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Ed Folsom
The University of Iowa

Translating Walt Whitman's "Barbaric Yawp." Introduction

Walt Whitman concludes his greatest poem, "Song of Myself," with a section that begins with an image of "the spotted hawk" swooping by him and complaining "of my gab and my loitering." This hawk is probably a red-shouldered hawk, common in the New York area, with distinctive "spotted" patterns on its wings and mottled breast, and with a very distinctive piercing call that it sounds as it swoops in for the kill. Whitman mentions the "redshouldered-hawk" in the short catalog of birds with distinctive "screams" in his Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (*LG*, 711). This hawk is always on the hunt, always searching, sweeping through the air to gain a heightened perspective on the world below. The hawk's loud, clear and simple sound and the energy of its movement shame the poet, who loiters and gabs, who lounges around and engages in empty talk. *Gab* means not only to "chatter" but also to "mock" or to accuse. There is a sense here, then, that humans waste their time with idle talk, mocking and accusing others, while the hawk soars above us, making the ultimate mockery and accusation by squawking a nonverbal complaint about how humans waste their time instead of living untamed. Then the poet compares himself to the hawk, and, in doing so, creates two lines that seem to taunt every translator who has tried to render them in another language:

> I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
> I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Whitman often sought to translate the sounds of animals—especially birds—into human speech. Some of his greatest poems—"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"—are built on attempts to translate into words what the "untranslatable" sounds of birds are indicating. But at this moment near the end of "Song of Myself," Whitman reverses things and, instead of trying to translate the bird's song into human language, claims his own chant as every bit as "untranslatable" as the hawk's cry, and he "sound[s] my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." (*LG*, 89) Thomas C. Gannon has noted how this yawp "is an early instance of a characteristic gesture in Whitman's poetics, his identification with a bird, through which the poet feels himself empowered to transcend the semiotics of human discourse, to better express the ambiguities inherent in the obsessive themes of life and death, of spirit and matter, of time and eternity" (Gannon 142). Gannon sees the spotted hawk as Whitman's "emblem of the wild and raw and physical," and he offers a paraphrase of Whitman's lines: "I, too, am as untamed as a wild bird . . . ; I, too, am as untranslatable as a wild bird . . . ; in fact, now I have no need for [the bird] since I have incorporated [its] inarticulate 'barbaric yawp' into my own poetic" (Gannon 153, 167).

That phrase—"barbaric yawp"—has been a challenge for every translator of Whitman's poem. Whitman combines two words that both have echoic roots. *Barbaric* goes back to Latin, Greek, and ultimately Indo-European roots that are themselves echoic, imitative syllables of what rude and uncivilized and primitive peoples (those who spoke neither Latin nor Greek) sounded like to "civilized" ears: *barbarbarbar*. The *OED* offers this explanation: "The Greek word had probably a primary reference to speech, and is compared with the Latin *balbus,* stammering. The sense-development in ancient times was (with the Greeks) 'foreign, non-Hellenic,' later 'outlandish, rude, brutal'; (with the Romans) 'not Latin nor Greek,' then 'pertaining to those outside the Roman empire'; hence 'uncivilized, uncultured,' and later 'non-Christian,' whence 'Saracen, heathen'; and generally 'savage, rude, savagely cruel, inhuman.'" And the *Online Etymology Dictionary* notes that *barbar* is "echoic of unintelligible speech of foreigners (cf. Sanskrit *Barbara*-"stammering," also "non-Aryan," Latin *balbus* "stammering," Czech *blblati* "to stammer"). So the sense of "barbaric" as "uncultured, wild, savage" derives from an ancient crude mockery of the

sounds of those people who spoke a different language. It is a word mocking the incomprehensible sounds of the Other.

