

# “Only a language experiment:” a Few Reflections on Translating the 1855 “Song of Myself” into French



Éric Athenot

## Prelude: why translate the 1855 *Leaves*?

Whitman’s poetry has mostly circulated outside the US in the form of the so-called “Deathbed edition,” published in 1891-1892. It came with a special mention from the author on the copyright page that it should be regarded as “[his] concluding words,” closing a poetic career which had occupied him on and off for the past thirty-seven years.<sup>1</sup> The complete Deathbed has been translated twice into French. First came the sedate but pioneering translation by Léon Bazalgette (1873-1928), in 1909. Bazalgette, friends with several European men of letters—among whom Stefan Zweig—, was a noted Whitman enthusiast and propagator. Not content with publishing the first-ever complete Deathbed in French, he released a two-volume panegyric of the poet, grandly entitled *Le “Poème-Évangile” de Walt Whitman*—a straightforward allusion to Whitman’s “Starting from Paumanok,” in

<sup>1</sup> Whitman’s recommendation is the following: “As there are now several editions of L. of G., I wish to say that I prefer and recommend this present one, complete, for future printings, if there should be any; a copy and fac-simile, indeed, of the text of these 438 pages. The subsequent adjusting interval which is so important to form’d and launch’d work, books especially, has pass’d; and waiting till fully after that, I have given (pages 423-438) my concluding words.”

(<https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/images/leaf006v.html>)

which the speaker states his ambition to write “the poem-evangel of comrades, and of love”.<sup>2</sup> This particular translation, although immensely instrumental in disseminating Whitman across Europe and beyond, was very early on criticized for the propensity shown by its author systematically to censor any remotely homoerotic allusion or imagery.<sup>3</sup> Such an attitude is precisely what Zweig emphasized approvingly in the pages he devoted to Bazalgette in his memoir, *The World of Yesterday*:

My friend of friends was Léon Bazalgette, whose name is improperly omitted from most accounts of modern French literature, in which it stood for something exceptional, namely that he exclusively employed his creative energy in fostering the work of others, and thus saved up his truly amazing intensity for the person he loved. [...] He had devoted ten years to making Walt Whitman known to the French by translating all his poems and by his monumental biography. His life’s aim was to carry the intellectual outlook beyond its frontiers, and to make his compatriots more manly and more comradely with this example of a free world-loving man: the best of Frenchmen, he was at the same time a passionate anti-nationalist.<sup>4</sup>

The second, and to this day only alternative French translation of the complete *Deathbed* was published by Gallimard in 2002. Its author, Jacques Darras (b. 1939), a former university professor, is an untiring promoter of American poetry in France.<sup>5</sup> His translation of *Leaves of Grass*, appearing in the prestigious Poésie/Gallimard collection, occupies an enviable position as the most visible and most affordable collection of Whitman’s verse in French. It was preceded by a two-volume selection of poems a decade or so earlier by the same translator but with a different publisher, Grasset. The two are still available commercially, and the link between them is far from

2 Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* (edited by Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973, p. 19.

3 Pages 115-156 of Betsy Erkkila’s *Whitman Among the French: Poet and Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) offer a thorough analysis of—among others—Paul Claudel’s and André Gide’s response to Bazalgette’s “heterosexualizing” of Whitman’s poems.

4 Zweig, Stefan [1943]. *The World of Yesterday*. London: Viking Press, 1945, p. 136.

5 A complete bibliography of Jacques Darras can be found at <http://www.jacquesdarras.com/biobibliographie/bibliographie>

obvious, with the Grasset edition having finally evolved to offer the complete *Deathbed*. What is apparent to the careful reader, however, is the liberties taken by Darras with the original in both editions as is his refusal to accept the limits imposed by Whitman's lexicon and the meanings particular words in this lexicon may have had in the 19th century. This sometimes makes for arresting options. It often leaves the present writer perplexed if not downright unimpressed at carelessness posing as invention.

