

Bojana AČAMOVIĆ

bojana.acamovic@gmail.com

ON RUSSIAN WHITMAN,  
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

(Delphine Rumeau. *Comrade Whitman: From Russian to Internationalist Icon*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2024, pp. 375)

Institute for Literature  
and Arts, Belgrade

The monograph *Comrade Whitman: From Russian to Internationalist Icon* undertakes to explore an important and vast area in Whitman reception studies, that concerning the poet's presence in Russian and Soviet culture. With this edition, Delphine Rumeau, professor of comparative literature at the University of Grenoble Alpes, continues her extensive research of Whitman's poetics and reception, parts of which were earlier presented in her monographs *Fortunes de Walt Whitman. Enjeux d'une réception transatlantique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019) and *Chants du Nouveau Monde. Épopée et Modernité (Whitman, Neruda, Glissant)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2009). Relying on the previous findings on the Russian as well as international reception of Whitman, Rumeau offers an insightful overview and analysis of the different ways Whitman's poetry was perceived by and presented to the audience in the Russian Empire and the USSR. The focus on the Russian/Soviet context, which in itself suggests a panoply of cultures and languages, and the broad timeframe covering one hundred years (1880–1980) promise a multitude of diverse responses, which considered in the overall international context further elucidate the functioning of global literary networks. The book was published by Academic Studies Press (Boston), an independent scholarly publisher specializing in Slavonic and Jewish studies, which also issued an anthology of Yugoslav avant-garde literature *Zenithism (1921–1927)* (A. Bošković, S. Teref, 2023).

As the subtitle suggests, although the primary focus is on the Russian reception of Whitman's work, *Comrade Whitman* covers a far broader scope, with large sections of the book devoted to the poet's reception worldwide. While Rumeau retains her earlier adopted transnational perspective, the focus on Russia and the Soviet Union allows for the introduction of new materials discovered in the course of this extensive research. Exploring the multicultural and multilingual environment of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, along with the diaspora which constitutes the core of Whitman's Yiddish reception in the United States, provided new insights not only into the international reception of one particular poet, but also into the transnational cultural relations. In this respect, Delphine Rumeau's latest book is a significant

ORCID 0000-0001-6926-3667

<https://doi.org/10.18485/kis.2025.57.186.29>

Књижевна историја (0350–6428), 57/186 (2025)

научни приказ  
821.09(049.32)

contribution to a series of studies by international scholars exploring Whitman's reception in French, German, British, Irish, Polish, Italian, Caribbean, Latin American, Iranian, and Serbian literatures and cultures, which together illuminate a vast global literary network with Walt Whitman as its nexus.

The monograph combines a literary-historical approach, drawing on the theories of cultural transfers and analyzing specific instances of mediation (esp. translations), with the close reading of selected poems and in-depth analyses of stage adaptations and visual representations considered against the backdrop of the contemporary historical and cultural circumstances. Such broadening of the scope is particularly valuable as it underlines the importance of interdisciplinary and intermedial perspectives in literary reception studies.

Following the Introduction, which clarifies the aims of the study and offers a brief outline of the global historical context and the Russian/Soviet and Yiddish reception, the ten chapters chronologically present the different stages of Whitman's reception, each highlighting one dominant aspect and examining it across different national cultures and literatures. The focus of the first two are the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, years of momentous changes for the Russian and the surrounding nations. The main emphasis is placed on the poetic aspects of Whitman's reception, which foregrounded Whitman as a *primitive* and as a futurist poet. Primitivism as an aesthetic phenomenon, at the time most eagerly explored in European thought and art, guided the attention of the contemporary critics towards the related themes in Whitman, which resulted in the poet being variously perceived as the poet of nature, the Adamic or Greek poet, or the barbarian. Rumeau's transnational perspective here is quite justified as it offers not only a comparative presentation of literary tendencies in different European cultures, but shows their interconnectedness. This perspective is retained in the following chapter on futurism, where we also learn about the perception of Whitman as an urban poet and as a "propeller" of the Western avant-garde. Analyzed in more detail is the work of Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky and also examined are instances of reception in the Baltic states and Ukraine.

