



ED FOLSOM & GAY WILSON ALLEN

## Introduction: “Salut au Monde!”

If it hadn't been for Emerson's electrifying letter greeting Whitman at “the beginning of a great career,” the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, would have been a total failure; few copies were sold, and Emerson and Whitman seemed about the only people who recognized much promise in it. Undaunted, Whitman published an expanded second edition in 1856, in which he included a visionary poem (then called “Poem of Salutation,” later to become “Salut au Monde!”) containing this prophetic exclamation:

My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination around the whole earth,  
I have look'd for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands,  
I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them. (LG, 148)

He boasted that this new edition would sell several thousand copies, but it turned out to be an even greater failure than the first. What we now see as prophecy appeared in 1856 as nothing more than boastful fantasy, for it would be many years before Whitman would become known in other lands. Throughout his life, though, he would maintain this international dream; in 1881, while expressing hope that a projected Russian translation of *Leaves* would soon become a reality, he noted:

As my dearest dream is for an internationality of poems and poets, binding the lands of the earth closer than all treaties and diplomacy—As the purpose beneath the rest in my book is such hearty comradeship, for individuals to begin with, and for all the nations of the earth as a result—how happy I should be to get the hearing and emotional contact of the great Russian peoples.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually Whitman would find “equals and lovers” quite literally around the world, a true “internationality” of “hearty comradeship.” Today, complete translations of *Leaves of Grass* have been published in France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Japan, and China, and selections of Whitman’s poetry have appeared in every major language except Arabic. Scores of biographical and critical books on Whitman have been published on every continent.

This book sets out to trace some of the ways Whitman has been absorbed into cultures from around the world for more than a century. From nation to nation, Whitman’s poetry and prose have generated a wide variety of aesthetic, political, and religious responses. Since no American writer has been more influential in more nations than Whitman, the materials in this book demonstrate some important ways that American culture, as articulated in Whitman’s work, has helped redefine older and more established national traditions and how it has helped emerging nations define themselves. These materials also show how various national cultures have reconstructed Whitman in order to make him fit their native patterns. This book presents and examines, then, some radically realigned versions of Whitman, as his writing—translated into other languages and absorbed into other traditions—undertakes a different kind of cultural work than it performs in the United States.

To accomplish this overview of responses, we organized an international group of writers and scholars, each with expertise in both Whitman and the culture about which they write. This group of distinguished scholars corresponded with each other and eventually met in Iowa City in 1992 to discuss the project in detail; their collaboration has resulted in one of the first sustained explorations of a major American writer’s influence on world literature. Our goal has been to bring together the most illuminating responses to Whitman from every culture in which we could identify significant work on Whitman. The book is organized in sections, each one offering a careful analysis of the ways that Whitman has been absorbed into a particular culture and then offering selections from writings about Whitman by poets and critics from that culture.

The size and detail of each section of this book reflect the range and depth of the particular national response to Whitman. For cultures that have long and manifold responses to *Leaves of Grass*, like Great Britain, we have chosen to present brief excerpts from a large number of respondents, indicating the wealth of materials available. Where particular essays have had a dramatic impact on Whitman’s reputation in a given culture, as José Martí’s did in Spanish-speaking countries or as Ferdinand Freiligrath’s and Johannes Schlaf’s did in Germany, we have devoted more space to those individual responses. In countries where the re-

sponse to Whitman has so far been fragmentary but still noteworthy, we offer only a historical and critical overview, with few or no selections. Selected bibliographies at the back of the volume list major translations and key critical writings.

This book began as an updating of Gay Wilson Allen's *Walt Whitman Abroad* (1955), but it quickly turned into a project that involved reconceptualizing and vastly revising the earlier work. While we reprint some pieces that appeared in *Walt Whitman Abroad*, much of the material is new, and the overviews have been completely rewritten to reflect the overwhelming changes of the past forty years—changes both in the cultures represented and in their views of Whitman. *Walt Whitman Abroad* contained no section on Great Britain, since at that time Harold Blodgett's *Walt Whitman in England* (1934) still seemed to cover the ground adequately. Blodgett's study now needs to be supplemented, however, and we are pleased to present M. Wynn Thomas's up-to-date overview of Whitman in the British Isles. *Walt Whitman Abroad* also did not include any of the poems that poets from around the world have addressed to Whitman over the past century. In 1981, in *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion collected many of the poems that demonstrated how poets from Whitman's time to the present have continued to engage in a dialogue with Whitman, literally "talking back" to him just as he talked forward to "Poets to Come." This ongoing poetic dialogue with Whitman was not limited to American poets, and in this book we present a selection of poems, many appearing for the first time in English translation, that demonstrates just how remarkably international the "talking back" to Whitman has been.

