

Tzvetan Stoyanov and the Bulgarian Reception of Walt Whitman: Translation and Reception Series

Abstract

The article examines the Bulgarian reception of Walt Whitman by focusing on the translation and critical work of Tzvetan Stoyanov. The theoretical framework is based on Marta Skwara's concepts of "translation series," "reception series," and "textualization," which allow us to trace the dynamics of Whitman's texts in the national context. The emphasis falls on Stoyanov's translations of "Leaves of Grass" (1965), which combine humanistic and philosophical pathos with the ideological requirements of the socialist era. A comparison with Vladimir Svintila's later translations reveals parallel translation series – canonizing (Stoyanov) and transgressive (Svintila). The analysis shows how translations function not only as linguistic transformations, but also as cultural and critical gestures that influence the poetic explorations of the 1960s and later literary debates in Bulgaria. In this way, the article reflects on the role of the translator as a cultural mediator and strategist of the national reception of world literature.

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Keywords

Walt Whitman, Tzvetan Stoyanov, translation series, reception series, textualization, Bulgarian literature, translation and ideology, literary criticism

Walt Whitman was one of the most influential writers of the 19th century. His collection of poems, "Leaves of Grass" (1855) became a landmark text in American literature, and over time, a source of inspiration for European cultures. Whitman's poetry, based on free verse and celebrating the body and democratic experience, had a profound influence on modern literature and changed the way poetry thought of itself.

Walt Whitman's work reached Bulgaria in several stages. The first avant-garde impulse appeared in the 1920s with the publication of "I Sing the Body Electric" translated by Georgi Mihaylov in the magazine

“Listopad“ in 1920. Later, Geo Milev included the poem in his “Almanac Libra“ (1923), which testifies to the proximity between Whitman’s free verse and the expressionist aesthetics of Bulgarian modernism. However, this early presentation remained episodic. A more formal interest in Whitman emerged only in the 1940s with the translations of Nedelcho Branev, but they were fragmentary and strongly marked by the ideological conjuncture. In the 1960s, thanks to the translations of Tzvetan Stoyanov, the work of the American bard poet entered literary life more systematically, forming the first reception series that marked the beginning of his canonization in Bulgarian culture. Tzvetan Stoyanov, together with Georgi Slavov, made a significant attempt to present Whitman more comprehensively, and later, in the years of socio-political and cultural transformation after 1989, Vladimir Svintila and Ogniana Ivanova offered new translations and interpretations. This dynamic outlines not only the history of the translation of Whitman’s work, but also the way in which Bulgarian culture makes sense of American poetry – as a field of dialogue between ideology, aesthetics and national literary needs.

Among all these names, it is Tzvetan Stoyanov who occupies a central place. He is not only a translator of Whitman, but also a literary critic, philosopher of literature and an active participant in cultural life in the 1960s, which further contributes to the perception of Whitman’s poetry in Bulgaria. His translations and critical texts become a starting point for the creation of the “Bulgarian Whitman”, and his role as an intellectual determines the way in which the American poet fits into the cultural discourse of the country. In this sense, Stoyanov’s work cannot be viewed solely as a linguistic transformation: it is both a cultural event and a critical gesture through which the foreign text becomes part of the national literary canon.

According to Marta Skwara in the preface to the book “Whitman in Poland: The Reception and Role of the American Poet in Polish National Culture“ (2014) it is necessary to clearly distinguish between the translation series and the reception series. The latter is seen as a research approach that traces how a foreign text functions within the framework of a national literature and culture. The reception series covers a significantly wider field than the translation series, since translations are only one, albeit very important, element in introducing a foreign author into a certain national context, but they do not exhaust the entire process. The purpose of such research is not

to determine which translation is the “most faithful” or most accurately reproduces the style and semantic layers of the original, but to show how and at what point the potential of a given text is realized and transformed in the new cultural environment.

For Skwara, the translation series is to some extent an “artificially isolated” corpus of texts, which in itself does not show how a foreign work functions in the national culture. That is why, considering the broad literary interests and critical research of Tzvetan Stoyanov, in his case it is not just a question of translation, but of a complete reception. In the 1960s, Tzvetan Stoyanov established himself as one of the leading literary critics. Even before that, he had already turned his attention to American literature and a significant part of his work was dedicated to introducing the Bulgarian reader to the broader cultural context through his translations and critical publications. Stoyanov creates a framework in which it is clearly visible how a foreign work begins to function in the national culture. On the basis of his translations, intertextual works later emerged, which further developed Whitman’s poetics in new forms. The reception series thus formed in the 1960s outlines a much broader field – it shows the connection between the original and its diverse manifestations in the Bulgarian cultural environment.

