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Whitman's "Barbaric Yawp" Sounded in Serbian*

On the occasion of the centennial of Whitman's birth, in 1919, the future Yugoslav Nobel laureate, Ivo Andrić, published an essay on Whitman celebrating his personality and his poetry as something that cannot be valued by European or any other known standards but should be studied in its totality, not dissected, and as "a poetry of the highest raptures and of a consciousness most awake" (*poezija najviših zanosa i najbudnije svesti*; Andrić 109). As an illustration of this introductory statement, the author translates two lines from the final section of Whitman's "Song of Myself":

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am un-translatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs
of the world.

Pa ja i nisam nimalo pitom; neprevodiv
sam;
Odjekuje moj barbarski vrisak iznad
krovova sveta.

Although Andrić himself previously produced several translations of individual Whitman poems, including parts of "Song of Myself," according to the existing lists of Whitman translations into Serbian, he did not attempt to translate that final section in its entirety.¹ Interestingly, though, the "barbaric yawp" made

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¹ The mentioned lists of translations and critical works are those provided by Ivan V. Lalić and Dragan Purešić in their editions of Whitman's poetry.

its way into a very important critical piece on Whitman at the beginning of the 20th century.

A general keen interest in the American poet shown by the Serbian literary public at the time is evident from the translations of individual poems and from the critical reviews that quite frequently appeared in various periodicals. The first translations of parts of “Song of Myself” were published in a literary magazine in 1911, and ever since it has been one of the most-translated among Whitman’s poems. It appears, however, that the translators have invariably used the Deathbed edition as the source text, apparently assuming that it is Whitman’s final and most authoritative version of *Leaves of Grass*.

In 1951 the first book-length Serbo-Croatian translation of Whitman’s poetry appeared in Zagreb owing to the poet and translator Tin Ujević. Ujević’s translations were included in the first Belgrade book-length edition of Whitman’s poetry, in 1969, together with the translations by Ivo Andrić and Tihomir Vučković. Unlike the previous magazine contributions, this edition contains the whole final section of “Song of Myself,” and thus the poet’s “barbaric yawp.” The subsequent Belgrade editions of Whitman’s poetry, translated by Ivan V. Lalić, a renowned Serbian poet, and Dragan Purešić, an award-winning translator, contain the “Song” in its entirety.

The line “I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” obviously was quite intriguing and inspiring for the translators, and we can spot significant differences in all of the four renditions examined here:

Odjekuje moj barbarski vrisak iznad krovova sveta. (Andrić, 1994: 109)

Ja dižem svoju barbarsku viku nad krovovima svijeta. (Vitmen, 1969: 26)

Glasim se varvarskim svojim štektanjem preko krovova sveta. (Vitmen, 1985: 125)

Puštam svoj varvarski krik preko krovova sveta. (Vitmen, 2008: 145)

One of the critical points in rendering this line into Serbian (Serbo-Croatian) has been translating the verb “sound.” Having in mind the onomatopoeic character of the whole phrase, the translator would certainly wish to retain the sense of “making a sound from one’s own throat,” and Ivan V. Lalić attempted precisely that, using a not-so-frequent verb, *glasiti se* (derived from the noun

glas—“voice”). While retaining the aural character of the word “sound” itself, Andrić here changes the whole sentence construction by changing the subject of the line. The subject in Andrić’s fairly poetic rendition is no longer the “I,” but “my barbaric yawp” (or rather “scream,” as will be discussed further) and the yawp here “echoes,” *odjekuje*. The other two translators, however, opted for the verbs which commonly collocate with the nouns denoting the “yawp,” but have little to do with “producing a sound” on their own—*dizati* (*viku*), literally meaning “to raise (a cry),” and *puštati* (*krik*), literally “to let out (a cry).” When it comes to the first part of the line, it is also interesting to note that only Ujević retains the Whitmanic “I,” i. e. *ja*, whereas Lalić and Purešić omit the pronoun, which is possible in most Slavic languages and thus poses a common dilemma in translating Whitman.

The adjective “barbaric,” with its Latin root, is a common word in most European languages and therefore does not usually create much of a problem for translators. Nevertheless, the examined translations show the difference pointing towards the historical changes of the Serbian language, represented in the two variants—*barbarski*, used earlier and mostly by the Serbian and Serbo-Croatian speakers in the west of the Balkans and still retained in Croatian, and *varvarski*, influenced by the Eastern, Byzantine pronunciation and transliteration, and today accepted as the standard Serbian variant. The two are obviously derived from the same root, although *barbarski* more clearly illustrates the possible etymological connection with the Serbian verb *brbljati* (“to babble”), in correspondence with Ed Folsom’s finding regarding the Czech verb *blblati*.

But surely, the greatest trouble here is translating Whitman’s, if not “untranslatable,” then certainly difficult-to-translate, “yawp.” Keeping both the onomatopoeic character of a word, as well as possible associations in the source language, is generally very rarely achievable. All four translations here refer to the sound itself, and not to the open mouth making it, which is another possible meaning of the English word, and none of the translators attempted to make a suggestive coinage of their own, as was one of the assumptions about Whitman’s “yawp.” Whereas the English “yawp” is not so commonly used, the Serbian translators chose the nouns that are quite established in literary and even everyday language, and would hardly be described as outlandish even by non-intellectuals. In fact, given the frequency of the English and the Serbian

words in question, it is not certain that any translator would back-translate these nouns as “yawp.” As mentioned above, Andrić renders this word as *vrisak*, which more closely corresponds to “a scream,” i.e. a piercing sound made by humans, perhaps resembling the sound a swooping hawk too. Lalić’s slightly surprising choice of *štektanje*, a verbal noun in Serbian denoting “yelping,” reveals the translator’s relying on the etymological relations of the English word, also mentioned in Ed Folsom’s Introduction. However, taking into consideration the possibility that some Serbian literature teacher will want to inspire his/her students in the style of Prof. John Keating, it would be perhaps more advisable to go with a word that is short and easier to “yawp.” Hence, Ujević and Purešić use the nouns *vika* and *krik* respectively, and the difference here is that the first one is almost exclusively associated with humans, whereas the second can denote the sounds made both by humans and animals (a hawk, for instance).

