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To Yawp, Or Not To Yawp: French Translators and Whitman's Distinctive Idiom

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In July 1886 the short-lived symbolist weekly *La Vogue*¹ published Laforgue's famed Whitman translations—a handful of the “Inscriptions,” as well as “A Woman Waits for Me,” and “O Star of France!”—two months after bringing out the first instalment of the first-ever complete printing of Arthur Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations*. The review included no extract from “Song of Myself,” and Laforgue's untimely death the following year robbed French Whitmaniacs of a version that would probably have set very high standards for translators to come. The line under consideration in these pages was not translated by Laforgue, but a Rimbaud poem published by *La Vogue*—«Barbare» (“Barbaric”)—offers an ironic counterpoint to Whitman's signature hyperbole,² with its

¹ The review ran on and off from April 1886 to January 1899. Its first editor-in-chief was Léo d'Orfer (1859-1924) soon replaced by Gustave Kahn (1859-1936), who spent most of his writing life fighting long and hard for the paternity of *vers libre*.

² As regards Whitman's barbaric yawp, it is highly unlikely that Rimbaud knew about it at all. If, as is thought by some, he possibly heard about Whitman during his English exile, in 1872, the poems with which he is most likely to have come into contact were those selected and published in 1868 by William Michael Rossetti, who omitted “Song of Myself,” and, consequently, the yawping line. When one looks at *Les Illuminations* from the perspective of its possible relationship to the Rossetti selection, one will be struck by the presence of multiple echoes expressing a note more of sarcasm than respect about their Whitman counterparts (cf. « Démocratie » — “Democracy” — and its eerily gruesome mock-Whitmanian overtones: “Let us go to dusty and exhausted countries—put ourselves at the service of monstrous industrial or military exploitations”; Rimbaud, 1932: 100). (*Aux pays poivrés et détrempés!*)

“woman’s voice reaching to the depths of arctic caves and volcanoes (Rimbaud, 1932: 55)” (*la voix féminine arrivée au fond des volcans et des grottes arctiques*, Rimbaud, 2009: 309).

A history of the French translations of “I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” spans a century of dissemination, confrontation, appropriation, and sometimes rewriting (not necessarily in that order). In the same way that Whitman kept revising and rearranging the poems of *Leaves of Grass*, the continuous translation of this line over a century—from 1909 to 2011—offers insight into what it is to try and accommodate a foreign poetic statement into one’s mother tongue, through what Antoine Berman called “the experience of the foreign” (Berman 1984). To the author of these lines, who has been studying, teaching and translating Whitman for the past fifteen years, the interest of this particular line—arguably the most beautiful in Whitman’s greatest poem—is that it offers in the course of eleven words what his tough-skinned mastodon of a preface fails to do over nine pages, i.e., a memorable punchy *ars poetica* combining the persona’s epic-lyric stance, his somatic bravado and a spatial sweep probably unparalleled in English-language poetry.

A consideration of the French translations of the line brings together translators from all walks of life, who approached the task of the translator from very different angles. They can be grouped into the following categories: one political intellectual-cum-man of letters (Léon Bazalgette³), one journalist-cum-writer, (Rosaire Dion-Lévesque⁴), one full-time poet (Joël Bosquet), one professional translator (Gilles Mourier), and four academics (Roger Asselineau, Éric Athenot, Jacques Darras, and Pierre Messiaen⁵). One notable

– *Au service. Des plus monstrueuses exploitations industrielles ou militaires*; Rimbaud, 2009: 314).

³ It is impossible to overestimate the role played by Léon Bazalgette (1873-1928) in disseminating Whitman’s poetry around Europe. His translation of *Leaves of Grass* often served as a linguistic prop to translators more comfortable with French than with American English.

⁴ Of French-American origins, Dion-Lévesque (1900-1974) was mostly active in the French-speaking Canadian press and his few books were published in Quebec.

⁵ A Professor of American literature at the Université d’Amiens until 1995, Darras (born 1939) is also a published poet and essayist, claiming particular affinities with Apollinaire, Cendrars, and Claudel (cf. <http://www.jacquesdarras.com/>), Asselineau (1915-2002), author of the seminal *The Evolution of Walt Whitman* (reissued in 2000 by the University

absence has to be deplored—that of any of writers taking part in the NRF project launched in 1918 by Gide and Larbaud, who only included Section 6 of “Song of Myself.”