I. The Choice of Tzvetan Stoyanov: Poetry and Context

Tzvetan Stoyanov (1930–1971) stands out in Bulgarian cultural life as a critic, writer, philosopher and translator with a particularly sensitive sense of the universal and the modern. He is completely dedicated to his work and perceives it as a mission. His approach to his role as a translator is no less responsible than his other activities, which is best conveyed in Bulgarian by the words: “Now we will translate. We will not be able to do anything else”. After that, he went up to the Orpheus hut in the Rhodope Mountains for many months and translated Shelley, Byron and Emily Dickinson (Nikolov 2025, 1). In his critical and essayistic books, he strives for a synthesis between literature, philosophy and social thought. His critical work can be defined as “systemic” and “philosophically grounded”, thus emphasizing his unique place in the Bulgarian intellectual tradition. This also finds its manifestation in his translations. Already in his early

texts, Stoyanov sought to insert Bulgarian literature into a dialogue with the English-speaking world and to search for universal human themes – alienation, freedom, identity. His dissertation, dedicated to the motifs of alienation in Western literature from the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century, shows that his interest in the philosophical dimensions of the word is lasting and deep. In this context, his choice to translate Walt Whitman is not accidental: the poetry of the American author embodies the search for new horizons in which the individual and the collective, the body and the spirit, the national and the universal intertwine.

For Tzvetan Stoyanov, poetry occupies a key place as a genre, as he perceives it as a living communion and a moral horizon that preserves memory, renews the language and inserts Bulgarian culture into a broader global conversation. Poetry has a fundamental meaning – it is a means of overcoming alienation, of preserving the humanistic impulse and a spiritual support of culture. The role of poetry is not limited to the literary phenomenon. Through translations of poetic works selected by Stoyanov, he insists that poetry is not only an aesthetic phenomenon, but also a channel that connects national culture with world culture. This is a “message” against cultural provincialism.

The collection “Leaves of Grass” (1965), translated by Tzvetan Stoyanov and Georgi Savov, marks a significant moment in the Bulgarian reception of Walt Whitman. Stoyanov’s translation includes some of the poet’s most important works – excerpts from “Song of Myself”, “I Sing the Body Electric“, “Song of Open Road”, “O Captain! My Captain!” and “The Mystic Trumpeter”. The selection on these works, conscious and purposeful, emphasizes the universal and humanistic pathos on Whitman and introduces the Bulgarian audience in his innovative poetics. This choice reflects both the tradition of socially engaged reading and the current cultural and ideological needs of the 1960s. At the same time, it marks the beginning of Whitman’s reception series in Bulgaria – a corpus of translations and interpretations through which the American poet-bard begins to occupy a permanent place in the national cultural horizon.

Stoyanov’s style as a translator is marked by a striving for philosophical clarity and classical harmony. His translation is a kind of act of cultural “assimilation”: Whitman is presented as a poet not so much of the experiment as of the ethical and spiritual message. The vocabulary is adapted to the Bulgarian literary language – with

pathos, rhythm and sublime tone, which makes the poems accessible and significant for the audience of the time. The influence of socialist ideology on the choice of texts cannot be ignored. The translations do not include poems with erotic motifs, as well as fragments that could be perceived as “scandalous“. Instead, the emphasis falls on the democratic and collectivist ideas, which allow Whitman to be interpreted as “his“ poet, in tune with socialist values. Stoyanov manages to achieve the balance between fidelity to the original and ideological acceptability, turning the translation not only into a literary act, but also into a cultural and political gesture.

In three articles in “Narodna Kultura” in 1957, Tzvetan Stoyanov formulated a programmatic demand for the translation and publication of world classics in Bulgaria, indicating a long list of still untranslated authors, key to the development of culture. This individual statement de facto outlines the direction of Bulgarian translation studies and publishing practice. The author refers to Boyan Penev’s thought on the need for critical, deep knowledge of foreign cultures and the assimilation of what ennobles one’s own (Penev 1924). If in Penev’s case this is a manifesto, in Stoyanov’s case we see the daily effort to “extract” Bulgarian culture from provincialism and open it to the great European and world culture (Metodiev 2025, 4-7).

