

**FaR 2021****International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”****REDEFINING APPROACHES TO TRANSLATION OF BIBLICAL  
INTERTEXTS IN WHITMAN'S "LEAVES OF GRASS"**

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**Abstract**

Within the scope of this paper, possible approaches to translating biblical intertexts in Walt Whitman's poem "Leaves of Grass" are discussed. The effect of the Bible on Walt Whitman's works is impressive: scholars refer to over two hundred direct biblical quotes, allusions, and paraphrases in his poetic texts. However, speaking of the role of the Bible in Whitman's poem, one should bear in mind that its impact goes far beyond borrowed linguistic forms, images, or structural principles. Whitman conceived his poem as a new American Bible of Democracy. The case study of two pieces from his "Leaves of Grass" illustrates many challenges that translators may face and highlights skills that they need to master to be able to offer authentic translation. In order to render biblical intertexts abounding in the poem into Russian, it is crucial to take into account social, cultural, and historical aspects of the country of the target language, be aware of the depth at which Russian readers know and understand biblical texts, see internal links between intertexts in the poem and the text of the Bible, and (if necessary) resort to explication methods with due respect for the spirit, style, and air of the original work.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Religious Framework of "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman

The spirit of "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman is fundamentally religious. Religion was of paramount importance for Whitman who associated it with the ideas of the Jewish Bible assimilated in intimate connection with the humanistic teachings of Christ. Having thoroughly studied the structure of Whitman's poem, Thomas Crawley assumed that "it cannot be denied that *Leaves of Grass* sprang out of a rich biblical milieu from which it derived form, color, and vigor" (Crawley, 1970, p. 63).

Whitman came to understand the "biblical milieu" of his poem while communicating with his American contemporaries who for the most part were not only familiar with Christianity but rather lived under its influence (regardless of individual preferences). This concept rests on particular intellectual, emotional, and spiritual state of mind of the poet as evidenced by his essay "The Bible as Poetry", Whitman's most favourable and enthusiastic criticism that treats the Bible as a piece of art, as "old poetic lore" (Crawley, 1970, pp. 57–58).

In his "long foreground" (see R.W. Emerson's letter to Whitman (2002b): "I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which you must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start" (p. 637), there has been nothing more valuable for Whitman than the King James Bible (KJV). (King James Bible, 2021). Commissioned and then published in 1611 under the sponsorship of James I, this book is still described as the Authorized Version. The New Testament was translated from the Greek texts of Textus Receptus, while the Old Testament was translated from Jewish based on the Masoretic Text. According to H.W. Allen, by the time of his maturity, Whitman had thoroughly assimilated the Hebrew Scriptures that finally became an integral part of his thoughts and expressions, his main point of reference and source of suggestive details (as cited in Crawley, 1970, p. 58).

Whitman's strive for "the Great Construction of the New Bible" (Grier, 1984, p. 353) cannot be seen as an attempt to replace the Old and New Testament with "Leaves of Grass", to make the "New Bible" similar in structure or content to the ancient sacred books. For Whitman it was obvious: "What is in the Bible had better not be paraphrased. The Bible is indescribably perfect..." (Crawley, 1970, p. 58).

## 2. Problem Statement

### 2.1. Biblical Intertexts and Translation Strategy for "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman

Whitman claimed many times that he pioneered a new form of verse that perfectly fits the prophet-poet of democracy (Nikitina, 2016). Having rediscovered the poetic techniques that emerged around five thousand years ago (parallelism of the Old Testament) and having absorbed the humanism of Christianity, Whitman reproduces *his* experience, *his* concept of ideal America, of an ideal American through the lens of the "biblical milieu". Whitman finds his own wordings for that. Still, the spirit and air of the New Testament are felt distinctly in some passages of "Leaves of Grass", which we will (following Andrei Desnitsky) refer to as "intertexts" for "Leaves of Grass" (Desnitsky, 2007). Note that in this respect we disagree with Roland Barthes who believes that any text is an intertext, while other texts are present within