The nature of the volumes featuring the line in translation has to be taken into consideration if one is to understand the impact this particular line is likely have on the reader. The latter is perhaps less likely to be impressed by it when it is first read at the end of the whole “Song of Myself,” while being extracted from the whole poem in a study of a short cluster of lines might cause it to make a deeper impression. The sample presents two translations of the complete Deathbed edition (Bazalgette and Darras), and two of the 1855 (Athenot—complete—and Mourier, without the preface), with the four other volumes reproducing more or less substantial selections from the Deathbed edition (with only Asselineau including the whole of “Song of Myself”). The yawping line condenses Whitman’s theory of poetic language in dramatic fashion and offers an illustration of the poet’s going with a flourish from theory to practice, while somehow turning his poetic idiom into an animal cry, the yawp. The very movement mentioned in the line (“above the roofs of the world”) will be more or less reproduced by the translators. It might therefore be necessary to consider alongside the various versions of the line what statements we have by each translator about Whitman’s language and poetic project as a whole as being expressive of their own approach to rendering the language of *Leaves of Grass* into French. Let’s start with the two complete Deathbed editions in French.

They can, in many ways, be regarded as the alpha and omega of the French Whitman translations as they span one century. Bazalgette’s *Feuilles d’herbe* was first published in 1909 and reprinted in 1914, 1922 and 1955.⁶ Bazalgette is well-known for his ecumenical, quasi-religious reading of Whitman, a poet he enrolled in his pan-European internationalist crusade. In the companion

of Iowa Press), who taught at the Sorbonne, also published poems of his own (www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-anglaises-2002-3-page-383.htm) Messiaen (1883-1957), a Shakespeare scholar and translator, is a well-known figure to musicologists, as one of his sons, Olivier, was to become France’s premier composer of the second half of the twentieth century.

⁶ The author of this study has had access to the 1909, 1922 and 1955 editions. The 1914 reprint has eluded him to this day.

piece to the 1909 edition—the two-volume study *Walt Whitman: l'homme et son œuvre*—Bazalgette describes Whitman as essentially a lyric poet. “If you listen to him,” he writes in the preface, “you might take him for some huge and rough rhapsodist who has come unnoticed from classical times to settle on American soil in order to confess the longings, the wonders and the faith of Modern Man.”⁷ In the hagiographic 1921 study *Le Poème-Évangile de Walt Whitman (Walt Whitman's Évangile-Poem)*, written as an answer to Gide's attacks on his translation (see Erkkilä 115-118), Bazalgette turns Whitman into an ancient Greek, one living before the classical period (Bazalgette, 1921: 287). Bazalgette carried out two translations of the line. The 1909 version is: *Je fais retentir mon jappement barbare par-dessus les toits du monde* (Whitman, 1909: 128) (I sound my barbaric yelp over the roofs of the world). The second, to be found at least from the 1922 edition on, reads as follows: *Je hurle mon cri de barbare sur les toits du monde* (Whitman, 1922: 126) (I yell my barbarian's shout on the roofs of the world). The change from the earlier to the later version is quite striking and not so felicitous as one might think. The first is a literal rendering of the original, with *jappement* feebly translating the untranslatable *yawp* and *fais retentir* a forceful rendering of the more neutral *sound*. All in all a balance of sorts is struck between the various words forming the line in the target language. The earlier version, however, has been overshadowed by the later one, even in selections made by writers quoting Whitman's poems in Bazalgette's rendering (see, in particular, Jamati 151; Whitman, 1964: 38). It is surprisingly less successful as it strives—in response to Gide's ferocious attack?—to make Whitman sound louder, wilder and well-nigh hysterical. The verb *hurler* (scream, howl, or yell) stands out of the line in a way *sound* does not in the original. To make matters more perplexing, Bazalgette deprives *yawp* of its original animal overtones. The replacement of *par-dessus* (*over*) with *sur* (*on*) ushers in the central question of the line's spatial strategy. In the second Bazalgette version, the *yawp* is static in contradistinction to the more dynamic preposition used in the original. In other words, the persona is louder, he has

⁷ “En l'écoutant, vous croiriez entendre quelque rhapsode, énorme et rude, qui de l'antiquité aurait invisiblement passé sur le sol américain, pour confesser les désirs, les émerveillements et la foi de l'Homme Moderne.” (Bazalgette, 1908 : vi)

put on a barbarian's costume, but his shout is less barbaric, not animal any more and more static.⁸