Tzvetan Stoyanov’s mastery as a translator, critic and literary critic is due to his deep and integral view of poetry and its role. For Stoyanov, poetry is not just an aesthetic form, but a higher manifestation of the human spirit and the creative energy of the people. His literary views exclude formalism, since in his opinion, form has meaning only when it is organically connected to the content. As he himself writes: “interest in poetic form can be formalism only when it becomes an end in itself – and when it is a search for expression related to a certain content, a necessity.” (Stoyanov 1978, 21). This position also determines his approach to translation and criticism. Stoyanov emphasizes that rhythm is not an external decoration of the verse, but part of its essence: “Rhythm is inseparably connected with the soul of the poetic work, it is part of the content, the language of the content.” (Stoyanov 1978, 24). Such an understanding makes him demanding in the choice of metric and prompts him to seek expressive forms that best correspond to the natural dynamics of the Bulgarian language. In his literary observations, he reveals the limitations of the syllabic tradition and calls for the development of freer and more flexible

rhythmic models. A special place in his critical approach is occupied by the idea of the musicality of speech. Even modern poetry, based on colloquial language, for Stoyanov retains a specific melodic that distinguishes it from prosaic speech: “And ‘modern’ poetry, when it is poetry, and not an exercise! – remains perhaps different from the musicality of the word. No one has said that this musicality must necessarily be gentle and ringing, it can be harsh, rough, cutting, but the important thing is – that it be organically connected with thought and emotion.” (Stoyanov 1978, 42). This concept is the key to his mastery as a translator: he is not satisfied with a literal transfer of meaning, but captures the inner rhythm, melody and “soul” of the text. In the deepest sense, for Stoyanov, poetry is the embodiment of the creative power of the people and the bearer of aesthetic and spiritual experience: “poetry is the power and glory of a language – and who else will teach us our language but you? [...] Because in you is gathered all the creative power of the people, all their sense of goodness and beauty – and since we have no other goal than to express this feeling, our path passes through your path!” (Stoyanov 1978, 45).

Tzvetan Stoyanov’s outstanding talent stems from his ability to think of poetry not as an abstract form, but as a living, spiritual and historical phenomenon. In his criticism, literary theory and translations, the aspiration to combine content, rhythm and musicality into an organic whole stands out. It is this sensitivity to the poetic essence that makes him an outstanding translator.

II. The Translation Series: Whitman in Bulgaria

Tzvetan Stoyanov’s translations, included in “Strukcheta Treva” (1965), can be perceived as a kind of “translation series” in the sense of Marta Skwara – a corpus of texts that is not random or fragmentary, but conceptually grounded and structured in harmony with the logic of the original. Stoyanov is not satisfied with translating individual emblematic poems, but builds a coherent system in which Whitman is simultaneously a poet of democracy, a prophet of human unity and a philosopher of modernity. The selection includes fragments of “Song of Myself”, as well as elegies (“O Captain! My Captain!”), hymns (“Song of the Open Road”), meditative miniatures (“A Noiseless Patient Spider”),

thus creating a comprehensive image of the poet, already refracted through the prism of the Bulgarian cultural context of the 1960s.

The majority of Whitman's key works were translated into Bulgarian only by Tzvetan Stoyanov and were not retranslated by subsequent translators. It was Stoyanov's translations that formed the foundation of the Bulgarian reception of Whitman: they became a canonical model, cited in textbooks, anthologies, and literary analyses over the decades.

The next translation series – by Vladimir Svintila – arises as a complement – more transgressive, fuller and more fleshly, based on a dialogue with Stoyanov's classical canon. The juxtaposition of Stoyanov's (1965) and Svintila's (1996) translations of the five common poems – “A Song of Myself (Excerpts)”, “I Sing the Body Electric”, “An Hour of Madness and Joy”, “A Song of the Open Road” and “Come Up from the Fields, Father” – reveals not only the different translation strategies, but also the ideological and cultural contexts that shaped the Bulgarian reception of Whitman from the socialist period to the post-communist era. The existence of both versions builds a pluralistic, polyphonic reception of the poet in Bulgaria: his image functions simultaneously as a prophet of humanism and as a radical rebel, and the choice of translator marks the context of interpretation for subsequent generations.

Selectivity and strategies

Tzvetan Stoyanov translates only excerpts from “Leaves of Grass”¹, thus offering the Bulgarian reader not the entire “flowing” structure of the text, but concentrated fragments that bring out its philosophical and humanistic charge. His translation lacks some of the expressive corporeality characteristic of Whitman, as well as the “barbaric” energy of the enumerations. Instead, the emphasis is on universalistic messages, on poetic self-consciousness, and on the image of the poet as a mediator between the individual and society. This selectivity is not the result of weakness, but of strategy: Stoyanov is building a translation series that aims to integrate Whitman into the Bulgarian canon and

¹ Retaining the original title is necessary because each translation carries its own nuances that can impose a certain interpretation on the text and the reader's perspective. This also applies to the further analyses in this chapter.

present him as close to the spirit of the era. In this sense, his “Song of Myself” is both a poetic translation and a cultural commentary – an act of adaptation and critical reflection.