A reader not familiar with the lengthy evolution of Whitman's poetry collection could quite justifiably wonder why anyone would want to translate the first of the six successive editions. Most scholars and Whitman aficionados, in the US and abroad, will nevertheless admit to some degree of fascination with the 1855 edition. No one has articulated my own reasons for preferring the first edition above all others more convincingly and elegantly than J. M. Coetzee:

The rule of thumb in the scholarly world is to take an author's last revision, his or her last word, as definitive. But there are exceptions, cases where the critical consensus is that the late revision is inferior to or even traduces the original. Thus we tend to read the 1805 version of Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude* in preference to the 1850 revision. In much the same way, one might argue in favor of reading Whitman's early poems in their first published form, since his tendency after 1865 was to revise in the direction of the "poetic" (i.e., the Tennysonian) in the hope of winning a wider readership.<sup>6</sup>

To my eyes, one of the most distinctive and endearing features of the 1855, besides being a beautiful artefact,<sup>7</sup> is precisely—to rephrase Coetzee's judgment—its "unpoetic" audacity. Unpoetic, indeed, the book seemed to most of its contemporary readers, just as unpoetic enough, apparently, were Emily Dickinson's poems to justify a thorough rewriting by her first editors. As regards Whitman's unpoeticity, the reviews of the 1855 *Leaves*, even when negative, register some of the spell it still casts on its readers more than one hundred years on.

6 Coetzee, J.M., "Love and Walt Whitman", *The New York Review of Books*, Sept. 22, 2005, Vol. 52, N°14

(<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/09/22/love-and-walt-whitman/>)

7 A complete electronic edition of the 1855 edition with page images can be accessed on the irreplaceable Walt Whitman Archive at <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1855/whole.html>

Called an “odd genius” by Charles A. Dana writing in the 23 July, 1855, New York *Daily Tribune*, labeled a “monster” by Rufus W. Griswold in the 10 November, 1855, edition of *The Criterion*, Whitman had penned a “curious and lawless collection of poems” according to Charles Eliot Norton writing in the September, 1855, edition of *Putnam’s Magazine*. Looking back on his poetic career, the poet famously remarked to his confidante Horace Traubel that *Leaves of Grass* was “only a language experiment, [...] an attempt to give the spirit, the body, the man, new words, new potentialities of speech.”<sup>8</sup> And this is precisely the language-oriented character of the 1855 which drew me to attempt the first translation into French.

### The foreignness of Whitman

During the eighteen months I spent working on the translation of the 1855 *Leaves* I complied with no particular theoretical principles. Having carried out the exercise myself on a few occasions, I was only too keenly conscious of how easy and frequently pointless it can be to write a critique of other people’s translations (this made me aware of the fact that the reservations voiced above about the complete translations of the Deathbed edition reflect my own sensibility and probably my own limitations too as a reader and as a Whitman scholar). Having taught Whitman at university for half a decade by the time I endeavored to try my hand at translating the 1855 *Leaves*, one thing had progressively dawned on me: nowhere in the various translations available on the market did I “hear” what I imagined to be Whitman’s French voice. I had gradually internalized a voice which had some degree of ponderousness, was not averse to quicksilver changes of tone and register, spoke in a kind of endless flow, while striving to mesmerize its audience into more or less full adhesion. I use the word “audience” on purpose, as I felt that what I missed most in the existing French translations of Whitman was precisely their lack of a consistent vocal dimension, a tone-deafness to the kind of sermon-like cadences and imagery which David H. Reynolds has so convincingly identified as one of the pillars of 19th-century literary imagination.<sup>9</sup> Whitman’s own cherished “vocalism”—rooted in his love

<sup>8</sup> Horace, Traubel [1987]. Foreword to “An American Primer,” in Whitman, Walt. *An American Primer*. Stevens Point: Holy Cow! Press, pp. viii-ix.

<sup>9</sup> See David H. Reynolds. *Beneath the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 21: “The new popular sermons were filled with unusual images

of Italian opera—makes for a poetry that is begging to be performed, to be read out by and grounded in a speaking body, making “voice” not just the usual topos of literary criticism but calling on the human vocal cords as an organ active in the production of poetic meaning and playing a key part towards sharing this elusive meaning with the audience through the corresponding sense—hearing. The concluding lines of later poem entitled “Vocalism,” for that matter, call for a voice “which has the quality to strike and to unclose,” a voice “which has the quality to bring forth what lies slumbering forever ready in all words.” (Whitman 1973, 384) If translation can be approached as performance<sup>10</sup> then performing Whitman’s poetry meant for me to take into account the specificity of Whitman’s idiom and syntax, its sermon-like periods, the particularity of its lexicon and the high/low register and make it performable, i.e., find the middle ground between the American-language original and a French version that, to my ears at least, would, while read out by a French performer, sound naturally French while retaining its unmistakable Whitmanian ring.

