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Brazilian “Barbaric Yawps”

When Walt Whitman and his “barbaric yawp” became well known and influential among Brazilian intellectuals in the early 1920s, important cultural, social and political changes were taking place in the country. In 1922 Brazilians were getting ready to celebrate the first centenary of their political independence and many of them, with nationalistic pride, were eager to begin a new era and to substitute traditional attitudes and colonial subservience with freedom and innovation. Political, artistic and literary renovation were key words at that time, and Whitman, brought by the international avant-garde movements, became instrumental in many ways. He was considered a model as man, artist and citizen.

For a group of young revolutionary writers who were dissatisfied with the outmoded artistic principles of neo-naturalists, neo-Parnassians and neo-symbolists the time was ripe to hurl a bomb of rebellion against the artificiality of Brazilian art and make a clean break with the past. “We are, in fact, the primitives of a new era” (Andrade 29) said Mário de Andrade (1893-1945), a leading figure of the most important artistic movement of the first half of the twentieth century that came to be known as Modernism. Poet Manuel Bandeira (1886-1968) in “Poética” summarizes the general feeling of this new generation of writers who were engaged in revising the conservative and conformist spirit that had thrived in literature:

I am sick of limited lyricism
Of well-behaved lyricism

.....
I want all the words
Chiefly the universal barbarisms
I want all the constructions
Chiefly the syntactical ones of exception
I want all the rhythms
Chiefly the unnumbered.
(qtd. in Nist 40)

Critic José Cândido Andrade Murici (1895-1984), in a 1922 article titled “Idealismo Yankee,” expressed deep regret that Whitman was almost unknown in Brazil, because there was no greater name than his on the continent (Murici 41). He praises Whitman as the Homeric bard of the New World, and a primitive and barbaric singer (Murici 47).

These quotations reveal that the adjective of the phrase “barbaric yawp” was highly regarded by the first Brazilian readers of Whitman, who linked it to notions of origin, of freedom from restraint, of purity or authenticity. As for the noun “yawp,” it is hard to know how it was understood at that time because, in my research in periodicals and books published in Brazil in the first quarter of the twentieth century, I have never come across a Portuguese translation of section 52 of “Song of Myself.” Although the 1920s can be considered the period of the first Brazilian wave of Whitman enthusiasm with abundant references to his life and work in literary periodicals, no book-length Portuguese translation of *Leaves of Grass* was published in Brazil. Nevertheless, French, Spanish and Italian translations were easily available. In the first decades of the twentieth century Brazil was culturally linked to France, and many educated people could speak French. To many Brazilians of that time Whitman came to be known by means of Léon Bazalgette’s *Feuilles d’herbe* (1922). Translations into two other Romance languages were also available and accessible: Armando Vasseur’s *Poemas* (1912), and Luigi Gamberale’s *Foglie d’erba* (1923). Therefore, in order to discuss the different ways Whitman’s barbaric yawp was translated into Portuguese, one has to start by analyzing how this phrase was rendered in those three translations.

But before moving forward, it is worth mentioning some relevant aspects of the production and reception of literary translations. First of all the production of a translation does not involve a simple lexical choice but is closely

dependent on the translator's beliefs and motifs, and on social and historical contexts. The same dependency is also true when it comes to the reception of a translated text. As for reception, it is also important to note that when a poet becomes known nationwide through a specific translation, there is a sort of symbiosis between the original text and the translated one or, to use a different metaphor, some stem cells of the translation are transplanted into the original text, and as time goes by it becomes difficult to distinguish them. We will see that it can be exemplified with several Brazilian translations that took Bazalgette's translation as a model.

Generally speaking and despite several minor divergences, two basic differences can be pointed out in the Brazilian translations of the line where Whitman used the phrase "barbaric yawp": translations that emphasize the human nature of the sound, and other translations that follow the original text and choose words that make reference to sounds produced by humans as well as animals.

