 1871 in an article about American literature in *Wetenschappelijke Bladen* (van de Schoor, 1986: 79), but he became really famous only in the 1890s when Willem Gerard van Nouhuys devoted a whole study to his work (*Walt Whitman*, 1895). Nevertheless, when Wagenvoort discovered Whitman’s poetry, reading and re-reading the masterpiece during his journey across the United States, he could be familiar only with a short biography that Willem G.C. Byvanck published in *Poëzie*

*en leven in de 19de eeuw* (1889). And yet, while Byvanck and later van Nouhuys trusted the spiritual portrait that Richard M. Bucke had created in his Whitman biography, both believing that Whitman's optimism could sweep away European "fin de siècle" darkness, Wagenvoort focused on a very different aspect of Whitman's poetry:

He chooses free love and unnatural love as themes of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and [insists that] the Old World must get to know them in order to be able to follow the direction modern life took on that side of the ocean. (van de Schoor, 1986: 79)

It is by no means a coincidence that Wagenvoort—"the reader Whitman dreamt of" (van de Schoor, 2007: 2)—longed to translate a selection of Whitman's poems, giving priority to *Calamus*. He himself was a homosexual and therefore he was very sensitive to Whitman's vision of love. He summed it up in 1894 in *De Kunstwereld* as follows:

His affection can concern woman or man; the magnetism of desire always flows through his feelings. He speaks about human body—male or female—with the freedom and admiring love of a sculptor; and seeing it is not enough—he wants to touch it. (qtd. in: van de Schoor, 1986: 79)

In *Natuurleven* Wagenvoort sought to translate above all Whitman's ideas, or even Whitman himself, but not his poetry itself, which is the reason why he decided not to translate the whole *Leaves of Grass*: "This is not the whole *Leaves of Grass*, but it is the whole Whitman, as he revealed himself in the *Leaves*." (Wagenvoort III) Besides, Wagenvoort did not consider Whitman's works as poems—"his songs are not poems; they are visions, statements, laws, poetry if you want, but poetry as ore" (Wagenvoort VII). On the one hand, the translator describes Whitman's songs as prophetic, they are believed to be the words of a divine self which function as objective laws; on the other, he connects them with natural elements and more generally with nature by comparing Whitman's poetry to ore. According to Wagenvoort, Whitman's writing belongs to nature, and Whitman himself is also "always human, always natural" (Wagenvoort IV). By relating Whitman to nature, Wagenvoort suggests, that the "unnatural" love that he describes is in fact a "natural" part of the "natural life."

The title *Natuurleven*, which means "nature's life" or "natural life", is thus the interpretative key to the whole book that Wagenvoort published in 1898. Realizing this helps to understand the way he translated the "barbaric yawp" line. Instead of "barbaric," he preferred the word "wild," which apparently refers to human savageness and animality, to instincts that bring human beings closer to nature.

Ik doe mijne wilde kreten galmen over de dakken der wereld. (Whitman, 1898: 73)	I am making my wild cries peeling over the roofs of the world.
---	--

When rendering the "yawp" Wagenvoort chose the plural form of *kreet*, denoting "a sudden utter and powerful sound of the (human) voice (whether or not articulated)" (van Dale 648). Interestingly, he transformed a singular form into plural, which gives a new meaning to the line, as the Dutch idiom *wilde kreten* means also "empty words."

This ambiguity disappears in the 2005 translation, as the translators get back to the singular form of *kreet*.

Ik slaak mijn barbareese kreet over de daken van de wereld. (Whitman, 2005: 101)	I let my barbaric cry out over the roofs of the world.
--	--

As we can see, they also remain more conservative while translating "barbaric" – they simply chose the Dutch equivalent *barbareese*. If we focus on the "barbaric yawp" line, the specific features of *Grasbladen* (*Leaves of Grass*) may pass unnoticed, since the line does not reflect the postmodern aspects of the whole project (Ligvoet) in which twenty-two contemporary Dutch poets were brought together under the direction of Jacob Groot and Kees't Hart.

In their introduction to the bilingual edition of *Grasbladen*, Groot and Hart explain that only a collective translation may suit the polyphony of Whitman's poetry:

The altruistic need of passion in *Leaves of Grass* creates a choir of voices, a tissue of snippets. Hence the translation of this inner song needed to be the work of a collective, a small community of poets. (Groot and Hart 8)

Although the two poets do not admit it directly, they present Whitman as a postmodern poet, who “convinces, because he contradicts himself, makes grotesque moves and bluffs” (Groot and Hart 7). Thus only a choir of poets who are able to distance themselves from Whitman’s myth may translate this “sublime model of poetic collage or montage” (Groot and Hart 7). Although not every poet-translator of *Leaves of Grass* practices postmodern poetry, we easily find among them those who are experienced in postmodern writing and use this experience to create a postmodern translation of the 1855 edition: Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, Astrid Lampe, Maria van Daalen, Geert Buelens, Anneke Brassinga, Anne Vegter and Peter Verhelst.