It is also important to recall Nedelcho Branev’s translation of “The Singer of the Cosmos: Walt Whitman” (1947), whose publication emphasizes universal and optimistic motifs, eliminating corporeality and eroticism. Branev’s interpretation is distinguished by pathos and classical rhetoric – a kind of “tamed” interpretation that makes Whitman compatible with the cultural and ideological framework of the late 1940s. It is this rhetorical “taming” that prepares the ground for the more profound and conceptually consistent translations of Tzvetan Stoyanov in the 1960s, which will form the first sustainably shaped reception series.

In the 1990s, Svintila offered an alternative approach: he translated “Song of Myself” in its entirety, without avoiding the difficult, bodily and erotic passages. His style is more direct, expressive, striving to preserve the rhythm and repetitions of Whitman. If in Stoyanov the reader meets Whitman as a philosopher and prophet of humanism, then in Svintila he meets the poet in his fullness – with contradictions, bodilyity, eroticism and radical democratic views.

In Marta Skwara’s theory, the “translation series” represents a series of versions of a text that enter into dialogue and reflect the cultural climate of the era. In the Bulgarian case, “Song of Myself” forms a dynamic series: Branev – selective choice, pathetic rhetoric, elimination of the bodily; Stoyanov – philosophical-humanistic emphasis; Svintila – complete translation, preserved rhythm and eroticism. Thus, the translation series “Leaves of Grass” shows how different cultural eras in Bulgaria create their own images of the poet: from a “domesticated” visionary to a “barbaric” prophet of freedom.

“Leaves of Grass” – between the fragment and the whole

In Marta Skwara’s theory, the “translation series” means that each new version of a given text does not cancel the previous ones, but adds to them and rearranges them, outlining a historical horizon of reading. This is exactly how the Bulgarian series around “Leaves of Grass” functions: it is a polyphony of solutions, in which different cultural

tasks and aesthetics figure. Two clearly distinguished approaches are already visible at the level of the titles. Tzvetan Stoyanov prefers “Pesen za sebe si” and “Strukcheta treva” – names that harmonize Whitman with the Bulgarian high style and with the humanistic canon of the 1960s. Vladimir Svintila chooses the more intimate “Pesen za men samiya” and the literal “Trevni lista”, emphasizing the ambiguity of the “lista” (a word that in Bulgarian may refer to the leaves of a book or that of a plant) and bodily expression. “Strukcheta treva” aestheticizes and softens the provocative charge; “Trevni lista” returns the literalness and the rough, “earthly” energy of the original. This choice is not indifferent: in Stoyanov’s case, the strategy is canonizing, aiming for a permanent entry into the cultural horizon; in Svintila’s case, it is alternative and expressive, emphasizing the bodily and the individual.

The beginning of “Song of Myself” is particularly indicative: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” In Svintila we read: „Аз чествам себе си, възпявам себе си, / което аз приемам, ще приемете и вие! / Защото всеки атом, който ми принадлежи, принадлежи и вам“. “Chestvam – ‘Celebrate’” gives an intimate-liturgical tone and emphasizes the spontaneity of the gesture. In Stoyanov the formulation is: „Аз славя себе си, възпявам себе си. / Това, което аз получа, и вие ще го получите, / защото всеки атом, който ми принадлежи, и вам принадлежи.“ “Slaviya – Celebrate” brings out a hymnographic layer and places the utterance in the odic tradition. The difference is not only stylistic: in Stoyanov the public “singing” addresses a community, transforming the individual “self” into a universal horizon; in Svintila the “celebration” is more intimate, almost confessional.

The key scene with the child who asks “What is the grass?”, concentrates the difference on level imagery. In Whitman the grass is “the flag of my disposition”, “the handkerchief of the Lord”, “the beautiful uncut hair of graves”. In Svintila: „Аз мисля, че е знамето на мойта разположеност... Или гонускам, че е Божията носна кърпа... Сега тревата ми се струва хубава и непогстригана коса от някой гроб“. In Stoyanov: „Представям си, че тя е флаг на моите чувства... или си представям, че е кърпата на бога... А ето, сега ми се струва, че тревата е хубавата, непогстригана коса на гробовете“. Stoyanov’s „кърпата на бога“ and „флаг на

моуме чувства“ have biblical – symbolic optics; Svintila maintains the intimate and mystical expression with „Божията носна кърпа“, which brings the image closer to corporeality and sensual perception. In the overall balance, Stoyanov’s version achieves a synthesis of accessibility, rhythm, and universalizing symbolism – a quality that facilitates Whitman’s canonization in the Bulgarian context.