These feelings led me to try and work in keeping with what Antoine Berman—a French post-Benjaminian translation studies theorist—termed “the experience of the foreign.” What I felt while translating the 1855 *Leaves* was the absolute need to keep true to what he calls “the strangeness of the foreign work.”<sup>11</sup> Such a strangeness implied in this case being attuned to the numerous particular features of the original and their uncongeniality vis-à-vis the French language. To my mind, trying to make those features heard in the target language and acceptable to the readers of that language was not just to be regarded as an illustration of the faithfulness which any translator is too frequently and too routinely asked to demonstrate in his/her translation. Berman’s “experience of the foreign” implies that the target language in which a translation is being carried out must strive to welcome as best it can features from the source language. After all, he reminds his reader, these features confer a given text its

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that showed the 19<sup>th</sup>-century religionist search for poetic alternatives to doctrine. These images, however, were unpremeditated, unrestrained. This combination of artifice and artlessness was noticed by the major authors.”

10 Among the many scholarly books and articles devoted to the matter, I would just like to point out the introduction to *Theatre Translation in Performance* (Silvia Bigliuzzi, Peter Kofler and Paola Ambrosi, eds.). New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 3), in which “the ideas of translation and performance” are analyzed as “coterminous,” translation being viewed “as performance” (emphasis in the original).

11 Antoine Berman [1984]. *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* (trans. S Heyvaert). Albany: State of New York Press, 1992, p. 5.

actual literary uniqueness within its own culture. In this regard I will go one step further and argue that in Whitman's case, by challenging the translator to make these features amenable to his/her language, the features making his poetry unique within his own culture should actually be relied on to guide him/her on the road to experiment with his/her own language.

Most of Whitman's many rhetorical devices, as I have already hinted, happen to be highly uncongenial to the French language and recur at regular intervals in the 1855 version of "Song of Myself." These features impact the complex transaction between the poem's *I* and *you* carried out throughout the poem, and they reveal with what care Whitman crafted his verse, a care which is too often downplayed and which may at times appear absent from his later creations. As far as I am concerned, the freedom supposedly inherent in Whitman's free verse<sup>12</sup> does not stand the test of close reading and calls for a translator who is sensitive to the precarious balance—what is frequently referred in the poems to as the "tally"—Whitman keeps between the micro- and the macrostructures.

I will start with the most minimal micro-structures to be found in the 1855 "Song of Myself," the two personal pronouns acting as the poem's protagonist/antagonist—*I* and *you*. A reader not familiar with romance languages may wonder what is so difficult about translating these two pronouns. *I* would logically be rendered as *je* and *you*—well this is where trouble begins. Not only are both pronouns gendered in French but the second can also be numbered, depending on whether it refers to one person or several people. I hope to show that, except for a handful of cases, that was not the problem. *You* also implies a concern with register which English-languages users are usually unaware of: in the case of an individual *you* is the poem's speaker addressing this individual formally (*vous*) or informally (*tu*)? The translator has to choose. And I will claim that in this particular case, this choice felt—and still feels to me as I write these words—as a defeat. I chose *tu* (which is more intimate and more immediate) but still resent having had to make a choice and not leave this option as open as in the original.

As for *I*. The various titles given to the poem can be relied on to decide that its protagonist is male. While untitled in the 1855 edition,

<sup>12</sup> Donald D. Kummings, in *A Companion to Walt Whitman* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 383) writes that the "long line captures the expansive freedom of Whitman's poetic style and evokes his vision of an expansive American culture."

the poem was printed as “Poem of Walt Whitman, an American” in the second, pared down to just “Walt Whitman” in the third before receiving the splendid title by which it has been known since 1881— “Song of Myself.” This poem does not shy from stressing the *I*'s manly features, particularly in the famous section narrating a scene of lovemaking in the June grass, now section 5 in the final version of the poem. Whereas the “vampiric”<sup>13</sup> partner is not gendered and may or may not be the soul, the concluding lines of the section make no mystery that *I* is male since the elusive *you* “reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet believing this male *I* to be Walt Whitman is to take a huge leap, which I am not sure a close reading of the poem would confirm. As a matter of fact, something usually unaccounted for happens to the *I* in one of the poem's key sections, which I will quote fully now:

Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,  
Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating, drinking and breeding,  
No sentimentalist . . . .no stander above men and women or part from  
them . . . . no more modest than immodest. (Whitman 2008, 94)

One might be forgiven for rushing to the conclusion that this “Walt Whitman”—who as an individual did not yet exist, as the copyright title page reminds us<sup>15</sup>—is to be equated with the poem's ubiquitous *I*. Yet one should note that precisely as the name appears so is the *I* notable for its absence from the lines. Added to the numerous dots printed in succession—a feature which Whitman unwisely removed from the second edition onwards—the disappearance of the *I* may be read as an invitation among others not to read these lines literally, not to make ours the facile assumption that *I* = “Walt Whitman” = the flesh-and-blood originator of the poem who had not yet chosen for himself this nom de plume.

I will deal with Whitman's present participles shortly, which *I* chose, for reasons I will explain later, *never* to render as present

13 I borrowed this adjective from Ed Folsom's introduction to the section available at <https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/writings/song-of-myself/section-5>

14 Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* (Éric Athenot, trans.). Paris: Éditions José Corti, 2008, p. 58.

15 The copyright page reads as follows: “Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1855, by WALTER WHITMAN, in the Clerk's office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of New York.” (cf.

<https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/figures/ppp.00271.009.jpg>). “Walter Whitman” was also the correspondent to whom Emerson sent his famous letter of appreciation.

participles in French. When it comes to this particular passage, however, they happen here to enable the lines to sway between two poles, the first and the third singular persons, making it possible to read “Walt Whitman” both as the first-person speaker of the verse and its third-person subject-matter. The challenge in French was to find verbs which would accommodate a form that could be construed in either person. The French version runs as follows:

Walt Whitman, américain, dur à cuire, kosmos,  
 Charnel et sensuel jusqu’au désordre . . . . mange trinque copule,  
 Pas sentimental pour deux sous . . . . pas du genre à se tenir  
 au-dessus des hommes et des femmes ni à part d’eux . . . . ni  
 pudique ni impudique. (Whitman 2008, 95)

The only verb group making it possible in French to link each verb to a first- or third-person indifferently is the first group, i.e. verbs ending with an “e” in both first and third persons. That was easy to do for “eating” and “breeding.” The former I translated as “mange” (which can come either after the first or the third person), and for the latter I decided to pun, thanks to the verb “copuler,” which means to “have sex,” but through which I hoped to hint at the noun “copule” (“copula”), the arch-example of which in English is the verb *be*, slippery identity being exactly what I tried to foreground in translating these lines. “Standing” comes in my translation with the reflexive pronoun “se,” bending the passage toward the third person. As for “drinking,” it took me three printings of my translation to settle on a solution which makes the lines slightly more colloquial than I wanted them originally to be but “boire”—the verb I first used—has one form for the first person—“bois”—and one for the third—“boit,” and I therefore belatedly resolved to do away with it. “Trinquer” comes from the German *trinken* and derives from the same proto-Germanic etymon, *\*drenkan*. I resigned myself to use it once I had decided that keeping the first/third-person ambiguity was more important to me than adhering to one fixed meaning or register, despite the risk of making the lines sound slightly more informal and festive than they may sound in the original (“trinquer” indeed is closer to “toast” or “drink to something” than to the more neutral “drink”). The way I chose to translate this passage acknowledges my perception of the poem’s *I* as being polymorphous and striving to occupy as much of the whole pronominal spectrum as possible, being both *I* and *he*—the



aptest confirmation of this being when Whitman condenses the *I + he* + present participle triad into “I am he attesting sympathy”<sup>16</sup> (Whitman 2008, 92).

The more obvious pronominal dialogue occurring in the 1855 “Song of Myself” is, of course, that between the *I* and the *you*. For that matter, the whole poem can be read as forming an arc from its first word—*I*—to its last—*you*. As I hinted earlier, this, for me, may be where translating this poem proved most slippery and self-defeating. This, still in keeping with Berman’s call for the translator to cultivate the “strangeness of the foreign” in the target language, led me to make choices as to the translation of the English *you* which impacted on how the lines themselves would unfold. I will use the poem’s opening as an example:

I CELEBRATE myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (Whitman  
2008, 50).