With Darras, things get even muddier. He has, as a matter of fact, published three different versions of the whole poem, one in his 1989 selection for Grasset, one in his complete Deathbed with Gallimard, and one for the 2009 reprinting of his Grasset selection. One individual translator for three different projects—in chronological order, the Grasset volumes (volume 1 in 1989, volume 2 in 1991), next, the complete Gallimard Deathbed (in 2002), and, finally, the Grasset volumes brought out as a single volume in 2009—is a rare enough occurrence. Equally striking is the way the translations reverberate down the years or not, from one volume, and one publisher to the next. Although Darras's language is very different from Bazalgette's—more flamboyant and more narcissistic—similar questions arise around the nature of the yawp, its spatial trajectory and its somatic origin... with Darras adding quirks of his own, as we will now see.

The chronological sequence shows a translator rewriting, reordering and revising, very much in the Whitman vein. The original translation reads: *Éructe ma clameur de barbare, youpi! plus haut que le toit du monde* (Whitman, 1989: 101) ("Belch my barbarian's clamour—*whoopee!*—above the roof of the world"). Many things are to be said about this translation. The I (*je* in French) is absent, as Darras chooses to link the verb—*éructe*—to the pronoun used in the preceding line. The words chosen make the line exceedingly dramatic. The persona doesn't sound his yawp, he *belches* it.⁹ *Yawp* is echoed through the somewhat old-fashioned onomatopoeia *youpi!* (*whoopee!*), which French people use somewhat ironically to express a sudden influx of joy. It is actually more childish than savage or wild. The persona does not so much sound his

⁸ French has only one word—*barbare*—to render both *barbaric* and *barbarian*. English distinguishes between a more cultural, ethnocentric meaning, *barbarian*, whose various definitions by the OED show, from the Greeks to the Chinese, to have been used throughout history to refer to someone outside one's own culture, and a merely descriptive one, *barbaric*, which, according to the selfsame OED refers to what "pertain[s] or [is] proper to barbarians or their art; in the characteristic style of barbarians, as opposed to that of civilized countries or ages."

⁹ This is an obvious throwback to the famous line of the poem's second section: "The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind."

yawp as emit a *clameur*, a word connoting sounds of protest made by a crowd. The persona, as is well known, does indeed contain multitudes, but are they really audible in the present line? Finally, the “roof-of-the-world” option is problematic, at least to this reader, as the phrase (albeit with a capital T at *toit*) is a periphrasis referring to the highest range of the Himalayas. This changes the scene quite drastically and makes Whitman’s barbaric yawp a threat to Chinese authorities! *Plus haut* (higher) finally changes the clamour’s trajectory and makes it more vertical than the original. If Darras’s choice of words is to be regarded as faithful to the original at all, fidelity, obviously, does not entail a careful adherence to the words or to the images used in the source language. The line remains unchanged in the 2002 complete *Deathbed*, while the 2009 Grasset reprinting offers one variant: *Éructe ma clameur de barbare, mon yawp plus haut que le toit du monde* (Whitman, 2009: 126) (“Belch my barbarian’s clamour—my yawp—above the roof of the world”). The spatial trajectory of the barbarian’s clamour remains unchanged, with only the *whoopie* giving way to the yawp in the target language. The problem is that, in much the same way as the poem’s persona declares himself to be “untranslatable,” the word *yawp* will prove unpronounceable to quite a few French speakers. Reading will entail individual, differing renderings. This might be seen as a democratic stroke on Darras’s part, an empowerment of the reader by a translator humbly leaving the last word to the original. And why not? The preface to the 2002 translation paints a picture of Whitman as a liberator . . . and an ancestor to generations of jazz players, with his free verse opening the way for bebop (Whitman, 2002: 25).

The 1855 renderings show Mourier and the present writer moving in starkly opposite directions. The Athenot translation of the line is: *Je lance mon abolement barbare par-dessus les toits du monde* (Whitman, 2008: 171) (“I give out my barbaric bark over the roofs of the world”) while Mourier’s is *Je corne mon glapir barbare au-dessus des toits du monde* (Whitman, 2011: 78) (“I blare out my barbaric squeal over the roofs of the world”). The scope of these translations is obviously very different. They agree on the second half of the line but clash on the opening words. The first tries to foreshadow the spatial hyperbole held in the latter words by using a verb expressive both of the act of giving out a sound and of throwing, launching, with a view to forming an arc from the