In Bazalgette's translation of "Song of Myself," section 52, line 3: *Je hurle mon cri de barbare sur les toits du monde* (Whitman, 1922: 126), the translation of the echoic slang word "yawp" as *cri* (cry, scream, shout), a current vocabulary that basically indicates loud sounds, eliminated the oddity of Whitman's line and emphasized the human source of the sound. It was the translation of the opening words "I sound" as *Je hurle* ("scream," "howl," "roar") that suggested the animal connotations of the original line. Unlike Bazalgette's lexical choices in Vasseur's translation *Hago repercutir mis salvajes ladridos por encima de los tejados del mundo* (Whitman, 1912: 100)—it is not the verb *repercutir* ("reverberate") that makes reference to animal sounds but the noun *ladridos* ("barks"). The same thing happens in Gamberale's translation that renders the same line as *e fo risonare il mio barbarico strillo su per i tetti del mondo* (Whitman, 1923: 94). The verb *sound* is translated as *risonare* ("resonate"), and it is the noun *strillo* ("scream," "shriek," "howl") that allows for an interpretation of the sound as something that can be produced by humans as well as by animals.

Bazalgette's seminal translation of the echoic slang word "yawp" as *cri*, which back translates into Portuguese as *grito*, has had many followers in Brazil and in Portugal and has influenced translators till today. But unlike Bazalgette, who used the verb *hurler* to maintain an association with sounds produced by

animals, Portuguese-speaking translators have moved even further towards a humanization of the action by preferring to remain closer to Whitman's use of the verb "sound" to introduce the line. Consider the following translations and back-translations. The first translator is Portuguese and the other two are Brazilian.

José Agostinho Batista: *Lanço o meu grito bárbaro sobre os telhados do mundo* ("I project my barbaric shout over the roofs of the world"; Whitman, 1992: 145).

André Cardoso: *Também faço soar meu grito bárbaro sobre os telhados do mundo* ("I also sound my barbaric shout over the roofs of the world"; Whitman, 2000: 110).

Rodrigo Garcia Lopes: *Solto meu grito bárbaro sobre os telhados do mundo* ("I release my barbaric shout over the roofs of the world"; Whitman, 2005: 129).

The softening and "humanization" of Whitman's phrase in Portuguese translations is also due to Geir Campos (1924-1999), whose influential book-length translation of *Leaves of Grass*, titled *Folhas de relva*, was published in 1964 and reprinted twice in 1983, and once in 1984, 1989, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1998 and 2002. The volume of 1964 was clearly connected to the turbulent social-political context of its publication. In 1964 there was a military *coup d'état* in Brazil that culminated with the overthrow of the president and with the end of his leftist policies. The military dictatorship that ensued and that would remain in power till 1985 would govern the country with censorship and persecution forcing people to choose their place on the political spectrum. Geir Campos, and probably the editors of the book, clearly tried to avoid being accused of using the book as political propaganda for the right and tried to make clear that the word democracy used by Whitman in his book of poems did not refer to the political system of his country but to a social regime based on comradeship, something still to be constructed. The dark illustrations, the somber book-cover and the politicized presentation of the book did not appeal to the public and the book did not sell well.

Surprisingly enough, in 1983 Campos managed to turn an editorial fiasco into a successful book that would be reprinted nine times, as we have seen. In order to achieve it he made the book congenial to the young generation of

Brazilians who were about to enter a new historical period of political freedom and economic growth. He gave the book a new name—*Folhas das folhas de relva* ("Leaves of Leaves of Grass"), simplified and altered some of his lexical choices, made some odd changes in Whitman's long lines, and smartly invited a young and popular Brazilian poet, Paulo Leminski (1944-1989) to write a presentation in which Whitman was described in such a way as to make young readers establish a strong identification with the American poet. It worked very well, and for almost twenty years this book would pave the way for Whitman's literary reception in Brazil.

In his 1964 translation of the third line of section 52 of "Song of Myself," Campos, would surprise his audience. Like Bazalgette, he kept the epithet "barbaric" and avoided using the echoic "yawp." He rendered the line as *faço soar meu bárbaro dialeto sobre os telhados do mundo* (Whitman, 1964: 36), which translates back into English as "I sound my barbaric dialect over the roofs of the world." By translating "yawp" as "dialect" Campos eliminated any animal trace from the line or any indication of an uncontrolled outburst of emotion. In his version, the subject of the poem is truly interested in communicating with his audience. It is hard to know the reasons why Campos made his vocabulary choice when he translated "yawp," but I am bound to believe that one of the reasons is the influence of the domestic social instability when endless political confrontations required the mind to be in control at all times. Campos probably thought that Brazilians had had enough outbursts and acts of bravado.