The following chapter "Whitman the prophet (1880s–1930s)" brings to the forefront the work of Konstantin Balmont, one of the two most notable Whitman's Russian translators of the time, discussing his essay "The Poet of personality and life". Emphasized is Whitman's poetry of the body, but with Balmont's emphasis on its democratic connotations. In relation to Russian cosmism, Rumeau examines responses by a number of authors, from the Yiddish poet Morris Rosenfeld, to the more psychologically oriented readings of Richard Maurice Bucke and William James, to the Russian views of Balmont and the artist Boris Grigoriev. Parallel to the Russian, Rumeau explores the Yiddish reception, mostly by the

American Yiddish poets, but also by those from the other parts of the then Russian Empire – Poland and Lithuania.

An extensive exploration of Whitman's reception in socialist and democratic circles starts off with the period from the 1880s to 1919, which is bound to be much more related to the overall historical context than the previous one on Whitman's *prophetism*. A considerable part of Rumeau's analysis is an overview of the British, German, Italian, French leftist appropriations of Whitman, relying on the earlier scholarly work, here placed side-by-side for comparison. The Russian socialist reception is allocated a separate section, with the author's indication that this is where the Russian reception "stands further apart from the European and the North American ones. Whereas Whitman the *primitive* or Whitman the prophet were shared constructs, Whitman the democrat took on rather specific features in Russia" (123–124). Attention is drawn to one of the earliest instances of Russian translations of Whitman (or rather mock translations, including those well-known by Korney Chukovsky), with an overall conclusion that at the time Whitman was more of a poet of revolutionary-spirited Russians than of Russian revolutionaries. Rumeau stresses the importance and radicalness of Balmont's reading of Whitman, aiming to offset the apparent neglect of Balmont's work in the Soviet period, when Chukovsky's translations were favored as far superior.

The section about what promises to be a most engaging period in Whitman's East-European reception (the interwar years) begins with the chapter on "The extraordinary adventures of Walt Whitman in the land of the Bolsheviks (1918–1936)", giving a nod to the 1924 film by Lev Kuleshov. As Rumeau notes, the reception peaked between 1918 and 1923, while the rest of the 1920s and 1930s served for a consolidation. Chukovsky's 1918 translation is the starting point of the analysis, with special attention given to the preface by Anatoly Lunacharsky. Also included are the data on the print run – the fact that Chukovsky's translation was printed in 5000 copies in 1918 and reprinted the next year in 50,000 is a telling indicator of the growing popularity of the American poet, not surprising as Whitman was part of Maxim Gorky's World Literature publications. Rumeau mentions but does not explore in much detail the cover art by E. Belukha, as well as the appearance of Whitman's poems in various almanacs, periodicals, chapbooks, which would certainly be a prompt for further research and analysis. Here again we obtain some information on the non-Russian Soviet reception – the Armenian and Ukrainian translations as well as work of the Ukrainian poet Ivan Kulyk. The text is accompanied by images of book covers and magazine pages, offering a glimpse into the rich interwar print culture and graphic design. The exploration of different media responses is continued with the non-literary instances of reception, with Rumeau paying particular attention to the agitprop and offering extensive and

engaging descriptions of the inclusion of Whitman's poetry in the Proletkult shows. The readers are thus informed on the actors, the audience, and the reviews of the shows, both positive and negative. Exploring the Whitmanian echoes in the Soviet cinema, Rumeau turns to the works of two cinematographers of major importance, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein.

A comparatist perspective on the interwar European reception is resumed through the presentation of publications and activities marking the centennial of Whitman's birth in Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Hungary, and Poland. Rumeau here talks about a "Comintern of translators" referring to the networks of Whitman enthusiasts with socialist inclinations active across Europe (France, Germany, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Lithuania) as well as in the US. Included are also the responses from South America and those by "the other America", i.e. the representatives of the Harlem Renaissance.

