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### “Barbaric Yawp” in German

Given the famously untranslatable nature of Walt Whitman’s “barbaric yawp,” it is perhaps unsurprising that the first documented reference to the phrase in a German-language publication did not even attempt a translation. In his foreword to a co-authored translation of selected Whitman poems published in 1889, Karl Knortz simply used the original English phrase, even though the translation of “Song of Myself” included in the same volume did present a German translation of the phrase. Drawn to the resonant imagery of the phrase but probably reluctant to offer a necessarily imperfect translation, Knortz effectively suggested that Whitman at his most original and powerful was indeed “untranslatable.” As a brief survey of the phrase’s occurrence in published German translations, biographical essays, and prefaces shows, however, many later translators in the German-speaking countries did offer up their versions of Whitman’s phrase in German, often struggling to maintain the allusions and connotations of the original.

The seven German full translations of the poem “Song of Myself” consulted for this study render Whitman’s phrase and the line in which it occurs as follows:

Karl Knortz and Thomas Rolleston, <i>Grashalme</i> (1889)	Ich lasse mein <b>barbarisch Geschrei</b> erschallen über die Dächer der Welt.
Wilhelm Schölermann, <i>Grashalme</i> (1904)	Und lasse meinen <b>barbarischen Raubvogelschrei</b> ertönen über die Dächer der Welt!
Johannes Schlaf, <i>Grashalme</i> (1907)	Ich lasse mein <b>barbarisches Geschrei</b> erschallen über die Dächer der Welt.
Max Hayek, Walt Whitman. "Gesang Von Mir Selbst" (1920)	Ich lasse mein <b>barbarisches Geschrei</b> hinschallen über die Dächer der Welt!
Hans Reisiger, <i>Walt Whitmans Werk</i> (1922)	Ich rufe meinen <b>barbarischen Raubvogelschrei</b> über die Dächer der Welt.
Erich Arendt, <i>Grashalme</i> (1969)	[I]ch lasse mein <b>barbarisches Schreien</b> über die Dächer der Welt erschallen.
Jürgen Brôcan, <i>Grasblätter</i> (2009)	Ich schmettere mein <b>barbarisches Gekreisch</b> über die Dächer der Welt.

All seven translators chose the adjective *barbarisch* to render “barbaric” into German, thereby retaining the same associations with savagery, wildness, fierceness, and a rejection of civilization’s norms and rules reflected in Whitman’s original and in the poet’s assertion that he is “untamed.” We find greater variation, however, among the different translations of the word “yawp.” Three of the German translations (Knort/Rolleston, Schlaf, and Hayek) feature *Geschrei*, a noun that denotes repeated yelling or shouting, but that is also used derogatorily to describe the constant screaming of a child or an individual’s continuous complaining. It is not typically associated with bird or animal sounds. One translator (Arendt) used the nominalized form of the verb *schreien*, which simply means “to shout” or “to cry” (in the sense of “to call loudly”) and does not carry the same derogatory associations as *Geschrei*. Two of the translators (Schölermann and Reisiger) chose the compound word *Raubvogelschrei*, composed of the nouns *Raubvogel* (“bird of prey”) and *Schrei* (“scream” or “cry”). Clearly recognizing that in this line Whitman compares himself to the hawk (German: *Habicht* or *Falke*) described at the beginning of this section of “Song of Myself,” Schölermann and Reisiger here opted for a more narrow term than “scream” or “screaming” and made the comparison between the poet and a bird of prey as explicit as possible. A similar motive probably underlies Brôcan’s odd use of the term *Gekreisch*, which can be translated as “screeching” and has clear avian associations. The German verb *kreischen*, from which the noun is derived, describes the high-pitched, jarring sounds made by agitated, screaming birds.

Although Brôcan, thus, also retains the implied comparison between poet and hawk from the original, the image of Whitman's speaker "screeching" his message across the roofs of the world adds an involuntarily ludicrous note. Finally, it is also worth noting that the translators differ in their approach to Whitman's verb "sound," which has no immediate equivalent among German verbs. As we can see, the majority of translators chose the construction *lassen* ("let") + verb, which places the agency more with the scream or cry of the poet than with the poet himself, who simply "lets" it ring out. Again, Brôcan's version stands out, featuring the verb *schmettern* that most Germans would associate with the act of belting out or blaring a song (*ein Lied schmettern*), an especially odd word in combination with the translation of "yawp" as "screeching."

German translations of the phrase "barbaric yawp" not only appeared in German versions of "Song of Myself," but also featured prominently in the prefaces, introductions, and essays about Whitman and his work that were written by many of his German translators and early critics, just as early reviewers of Whitman's work in English often highlighted the phrase. In fact, it is surprising to see how often these writers singled out the phrase as an apt metaphor for describing a particular aspect or quality of Whitman's poetic style.

