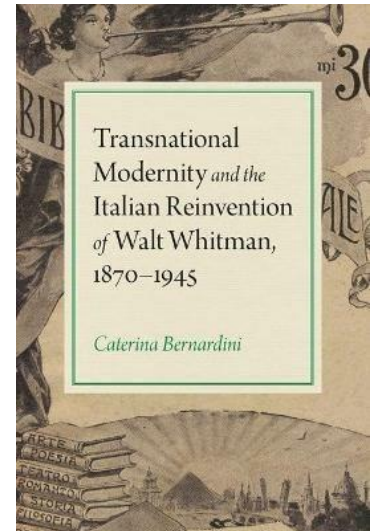


Caterina Bernardini

Transnational Modernity and the Italian Reinvention of Walt Whitman, 1870-1945

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Review by Valerio Massimo De Angelis

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Almost fifteen years ago, a group of Whitman scholars from the two sides of the Atlantic met in Paris and created the Transatlantic Walt Whitman Association, dedicated to the study of the ‘American Bard’ and his heritage from an eminently comparative, intercultural and transdisciplinary perspective. A prominent role was played by Italy, in the person of Marina Camboni, who in 2010 organized the Whitman Seminar and the Symposium on the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in Macerata. In the following years, a number of young scholars had the opportunity to specialize in the—wide and always expanding—field of Whitman Studies. Among them was an Italian student, Caterina Bernardini, who later got a joint PhD from the University of Macerata and the University of Nebraska, where she collaborated with the online *Walt Whitman Archive*, co-directed by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price. Her PhD dissertation on the Italian reception of Whitman’s poetry that has now become a book published by the University of Iowa Press, in which Bernardini reconstructs the extremely complex process that at the turn of the 19th into the 20th century made Whitman a central figure not only in Italian poetry and criticism, but in Italian culture at large.

One specific focus of the book concerns, as the title itself suggests, how the first Italian translations of Whitman’s poetry and the critical reaction to such an unconventional author played an important role in the ‘modernization’ of Italian poetry. In some ways, this anticipated (and prepared) the deeper and vaster ‘rebirth’ of national literature Elio Vittorini would try to trigger with the publication of the anthology *Americana* (1941), which was intended to serve as

a spur to the formally timorous, culturally provincial and politically compromised Italian writers. Whitman's impact was variegated and uneven, and it often elicited misreadings which tell us much more than could be expected about the rapidly changing shape of Italian society and literature. Before Bernardini's book, Italian criticism about Whitman and Italy had mostly dealt with the Italian translations of Whitman's poetry—one notable exception being Marina Camboni—and just made a few observations about his influence on mainstream authors like Giosuè Carducci and Gabriele D'Annunzio. One of Bernardini's major contributions is precisely that of bringing into full light the relevance Whitman had for writers such as Ada Negri, Sibilla Aleramo, Dino Campana, Emanuel Carnevali or Piero Jahier. In doing so, she recreates the wide international network of modernist experimentalism they became entangled in also thanks to their 'use' of Whitman. The comparison between their attitudes, which creatively reinvented Whitman to turn him into the inspirer of the poetic revolution they wanted to prompt, and the much more literarily 'conservative' and politically nationalistic attempts to appropriate the 'American Bard' by critics like William Michael Rossetti, Girolamo Ragusa Moleti and Enrico Nencioni, show how Whitman could be adapted to the most diverse ideological and cultural projects. Indeed, even the most biased interpretations can be considered as coherent with and justified by Whitman's own idea that his poetry was something that "continually asked, demanded, to be addressed, actualized, transformed, reinvented" (Bernardini 2021, 7).

Of course, it all began with the first (partial) translation of *Leaves of Grass* (1887), which made Whitman available not only to the audience of 'common' readers, but also to writers and even critics who did not have much familiarity with the English language. "Luigi Gamberale's Lifelong Translating Enterprise" constitutes in itself a relevant chapter in the history of the modernization of Italian (and European) literature and culture, due the "outsized influence of Gamberale's translation on the future reading and reception of Whitman, both in Italy and abroad" (73). Bernardini closely analyzes Gamberale's translations, and in so doing she underlines the shortcomings that affected all of his translations, from the first two selections published in 1887 and 1890 to the unabridged editions of 1907 and 1923: "imprecise renderings and oversights, misunderstandings and awkward moments, and, certainly, too large a reliance on an archaic and refined lexicon" (45). Nonetheless, the 1907 translation, the first complete one to appear not only in Italy but in Europe, especially triggered a transnational interest in the American poet that from Spain and France reached even Russia, and influenced some of the stylistic innovations of the dawning modernist revolution, first of all free verse and prose poetry. But Bernardini also adds a new perspective based on her personal research in the Baldassarre Labanca Library in Gamberale's hometown, Agnone (Molise), regarding aspects that have been

until now almost totally disregarded by Whitman and Gamberale scholarship, like the response of ordinary readers to Gamberale's Whitman: the correspondence studied by Bernardini draws a much wider map of Whitman's "subterranean influence" (94) on early 20th century European culture, which may well involve recognized authors like D'Annunzio, but also involves the invisible web of enthusiasts that helped set the foundations of a worldwide 'Whitman lineage' extending to the present.