it to varying degrees and in more or less recognizable forms (Mary Orr, 2003). Our stance rests on the statement (perhaps overly categorical) made by Whitman himself: "Nature may have given the hint to the author of "Leaves of Grass", but there exists no book or fragment of a book which can have given the hint to them [sic]" (Traubel, 1906, p. 16). Both the author of "Leaves of Grass" and the Author of the Bible focus on "me-me" type of communication (classification proposed by Yuri Lotman). Speaking of Whitman, note should be taken of passages both extremely significant, climactic, and those that have more subtle implications, as well as of frequent but minor allusions that are hardly crucial in isolation but produce a strong cumulative effect.

The problem of translating intertexts should be obviously considered in line with the strategy of translating the poem as a whole suggested by the author of the original. In his comments on possible American translation of the Bible, Whitman warns of the probable loss of the communicative and associational values of the old phraseology (Crawley, 1970). Whitman's faith in the didactic function of the Hebrew Scriptures determined his urgent need for communication, interaction with his reader. Whitman's principle of communicative orientation is similar to the biblical one and should be sustained in translation, which means rendering the form of Whitman's verse (biblical parallelism), religious spirit, and symbolic status of "Leaves of Grass". Thus, we set out the translation strategy, i.e. "a general program of performing translation activities <...> in a certain communicative situation" (Sdobnikov, 2015, p. 135).

Not only the original text of "Leaves of Grass" will pose a challenge for a translator but also the King James Bible (as a source of ambiguous details for Whitman), and most notably the New Testament, which Whitman saw as the culmination of the Jewish religion: "The real owners and heirs of the Hebrew Bible, rejecting the New Testament and what it stands for, still wait for the climax of the poem" (Crawley, 1970, p. 60).

### 3. Research Questions

#### 3.1. Christ-Symbol in "Leaves of Grass": Spiritual and Social Ego

The religion of "Leaves of Grass" has at its core a single personality that strikingly resembles Christ of the Hebrew Bible. The significance of the symbol of Christ for Whitman was rightly pointed out by Crawley: "Any thoughtful reading of *Leaves of Grass* is likely to be accompanied by an awareness of the Christ-symbol above all others; it is repeatedly suggested throughout the work, particularly in the climactic passages" (Crawley, 1970 p. 63). The symbol of Christ contributes to a single holistic structure of the poem. To obtain the same effect, a translator should start by evaluating the immediate source of the intertext in the native biblical context, thus it is possible to understand Whitman's intention and take the right translation decision that would comply with the poet's concept of Christ. The essence of this concept lies in Whitman's statement on the two components of his poetry: according to him, America's problem is consigned to social and religious issues and should "be finally met and treated by literature" (Whitman, 1982a, p. 932–933). Therefore, a Christ-like personality is expressed in "Leaves of Grass" in two hypostases, in an egotism of two kinds: first, the transcendental (spiritual) ego, which similar to Christ recognizes itself as a part of God; second, the social ego that is "keenly aware of innumerable equal identities" (Crawley, 1970, p. 68). (Edna D. Romig in "The Paradox of Walt Whitman" mentions the personality trinity that apart from the above

mentioned egos encompasses the autobiographical ego. However, this study is not concerned with the identification of Whitman with the Christ-like prophet, as it has nothing to do with Whitman's concept of Christ that he uses as a literary device).

Speaking about transcendental and social egos, it is easy to see parallels with the commandments of Christ. The transcendental ego follows the first commandment: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (KJV, Mark 12:30); the social ego follows the second commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these" (KJV, Mark 12:31). Basically, these two commandments define the boundaries within which Whitman's concept of Christ unfolds as a combination of two components of a personality, social and spiritual.

## 4. Purpose of the Study

### 4.1. Approaches to Translating Biblical Intertexts Exemplified by Two Passages from "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman

Let us consider several examples (most typical ones) that will determine the line of search for the ways to translate intertexts.

