

Diana Ismail
Uniwersytet Szczeciński

The Fifth International Whitman Week
(28 May 2012–2 June 2012, Pobierowo, Poland)

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, though written over two centuries ago, is still a landmark of modern poetry and world literature. Year by year, Whitman's works blossom as new editions are published in a variety of languages. New generations of poets carry the seeds of Whitman's meaning into their own poems, or "leaves," as Whitman might say, as the poets attempt to emulate Whitman, transfer his lines and ideas into their own poetry and thus enter their own dialogue with the poet. Passages of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* continue to be referred to and quoted in films, and made into songs. His name arises in discussions of sexuality and gender and it continues to be present in the curricula of colleges and universities worldwide. It is these responses that make the poetry of Walt Whitman a living, breathing organism that continues to thrive youthfully and give rise to fruitful discourse despite its venerable age.

The Transatlantic Walt Whitman Association (TWWA), founded in Paris in 2007, considers it its mission to respond to the international phenomenon of Walt Whitman and perhaps his best-known work—*Leaves of Grass*—which remains a major influence on world literature and culture. Therefore, each year since 2008, the TWWA sponsors an International Whitman Week to celebrate the international significance of Walt Whitman's poetry. Each Whitman Week consists of a series of International Whitman Seminars, where students from different countries meet to take part in intensive workshops taught by an international team of Whitman specialists. Afterwards, a Symposium is organized in

which papers on Whitman-related topics are presented, followed by a discussion of the papers and an exchange of opinions and ideas.

The first Whitman Week was held in Dortmund, Germany, in June 2008, the second took place in Tours, France, in June 2009, the third in Macerata, Italy, in June 2010 and the fourth in Araraquara, São Paulo, Brazil, in July, 2011. The fifth and most recent Annual International Whitman Week was held in Pobierowo, Poland at the end of May and the beginning of June 2012, at a villa belonging to the University of Szczecin. The event brought together students, scholars, researchers, professors and Whitman enthusiasts from Serbia, Belgium, France, Italy, Brazil, the USA, Germany and Poland.

The Seminar Morning Sessions

The Fifth Whitman Week in Pobierowo officially began on 28 May with the five-day seminar, titled *Walt Whitman International: Reading His Work, Translating His Poetry*, attracting thirty students and a dozen Whitman specialists from the above-mentioned countries. Each day of the seminar was scheduled to comprise of a morning session, a group session and an afternoon translation workshop—except on the first and last day.

The first day of the Seminar and of Whitman Week unfolded with a ceremonial opening of the event, was followed by a welcome lunch and came to a close with an afternoon of sightseeing in Szczecin and a long walk along the beach from Pobierowo to Trzęszacz). On the first morning of the Whitman Week Seminar, all the participants and instructors gathered in the conference room of the villa to hear the inauguration speeches of Professor Andrzej Witkowski, the Vice-Rector of the University of Szczecin, and the Whitman Week organizers. As it has become the tradition of Whitman Weeks, the agenda of the first meeting also included the viewing of the Walt Whitman film, showing the life and work of the poet. The second half of the last day of the seminar, on the other hand, was cut shorter due to the Symposium which was to begin that afternoon. Not counting these two exceptions, the Seminar proceeded in a similar fashion each day, consisting of morning sessions, group sessions and translation workshops.

The morning classes were led by renowned Whitman specialists: Ed Folsom (University of Iowa), co-founder and editor of the *Walt Whitman Archive*, and author or editor of ten books on Whitman; Walter Grünzweig (Technical University of Dortmund), author of *Walt Whitman* and *Constructing the German Walt Whitman*; Kenneth M. Price (University of Nebraska, Lincoln), co-founder and editor of the *Walt Whitman Archive* and author or editor of six books on Whitman, and Agnieszka Salska (University of Łódź), author of *Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness*. Each morning session was assigned a different topic, thus each morning the instructors would give a talk, mini-lecture or presentation that would serve as an introduction to the topic of the day's group sessions and/or afternoon workshops.

For instance, on 31 May, as the topic of the morning session touched upon Whitman and the Civil War, to give a broader view of the subject, the instructors each discussed Whitman in the war context, from a different perspective: Kenneth M. Price talked about Whitman and the Civil War legend discussing, for example, Whitman's attitude towards the emancipation of blacks; Agnieszka Salska compared Whitman's Civil war poetry to Longfellow's poetry of this period, showing how differently the poets depicted war despite sharing a similar war experience; Walter Grünzweig discussed Whitman's nursing of wounded soldiers during the war and the eroticism of the nurse figure, which is frequently commented on in Whitman's poetry of this period; while Ed Folsom discussed the toll of war—death—in passages of *Specimen Days* and the poem "This Compost," showing Whitman's invention of a new syntax of mass death.