As noted, Karl Knortz used the untranslated English phrase in the very first paragraph of his foreword to *Grashalme* (1889), the first book-length translation of poetry by Whitman into German ever published, to introduce the poet as an untamed and unapologetic eschewer of conventions. While his co-translator, Thomas Rolleston, and he did translate the phrase later on in the book (see table above), Knortz let the original phrase stand in his preface without explanation, undoubtedly puzzling many of his German readers. He wrote, "the singer of the much vilified 'Leaves of Grass' not only holds a special place in American literature, but also in the literature of all peoples around the globe. He arbitrarily sets aside our conventional metrics and sings his 'barbaric yawp' just as he pleases" (Knortz/Rolleston v). Knortz then proceeded to liken Whitman's poetic style to "the wild American primeval forest, the beauties of which must not exclusively be enjoyed through the eye of the professional landscape gardener" (v). Thus associating the poet and his barbaric yawp with the vast forests and untamed landscapes of the United States—images commonly tied to America in the minds of many Germans at the time—from the very beginning of his

book, Knortz constructed Whitman and his poetic style as fitting symbols of America: beautiful, inspiring, and liberating on the one hand, but also wild and threatening the stability of established poetic conventions. The “barbaric” quality invoked here by Knortz is set up as a positive contrast to rules and regulations governing European society and poetry, and the link between barbarism and wild nature that is an integral part of Whitman’s original poem is maintained in Knortz’ use of the phrase in this foreword.

In an 1892 essay simply titled “Walt Whitman,” Johannes Schlaf also latched onto the phrase to illustrate the unconventionality and force of Whitman’s poetic style and message. As he wrote, “like mighty dithyrambs of new life and new power his ‘barbaric chants (*barbarischen Gesänge*) sound across the roofs of the world,’ straight into the midst of the many death songs of the old world, proclaiming a new religion, new art, and new value for life. Whitman is neither an optimist nor a pessimist: he is power” (Schlaf, 1892: 978). Schlaf, a Naturalist writer who did much to popularize Whitman’s poetry in German translation, was very influential in creating an image of the poet as a prophet or messiah for the modern age, whose message led the way toward cultural rebirth and rejuvenation. Just as he did in his essay, Schlaf also portrayed Whitman as a prophetic figure in the introduction to *Grashalme* (1907), his own book-length translation of poems by Whitman, and again the phrase “barbaric yawp” played a key role. Emphasizing that one of Whitman’s main topics was “a new, freely recognized equality between man and woman and a new, changed and liberated attitude of each sex toward the other,” Schlaf first explained in this introduction that it was this sentiment, which he called “pure” and “healthy” that first scandalized the “prudish” Yankees (Schlaf, 1907: 8). Then, invoking Whitman’s famous phrase both in translation and in the original, he commented: “Barbaric chants’ (barbaric yawps) Walt Whitman calls these poetic compositions; ‘barbaric chants,’ whose great, wild, free, dithyrambic rhythms he sounds ‘across the roofs of the world’ with the high, venerable, synthetic pathos of old prophecy” (Schlaf, 1907: 8-9). The “barbaric” quality of Whitman’s chants, then, to Schlaf was a positive one that consisted both in the poet’s unique and highly original style and in his willingness to embrace controversial ideas and shatter taboos of the time.

Schlaf’s hope that Whitman’s yawp would disrupt or end the “death songs” of the old order was echoed by another translator, Max Hayek, who similarly

invoked Whitman's "barbaric yawp" in the introduction to his translation of "Song of Myself" from 1920. At the end of this introduction, Hayek wrote: "The barbaric screams (*das barbarische Geschrei*) that this poet sounds across the roofs of the world—may they remind us in the pale wasteland of our cities and streets that somewhere in the world there is an untrodden wilderness, primeval deities, things free from rules and coercion, oceans, cataracts, wild currents, eagles and falcons, buffaloes and prairies, unbroken and athletic humanity and manhood, harmonious in body, spirit, and soul!" (Hayek 17). Writing in the aftermath of World War I, Hayek thus combined Schlaf's hopeful reading of Whitman's "barbaric" force as an antidote to the ills and failings of modern society with a nostalgic longing for untouched and wild nature, with which, like Knortz, he associated Whitman.

Hans Reisiger, author of the two-volume translation *Walt Whitmans Werk* (1922), also highlighted Whitman's phrase in his lengthy introduction, in which he included the following passage:

Whitman himself, at the end of his "Song of Myself," speaks of his "barbaric yawp" (*barbarischen Raubvogelschrei*) sounding over the roofs of the world, and uses this poetic picture as the finale of this powerful rhapsody. At the very climax of his perception of life and death, he falls short of breath; he stands, his voice faltering, at the edge of the sunset in which the physical and the spiritual, the finite and infinite seem to dissolve in the flaky and fiery shreds of cloud. Then, in the very depth of his soul a cry rings out, lonely, sad, and yet rapturous, similar to that of the nocturnal cry of a falcon. (It reminds me of the last line of Gottfried Keller's wonderful poem: "Far off, wild and sad the falcons' voices sounded.")