My translation runs as follows:

Je me célèbre moi,  
Et mes vérités seront tes vérités,  
Car tout atome qui m’appartient t’appartient aussi à toi (Whitman  
2008, 51).

There are no clues as to the *you*’s gender or whether the *I* is addressing one or several people. I chose to go for the most intimate option, the second-person singular, which denotes singularity and informality—*tu*, here to be found in various guises as *tes*, *t’*, and *toi*.<sup>17</sup> The apparently casual use of the words reveals a very careful ordering on Whitman’s part, with the first line being contained between *I* and *myself*, the second having *I* and *you* in perfect symmetry (two words before *I*, two after *you*) and finally, *you* being and having the last word in line 3. French cannot naturally replicate this word order, if only because the

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<sup>16</sup> The edition of the 1844 Webster’s dictionary lists four definitions of “sympathy,” each relevant to Whitman’s strategy: 1) “Fellow feeling;” 2) “An agreement of affections or inclinations;” 3) “In medicine, a correspondence of various parts of the body in similar sensations or affections;” 4) “In natural history, a propension of inanimate things to unite, or to act on each other.”

<sup>17</sup> The singular pronoun—*yourself*—appears one page later and therefore confirms the fact that the *you* is meant to be addressed at—or at least received by—one addressee.

pronouns, when used as complements, are expected to come before the verb (hence “Je *me* célèbre”, and “*t’appartient*”). I felt it necessary to emphasize these pronouns by doubling them (hence the use of “moi,” in line 1, and “toi,” in line 3). I adopted the exact same strategy for the poem’s concluding line—“I stop some where waiting for you (Whitman 2008, 170) by doubling the final pronoun (“Je suis arrêté quelque part et n’attends que *toi*”) (Whitman 2008, 171). Only could this doubling of the pronouns enable me to keep the progression from the *I* to the *you*, which I see as giving the poem its thrust and making the *I*—and the *Myself* of the title—vehicles for identification and final appropriation by its readers. In doing so I was aware of upsetting the lines’ verbal economy, a notion that is of paramount importance when translating such expansive lines as Whitman’s and all the more crucial as translation studies specialists usually estimate word-count increase from English to French at between 10 and 20%.<sup>18</sup>

### On being economical

In trying to be true to what I perceived to be Whitman’s pronominal strategy, I also seized on the expansiveness of his lines in paradoxical fashion. I tried in my translation to work against the received wisdom encapsulated by Kummings’ statement quoted earlier. One would, after all, be forgiven for thinking that any translator dealing with such a monumental piece as “Song of Myself” would feel both unconstrained by the length of the lines, their deceptively apparent explicitness and be liberated by the sheer size of the poem. Most French translators of Whitman’s verse seems in that respect to have been oblivious to the poet’s description of *Leaves of Grass* as “only a language experiment.” The consensus among them seems to have been that syntax and grammar should be treated in a fairly straightforward manner. Present participles call for present participles, and Whitman’s trademark repetitions entail straightforward repetitions in French, rendered verbatim. I, for my part, have always felt that the greatest risk run by anyone translating Whitman into French was, while keeping his/her attention focussed on the many stylistic constraints inherent in the poems, fall a prey to the surface boundlessness of the lines. Because French lacks the concision and economy of English, I resolved to be as economical as possible in my rendition of Whitman’s

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the chart at <https://www.andiamo.co.uk/resources/expansion-and-contraction-factors>.

lines to try and reach some degree of poeticity by not posing as garrulous and slangy in a desperate effort not to make Whitman sound verbose and flat, as he unfortunately does to my ears in most French translations.