We had hoped to present a study of Whitman in African nations, but that important topic remains to be done. Certainly Whitman has generated African responses, from white South Africans like Jan Christiaan Smuts, a former prime minister who wrote one of the earliest critical studies of Whitman, and novelist Alan Paton, to important black writers like Ngugi wa T'hiongo, who has used Whitman's poetry as epigraphs for his novels, and Syl Cheney-Coker, a Sierra Leone poet who has written Whitman-inspired poems, including his own "Children of Adam." But the responses have yet to be gathered, studied, and sorted according to the multitude of national and tribal traditions in Africa. This important project awaits a generation of critics to come.

From the 1860s to the present, Whitman's poetry has been remarkably influential in an international context. Before he was widely viewed as a significant writer in the United States, Whitman was already taken seriously by readers in many countries as an author who carefully and imaginatively defined the problematics of democracy. Until well into the twentieth century, in fact, he was more highly regarded and more widely read in several European countries than he was in the United States. His international impact has continued to grow throughout this century, and he has helped generations of writers—in Europe, Latin America, the Indian subcontinent, and emerging African nations—to formulate and challenge democratic assumptions and attitudes. As Gay Wilson Allen noted in his preface

to *Walt Whitman Abroad*, "Time after time the critics in other lands have seen in Whitman's crudities—or fancied crudities—the awkwardness of a young nation, an immature giant which has not yet learned its own strength." Allen suggested that "these foreign critics of Whitman may help Americans to understand themselves [and] to understand the misconceptions about themselves that they must overcome."<sup>2</sup>

Now, forty years later, the United States perhaps seems less of an "immature giant," but the culture clearly remains just as much in need of help in defining itself. Critics and poets from other cultures still turn to Whitman for the materials out of which they define the United States. Huck Gutman has observed, in the introduction to a recent collection of essays investigating international perspectives on American literature, that the great value of such a global view "is the manner in which the study and reception of American literature reveals national identity. When one culture abuts another, the way in which one encounters or assimilates the other is defining in special ways."

Gutman's collection (in which Whitman is notably absent) sets out to provide "a sense of just how thoroughly—or partially—American culture has penetrated other cultures, and with what sort of impact."<sup>3</sup> *Walt Whitman and the World* provides a case study of how one of the best-known representatives of American culture has carried his democratic message into an array of other cultures and how those cultures have responded to that message.

Questions concerning the nature of a democratic political system, a democratic art, a democratic sexuality, and a democratic religion are central concerns of Whitman's, and they have been key components of countless international responses to Whitman. His impact was felt in the Soviet Union, where he was read as a kind of socialist prophet (it will be interesting to see just where and how he continues to be read in the myriad countries emerging from the collapse of the USSR), and it is beginning to be felt in China, where a full translation of *Leaves of Grass* is now available (after having been delayed by Chinese authorities for fear of the impact it might have had during the Tiananmen Square student democratic uprisings a few years ago). It is no accident that Whitman's influence has been most dramatically apparent in countries that are in the midst of democratic revolutions and deep social change. Whitman's poetry has in the last few years been translated into Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian and was published in Yugoslavia just before that country disintegrated into ethnic states, and the first major edition of his prose work to appear in East Germany was published less than five years before the Berlin Wall came down.