After the morning session, the students were divided into four smaller groups and spent an hour with one of the instructors for a group session, during which students had the opportunity to engage in discussions with the instructor and each other, exchanging their cultural perspectives on the subject discussed, share their readings of key poems and clusters, focus on fragments of particular interest to them, or continue a thread started during the morning session. Afterwards, following a lunch break, the students attended afternoon translation sessions on the reception of Whitman in various countries and languages, as well as on the translation of his poems into German, French, Italian, Portuguese and Polish.

The Seminar Translation Workshops

The introduction of translation workshops to Whitman Week was implemented for the first time during the fifth Whitman Week and it proved to be a great success. The poem that was chosen for analysis and translation was “When I heard the Learn’d Astronomer.” The workshops were led by Marina Camboni (University of Macerata), Mario Corona (Bergamo University), Eric Áthenot (University of Tours), Betsy Erkkila (Northwestern University), Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brazil), Vanessa Steinroetter (Washburn University) and Marta Skwara (University of Szczecin)—all of whom also are acknowledged Whitman specialists, and some of whom are additionally translators of Whitman’s poetry themselves.

During the first translation workshop, the students were given translations of the poem in the native languages of the participants and instructors. Each language had at least three different translations of the same poem, each done by a different translator. The task of the first meeting was for the students to analyze the differences in the translations, comparing them with the original English version. Therefore each student’s role was to analyze the translations in the language that they knew in order to explain to the rest of the students what differences arose in them, compared to the original version, and to comment on what difficulties arose in the translations of particular lines.

The second workshop was meant to shed light onto the reception of “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” in different countries, and also to discuss and assess the translators’ choices and the translator’s bane in problematic areas of the poem in Italian, German, Portuguese, Polish and French. However, due to the fact that the organization of the workshop in the form of talks on the instructors’ behalf met with some protests from some of the participants, the length of the debate on the future organization of such workshops that followed, unfortunately, did not enable all the languages to be covered in equal depth.

Finally, during the last workshop sessions, the students were placed in smaller groups and asked to produce their own translation of “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” into the native language of each student. If the student’s native language was English, then the student was asked to translate into a language that that student had learnt and knew well enough to translate into.

Next the students were asked to produce back-translations of the poem into English and then present the results before the other groups and share their observations. The task met with zealous effort from the students and resulted in productive discussion and enthusiastic debate. The results of the translation endeavor revealed that, surprisingly, the syntax and lexis of many of the languages in question shared the same problems in the attempt to translate particular passages e.g. as in the case of the *unaccountable I*, or the first person *I* in general (the first person *I*, as it turned out, is usually omitted in translations to avoid awkwardness, despite the significance of the *I* in Whitman's poetry).

In sum, the participants of the workshops found the new project to be an enjoyable and enriching learning experience and welcomed the prospect of including similar translation sessions in the programs of Whitman Weeks to come.

The Symposium

The seminar participants also had the opportunity to attend the fifth Whitman Week Symposium, titled "*Voluptuous Cool-Breath'd Earth*": *Whitman, the Earth, and Ecology*, which took place immediately after the workshops. The two-day symposium started on the afternoon of 1 June and included papers and presentations of Whitman scholars from various countries (as well as of some of the seminar participants) on topics ranging from Whitman's attitude towards nature, Whitman's landscapes, his style, his nature imagery in erotic passages of his poetry, to urban ecology and analyses of Whitman in relation to writers and philosophers.

During the symposium the participants learned why in 1876 a number of Victorian devotees in Britain, including George Eliot, George H. Lewes, M.D. Conway and the poet and critic Robert Buchanan, renounced Whitman and his earthly sensuality. How the Chilean avant-garde poet Vicente Huidobro is connected to Walt Whitman through his 1918 poem *Equatorial* (*Equatorial*). How Whitman was received by some nineteenth-century critics to be a follower of Spinoza. What Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* have in common with M. Schele de Vere's *Stray Leaves from the Book of Nature*. Why the Polish Nobel-Prize laureate and translator of Whitman's poetry, Czesław Miłosz,

chose to translate and publish in his *Unattainable Earth* sections of a Whitman poem in which nature is painted in an overall uncharacteristic of Whitman dark tone. As well as how the Brazilian poet Hilda Hilst and Walt Whitman use eroticism in depictions of nature. The participants of the symposium also discovered what significance a New York barroom called Pfaff's beer cellar had to Whitman's experience of what the author of the paper describes (paraphrasing the eco-critic Lawrence Buell) to be an urban ecological process of "rehabitation," or "a relearn[ing] of what it means to be 'native'" to the city of New York. Other nature-oriented papers explored, for instance, Whitman in light of modern ecological awareness showing Whitman's dialog with the environmental discourses of his day and Whitman's local poetics in the context of mid-nineteenth century environmental debates.