At certain points in the book, Rumeau switches from a panoramic view of the broader international reception to focusing more attentively on specific "cases" – notable editions, translations, or adaptations, or to one particular poem and its appearance at different times and in different places. A whole chapter is thus dedicated to the poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!", where covering a timeframe of almost sixty years (1886–1944), Rumeau explores the history of the poem and its political transfers with particular focus on the Russian and Soviet cultural space, but also touching on its significance to the leftist and socialist circles in Poland and Yugoslavia. Apart from being a valuable repository of information on different editions and translations, this also serves as an illustration of the various possibilities of comparative literary research, addressing both purely literary aspects and the broader context in the source and the target culture. The central interest of this chapter (and perhaps the whole book) is an avant-garde edition of "Pioneers!" in Russian translation published by the Petrograd Cooperative Segodnia in 1918 and featuring the artwork by Vera Ermolaeva.

The chapter "Anti-fascist Whitman (1936–1945)" explores the continual presence of Whitman in the discourse of the antifascist fight of the late 1930s and during the war, in the US as well as the USSR, considering the different ways the poet was accepted as "the champion of 'Democracy', a word that functioned as a unifying mantra, in spite of its different meanings" (223). Noted are the references to Whitman's poems in the context of the Spanish Civil War, with special attention paid to the work of the poet Leon Felipe, his political "translation" of "Song of Myself", and the mutual processes of "whitmanization" of Felipe's and "felipization" of Whitman's voice. The included instances of "fake translations", original poems written by Whitman-inspired "translators", show Whitman's lasting impact on the imagination of the poets and the way the idea of authorship has been constantly challenged and

perhaps even ridiculed. Further on, the author examines Whitmanian antifascist references that gained global significance during World War II and the ways in which extra-literary circumstances often dictate the literary production. One instance of this would be the temporary absence of Whitman from Soviet publications coinciding with the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of non-aggression, which corroborates the thesis that Whitman was for the most part the poet of leftist and antifascist forces. Of the more notable wartime Whitman appearances, apart from those in American anthologies, are those in the Soviet magazine *Internatsionalnaya Literatura* along with the tenth edition of Chukovsky's translation (1944).

Whitman's reception in the turbulent post-WW2 years are covered in the chapter "'Salut au Monde!' across the Iron Curtain (1946–1956)", where Rumeau again takes up the global perspective and explores little studied Whitman's reception in the postwar French communist circles, including the instances of employing Whitman in support of the anticolonial discourse, as well as in South America, extensively analyzing the work of poets and translators in Brazil, Chile, and other Latin American countries. Around the centennial of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary new translations appeared as well as original works of poetry Whitmanian in nature.

The final chapter moves on to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Soviet reception was not that dynamic as before (Whitman being already established as a classic), but when the poet's compatriots, primarily the Beat poets, were taking the lead in literary and social activism, often Whitmanian in its nature. Owing to them, Whitman retained his aura of a revolutionary leftist as his poetry was referenced to in the context of the Vietnam War and the rising counterculture. In this re-establishment of Whitman as a political poet a significant role was played by Pablo Neruda. Aside from this, Rumeau particularly pays attention to Allen Ginsberg's references to Whitman in the context of the USSR and Russian poetry.

*Comrade Whitman* concludes with a "Coda" presenting Whitman's place and role in the contemporary Russian culture and society, which is in sharp decline from the 1980s. This is again mostly due to the overall political climate and international relations, which in itself could be a topic for further analysis. One thing, however, seems to be a constant – Whitman retains his aura of a political poet and this is confirmed in the quoted speeches of Sergei Lavrov and Hillary Clinton, delivered at the unveiling of Alexander Burganov's Whitman monument on the Lomonosov University campus in 2009. That the American poet still occasionally provokes new artistic responses in Russia is proven by a mural painted in the city of Pskov in October 2022, reproducing a 1918 portrait of Whitman. In view of the dismal circumstances in which it appeared

and the controversies it sparked, the mural seems to be an appropriate conclusion for a book with this topic – reflecting the complexities accompanying the international reception of a poet such as Whitman. Delphine Rumeau elucidates some of these complexities minutely analyzing the crucial points of Whitman's Russian reception and connecting them to the contemporary tendencies in other cultures. What remains to be further explored are the many lesser known or lesser studied responses in Russian culture, briefly touched on in this book but worthy of more attention.