

Caterina Bernardini, *Transnational Modernity and the Italian Reinvention of Walt Whitman, 1870-1945* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2022), 281 pp.

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Walt Whitman's relation with Italy has been long, fruitful, and incredibly varied. As Caterina Bernardini's book *Transnational Modernity and the Italian Reinvention of Walt Whitman, 1870-1945* amply and brilliantly demonstrates, the American poet has always been a pivotal figure in the Italian cultural landscape, a mediator and point of reference for authors working on the cusp of tradition and modernity. Only in the last 70 years, Bernardini explains, "there have been twenty-one new selected and complete translations of Whitman into Italian": "an average of about one new translation every three years" (211), thus showing how Whitman continues to be a source of reinvention for poetic language and a favorite interlocutor for Italian letters. According to the author, "a continuous and fruitful negotiation between tradition and innovation, and not a sudden breakage with the literary past, is at the very heart of the Italian and transnational reception of Whitman" (208).

Bernardini's book traces this web of relations, providing a mosaic of Whitman's presence, along with its resonance and reception in Italian literature, from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War. In showcasing a gallery of intellectual figures from the more widely known Gabriele D'Annunzio, Giosuè Carducci, Antonio Gramsci, Sibilla Aleramo, and Cesare Pavese, to the less internationally recognized, such as Luigi Gamberale and Girolamo Ragusa Moleti, Bernardini's study reveals also how this large group of literati was never operating in "national isolation, but constantly in relation to – and direct collaboration with – other cultures that were also intent, in those same years, on reading and re-elaborating Whitman" (1).

By employing a comparative method that cuts across multiple fields and languages, discussing translations, critical works, archival findings, and correspondences, Bernardini challenges the notion of discreet national literatures, and binational flows of influence. Although she focuses on Italy, the author considers, as well, cultural products and crucial figures from France, England, and Russia, thus developing a model of transnational approach that illuminates a global landscape that has always been interconnected. Bernardini extends the account of Whitman's influence in Italy in two important ways—both by looking more broadly at transnational flows of influence and by looking more deeply into untapped archives where women and nonelite authors and critics converse and write about Whitman.

Starting from the active traffic in reviews and poems in the late nineteenth century, and the post-Risorgimento search for a modern Italian national identity, Bernardini dedicates her first chapters to the early Italian encounters with Whitman, culminating in Gamberale's five

<https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajad084>

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translations of *Leaves of Grass* into Italian, three of which were partial selections (1887, 1890 and 1912, this last edition “intended to be a vade mecum for working-class laborers” (67)), and two unabridged (1907 and 1923). A most fascinating figure, the self-taught and progressive high-school principal Gamberale was the first European to produce an unabridged translation of *Leaves of Grass* in 1907 (complete with a preface), and he became a crucial node in the network of critics, translators, poets, and readers interested in and revolving around Whitman’s work. Through attentive and precise close readings of the original and the translations, Bernardini illustrates how Gamberale on the one hand “appreciates Whitman’s innovations,” while on the other hand he also “seems to *feel* the overall effect of innovation, [failing] to *see* what this latter is composed of” (52) not comprehending fully the nature of Whitman’s ground-breaking and inventive poetic traits. Furthermore, and similarly to all the other Italian figures populating this volume, “Gamberale, whether deliberately or not, failed to recognize the strongly homoerotic component of [Whitman’s] vision, but he did grasp the idea of Whitman’s message of love and the American poet’s understanding of writing as a form of social and political activism” (53).

Adding to the rigorous attention to linguistic and poetic styles, and the intertextual connections in texts from different languages, this section of the book offers a methodological model in archival research, showing a due consideration of the rich epistolary exchanges among readers and other members of the Whitmanian Italian literary world. In focusing on the reception history, and on the poet’s significance for the modernization of Italian letters, Bernardini narrates how Whitman was known and experienced by high school teachers and principals in provincial locations like Molise or Calabria, as well as by cosmopolitan critics and writers in Parisian circles, thus rendering visible nodes and edges of connecting networks that are more complex and layered than the ones limited to the main cultural European centers, particularly Rome, Florence, Paris, and London. Thanks to in-depth archival work in local and private libraries, the chapter on Gamberale sheds light on the vitality of cultural production and dissemination that travel lesser-known paths of interpersonal and intellectual collaboration, contributing to a redrawing of the Italian geography of critical thought and active intellectual pursuits.

Among the numerous merits of this study is the ambitious project of “studying Whitman’s perception in a transnational perspective [as] an opportunity to perceive how many countries were at the same time collaborating to carve out the writing of modernity” (9). This extensive vista explains how Whitman became relevant for and was appropriated by the more conservative and nationalistic writers on this spectrum, as well as by more progressive and socially conscious authors, showing how selective readings of his work allowed Whitman to be customized in order to accommodate different ideological, cultural and political propositions.

Differently from earlier studies, Bernardini pays very close attention to the women who read, critiqued and were inspired by Whitman's ideas and work. From Margherita C. Haskard, a reader who in her 1893 letters thanked Gamberale for his early translations and defined herself a "feminine Whitman" (60), to Ada Negri's "passionate admiration" (75) in her 1893 article titled "Il gigante della libera America" (The Giant of Free America), and the discovery of Sibilla Aleramo's essays on Whitman written under pseudonym, Bernardini extends previous critical conversation of Whitman. In so doing, she inspires scholars to continue to pursue research in areas that remain vastly unexplored, considering even obscure figures who might provide a "more comprehensive understanding of Whitman's celebration of the body, of homoerotic love, sexuality, and pansexuality," and to recover and emphasize "the responses to Whitman of women writers and critics, . . . in parallel to the larger and crucial task of recovering women's contribution to Italian literature in the past two centuries" (209).

Transnational Modernity and the Italian Reinvention of Walt Whitman, 1870-1945 closes its robust critical perusal with the most astute of the Italian critics taken into account in the volume's temporal arc, Cesare Pavese, who was not only an important writer and poet, but also one of the most important and insightful mediators of US culture in Italy, through his translations and critical writings. From his thesis on Whitman, which he defended in 1930, to a few short translations recently discovered and only published in 2020, Pavese had a long-lasting relation with the poet, and he was instrumental in bringing about the 1950 unabridged translation of *Leaves of Grass* by Enzo Giachino. In his 1933 essay "Walt Whitman, poesia del far poesia" ("Walt Whitman, Poetry of Poetry-Making"), Pavese explains to the Italian public "the textual history of the different editions of the *Leaves*, and argues once again" that Whitman "had a clear metacognitive and critical awareness that guided his composition and revision process" (197). Pavese recognizes, possibly for the first time in Italy, the "programmatically and self-aware component of Whitman's poetics and formal innovations" (197), understanding the poet's constant process of making and remaking, in all his various rewritings and revisions.

Part of the strength of this volume for current and future scholars, lies, therefore, in Bernardini's generosity: by delving into unpublished materials and specific, occasionally remote archives, the author indicates new avenues of research, significantly expanding our Whitmanian vistas.