Each of the four symposium sessions concluded with question time and animated discussion.

After Hours

The Fifth International Whitman Week, as a few Whitman Week "regulars" observed, seemed to spur discussion concerning Whitman even long after the sessions and workshops came to a close. There seemed to be something rather "mystical" in the "moist night air" to paraphrase a passage of "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"—and it was definitely not just the rain (which we had plenty of that week). There appeared to be quite a few other factors at work to create such a stir.

For instance, the exceptionally favorable and quite coincidental circumstances under which the Fifth Whitman Week took place. The tranquil, picturesque seaside town of Pobierowo, a place abounding in greenery and sandy beaches, situated approximately 65 km east from the German border and directly by the Baltic Sea, proved to be situated in an excellent location for the event, considering the international subject matter of the seminar (*Walt Whitman International: Reading his work, translating his poetry*), and the ecology-related symposium ("*Voluptuous Cool-Breath'd Earth*": *Whitman, the Earth, and Ecology*). Apart from the fact that the topics of nature, ecology and intercultural dialogue fit in perfectly with the Whitman Week venue, the Fifth Whitman

Week also happened to span over 31May—a very significant date to all true Whitman enthusiasts. It just so happens that exactly on 31 May 1819, Walt Whitman was born and by mere coincidence the fifth Whitman Week took place during the one hundred and ninety-third anniversary of Walt Whitman's birth which, I might add, has happened for the first time since Whitman Weeks have come into being.

If you add to that the multicultural diversity, late night strolls along the beach, the Whitman movie night (held 31 May to celebrate Whitman's birthday) premiere of the new Whitman movie, the Polish movie nights at the villa, the "Goodbye Evening" with Polish cuisine (earnestly prepared by the Polish organizers and their families) the charisma of the instructors and their contagious enthusiasm of everything Whitman—it was not hard to become inspired. Towards the end of the seminar, all the students participating in Whitman week received credit-bearing certificates and if you were to look closely at the hand-written names on each one, you would notice the winding ornate letters that make up the "spermatoid" font of Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* cover—an after-effect of Ed Folsom's inspiring lecture on the student responsible for printing the names on the certificates.

The Sixth International Whitman Week

The 6th Whitman Week is to be held 24 June–29 June 2013. On the last day of Whitman Week during the TWWA business meeting, it was decided that the Sixth International Whitman Week would be organized by Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, USA, and the theme of the forthcoming event would be *Whitman North and South*.

Summary

The coverage summarizes the fifth annual meeting of scholars and enthusiasts of the nineteenth century American poet, Walt Whitman. It contains information concerning the background of the event: the overall aim of International Whitman Week, the role of its founders, a description of its structure and a summary of the event held in Pobierowo, Poland. The review draws to a close with an account of some of the highlights

of the Fifth International Whitman Week concludes with a reference to the following Whitman Week which is scheduled to take place in June 2013, in the USA.

Key words: Transatlantic Walt Whitman Association, The Fifth International Whitman Week in Pobierowo, University of Szczecin

Piąty Międzynarodowy Tydzień Whitmanowski w Pobierowie (28 maja 2012–2 czerwca 2012)

Streszczenie

Sprawozdanie podsumowuje piąte coroczne spotkanie miłośników dziewiętnastowiecznego amerykańskiego poety, Wálta Whitmana. Zawiera informacje dotyczące: celów organizowania Tygodni Whitmanowskich, pomysłodawców wydarzenia, poprzednich Tygodni Whitmanowskich, oraz struktury Piątego Tygodnia Whitmanowskiego w Pobierowie. W podsumowaniu sprawozdania, autorka przedstawia zalety Tygodnia Whitmanowskiego i organizacji tego wydarzenia w Pobierowie oraz zapowiada Szósty Tydzień Whitmanowski, który ma odbyć się w 2013 roku w Stanach Zjednoczonych.

Słowa kluczowe: Transatlantyckie Stowarzyszenie Badaczy Wálta Whitmana, Piąty Międzynarodowy Tydzień Whitmanowski w Pobierowie, Uniwersytet Szczeciński