

**Speaking in Tongues:
Celebrating Walt Whitman in Translation
Université Paris-Est Créteil
June 13-14, 2019**

When Rubén Darío published his sonnet entitled “Walt Whitman”¹, in 1888, he started a tradition that has been continuing for over a hundred years and that—witness Laurent Galley’s recent “Ode à Walt Whitman”²—is still going strong in the twenty-first century. From García Lorca’s “Oda a Walt Whitman” to Jean Sénac’s “Paroles avec Walt Whitman,” from Pessoa’s unfinished “Saudação a Walt Whitman” to B. Alkvit-Blum’s “Dayne grozn,” Whitman, more than any other English-language poet before or after him, may be said to have attracted a considerable number of direct responses from poets not writing in English. The editors of the seminal *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* analyze Whitman’s attraction to English-language poets as follows: “Most of the poets who address Whitman do so to satisfy a gnawing urge to talk things out with him, to relieve the itching of his words at their ears.”³ For those not using English, however, their fascination with Whitman’s verse seems in great measure to have resulted from more or less accurate perceptions of his representativeness as an American, his claim to be read as an advocate of political and artistic internationalism, his innovative poetics, and, for a sizeable number of them, his ground-breaking queerness. Appearing to take at face value Whitman’s only partially-realized “absorption” of his poetry by his country⁴, they have frequently invoked him as America made flesh, appearing in so doing to equate the flesh-and-blood author of *Leaves of Grass* with the ubiquitous “rough” present in many poems.

Just as Whitman’s verse has been drawing poetic responses from around the world for over 160 years, foreign translations of his poetry started to be published relatively early in his lifetime, first in reviews appearing in literary journals, then in book form. The former practice started in France, with a text by Louis Étienne appearing in 1861 in *La Revue européenne*. Étienne counterbalanced his indictment of Whitman with a generous selection of lines translated into French. Germany toed the line with Ferdinand Freiligrath’s contribution to the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*, in 1869, and Italy, somewhat later, in 1879, with Enrico Nencioni’s piece in *Fanfulla della domenica*. These paved the way for book-length translations of all or part of *Leaves of Grass*, usually in its final, so-called “Deathbed” version. The publication history of these translations—

¹ Rubén Darío, “Medallones”, III, in *Azul* [1888], Madrid: Biblioteca Edaf 276, 2003, pp. 199-200.

² <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/laurent-galley/blog/310313/ode-walt-whitman>

³ Jim Perlman, Ed Folsomn and Dan Campion (eds.) *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, Duluth: Holy Cow! Press, 1998, p. 23.

⁴ The 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* famously concludes with the idea that: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” (Walt Whitman, Preface to the 1855 edition, *Leaves of Grass*, Sculley Bradley & Harold W. Blodgett, eds. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973, p. 731).

continuing to this day—has been complexified by the publication of competing versions, along with the translation of once-neglected earlier editions of *Leaves of Grass*. On the other hand, this history reflects the upheavals in linguistic geopolitics, with translations into the major European languages gradually cohabiting with translations into the Asian and African languages they had once eclipsed in the countries their speakers had colonized⁵.

This conference would like to celebrate the bicentennial of Whitman's birth in truly plurilingual fashion and give maximum space to his poetry in languages other than English, while, for the sake of communication, speakers will be expected to give their papers in English. Among the many issues which could be addressed, separately or jointly, the following will be of particular interest:

- the practice of writing poems addressed to or dealing with Whitman in languages other than English, and their dialogue with their literary and cultural environments;
- the role played by translations in the reception of Whitman's work in specific countries and cultures;
- the impact of Whitman's poetry (in English or in translation) on the development of non-English speaking poetry;
- the possible interaction between Whitman translations in different languages;
- the practice of retranslation;
- the dissemination and teaching of Whitman in academic environments outside English-speaking countries;
- research on Whitman in non-English speaking countries.

Speakers willing to take part in this conference are invited to send a two-hundred word abstract by September 15, 2018, to Éric Athenot (athenot.eric@orange.fr) and Graciela Villanueva (graciela.villanueva1@wanadoo.fr)

⁵ A complete translation of *Leaves of Grass* into Arabic was published in Baghdad in 1976 (cf. <https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/writings/song-of-myself/resources>). For translations into Farsi, Malay, Kurdish, Khmer, and a few other languages, see the Walt Whitman Archive (<https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/writings/song-of-myself/about>).