From early on, Whitman has been read in other cultures as a poet of revolution, and his influence has been notably cross-cultural, as writers from one nationality export or import him with ease into another. One of the earliest critics to become interested in Whitman was the German poet Ferdinand Freiligrath, who published an essay on Whitman in 1868; he first encountered Whitman's works while he was living in England as an exile because of his rebellion against political tyranny in Germany. Several radicals in Britain had recently discovered

Whitman (he was embraced there mostly by liberals, militant democrats, and proto-socialists), and it was their discussion of him in periodicals that attracted Freiligrath's attention. In 1871 Algernon Swinburne addressed a poem to Whitman, celebrating him as a prophet of liberty, a "strong-winged soul with prophetic lips hot with the blood-beats of song" (Swinburne would eventually include this poem in his *Songs Before Sunrise*, a book dedicated to Giuseppe Mazzini, leader of a revolution in Italy), and in 1878 Edward Dowden hailed the American poet as the "poet of democracy." Some Chinese poets came to know Whitman first while living in exile in France, and the German Erich Arendt engaged Whitman's work while exiled in Latin America. Wherever he was first encountered, and in whatever language, his writings usually seemed to speak democratic revolution.

Actually, Whitman wrote very few poems about political revolution, though his 1855 edition did contain two: a satirical poem later entitled "A Boston Ballad" and another that lamented and celebrated the failed revolts in various European countries in 1848–49 (later entitled "Europe, the 72nd and 73d Years of These States"). His "Europe" poem offered both consolation and prophecy: "Not a grave of the murder'd for freedom but grows seed for freedom, in its turn to bear seed, / Which the winds carry afar and re-sow, and the rains and the snows nourish" (LG, 268). Such sentiments appealed to some of the young Russian poets and journalists during the abortive Russian revolt in 1905 and again, more widely, during the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Earlier, a Russian journalist named V. Popov had called Whitman "the spirit of revolt," the champion of all those oppressed by tyranny: this was the Whitman who appealed to the Bolsheviks, who distributed translations of his poems in military camps.

But Whitman was not read only for his revolutionary political impulses. Others turned to him for what he could teach them about poetry or about themselves: Franz Kafka, for example, found him "among the greatest formal innovators in the modern lyric," and in Portugal Fernando Pessoa celebrated Whitman's "wild and gentle brotherhood with everything," finding in the American poet wonderfully incongruous personalities that opened up new possibilities for subjectivity. Whitman's ability to reconcile contradictions, to resist the valorization of soul over body, has led many Indian writers to hear ancient Hindu voices at the heart of Whitman's poetry.

Whatever his sources, the remarkable thing about Whitman's appeal to his readers is that everyone seems to find in his poetry what she or he wants and needs. So the Russians, unhappy under their czar, perceived in Whitman's poems "the spirit of revolt and pride," while later Soviet Communists admired the way he "defines the solidarity of interests of working people . . . and foretells the advent of brotherhood of all nations." In France he was admired early in the twentieth century by the Symbolists and a few years later by the pan-social Unanimists, while still others, like André Gide, found fellowship in Whitman the homosexual. During the first Whitman cult in Germany, he was admired for his cosmic world outlook and was compared to Beethoven and Bismarck; during World War I,

German soldiers were attracted by *Drum-Taps* and carried translations of his poems in the trenches; after the war, the German labor press discovered Whitman and used him for their propaganda; in 1922 Thomas Mann, in his famous “Von Deutscher Republik” speech, praised Whitman and Novalis as archetypes of American democracy and German humanity. Once we begin to trace the fertile and shifting responses, the examples proliferate; this book provides an abundance of materials out of which illuminating new international influence studies can be constructed.

In a surprisingly large number of nations, then, important writers have responded in significant ways to Whitman — ways that help define the intersections between American culture and other cultures, ways that help define the varied possibilities for the construction of democracies, and ways that help define an emerging international culture. Jorge Luis Borges said that Whitman “wrote his rhapsodies in the role of an imaginary self, formed partly of himself, partly of each of his readers.” This is why so many readers find not only Whitman but also themselves in his poems, and it is why so many nations find in his work aspects of and challenges to their own cultures. No other poet in English since Shakespeare has appealed to so many people in so many places in so many ways.

In the United States, during this century, an awareness of Whitman’s international influence has slowly evolved. Even in Whitman’s own lifetime, the poet’s disciples were actively involved in gathering and responding to essays on the poet published in European countries, and Whitman’s follower Horace Traubel used his wide association of socialist contacts to form an International Walt Whitman Fellowship. As Whitman scholarship developed in the twentieth century, however, most American critics lost touch with the developing foreign reputation of Whitman and instead turned their attention to Whitman’s American connections and to his native roots. During the era of New Criticism, with its insistence on viewing poetic texts as self-enclosed art objects, Whitman’s poetry came to seem both loosely symbolic and embarrassingly nationalistic.