The feeling that Christ is present in Whitman's poem comes when reading the following lines from chapter 10 of "Song of Myself" (social ego):

And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and bruis'd feet (Whitman, 2002a, p. 34)

First, we recognize the biblical style ("and he came... and said... and answered") that was inherited by the New Testament and that "appeared in almost every language that the Holy Scripture was translated to" (Desnitsky, 2007, p. 244). The immediate source of the described situation is the Gospel of John: "After that, he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded" (KJV, John 13:5) (translators of the King James Bible added italicized words in order not to violate the syntactic norms of the language). The meaning lies in the surrounding context. Christ tells his disciple Simon Peter: "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me" (KJV, John 13:8). When asked by Peter to wash his hands and his head as well, Christ replies: "He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all" (KJV, John 13:10). And then Christ tells his disciples, "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet" (KJV, John 13:14).

## 5. Research Methods

How can a translator best convey Whitman's concept? Based on a specific context, Korney Chukovsky offers the following translation into Russian:

И принес воды, и наполнил лохань, чтобы он вымыл вспотевшее тело  
и покрытые ранами ноги (Whitman, 1982a, p. 56)<sup>1</sup>

Chukovsky seems to ignore the symbolism of what the persona does: a fugitive slave that has washed himself will "have no part" with a man that offers him shelter. Chukovsky's translation logic is obviously driven by the social and cultural setting of the target language. However, this translation fails to contribute to the intention to recreate the integrity of the original structure, it fails to reinforce, to unite with a single thought many passages scattered over "Leaves of Grass", such as:

I am large, I contain multitudes (Whitman, 2002a, p. 77).

Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them (Whitman, 2002a, p. 67).

Embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering <...>.

Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail but I am handcuff'd to him and walk by his side <...>.

Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp but I also lie at the last gasp (Whitman, 2002a, p. 62–63).

I walk with delinquents with passionate love.

I feel I am of them – I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself (Whitman, 2002a, p. 324).

On careful reading of the poem, it is possible to find many other passages focused on Christ's second commandment that corroborate the author's intent. It is no coincidence that Whitman "repeats" (by way of parallelism rather than simple repetition) the story of the fugitive slave in his "Song of Myself":

The hounded slave that flags in the race and leans by the fence, blowing and cover'd with sweat,  
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the murderous buckshot and the bullets,  
All these I feel or am (Whitman, 2002a, p. 58).

This structure (parallelism "at a distance" – a term coined by Desnitsky (2007, p.206)) first confirms that Whitman perceives the biblical connection of two phenomena: "washing" the slave and "having part" with him, and second proves the credibility of the biblical text as a source of "Leaves of Grass" for Whitman.

It would be a mistake for a translator to reduce a complex and meaningful intertext to some simplest concrete meanings. In this case, we should resort to a universal technique that has determined our translation tactics – making a guess based on the biblical context.

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<sup>1</sup> In compliance with the journal policy, Russian texts provided in this study are accompanied by interlinear translations, although we shall keep in mind that this type of translation aims only at rendering content through lexical cognates established between English and Russian and cannot be referred to in order to educe connotations, artistic features of the original text such as cadence, rhythm, style, euphony, etc.:

And brought water, and filled a washtub so that he would wash a sweated body and injured feet.

## 6. Findings

With due regard to the adopted translation strategies and tactics, we suggest a full-fledged embedding of the intertext into the Russian-language space of "Leaves of Grass" (challenges of rendering sound repetitions require a separate study):

И принес воды, и наполнил лохань, чтобы омыть его вспотевшее тело и  
израненные ступни...<sup>2</sup>

We note that in line with his plan, Whitman expands the circle of "twelve" to a universum (not only the slave's legs, but his body is washed as well). Based on the assumption that an average reader is ill-informed about the Bible, a translator should add a footnote at the end of the line to explain the symbolism of the act: "washing" the slave means "having part" with him (John, 13:8).