opening to the closing words of the line. The act of yawping, in this instance, is part of a trajectory that starts in the persona's lungs and is concluded out of sight, "beyond the roofs of the world." The yawp, in the Athenot translation, becomes a mere dog's bark (*aboiement*), made out somewhat louder by the consonantal echoes in the epithet, creating a phrase—« *aboiement barbare* »—which was actually singled out by two reviewers of the book, with one using the whole line as the title of his review.¹⁰ Mourier uses an obsolete verb (*corner*) implying breaking out a piece of news in an unpleasant voice, as through a horn. The persona therefore no longer gives out an unarticulated sound—which may be wordless or outside the genteel reader's ken—but bellows a boring or unwelcome message out loud. It might be deemed a perfectly relevant reading of the line—even though we move from pure animal sound to some intimation of language—but the fact remains that *corner* is an extremely old-fashioned term, a verb which, to the present writer, seems almost too erudite to render the provocative bragging of the line. As for *glapir*, Whitman might not have been happy to see his yawp relegated to the level of "shrill sounds made by small dogs, foxes and cranes," as the Larousse dictionary has it. What we have here is a more oxymoronic persona than Whitman may have anticipated, a barbaric lapdog. He sounded famously more like "a sentimental donkey"¹¹ to one of his reviewers, but again why not? On the dust jacket, Mourier writes that *Leaves of Grass* is "devoid of any reading agenda" (*dépourvu d'un programme de lecture*) and "of a stable language and rhetoric" (*d'une langue et d'une rhétorique stables*). After scouring Mourier's website, the present writer found an arresting statement as to the French language's "ever weakening resources," which Mourier allegedly strove to overcome in his online translation of the poems of Wallace Stevens.¹² The same must certainly hold for his 1855 Whitman.

The final comments will be devoted to the four translations of the line featured in selections from *Leaves of Grass*, not all of which give "Song of My-

¹⁰ See <<http://passouline.blog.lemonde.fr/2008/02/06/un-aboiement-barbare-par-dessus-les-toits-du-monde/>>, and <<http://www.liberation.fr/livres/010175162-et-walt-whitman-roula-ses-feuilles-d-herbe>>.

¹¹ Cf. <<http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1855/anc.00016.html>>.

¹² "[J]e n'ai jamais hésité à faire appel à toutes les ressources envisageables – malheureusement de plus en plus chétives – du français" (<<http://mapage.noo.fr/gmurer0001/ws.htm>>).

self” in its entirety.¹³ The first, Rosaire Dion-Lévesque’s, reads *Je fais retentir les toits du monde de mes cris barbares* (Whitman, 1933: 100) (“I make the roofs of the world echo with my barbaric shouts”). Gone is the animal cry of the persona in favour of a generic, unspecified cry—in the plural form and at the end of the line, which acquires a somewhat static dimension. If the author of the preface—Louis Dantin, who quotes this particular line in full—is to be believed, Dion-Lévesque was less sensitive to Whitman’s barbaric poetics than to the poems’ Homeric scope. Once again, Whitman becomes a Greek (which, if correct, makes the persona’s barbaric yawp culturally antiphrastic¹⁴).

Pierre Messiaen’s rendering: *Je fais retentir mon hurlement de barbare sur les toits du monde* (Whitman, 1951: 212) (“I sound my barbarian’s howl on the roofs of the word”) once again chooses to overlook the animal nature of Whitman’s cry. Again, like Bazalgette before him and Darras after him, he chooses the substantive—*de barbare*, i.e. *a barbarian’s*—over the adjective. And, as with Dion-Lévesque, the scene is static, as *sur* (*on*) implies no movement while underlining the spatial reverberations of the howl.

For Messiaen, as explained in the preface to the volume, Whitman’s language is “brutal, brutally expressive” (*[b]rutale, brutalement expressive*) and derives not so much from the ancient Greeks as from the King James Bible (Whitman, 1951: 47).

With Asselineau—France’s undisputed Whitman specialist in the second half of the 20th century—something very odd occurs, which was corrected in none of the several editions of his volume. The line in Asselineau’s rendering is *Je fais retentir mon cri sur les toits du monde* (Whitman, 1989 a: 23) (“I sound

¹³ In fact, only Asselineau gives the full translation of the poem—in the 1882 version but strangely dated 1855 . . .