Another literary phenomenon often overlooked in Whitman criticism is his reception and imaginative 'recycling' by women writers such as Ada Negri and Sibilla Aleramo. Negri foregrounded both those potentially subversive political visions that could verge on socialism and had been carefully censored until she published an article on Whitman in 1893, and also the even more disquieting sexual (and homosexual) overtones that totally clashed with the image of the poet as the singer of the common (and 'healthy') people, so cherished by her contemporaries. Curiously enough, her full awareness of his political and sexual radicality notwithstanding, Negri was much more conservative in applying Whitman's example to her own poetry on the formal level. Pascoli, conversely, concentrated on the musical dimension of Whitman's poetry and recognized that his language never lost "its rhythmical, wavy motion," thus making the book acquire a "sense of the universal" (113). This, incidentally, probably convinced him to accept the 1907 Gamberale translation in the "Biblioteca dei popoli," the "cosmopolitan editorial initiative" (114) he had created for the Palermo publisher Sandron. The inextricable relation between Whitman's stylistic and political audacity was instead fully understood by Sibilla Aleramo, who—Bernardini states, providing convincing evidence—in the first decade of the 20th century wrote four reviews for *Nuova Antologia* under the pseudonym NEMI, collectively used by the editorial board of the journal: what Aleramo especially stressed in her readings was, besides Whitman's pacifism and democratic spirit, the organic correspondence between his ideals and an experimental style that broke all rules. Almost half a century later, after World War II, Aleramo even adopted Whitman's oratorical diction in her own most political poetry, also entertaining a political-literary dialogue with Palmiro Togliatti, who had translated some poems by Whitman.

But the transatlantic network built by Whitman's influence on Italian literature and culture went both ways. An especially illuminating discovery by Bernardini is that of Emanuel Carnevali's contribution to making Whitman a central presence in *American* modernism. Carnevali, who migrated to the USA when he was seventeen, started to be known in the literary circles of New York and Chicago at the end of the 1910s, with a vehement attack (launched from a critical position that combined the nonconformism of *La Voce* and Whitman's ruthlessness, so

important for Papini and Jahier) against the lack of authenticity and the obsession for technical issues of the new American poets. Surprisingly, they did not resent the accusations of that ‘outsider’ and instead took his advice to look backward to Whitman (“making a truce” with him, as Pound would say)—the poets of the New York magazine *Others* even dedicated an issue to Carnevali.

Carnevali’s case demonstrates how, in the era of great migrations, the circulation of literary movements and critical theories that laid the groundwork for the modernist avantgardes was not limited to texts and their reception, but also implicated the physical experience of dislocation that allowed writers and critics to enter into direct contact with the different cultures that were getting entangled in the modernist web. The same can be said for Dino Campana, who brought a copy of *Leaves of Grass* with him when he left for Argentina in 1907, and who later on shared his admiration for Whitman with his lover, Sibilla Aleramo. On one side, as Bernardini underlines, Campana’s ‘Whitmanian turn’ was mediated by his acquaintance with Nencioni (who defined Whitman’s poems as “orphic songs” (166) and D’Annunzio. This ‘prepared’ Campana for his own encounter with America by setting him inside a ‘horizon of expectations’ that turned his own journey to the New World into a mix of the standard voyage of initiation into the “American Dream” sung so many times by Whitman and the much more classical Ulyssean (and ‘Orphean’) exile to the land of the unknown. On the other, in America Campana came to feel that he could literally as well as literarily follow Whitman’s Emersonian example to ‘be himself,’ and get rid of any traditional mode of versification (and even of the distinction between poetry and prose)—and, in so doing, he also became one of the most revolutionary Italian poets, and would have probably gained full admittance to the modernist European vanguards if he had not been interned in an asylum with a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

The last two chapters of the book deal with Whitman and Futurism and with Cesare Pavese’s contribution to Whitman’s reception in early post-World War II Italy. Even without offering original readings or innovative views like in the former chapters (it would be really hard to say anything distinctly new about issues that have already been so thoroughly examined by Italian and foreign criticism), they manage to give a sense of closure to Bernardini’s study. They provide the reader with a complete image of Whitman’s function in the liberation of Italian poetry from the constraints of traditionalism and provincialism (and the comparison with Russian Futurism or the analysis of Whitman’s traces in Mina Loy are a further aid to the comprehension of the complexity of the connections linking such different modernisms to Whitman and among them through him). They also carefully reconstruct Pavese’s function in redefining the literary agenda of post-fascist Italy by adapting to the cultural needs of the nation reborn with the Resistance

a myth of America as the land of democracy and opportunity that for him Whitman so perfectly embodied.

In the conclusion to her book, Bernardini mentions a series of unanswered questions, which can be addressed only by looking even deeper into unaccounted archives (especially local and private ones) in Italy and elsewhere, or by reconsidering Whitman's impact in the wider sphere of public culture—not to mention the strictly literary influence he had in Italy after World War II. This was fostered by the establishment of the field of American criticism in the Italian academia, by his acquisition of the role of mythical father figure for poets so worshipped by the Italian audience like the Beats, and, needless to say, by the new translations produced by Enzo Giachino, Igina Tattoni or Mario Corona (just to name a few), who were all able to reimagine every time a new and different Whitman. Besides its many intrinsic merits, *Transnational Modernity and the Italian Reinvention of Walt Whitman* could also have that of encouraging such kinds of research.

Valerio Massimo De Angelis teaches American Literature and Culture at the University of Macerata. He is the author of two books on Nathaniel Hawthorne, co-editor of two collections of bio-critical essays on contemporary American writers and of the proceedings of two international conferences. He has published articles and essays on historical fiction, romance, abolitionism, feminism, modernism, postmodernism, comics, science fiction cinema, transatlantic Italian American relationships, and on authors like Poe, Whitman, Bierce, Stephen Crane, Henry James, Langston Hughes, Thomas Wolfe, Hammett, Chandler, Henry Roth, Pietro di Donato, Leslie Fiedler, Doctorow, Stephen King, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gloria Anzaldúa, Margaret Atwood, and Rudy Wiebe. He is General Editor of *RSA Journal*, the review of the Italian Association of North-American Studies, and Coordinator of the Center for Italian American Studies at the University of Macerata.