Similar observations are also made with “I Sing the Body Electric”. The opening exclamation sets forth an apology for the flesh, in which the catalogs of organs (“the lung-sponges, the stomach, the bowels...”) build a litany of the living body. Svintila literally reproduces the anatomical concreteness: „гъргурме, гробовеме, стомахът, червата“, preserving the “barbaric” energy and rhythmic persistence of the enumeration. Stoyanov reduces the concreteness to „възторжени членове, живи части на мялото“, translating the bodily catalog into a generalized, philosophical figure. This is not “softening”, but a purposeful aestheticization that transforms the body into a sign of human dignity and moral strength. The difference is also visible in the title: “Възпявам електрическото тяло” (Stoyanov) is a hymn, where the emphasis falls on the act of singing and on the transcendence of the flesh; “Тялото електрично аз възпявам” (Svintila) places the body itself at the center, as a source of sacred energy. Historically, Stoyanov’s strategy makes possible the cultural acceptance of the poem in the conditions of the 1960s; Svintila’s strategy, already in a post-communist context, restores all sensual and formal radicalism.

In “Come Up from the Fields, Father,” Whitman pits the idyll of autumn against tragic news. The opening lines – “Come up from the fields, father, here’s a letter from our Pete; / And come to the front door, mother, here’s a letter from thy dear son” – combine homely warmth with a sense of loss. Svintila opens the poem expressively: „Ела от полетата, татко, имаме поща от Пийт! Излез пред вратника, майко, писмо от скъпия ти син!“, with the repeated “уви, сега е есен, уви...” intensifying the tragic register, a shadow of a folk-song lament. Stoyanov prefers restraint and narrative clarity: „Върни се от полята, татко, гоئے писмо от Пум! Излез на портата, мамо, гоئے писмо от твоя син“, and then piles on specific details – „гърветата са по-тъмнозелени, по-червени и по-жълти... в овоцната градина висят зрели ябълки...“. Thus, tragedy arises from the contrast between mature nature and the recent news, without the need for pathetic exclamations. Here Stoyanov’s strength lies in

“quiet” rhetoric: to convey the emotional impact through composition and imagery, not through rhetorical density.

The poem “One Hour to Madness and Joy” is one of the most daring in “Leaves of Grass”. The beginning “One hour to madness and joy! O furious! O confine me not!” in Svintila comes across as: „Егунствен час на лугост и на рагост! О, бесноват! Не ме ограничавай!“. „Егунствен“ and „бесноват“ raise the mystical and sensual intensity, and the tone is visionary. In Stoyanov we read: „Егун час на безумие и рагост! О лугешки час! Не ме възнурай!“. Although he reduces some bodily allusions and chooses to address in the feminine form („която и га си“), his version preserves the impulse of liberation and transcendence, translating ecstasy into the category of spiritual impulse. This translation decision here also works aesthetically: it makes possible the “high” reading of the poem in the Bulgarian context, without taking away the rhythm and dramatic gesture. The comparison shows two valid optics: Svintila “unfolds” the erotic and mystical register; Stoyanov “canonizes” it as an experience of the spirit.

“Song of the Open Road” is a manifesto of the movement’s self-poetics. The first verse reads “Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road.” In Svintila’s version: „Пеша, с олекнало сърце поемам по открития прег мене път, свободен, здрав, светът разкрит прег мен.“ „Олекнало сърце“ conveys a slight, almost confessional relief – joy of liberation. Stoyanov translates this as: „Пеш и ведър, аз хващам широкия грум, свободен и здрав – светът е прег мен.“ „Ведър“ stabilizes spiritual clarity, and „широкия грум“ adds a monumental, epic perspective. The divergence marks two different horizons: the individualistic, existential road (Svintila) and the communal, civilizational „грум“ (Stoyanov). In both cases, the dynamics of free verse and the rhythmic impulse of the declaration are preserved; In Stoyanov’s work, however, syntactic discipline and rhetorical balance act as a unifier, giving the poem a scale in which the personal becomes universal.