A minor difference in rendering this phrase into Serbian is the position of the possessive adjective *svoj* (“my”), usually placed at the beginning of the noun phrase, but not uncommonly, as in Lalić’s translation, interpolated between the adjective (*varvarsко*) and the noun (*štektanje*). This middle position is not only possible in Serbian, but also quite typical of poetic language, bringing about a change in rhythm, especially when the surrounding words are longer. Furthermore, the use of different prepositions in the last part of the line creates interesting variations in the meaning. While Lalić’s and Purešić’s translations of “over the roofs of the world” indicate that the yawp will travel or fly over the world just like the aforementioned hawk, Ujević’s use of a different preposition (*nad* instead of *preko*) brings to mind a more static image of a poet standing above the world and sounding his yawp.

The names of the authors who showed interest in Whitman by translating his poetry pose the inevitable question whether and to what extent we can speak of Whitman’s influence on the poetics of Andrić, Ujević and Lalić. However, it is interesting to note that another Serbian writer, Mihajlo Pantić, warns against readily accepting the claims about such influences when the great poets are concerned, by comparing precisely the presently considered Whitman line to the lines from Tin Ujević’s poem “Daily Lament” (“Svakidašnja jadikovka”). In his article “One Magical Analogy” (“Jedna magična analogija”), Pantić quotes Ujević’s lines:

Pa nek sam kres na brdimu,
pa nek sam dah u plamenu,
kad nisam krik sa krovova! (Pantić 809)

May I be the fire on the hills,
May I be the breath in flames,
If I am not a yawp from the roofs!

and he goes on to stress that neither Ujević, nor Whitman, nor any other poet of greatness should be read through somebody else's poetry. As Pantić points out:

Vitmenov stih je finale jedne uskomešane, slikovne, asocijativne i retoričke avan-ture u kojoj se lirsко Ja varljivo postoveću sa svim predmetima vlastitog haotičnog kataloga, da bi se, na kraju, nesmireno, objavilo u vidu 'varvarskog,' praiskonskog glasa i otplovilo u visinu, u ravnodušni, neizvesni prostor. (Pantić 809)

Whitman's line is the finale of an agitated, pictorial, associative and rhetorical adventure in which the lyri-cal I is illusively identified with all the objects of one's own chaotic catalogue, to be eventually, restlessly sounded in the form of a 'barbaric', primeval voice, and to sail away in the heights, in the indifferent, uncertain space.

In Whitman's, as well as in Ujević's yawp, he sees a Munchian scream of an abandoned and horrified modern man.

Much less pessimistic readings of the "barbaric yawp" have been offered by some other Serbian authors. What is undeniable and often repeated in the reviews of Whitman's poetry is his influence on the poetics of Dada, Futurism, Expressionism, and the related movements of the beginning of the 20th century. Especially interested in Whitman were the activists of the Yugoslav avant-garde movement Zenitism, as can be seen from the works of its founders, Boško Tokin and Ljubomir Micić. Tokin regarded Whitman as "barbaro-kosmos," also noting that "to be a barbarian means: the beginning, the possibility, the creation" (*Biti barbar znači: početak, mogućnost, stvaranje*; Tokin 73). Similar ideas are present in Micić's poem "Barbarogenius" ("Barbarogenije"), which truly echoes the Whitmanic yawp in the line *Ah divlje bi da riknem u planine balkanskog kontinenta* ("Ah I would roar wildly into the mountains of the Balkan continent"; Micić, n. pag.).

The overall idea of Micić's poetics indicates that the anguish of the time after the Great War could be relieved only through the character of *barbarogenius*, and that the whole Europe needed to return to the primeval, "barbaric" values. In other words, it needed to sound Whitman's "barbaric yawp," uncivilized and natural, thus bringing vigor and freshness to a world which had become a bit stale.

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Summary

The paper analyzes four Serbian (Serbo-Croatian) translations of the line "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" that were made by Ivo Andrić, Tin Ujević, Ivan V. Lalić, and Dragan Purešić. The author is also interested in Whitman's influence on the poetics of the authors who read and translated him. Such influence, especially in relation to the "barbaric" quality of Whitman's singing, can be noted, for instance, in the ideas of the Yugoslav avant-garde movement Zenitism and its activists.

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

„Barbarzyńskie yawp” Whitmana po serbsku

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje cztery serbskie (serbsko-chorwackie) tłumaczenia wersu „I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world”, których autorami są Ivo Andrić, Tin Ujević, Ivan V. Lalić oraz Dragan Purešić. Autorkę artykułu interesuje także wpływ, jaki poezja Whitmana wywarła na twórczość poetów, którzy ją tłumaczyli. Można go dostrzec, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do „barbarzyńskich” właściwości śpiewu Whitmana, na przykład w twórczości jugosłowiańskiego ruchu awangardowego Zenitizam (*Зенитизам*).

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