Whitman then combines this word with a slippery slang term, "yawp," a word that quickly became associated with him. Numerous parodies of Whitman focused on the word: "Yourn and Mine, and Any-Day: A Yawp, after Walt Whitman," appeared in the *Saturday Press* in 1860, not long after a scathing review of Whitman's "A Child's Reminiscence" called "Walt Whitman's Yawp." H. L. Mencken, in his monumental *American Language*, argued that, although Whitman is celebrated for his love of vernacular speech, very few examples of the vernacular actually got into his poetry: "He is remembered for a few*, e.g., yawp and gawk*, but for a few only" (Mencken 125-126). Many commentators have assumed that "yawp" is one of Whitman's coinages, since it does not appear in the 1844 *Webster's Dictionary*. Even Whitman's disciple Richard Maurice Bucke assumed it was a Whitman coinage that would someday appear in dictionaries (*WWWC* 243). But Whitman would in fact have been familiar with the word, since it often appeared in newspapers of the time and must have been a frequently used slang term. The *Semi-Weekly Eagle* of Brattleboro, Vermont, for example, printed a dialogue heard on the street in 1852, in which one character tells another to "Shut up your yawp." The *OED* tracks the word back into the 1400s, finding its etymology to be echoic, and associating the word with *yap* and *yelp*. It seems to have been spelled in various ways–*yaup, yop, yalp*, *yolp*, *yaap*, as well as *yawp*. Just as *barbarbar* seems to have been a very early attempt to characterize the speech of humans who spoke a language incomprehensible to the listener, so *yapyapyap* or *yawpyawpyawp* seems to have been an ancient attempt to echo in language the incomprehensible sounds of animals, particularly dogs and birds. The *OED* defines it as "to yelp, as a dog" or "to cry harshly or querulously, as a bird." *Yawp* also means, when applied to the human voice, "to shout or exclaim hoarsely." As a noun, it came to mean "open mouth" (just as, in today's American slang, people still say "shut your yap" or "shut your trap"). Whitman uses the word as a noun, but not as a synonym for "mouth" but rather in the sense of "yawping," turning the word into one of the verbal nouns he loved so much.

The closest word in the 1844 *Webster's* is *yap*, which is defined as "to bark" and is summarily dismissed as "not a legitimate word." This illegitimacy is part of the word's power, of course, and Whitman's use of such a slangy word in a poem struck many as outlandish. George Santayana, writing a dialogue about Whitman in the 1890 *Harvard Monthly*, has one speaker assert: "You may like to hear Whitman's 'barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world,' but you must confess it is a whim of yours, and that a yawp is one thing and a poem another." Early reviewers of *Leaves of Grass* often latched onto the word as symptomatic of Whitman's unpoetic style and diction. *The New Eclectic* in 1868 opined that Whitman "certainly declares himself to be a poet, but at the same time he describes the offspring of his muse as a 'barbaric yawp.' We have no very definite idea as to the precise nature of a yawp, but, whatever it may be, it can scarcely be poetry." Such criticism began soon after the 1855 *Leaves* appeared. *The Critic*, for example, in 1856 excoriated the poet by focusing on the phrase:

> Or rather perhaps, this Walt Whitman reminds us of Caliban flinging down his logs, and setting himself to write a poem. In fact Caliban, and not Walt Whitman, might have written this: "I too am not a bit tamed—I too am untranslatable. / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." Is this man with the "barbaric yawp" to push Longfellow into the shade, and he meanwhile to stand and "make mouths" at the sun? The chance of this might be formidable were it not ridiculous.

Even those early reviewers that were more sympathetic to Whitman's work still highlighted the controversial term, as did the reviewer in the 1856 *Literary Examiner*: "No illusion truly is Walt Whitman, the new American prodigy, who, as he is himself candid enough to intimate, sounds his barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" (180). Similarly, Whitman's friend James Redpath saluted the poet in 1863 with an image of the yawp as a victorious march, a harbinger of a new era of poetry: "I love you, Walt! A conquering Brigade will ere long march to the music of your barbaric yawp."

It is important to note that *yawp* has always been a word outside the mainstream of language, often omitted from dictionaries or included only grudgingly as dialect or slang. American students today are usually unfamiliar with the word and encounter it for the first time when they read "Song of

Myself." If we track the word's usage in large databases of books, we can see that it appeared sporadically in the early nineteenth century but only took hold in print after Whitman's poem appeared in 1855; its usage peaked in the mid-1920s, and by that time most of the examples were in fact quotations of Whitman. The word had had a substantial pre-Whitmanian life in dialect, however. Nineteenth-century etymological guides, like John Jamieson's supplement to the *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1825), defined the word as "the cry of a sickly bird, or of one in distress" and also recorded an adjectival definition of "hungry." Other nineteenth-century guides confirm the word's origins in British dialect: Richard Oliver Heslop's *Northumberland Words* (1894) claims that *yawp* is dialect (often spelled *yaap*) for "to shout, scream, or talk in a boisterous manner," as well as the sound a chicken makes when crying for its hen-mother (801), and John Drummond Robertson's *Glossary of Dialect & Archaic Words used in the County of Gloucester* (1890) defines it as a variant pronunciation of *gape*, meaning to "yawn audibly" and also "to talk boisterously" ("Molly, my dear, don't *yawp* so") (Robertson 294).