Despite the fact that it was high time to publish a complete edition of *Leaves of Grass* in Dutch and to replace Wagenvoort’s outdated version, *Grasbladen* was met with a great deal of criticism in the Netherlands, and it was precisely because of its heterogeneity. Indeed, some poets totally remade Whitman’s verses, while others stuck too close to the original, as in the very literal translation of the barbaric line mentioned above. For this reason, Jakib Veenbaas prepared a new selection of poems from the Deathbed-edition that he published in 2007 under the title *Grashalmen* (“Blades of grass”). As we can see in the “barbaric yawp” line, Veenbaas is artistically more audacious and tries to be innovative in the translation:

Ik laat mijn barbaars gekrijs over de daken der wereld snerpen. (Whitman, 2007)	I let my barbaric scream skirling over the roofs of the world.
---	--

In Dutch Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” sounds obviously more melodious than a barbaric shrill/ scream piercing and skirling over the roofs of the world...

### Works Cited

- Byvanck, Willem G.C. *Poëzie en leven in de 19de eeuw: Biographieën en fragmenten*. Utrecht: H.A.J. Koezijjnse, 1889.
- Groot, Jacob and Kees Hart. Introduction. *Leaves of Grass/Grasbladen Vertaald door 22 Dichters*. By Walt Whitman. Trans. Huub Beurskens, Anneke Brassinga et al. Amsterdam: Em. Querido’s Uitgeverij, 2005. 7-8.

- Ligtoet, Frank. "Walt Whitman in stukken." *Filter, tijdschrift over vertalen* 12 (2005): 28-29.
- van de Schoor, Rob. "Walt Whitman twee keer vertaald." *Nederlandistiek* 10 (2007): 1-8. <<http://www.neerlandistiek.nl/publish/articles/000144/article.pdf>> 6 Jan. 2013.
- . "De ontvangst van Walt Whitman in Nederland aan het eind van de negentiende eeuw." *Maatstaf* 2 (1986): 79-85.
- van Nouhuys, Willem Gerard. *Walt Whitman*. 's Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1895.
- van Sterkenburg, P.G.J., ed. *Van Dale. Groot woordenboek van hedendaags*. Nederlands. Utrecht/Antwerpen: van Dale Lexicografie, 1984.
- Wagenvoort, Maurits. Introduction. *Natuurleven*. By Walt Whitman. Trans. Maurits Wagenvoort. Haarlem: De Erven F. Bohn, 1898. III–VIII.
- Whitman, Walt. *Natuurleven*. Trans. Maurits Wagenvoort. Haarlem: De Erven F. Bohn, 1898.
- . *Leaves of Grass/Grasbladen Vertaald door 22 Dichters*. Trans. Huub Beurskens, Anneke Brassinga, Tsead Bruinja, Geert Buelens, Maria van Daalen, Arjen Duinker, Jacob Groot, Kees 't Hart, Judith Herzberg, Gerrit Komrij, Rutger Kopland, Jan Kuijper, Astrid Lampe, Hagar Peeters, Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, Toon Tellegen, Anne Vegter, Hans Verhagen, Peter Verhelst, Simon Vinkenoog, Elly de Waard, Menno Wigman. Amsterdam: Em. Querido's Uitgeverij, 2005.
- . *Grashalmen*. Trans. Jakib Veenbaas. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Wagner & Van Santen, 2007.
- <<http://eerder.meandermagazine.net/wereldpoezie/gedichten.php?txt=3522>> 28 Jan. 2013.

### Summary

The article presents two most important translations of Whitman's line in Dutch. The first one comes from *Natuurleven* ("Natural life"), the selection of poems that Maurits Wagenvoort translated into Dutch in 1898; the second one was taken from the first complete edition of *Leaves of Grass* in Dutch which came out in 2005 under the title *Grasbladen* ("Leaves of Grass"). Both of them present very different interpretations of Whitman's poetry: while the too literal and too vague translation in the collective project of *Grasbladen* presents a "postmodern attitude" to Whitman's work, Wagenvoort's translation is a subtle attempt of expressing the natural character of homosexuality

and Whitman's vision of love. The essay ends up with the new translation that Jakib Veenbaas published in 2007.

**Key words:** comparative literature, translation studies, Walt Whitman, "Song of Myslef," Dutch literature

## „Barbarzyńskie yawp” po niderlandzku

### Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia dwa najważniejsze tłumaczenia wersu Whitmana na język niderlandzki. Pierwsze pochodzi z *Natuurleven* („Naturalne życie”) – wyboru wierszy, które Maurits Wagenvoort przetłumaczył w 1898 roku; drugie – z pierwszego kompletnego wydania *Leaves of Grass* w języku niderlandzkim, opublikowanym w 2005 roku pod tytułem *Grasbladen*. Oba tłumaczenia prezentują bardzo różne interpretacje poezji Whitmana: zbyt dosłowne i niejasne tłumaczenie zawarte w *Grasbladen* prezentuje „postmodernistyczne” odczytanie poezji Whitmana; natomiast tłumaczenie Wagenvoorta to próba subtelnej wyrażenia naturalności homoseksualizmu oraz Whitmanowskiej wizji miłości. Artykuł kończy przywołanie najnowszego przekładu, dokonanego przez Jakiba Veenbaas'a w 2007 roku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komparatystyka literacka, studia przekładoznawcze, Walt Whitman, „Pieśń o mnie”, literatura niderlandzka