¹⁴ “He is like the primitives and is reminiscent of Homer, and Job. [Line quoted in Dion-Lévesque’s translation]. It matters little that his shouts are barbaric as long as they proclaim his mission . . . While Larbaud and Gide publish a Whitman whose features are essentially abnormal, [Viélé-Griffin and Bazalgette] a democratic and socialist Whitman, Dion-Lévesque, with no patience for side issues, offers the inspired and profound bard.” (*[I]l rejoint les primitifs, et fait songer à Homère, à Job. « Je fais retentir, dit-il, les toits du monde de mes cris barbares ». Peu importe qu’ils soient barbares pourvu qu’ils clament sa mission. (...) [A]lors que Larbaud et Gide projettent surtout un Whitman aux traits anormaux, [Viélé Griffin et Bazalgette] un Whitman démocrate et socialiste, M. Dion-Lévesque, sans souci d’à-côté, présente l’aède inspiré et profond; Whitman, 1933:15).*

my shout on the roofs of the world”). While his translation as a whole does not strive to shine through the original, it is a surprise that his yawping line should present a poet with no barbaric and animal feature at all. *Yawp* is rendered as *cri*, or *shout*, while *barbaric* is left untranslated altogether. As Asselineau never corrected this in any of the editions published between 1956 and 1989, omitting the epithet signals a conscious translating choice and is not to be deplored as an omission. Strangely enough, in the Asselineau’s discussion of the line in the preface, the translation is not quite identical—the static *sur* (*on*) actually gives way there to the more dynamic *par-dessus* (over). It remains a mystery why Asselineau the translator did not choose to follow the more reliable flair of Asselineau the scholar. About Whitman’s yawp, Asselineau has this to say: “Even if he sounded his ‘yawp’ over the roofs of the world, Whitman’s feet remained nonetheless firmly on the ground” (*Whitman avait beau lancer son « yawp » par-dessus les toits du monde, ses pieds n’en demeuraient pas moins bien plantés sur le sol*; Whitman, 1989 a: 177). Asselineau’s rendering is no-nonsense and yet strangely devoid of what the present writer regards as the three key characteristics of the line—the animal cry, the barbaric nature of the persona and the dynamic thrust of the whole line.

The last example of the yawping line in French is that by the poet Alain Bosquet, from his book on Whitman, an essay interspersed with short poems or extracts from the longer pieces: *Je clame mon cri barbare sur les toits du monde* (Bosquet 182) (“I shout out my barbaric cry on the roofs of the world”). The verb *clamer* means both *shout out* and *proclaim*, as if the persona was shouting loudly but also boasting about this shout. The verb redoubles the shout while possibly hinting at a verbal element in it. And again two aspects of the line seem missing—the animal nature of the cry—the yawp—and its spatial movement (*sur* having again been preferred to *par-dessus*). Bosquet, who also published studies on Dickinson, and Sandburg, hears in Whitman’s yawp “an emancipating shout,” and sees in Whitman “the greatest illiterate poet of modern times” (Bosquet 147).

An illiterate poet who lashed on to *litterati* with such frequency and vehemence could only have relished Bosquet’s comment, which should not be taken as derogatory or patronising. What all the versions of the line demonstrate is not only the vexed and antiquated notion of an illusory or even unwished-for

“faithfulness” to the original but the various routes that one language takes to accommodate realities—the yawp in particular—that do not exist in it. All the routes, some of which individual readers may find more agreeable to their tastes than others, point towards the constitution by the translators of, to echo Antoine Berman again, an American poem in French, a text not originating from their own language but always already in the process of waiting to be appropriated by it.

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Summary

The French editions of Whitman's "Song of Myself" have had from the start to contend with two difficulties—the "yawp" and the choice between a static or a more dynamic rendering of the poet's cry. From the trail-blazing Bazalgette text (1909) to the latest Darras volume (2002), the history of Whitman's signature line in France maps the route travelled by the various translators on the way to appropriate a poetic idiom that turns out to be not so "untranslatable" after all.

Key words: comparative literature, translation studies, Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," French literature

Tłumacze francuscy i charakterystyczny idiom Whitmana

Streszczenie

Francuskie wydania „Song of Myself” od samego początku musiały zmierzyć się z dwoma wyzwaniami – przekładem samego „yawp” oraz wyborem pomiędzy statycznym i dynamicznym oddaniem „krzyku” poety. Od pionierskiego przekładu Bazalgette’a (1909) aż do najnowszego tomu Darras’a (2002) tłumaczenia wersu Whitmana we Francji wyznaczają drogę przyswajania poetyckiego idiomu, który ostatecznie okazuje się nie być zupełnie „nieprzetłumaczalny”.

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