Whitman substantiates the essence of the transcendental ego in his prose. He writes, "one main contrast of the ideas behind every page of my verses <...> is their different relative attitude towards God" – attitude that implies personal relations between the persona and God (Whitman, 2002b, p.474). Obviously, this is the perspective from which one should analyze intertexts in which the persona of "Leaves of Grass" is presented as the transcendental ego. Here lies the approach to translating these intertexts. Below is one of the manifestations of the transcendental ego in the persona:

I exist as I am, that is, enough,  
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,  
And if each and all be aware I sit content (Whitman, 2002a, p. 42).

Chukovsky translated these lines as follows:

Я таков, каков я есть, и не жалеюсь;  
Если об этом не знает никто во вселенной, я доволен,  
Если знают все до одного, я доволен (Whitman, 1982b, p. 65)<sup>3</sup>.

This translation seems to cause some ambiguity. Indeed, the statement made in the first line does not imply much interest in it from everyone in the universe. The reaction of the persona to mutually exclusive "if-if" possibilities also requires explanation.

This is a complex symbolic text, so while working with it, a translator should shift his focus from ideas and objects to the tools of symbolism and try to identify links between the intertext and the Bible in order to recreate these links in translation. Let us consider two abstracts from the King James Bible that we reckon served a source for this intertext. In the first abstract, during the encounter of the burning bush,

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<sup>2</sup> And brought water, and filled a washtub to wash his sweated body and sore feet.

<sup>3</sup> I am that I am, and I do not complain,  
If nobody in the universe knows about it, I am content,  
If each and everyone knows about it, I am content.

Moses asks God what he is to say to the Israelites when they ask what God has sent him to them: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you" (KJV, Exodus 3:3:14). Let us compare the English text with the original Hebrew text. As to the latter, we will consult the working version of the translation used by Desnitsky in his reasoning: «Бог сказал Моисею: "Я Тот, Кто Я Есть". Так и ответь сынам Израилевым: "Я Есть послал меня к вам"»<sup>4</sup>. (The English version unlike the Russian one retains the repetition typical of the original: the end of the phrase repeats the beginning – I AM THAT I AM.)

We see that the King James Bible while preserving the breadth and vagueness of the original rather accurately conveys a simple thought of ancient Israelites: replying to Moses, "God just asserts that He is actually there and He is actually He" (Desnitsky, 2007, p. 140).

The importance and intrinsic value of the words "I Am" can hardly be overestimated. Desnitsky shows that they can be interpreted in different ways (depending on the cultural context). It is noteworthy that for Whitman with his "relative attitude towards God", they mean the same as for the ancient Jews: "actual and active presence [of God] is people's lives" (Desnitsky, 2007, p. 140). For the persona, Whitman is the One Who enters into a personal relationship with him. There are many illustrations of the above in "Leaves of Grass":

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own (Whitman, 2002a, p. 30).

Walking the old hills of Judea with the beautiful gentle God by my side (Whitman, 2002a, p. 56).

My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,  
The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms (Whitman, 2002a, p. 72).

I will cling fast to Thee, O God...  
Thee, Thee at least I know (Whitman, 2002a, p. 355).

I cannot rest O God, I cannot eat or drink or sleep,  
Till I put forth myself, my prayer, once more to Thee,  
Breathe, bathe myself once more in Thee, commune with Thee,  
Report myself once more to Thee (Whitman, 2002a, p. 354).

The second passage stems from the New Testament (Gospel of John):

18:5. They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus saith unto them, I am he. And Judas also, which betrayed him, stood with them.

18:6. As soon then as he had said unto them, I am he, they went backward, and fell to the ground.

18:8. Jesus answered, I have told you that I am he: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way.

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<sup>4</sup> God told Moses, "I Am That I Am." So tell the children of Israel, "I Am sent me to you."

18:12. Then the band and the captain and officers of the Jews took Jesus, and bound him.