The juxtaposition of the five poems outlines a stable model of the Bulgarian translation series. Tzvetan Stoyanov’s version – philosophical, balanced, rhetorically clear – does not simply “soften” Whitman, but integrates him into the stable register of the Bulgarian high style. It reduces the rough carnal concreteness where it would block reception, and translates it into universal symbols („флаз“, „кърпа на бога“, „широкия грум“). Stoyanov’s achievement is twofold: he preserves

the rhythm, while simultaneously offering a conceptual framework for reading – Whitman as a poet of human dignity, of humanistic solidarity and of spiritual freedom. That is precisely why his versions become textbook, anthological, institutionally “wearable”: they sound organic in Bulgarian and open the “door” to Whitman for generations of readers.

The alternative series by Vladimir Svintila – corporeal, expressive, literally faithful to erotic energy – fulfills another cultural task: it returns the “barbaric” power of the original and recalls the radicalism of free verse. The two series are not mutually exclusive, but work together. Stoyanov provides the canonical implementation and the “universal” reading; Svintila loosens the filters and opens up to the fullness of Whitman’s experience – sensual, democratic, rhythmically persistent. As a result, “Leaves of Grass” functions in Bulgaria as a polyphonic corpus: the poet is both a moral visionary and a singer of the body; both personal and collective; both sublime and “earthly”.

Stoyanov creates the series, which is selective, philosophizing and adapted to the ideological climate of the socialist times. His Whitman is harmonized, humanistic and inscribed in the socialist canon. Svintila, on the contrary, builds an alternative, transgressive series – complete, bodily and expressive, returning the “barbaric energy” of the original in the conditions of cultural freedom after 1990.

The comparison of the five poems clearly shows the functioning of the so-called “parallel translation series” (after Marta Skwara). In this series, the same text receives different versions of translation, which are not mutually exclusive, but enter into dialogue with each other. This creates a dynamic, polyphonic reception: the same poet can be read both as a prophet of humanism (Stoyanov) and as a radical singer of the body and freedom (Svintila). It is this dialogue between different translation strategies that is the essence of the translation series.

From the perspective of reception history, this duality is productive. It does not force an “either-or” choice, but offers a field of “and-and” reading in which Whitman can be heard both as a hymnographer of the common and as a bodily mystic. If we are looking for a criterion for a “better” translation in a strictly philological sense, the comparison is endless – each solution has its price. But if the criterion is cultural effectiveness and durability of presence, Stoyanov’s advantage is that he makes Whitman part of the canon. Stoyanov is not only a translator, but also a significant figure in Bulgarian cultural history,

whose translations and critical texts testify to a demonstrated talent and scale of thinking. He is able to capture the philosophical depth and spiritual charge of the originals and convey them in Bulgarian with such naturalness that they sound like an organic part of the national vocabulary. His systematic approach to literature, combined with brilliant linguistic mastery, turns each of his works into a cultural event. In Stoyanov's translations, the rhythm and musicality of the word are intertwined with a moral and philosophical vision, which gives them lasting value far beyond the specific historical moment. His pen combines the precision of a philologist, the sense of a poet and the insight of a thinker, making him one of the brightest examples of an intellectual who manages to bring Bulgarian culture to the level of global dialogue.

III. The reception of Tzvetan Stoyanov's translations. Textualization and secondary uses

Tzvetan Stoyanov is presented unambiguously as a critic and translator of key English-language authors, which makes him an important figure in the Bulgarian reception series in the twentieth century. The *Kultura* portal notes: "Tzvetan Stoyanov (1930–1971) is a critic, writer and translator. We owe to him the translations of Emily Dickinson, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walt Whitman, [...] Kipling's "The Jungle Book", "Tortilla Flat" and Steinbeck's "The Winter of Our Discontent"². His range encompasses both poetry (Dickinson, Shelley, Whitman) and canonical prose (Kipling, Steinbeck). In another article in *Kultura*, this is repeated with an emphasis on the quality of the translations: "We owe to him the wonderful translations from English of Emily Dickinson, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walt Whitman... *Gulliver's Travels* [Swift] and *To Kill a Mockingbird* [Harper Lee]" (Nikolov 2025, 1). Tzvetan Stoyanov's translations are not simply literary exotica—they are part of his modernization project. Stoyanov insists that classical world literature is necessary for the "spirit" of Bulgarian culture; that without its presence, the culture remains a spiritual desert.