(Grünzweig 167, trans. Horst Frenz and Walter Grünzweig)

Creating a mythic scene in which he imagined Whitman suspended in time and space, Reisiger here emphasized the primacy of the poet's "yawp" or cry, explicitly compared to that of a powerful bird of prey, and its creative power. It is, thus, to him at the core of Whitman's entire poetic project. By then comparing the Whitmanian phrase to a line from the poem "Von Kindern" ("Of Children") by the Swiss writer and poet Gottfried Keller's ("Fern, wild und weh der Falken Stimmen klangen"), Reisiger invited his German readers to connect the idea of Whitman's yawp or primal scream to the cries of falcons and similar tropes with a long tradition in German-language poetry, thereby illustrating the phrase's resonance across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

As this brief survey has shown, Whitman's "barbaric yawp" fascinated Whitman's early translators and critics alike, many of whom viewed his "barbaric" qualities as a positive model to applaud and perhaps emulate. Perhaps no text makes the criticism of modern society or "civilization" implied by the positive valuation of "barbarism" clearer than an essay titled "Barbaren" ("barbarians") that Hermann Bahr, an Austrian dramatist, critic, and leading figure in the avantgarde group "Young Vienna," published in *Die neue Rundschau*, one of Germany's leading literary magazines, in 1908. In this essay, as Walter Grünzweig explains, "he welcomed a new 'barbarianism' in literature which was, in his view, the only adequate answer to the challenges brought about by emerging technological realities" (Grünzweig 167). Ostensibly a commentary on essay collections by George Bernard Shaw and Johannes Jensen, it was really a celebration of a new type of artist and human being, a *neuer Mensch* who actively embraced the label "barbarian" that the more conservative parts of society placed on him. As Bahr declared, "we are now in the process, it seems, of turning into barbarians," a development that he welcomed unequivocally (Bahr 1774). Criticizing the preoccupation with *Kultur* ("culture") and *Zivilisation* ("civilization"), that past generations exhibited, Bahr explained that to modern man, these concepts have become "questionable" (1774). Though he did not invoke Whitman's famous phrase directly, Bahr explicitly attributed this spiritual, artistic, and cultural rebirth to Whitman, going so far as to coin the term "the Whitman race" (*die Rasse Whitman*). "With Whitman," he explained, "a new human race has begun, one that knows no ghosts, but rather owns only that which is alive" (1779). Self-identifying as one of these new "barbarians," Bahr confidently announced: "we barbarians are the founders of a new order" (1776). Bahr did not see this new order or humankind as being in conflict with the machine age, nor did he advocate for a return to an idealized natural state of the past. Instead, he saw in the writings of Jensen and Whitman signs of an inner rebirth, a modern aesthetic, and a new, modern human being equally at home in untouched nature and in sprawling cities, but rejecting all conventional thought and mores of the past. To Bahr as to many of Whitman's other German critics and translators, the American poet's "barbaric yawp" heralded a new poetic style as well as a new, modern age unencumbered by old conventions, ideologies, and prejudices. To be "barbaric" meant to be critical of civilization

and its perceived defects, and Whitman's phrase more than any other seemed to express, in their view, this affirmation of a new attitude toward the world, humanity, and art.

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## Summary

This essay presents an overview and analysis of German-language translations of Walt Whitman's phrase "barbaric yawp" in seven full versions of the poem "Song of Myself" and in key biographical essays and prefaces by critics and translators in the German-speaking countries.

Although the first documented mention of the phrase in the foreword to the Knortz/Rolleston translation (1889) left it untranslated in the English original, many later translators did offer up their versions of Whitman's phrase in German, often struggling to maintain the allusions and connotations of the original. As this essay shows, Whitman's "barbaric yawp" fascinated many of his translators and critics alike in the German-speaking countries, whether because they saw in his "barbaric" qualities a positive model to applaud and perhaps emulate or because they regarded the phrase as an apt metaphor for his unique and provocative poetic style.

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

## „Barbarzyńskie yawp” po niemiecku

### Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje tłumaczenia „barbaric yawp” Whitmana zawarte w siedmiu pełnych wersjach „Song of Myself”, a także w najważniejszych esejach biograficznych oraz w przedmowach autorstwa badaczy i tłumaczy twórczości Whitmana w krajach niemieckojęzycznych. Pierwsze udokumentowane przywołanie omawianego wyrażenia pojawiło się w przedmowie autorstwa Knortza i Rollestona (1889), nie zostało jednak przetłumaczone. Mimo to późniejsi tłumacze nie ustali w poszukiwaniach odpowiedniego wyrażenia w języku niemieckim, które zachowałoby bliskie związki z oryginałem. Jak pokazuje artykuł, „barbaric yawp” Whitmana fascynowało zarówno tłumaczy, jak i badaczy jego twórczości w krajach niemieckojęzycznych. Być może dlatego, że w „barbarzyńskich” właściwościach jego poezji dostrzegali oni model do podziwiania, czy naśladowania, a także rozpoznawali w „barbaric yawp” trafną metaforę poetyckiego stylu Whitmana – zarazem unikalnego i prowokacyjnego.

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