This association of *yawp* with its close orthographic cousin *yawn* is something that Sally Ann Batchelor mentions in her 1972 article, "Whitman's Yawp and How He Yawped It":

> Whitman studied words and word lists from the dictionary. Perhaps he searched for a word meaning "to open the mouth with deep inspiration." If he located such a word in a dictionary, it is "yawn." And the inspiration for it is drowsiness, fatigue, or boredom. But listed after "yawn" is "yawp." Here Whitman made his selection. (Batchelor 100)

The problem with Batchelor's speculation is that, as we have seen, "yawp" did not appear in the 1844 or 1851 *Webster's* dictionaries that Whitman used when he wrote the 1855 *Leaves* (the word did make an appearance in later editions of *Webster's*, where it is defined as a variant of *yaup* or *yelp*, "to cry out like a child," and where it is traced to Scottish dialect [see Webster, 1876]). Still, the association of the word with an open mouth is strong (American expressions like "Shut your yap" conflate the verb and the noun, the open mouth identified with the loud sounds coming out of it). So *yawp* has that added association of a gaping or open mouth, like a hawk's open beak when crying out.

Batchelor offers a helpful summary of the connotations of "barbaric yawp":

> The phrase denotes an untranslatable and untamed loud, harsh cry. Its meaning absorbs and reflects words from the preceding line: "I too am not a bit tamed, / I too am untranslatable." Again Whitman provides three associated terms–untamed, untranslatable, and barbaric. By definition, a barbarian cannot translate Greek, a classical language. Barbaric also denotes wild or untamed, man's primitive naturalness as opposed to his civilized gentility. Were Whitman a civilized hawk he would translate his poetry into classical or accepted usage. But he is no trained hawk, blinded, jessed, and belled, moving only at the consent of his genteel trainer; he is an adult wild bird, a haggard, sounding his ineffable, noetic yawp free of social and poetical corsets. (Batchelor 99-100)

The challenge for translators, then, is to translate what Whitman names as "untranslatable." The two words he sounds—"barbaric yawp"—are both words that have no easy or stable definition, because they are echoic in origin, imitating sounds that are outside of meaningful language. Because they are echoic, the temptation might be to translate the words simply by carrying them over into the new language and allowing them to sound their original echoic sounds. But echoic sounds vary significantly from language to language: what one language hears as an echo of a bird's sound, another may hear as something entirely different. Thus animal-sound words like "meow" or "bow-wow" or "cluck" or "gobble" always pose special challenges for the translator (see "Animal Sounds"). M. Wynn Thomas translated "Song of Myself" into Welsh, and, in his review of Thomas's translation, Joseph P. Clancy noted the peculiar difficulty that "yawp" presented: "'Yawp' creates special difficulties in a number of languages: *crochlais* does not really convey Whitman's 'yawp,' but I can't think of any Welsh word that would, and Welsh orthography doesn't permit simply taking the word over into the language while retaining its sound."

Even if my American English-speaking students have never heard the word "yawp" before encountering it in Whitman's poem, they still have immediate associations with "yap" and "yelp" and even "yawn," and so they intuit the word in a kind of native way, quickly fitting it into sound patterns and denotative patterns with which they are familiar. The ways that readers in other languages will hear the phrase, though, is less certain, and that uncertainty

makes "barbaric yawp" a particularly rich phrase for a detailed study of its multiple translations.

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Summary

The introduction examines the origins and history of the word "yawp," offers an overview of how Whitman's "barbaric yawp" has been interpreted in criticism about "Song of Myself" and suggests some of the challenges in translating the phrase.

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

Tłumacząc „barbaric yawp" Walta Whitmana. Wprowadzenie

Streszczenie

Autor artykułu przedstawia etymologię słowa "yawp", a także odnosi się do różnych interpretacji „barbarzyńskiego yawp" zawartych w pracach krytycznych poświęconych „Song of Myself" Walta Whitmana. Artykuł wskazuje także na wyzwania, z którymi muszą się zmierzyć tłumacze analizowanego wyrażenia.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, studia przekładoznawcze, Walt Whitman, „Pieśń o mnie"