² <https://www.kultura.bg/author/370-cvetan-stoyanov>

Although the comparison of the translations of Tzvetan Stoyanov and Vladimir Svintila usually focuses on the five common poems (“A Song for Myself (Excerpts)”, “I Sing the Body Electric”, “An Hour of Madness and Joy”, “A Song of the Open Road”, “Come up from the Fields, Father”), it is Stoyanov who remains the most frequently cited and most respected translator of Whitman in Bulgaria. This is also because he is the author of the first Bulgarian versions of a number of key works that Svintila does not include. Stoyanov’s translations – although selective, philosophized and adapted to the socialist context – acquired canonical status and for a long time served as the main “window” to Whitman for the Bulgarian reader.

Along with the five poems that have parallel translations in Svintila, Stoyanov also translated a number of other important texts. Among them, an important place is held by “Poets to Come”, “O Captain! My Captain!”, and “A Noiseless Patient Spider”. These works have no parallel in Svintila, and it is through them that Whitman enters Bulgarian culture with his full force. They become the most popular and frequently cited texts – retold in anthologies, critical studies and curricula. The case of Hristo Fotev is particularly telling. In his poem “From the Summer of ‘68,” the image of the “captain” takes on new dimensions – from Whitman’s mourning symbol, he transforms into the figure of the executioner, at the head of the murderers. As Plamen Doinov notes: “At that time (the fall of ‘68), there is no doubt that Fotev already knew the famous lines from ‘In Memory of President Lincoln’, translated by Tzvetan Stoyanov: ‘O captain! My captain!’” (Doinov 2012, 282). The mournful intonation is preserved, but directed not at the victim, but at the abuser – Fotev’s captain is a negative leader, a figure of collective guilt and historical trauma. Thus, Stoyanov’s translation turns out to be a source of intertextual references that allow Bulgarian poetry to articulate the political and existential dimension of its time. Plamen Doinov emphasizes that Stoyanov is not only a translator, but also a cultural mediator, and his versions create an institutional weight for Whitman in Bulgaria. This testimony clearly shows how Stoyanov’s translation series grows into a receptive and textual series – precisely in the spirit of Marta Skwara’s theory.

Tzvetan Stoyanov’s role in the Bulgarian reception of Whitman is not limited to his translations. He was an active participant in the cultural processes of the 1960s, when a group of young poets – Konstantin Pavlov, Stefan Tsanev, Lyubomir Levchev and sometimes

Ivan Dinkov – built a laboratory for a new poetic language. As Plamen Doinov points out, this group combined the legacy of the left-wing avant-garde (Geo Milev, Lamar, Marangozov) and the left-wing classics (Vaptsarov), while simultaneously drawing on examples from world literature – Mayakovsky, Whitman, Eliot. In this circle, Stoyanov is not just an observer, but an active “educator” and critic who guides poets to new horizons and promotes their work to the public” (Doinov 2012, 66). It is through him that the American poet Whitman becomes a cultural referent for a generation that is looking for ways to renew the poetic language. Stoyanov’s translations are not only texts to read, but also a source of ideas, stylistic solutions and models for dialogue with modernity. Thus, the critic and translator plays a dual role – he simultaneously introduces Whitman to Bulgarian culture and serves as a bridge between young poets and the world literary tradition.

It is often noted that Stoyanov possesses the qualities of a mediator, who not only conveys the poetic form, but also the cultural layers of the works: “an aesthetic attitude towards the world ideas with which he introduces Bulgarians” (Chulova 2010). In Toni Nikolov’s article, “Tzvetan Stoyanov and the 1960s Dispute about the ‘Spirit of the Place’” (Nikolov 2024, 67-68), the Bulgarian critic and translator is presented as a key figure in the debate on national identity and its connection with global culture. Stoyanov, referring to the concept of “world literature”, insists on mapping works whose absence from Bulgarian literary life would impoverish the cultural context. In this sense, his position can be understood through the concept of “reception series” – as a process and a set of translation, critical and editorial choices that form the canon of presence of foreign literatures in the Bulgarian language. Nikolov notes that Stoyanov asks questions about the “foreignness” of authors such as Whitman, Eluard, Brecht, Neruda, Hikmet, Quasimodo, thus exploring the tension between the local and the universal. For Stoyanov, these authors are not “foreign,” but an organic part of the world’s cultural horizon, without whose presence Bulgarian literature would remain isolated and incomplete.