Meanwhile, Whitman’s reputation in other countries was developing along quite different lines, lines that were invisible to most American scholars until Gay Wilson Allen’s *Walt Whitman Handbook* was published in 1946. Allen devoted a chapter to Walt Whitman and world literature, and he developed his analysis in *Walt Whitman Abroad*, which offered the first gathering of international responses. In 1955 that book came as something of a shock to scholars who had learned to view Whitman in more insular ways. Books gradually began to appear that viewed Whitman in particular cultural contexts: Harold Blodgett had already written on Whitman in England, as had Fernando Alegría on Whitman in Hispanoamerica; soon, V. K. Chari would write on Whitman and Indian traditions; later, Betsy Erkkila on Whitman among the French; and most recently, Walter Grünzweig on Whitman in German-speaking cultures. Essays appeared tracing Whitman’s influence on countries as diverse as Russia, Brazil, Israel,

China, and Finland. It became clear that a multinational and quite diverse response to Whitman had been forming for more than a century, but, while individual pockets were known, there had been no attempt to assess the full range of responses.

The ways that a writer of one nationality begins to influence writers of another nationality — and then becomes more generally absorbed into the culture — are obviously complex. When language barriers exist, the patterns of influence become even more difficult to trace, especially in the case of poetry, where the radical and innovative use of language embeds the text even more firmly in the originating culture. Usually some significant translation of the author's work into the host country's language is the first step in developing international influence, and that is generally followed by critical responses to the work in translation. This book takes the next step, translating this international critical response to Whitman back into English and investigating the nature of the response, so that the international reaction can in turn begin to have an impact on Americans' comprehension of Whitman's importance. *Walt Whitman and the World* completes the circle, allowing the insights that have been gained by reading Whitman in other cultural contexts to impinge on the rather provincial understanding of Whitman held by many American readers and writers, who tend still to view him only in an American context and who tend to be oblivious to the variety of ways that Whitman has been construed for the purposes and needs of other cultures.

One of the most persistent concerns about the field of American Studies and American Literature in the past half century has been its provincialism, its insistence that American literature can only be understood in national terms, in relation to the opening of the American West, in relation to the Civil War, in relation to the search for a distinctly American literature. Such approaches to American literature were necessary to offset the earlier perception of the nation's writing as simply a subset of British literature, a colonial literature best read in the context of and judged in relation to the tradition of English literature in the old country. But the work of defining the national origins and goals of American literature is largely complete, and more recent concerns in the field now call for a wider understanding of the multicultural forces that have combined to form what we call "American" literature: Spanish influences, Japanese and Chinese contributions, Amerindian influences, African influences. It is vital to see the melding of various ethnic traditions that form American literature, and such a melding was exactly what Whitman celebrated about his country's emerging literary and political traditions. He saw a time when democratic literature would transcend national boundaries, and he did his best to encourage an international reaction to his work, to generate a debate on the nature of democratic literature that would eventually produce poets from around the world who would carry on and refine the project he began.

But even Whitman would have been startled by the variety of reactions to his work and by the multitude of ways that his call for a democratic literature has

been heard. The tracking of this international response, then, is one way that American literature can be conceptualized outside of national boundaries and outside of “English” influences and reactions. This book internationalizes our perception of American literature by demonstrating how various cultures appropriate an American writer who ceases to sound quite so narrowly “American” as soon as he is read into another culture’s traditions.

Those readers interested primarily in American literature will find this study yielding fascinating insights into and responses to American cultural concerns and will discover how differently American literary traditions appear to those who are more distant from the localized historical, political, and economic factors that surrounded nineteenth-century writers. We have set out to challenge narrow nationalistic views of American authors by placing America’s most important poet clearly and fully in a remarkably wide international context and by assessing the ways that other cultures have adapted an important American writer for their own political, artistic, and religious needs.