Various parallels can be drawn from the above depending on how to perceive Christ's words "I Am". If they are viewed as a reply of the One Who spoke to Moses, the surprising reaction of the guards is unequivocal – they stepped back and fell on their knees. However, if these words are just a simple confirmation – He is Jesus of Nazareth – the abrupt change in the guards' behavior looks logical – they tied down Christ.

The scope of translation decisions emerging from these two excerpts from the Bible helps identify the links implied by Whitman between the intertext and the Bible. Moreover, this scope acts as a model, a source of creating a parallel situation. "I exist as I am, that is, enough" is a line that appeals to both passages at once. Interpretation of the first one, as illustrated above, aligns well with Whitman's ideas about God. Whitman's "I am" suggests his active involvement in people's lives. Actually, the words "that is, enough" prove that "I am" is something "significant and intrinsically valuable" for him. It follows from the second passage that Christ identifying himself with the God of Israel, could say about himself – I am. In addition to the guards struck with reverential awe, the following lines from the New Testament confirm this idea: "...he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (KJV, John 14:9), "I and my Father are one" (KJV, John 10:30).

In the second and third lines, Whitman invokes biblical parallelism to express the attitude of the transcendental ego to the situation: whether all and everyone are aware of his active presence in their life or not, anyway he is satisfied. Given the symbolic status of the poem, it can be assumed that Whitman anticipates the biblical result: "your sorrow shall be turned into joy" (KJV, John 16:20). Indeed, the transcendental ego of "Leaves of Grass" follows the crucifix-resurrection line of Christ's life:

That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion – and bloody crowning  
(Whitman, 2002a, p. 63).

Here comes the question of legitimacy of the autobiographical ego that in some way shared Christ's fate: America had long been waiting for its bard, but when he finally arrived, America failed to recognize its poet. Recognition came later.

The focus on the Bible could be traced towards the end of the chapter. We will limit ourselves to the line following those that have been parsed above:

One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself (Whitman, 2002a, p. 42).

Obviously, Whitman sourced these words from those of Christ: "...for I know whence I came, and whither I go; but ye cannot tell whence I come, and whither I go" (KJV, John 8:14).

Observations made in the course of the study suggest the following translation:

Я тот, кто я есть, сказано достаточно,  
Если никто во вселенной не знает меня – я доволен,



И если каждый и все знают меня – я доволен.<sup>5</sup>

This translation could go unannotated if the Bible was more common in Russia. However, an average Russian reader would hardly have a thorough knowledge of the Bible, therefore a footnote to the words «я есть» should run as follows: "I am" for Whitman means the same as for ancient Jews – active involvement in their lives". Translation without a footnote is obviously impossible. If an implicit message (for the Russian reader) of the persona is replaced with an explicit one, with the words "that is, enough" being abandoned accordingly, the rhythm of the original thought will be violated in translation, however it is a priority task for a translator of "Leaves of Grass" to preserve the rhythm (see (Nikitina, 2014)).

## 7. Conclusion

In order to embed the biblical intertext into the Russian-language space of "Leaves of Grass", a translator (based on the above analysis) needs the following:

- Unmistakably feel the spirit and style of the Bible in order first to discern a biblical intertext, which means that a translator should shift the focus to the tools of symbolism, and second to replicate this spirit and this style in translation, i.e. to convey the feeling of a biblical intertext to the Russian reader.
- Be able to find internal links between an intertext and the text of the Bible. Sometimes it is enough to make a guess based on the biblical context (first example). In more complicated cases, an expert interpretation may come in handy (second example).
- Weigh the need for comments (footnotes) based on the reader's level of awareness. In common situations they may be superfluous.

In conclusion, note that the intertextuality of "Leaves of Grass", understood *en masse* as a dialogue with the Bible, is a manifestation of the most characteristic feature of Whitman's poetic text – parallelism.

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<sup>5</sup> I am that I am, enough has been said,  
If no one in the universe knows me – I am content,  
If all and everyone knows me – I am content.

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