This is fully consistent with the idea of the central role of the translator in the construction of a national reception series. The emphasis is placed on his ability to create an “aesthetic attitude towards world ideas”, giving them sustainability in the Bulgarian cultural dialogue. The translations of Whitman that Stoyanov realized are evaluated as an act of creative mediation, and his version of the

American poet becomes a reference for subsequent generations of readers and researchers. It is this function of a canonical translator and cultural mediator that coincides with the concept of the reception series: the language and critical perspective imposed in this way define the long-term national version of Whitman in Bulgaria. This evidence shows that Stoyanov's translations – including his versions of Whitman – are perceived not only as a literary achievement, but also as a cultural gesture. Here we observe the transition from a “translational” to a “receptive” and “textual” series: Stoyanov's translations create a stable layer that becomes a starting point for later parallel or alternative voices in the Bulgarian reception of Whitman, as well as a source of new intertextual references in Bulgarian poetry itself. Stoyanov's vision of literature is deeply universalist: literature is not confined within the boundaries of language and national tradition, but represents a dynamic network of mutual influences in which the national is enriched by the global. He views the literary process as a dialogue – a place where different “voices” create a common cultural map. In this context, translation and criticism acquire the status of a cultural mission – a task that goes beyond purely aesthetic criteria and becomes a project for the spiritual modernization of Bulgarian culture. Thus, Stoyanov outlines the role of the reception series not only as a mechanism of continuity, but also as a strategy for cultural identity, in which Bulgarian literature is conceived as a full participant in the world literary dialogue.

In the context of the reception series, Stoyanov serves as a “portal” to English-language literature in Bulgaria – his choices of authors, genres, and style form a canon that includes Romanticism, Modernism, poetry, and prose. This means that his work as a translator is not only an aesthetic contribution, but also a cultural strategy for overcoming isolation, for introducing new ideas and literary forms that influence the further development of Bulgarian literature.

From the perspective of the theory of the reception series (as a sequence of translation and editorial choices that shape the presence of foreign literatures), Stoyanov's work outlines a strategic introduction of English-language authors into Bulgarian culture – from American lyric poetry (Dickinson, Whitman) to the formative prose of the 20th century (Steinbeck, Harper Lee). These translations not only fill gaps, but also overturn hierarchies in the Bulgarian literary field, providing examples of style, theme and ethics – precisely what makes the

reception series a mechanism of cultural change. Tzvetan Stoyanov is not just a translator of English-language literature – he is a driver of modernization in Bulgaria, of familiarization with globally significant examples as a cultural mission. His choices for translations are strategic: genres, eras, styles that will broaden the reader’s horizons. He doesn’t just translate foreign texts into Bulgarian, but chooses ones that will provoke, enrich, shake up the canons and set new standards.

At the same time, as modern studies show, the reception series is not limited to printed publications. Stoyanov’s translations continue in radio broadcasts and stage readings of Whitman, through which the foreign poet begins to “live” in new media forms and reach a wider audience. In this way, Stoyanov’s role as a translator of English-language literature (Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Dickinson, Whitman, Steinbeck, Harper Lee, etc.) acquires strategic importance for Bulgarian cultural modernization. His translations launch and nourish the Bulgarian reception series, including not only books and critical articles, but also audio and media appearances that establish Walt Whitman and other authors as part of the national cultural horizon.

Skwara also introduces the concept of textualization, by which she understands all new texts and forms created on the basis of the original – including intermedial adaptations, such as radio broadcasts. In this context, the broadcasts on the Bulgarian National Radio can be mentioned. It is Tzvetan Stoyanov’s translations that serve as the basis for radio dramatizations of Whitman’s work, for “translation” into another sign system. For example, we hear an excerpt from the sixth part of “A Song of Myself”, performed by the voice of Andrey Chaprazov in the program “Voices” (BNR 1979), as well as an excerpt from “I Sing the Body Electric” interpreted by Sava Hashamov (1970). In this way, Stoyanov’s translations begin to exist in new forms and media (Dimitrov 2024).

Reception series do not always emerge as a natural consequence of the literary process – sometimes it is the researcher who compares different texts and places them in a new perspective. In the case of Stoyanov, his translations and critical studies enable the Bulgarian audience to encounter Walt Whitman “in his true image”. Through conscious comparisons between the translations and the national literature of the era, Stoyanov shows that the original can be revived in a new language and preserve the connection between tradition and modernity. Thus, his reception series is revealed as a set of interpretive

proposals. It is no coincidence that the translations of Georgi Slavov and Tzvetan Stoyanov are perceived as canonical and are often read as the authentic voice of Whitman himself. As a translator, critic and literary scholar, Stoyanov manages to give the texts a lasting significance that makes them key to the Bulgarian reception of the American poet. In his book “On Good Conversations,” he communicates with the reader in a way reminiscent of the dialogue that Whitman himself conducts in his poetry. Both – Whitman and Stoyanov – speak about the society they know and the spiritual needs of their contemporaries.

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