Almost twenty years later, in the nine reprints of his book that span from 1982 to 2002, Geir Campos would keep his translation of the phrase but would make an astonishing and totally unexpected translation of the main verb. Here is his translation: *Faço tinir meu dialeto bárbaro / sobre os telhados do mundo* (Whitman, 1983: 42), which translates back into English as "I tinkle my barbaric dialect / over the roofs of the world." How could this happen? Whitman's harsh barbaric yawp turned into the gentle sounds of a bell! Probably we will never know why Campos made such an awkward translation, but the fact is that his book-length translation remained the sole Portuguese translation of Whitman's poems to gain nationwide notoriety for more than twenty years. Now Brazilians can count on three complete translations of *Leaves of Grass*, and on one complete rendering of the 1855 edition.

In opposition to translators who have tried to humanize or to tame Whitman's barbaric yawp, there are others who have chosen words that stress the animal feature of the source language, as is the tendency in Hispanophone countries. Among the Brazilian translators who belong to this second group are:

Péricles Eugenio da Silva Ramos: *Solto o meu ladrido bárbaro sobre os telhados do mundo* ("I release my barbaric barking over the roofs of the world"; Whitman, 1965: 160).

Luciano Alves Meira: *Lanço no ar o meu urro bárbaro sobre os telhados do mundo* ("I project in air my barbaric roaring over the roofs of the world"; Whitman, 2005: 107).

Bruno Gambarotto: *É meu berro cheio de fúria o que lanço pelos telhados do mundo* ("It is my bellow full of fury that I project by the roofs of the world"; Whitman, 2011: 89).

In my view, the most problematic of these three translations is Gambarotto's. There is no gain in the substitution of "barbaric" with the phrase "full of fury", and worse of all the translation has destroyed an expression that has become emblematic of Whitman's poetry as all the essays here indicate. On the other hand my favorite translation of this line is the one made by the Portuguese translator, Maria de Lourdes Guimarães, who published a bilingual translation of *Leaves of Grass (Folhas de erva)* in two volumes, in 2002. In her translation she makes use of the word *uivo* ("howl") to translate the complex lexical item "yawp." Besides making sense in the context of the poem, this word evokes *Howl*, the famous book by Allen Ginsberg, another revolutionary American poet. She renders the line as *Faço soar o meu uivo bárbaro sobre os telhados do mundo* (Whitman, 2002: 169), which translates back into English as "I sound my barbaric howl over the roofs of the world."

Either through shouts, howls, barks or tinkles, what is clear is that Whitman's voice continues echoing over Brazilian roofs.

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Summary

This essay examines the different ways Walt Whitman's "barbaric yawp" was translated into Portuguese and in so doing it offers information about Whitman's literary reception in Brazil. Although it has taken almost 150 years for Brazilians to be able to read a complete version of *Leaves of Grass* in their own language, Whitman was very much alive in the country throughout the 20th century by means of translations into other Romance languages and in collections of poems translated into Portuguese. Besides analyzing the famous expression in those collections, the essay also explores the way the expression was rendered in the four complete Portuguese translations now available.

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

Brazylijskie „barbarzyńskie yawp”

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia różne tłumaczenia „barbaric yawp” na język portugalski, a także recepcję poezji Whitmana w Brazylii. Mimo iż czytelnicy brazylijscy musieli czekać aż 150 lat na pełne wydanie *Leaves of Grass*, poezja Whitmana pozostała żywa w Brazylii w XX wieku dzięki tłumaczeniom na inne języki romańskie oraz dzięki zbiorom poezji wydawanym w języku portugalskim. Artykuł analizuje tłumaczenia zawarte w tych właśnie zbiorach, a także w dostępnych obecnie czterech pełnych tłumaczeniach „Song of Myself” na język portugalski.

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