Those readers interested in reception theory and those interested in the problematics of translation will find here a detailed case study of the multicultural reception of a major figure. If, as is often claimed, poetry is what is lost in translation, this book demonstrates just what new poetry emerges *in* the act of translation itself, so that often it is not Whitman who influences another culture so much as Whitman-as-rendered-by a particularly influential translator (as was the case with Ferdinand Freiligrath and Johannes Schlaf in German-speaking cultures).

No poet has generated more responses from other writers than Whitman has. Authors from around the world have written poems and essays and books that directly respond to questions that Whitman raised; they literally talk back to him, across time, across cultures, across languages. Whitman always addressed his work to “poets to come,” and those later writers have taken up his challenge by arguing with him, adapting his innovations, realigning his sympathies, and developing his insights. This gathering of a wide array of international responses forms a tapestry that reveals for the first time the overall patterns of the century-long response to Whitman, a pattern that has much to do with the way democratic ideals, democratic attitudes, and democratic institutions are perceived around the world. It should be emphasized that, while the nature of democracy and of democratic art is at the heart of Whitman’s influence, the patterns of his reception in other cultures are complex and far from jingoistic. There is little evidence of any such phenomenon as Whitman/America conquering the world in the name of democracy. Instead, there are complex weaves of influence, resistance, realignment, and application—a kind of resistant “talking back” to Whitman by other cultures, a dialogue that challenges as much as it affirms.

Whitman thus enters each culture as a singular figure; his views of democracy and of democratic art are distinctly reconfigured by every culture he enters. The act of translation itself alters his poetry and makes it conform in ways it otherwise



would not to the traditions and tones of the receiving nation. His free verse forms—connected as intimately as they are to American speech rhythms, oratorical styles, and colloquial diction—are difficult to reproduce in other languages; in some cases, simply to be able to reproduce his work as something that would be perceived *as* poetry by readers in the host culture, translators have reformed his free verse style into patterned and rhymed verse. Moreover, each translated version of his work is produced with specific motivations and is read in specific contexts, so certain elements of Whitman's work are emphasized, others silenced. Whitman thus enters Indian culture as a western version of a Hindu prophet, and his work is perceived as endorsing a democracy of the spirit, while his poems are read as a kind of yoga discipline. This version of Whitman is very different from the political revolutionary, often seen as a prophet of socialism, that defined the Whitman who entered the cultures of many European nations in the late nineteenth century. And, in turn, that radical version of Whitman contrasts the politically conservative apologist for American imperialism that was the Whitman often perceived (and resisted) in Latin American cultures. But even such rough generalizations do a disservice to the complex dynamics that generate each national version of Whitman, where he is finally far from a simplistic construct but rather emerges as a figure who incorporates many and often conflicting strands of any given culture's concerns and obsessions. This text contains many possibilities for understanding Whitman, gathered from many different times and places. Out of these possibilities, the reader is invited to construct not only a new understanding of Walt Whitman but also a new understanding of how national literatures might function in a dawning era of internationalism.

As this book was being prepared for press, international events continued to remind us how fluid and unstable many national identities are. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, studies of Whitman's international influence echo the increasing fragmentation. What formerly seemed like relatively simple absorptions of Whitman into a single nationality now reveal themselves to be much more complex and multiple patterns of influence. We have tried to trace some of these emerging new patterns, especially in the former country of Yugoslavia, where Whitman's entry had several distinct sources in Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian traditions. With the swift changes in national boundaries and the resurgence of long-repressed ethnic affinities, it becomes clear that any book like this one can only be a snapshot of the current state of an ongoing process. Whitman continues to be an active agent in cultures that are themselves undergoing unpredictable changes. Joking about the bewildering array of photographs of himself that he kept encountering, Whitman once said, "I meet new Walt Whitmans every day. There are a dozen of me afloat."<sup>4</sup> He would no doubt feel the same way were he able to see the versions of Walt Whitman that continue to emerge in cultures around the world: year after year in country after country, there are new Whitmans afloat.

#### NOTES

1. Justin Kaplan, ed., *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1049.
2. Gay Wilson Allen, ed., *Walt Whitman Abroad* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1955), viii.
3. Huck Gutman, *As Others Read Us: International Perspectives on American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 16, 11.
4. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Boston: Small Maynard, 1906), 1: 108.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

LG: Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Harold Blodgett and Sculley Bradley. New York: New York University Press, 1965.