In that respect, Derrida's notion of *économie* came in handy to formulate what I was aiming at. In his essay on translation, *Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction relevante?*, Derrida insists on the notion of quantity.<sup>19</sup> "Translation," he writes, "is always an attempt at appropriating, at importing home, into one's language, in as proper and as relevant as possible a manner, the proper meaning of the original." Economy, he adds, is "a law of quantity: when one discusses economy, one is always discussing a quantity that can be quantified. [...] One counts and accounts for" (Derrida 2005, 15, I translate). Dealing with a poet prone to being verbose and translating into a language requiring between 10 to 20% more words than the original, in order to try and keep clear of the flatness I feared and came to deplore in French translations of Whitman, I soon came to realize that striving to be economical might help me keep the sermonizing lilt I heard in my mind when imagining Whitman in French. Derrida, in a rather unorthodox way, goes so far as to state that *économie* "is not about counting the number of signs, signifiers or signified, but counting the number of words, the lexical units called "word[s]" (Derrida 2005, 16). However extreme if not downright unattainable and undesirable such an approach to translation may at first sound, it nevertheless proves extremely valuable in accounting for the constraints that I set myself in translating such a profuse text as the 1855 "Song of Myself."

To go from the *I* to the *you* in the poem any would-be translator is confronted with recurring features that give substance to the sheer size of the poem and often proves wearisome to readers who do not care for Whitman's style. One of these is the ubiquitous reliance on repetition, a writing device central to Whitman's use of parallelism, and one utterly abhorrent to the French language. Translating Whitman's parallelisms verbatim risks making the French version tiresome. The pioneering translation of the deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* carried out by Léon Bazalgette in 1909 does exactly that. It reads today more like stylistic mimicry than outright translation. The second alternative, favored by Jacques Darras, is to play around with the form and frequently jettison it altogether in order to lighten and jazz

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction relevante?* Paris: Cahiers de L'Herne, 2005.

things up. While literal translation is often detrimental to poetry—and perhaps not more so than in the case of *Leaves of Grass*—I doubt that Whitman can survive being hip and light-footed. I therefore chose to steer a middle course by keeping the parallelisms while displacing the repeated terms when they occur at a higher frequency than usual, or by making the repetition bear on a different signifier from the one repeated by Whitman, as in the following case:

Outward and outward and outward and forever outward (Whitman 2008, 156),

which became in French:

Toujours, toujours et toujours plus loin (Whitman 2008, 157)

the repetition bearing here on “forever” and not “outward.”

Another key Whitmanian rhetorical device is the present participle, fortunately less systematic in the 1855 “Song of Myself” than in many later ones, but still present in many places. French does not wear the present participle very handsomely and, where Whitman uses it at great length, I felt it necessary to find an alternative form, as in the following extract:

Speeding through space.... speeding through heaven and the stars,  
Speeding amid the seven satellites and the broad ring and the  
diameter of eighty thousand miles,  
Speeding with tailed meteors.... throwing fire-balls like the rest,  
Carrying the crescent child that carries its own full mother in its belly;  
Storming enjoying planning loving cautioning,  
Backing and filling, appearing and disappearing,  
I tread day and night such roads (Whitman 2008, 120).

In this passage, the repetitions are coupled with Whitman’s choice trope, i.e., anaphora. My translation reads as follows:

À toute vitesse je traverse l’espace.... à toute vitesse je traverse le  
ciel et les étoiles,  
À toute vitesse je vais parmi les sept satellites, le vaste anneau et le  
diamètre de quatre-vingt mille milles,  
À toute vitesse j’accompagne les météores à queue.... lance des

boules de feu comme les autres,  
 Porte l'enfant-croissant qui porte dans son ventre sa propre mère  
 pleinement formée;  
 Je tempête me délecte projette aime avertis,  
 Soutiens et remplis, apparais et disparais,  
 Voilà les routes que jour et nuit je suis (Whitman 2008, 121)

In this instance I chose to turn the verb “speed” into the periphrasis “à toute vitesse” (literally “at full speed”) and to use fully-inflected verbs in the final lines, while dropping the subject almost completely in the last three lines, as Whitman does with his present participles. In order to compensate for the loss of the rhyme-like effect induced by the accumulation of present participles I tried to introduce assonantal and consonantal rhyming echoes within my list of verbs.

Another example where the present participle introduces a rhyme-like effect and a certain semantic ambiguity is the following example:

In me the caresser of life wherever moving.... backward as well as  
 forward slueing,  
 To niches aside and junior bending (Whitman 2008, 70).

In my translation, I tried to keep a vocalic rhyming effect on the last syllable of each line and aimed to mirror the mimetic positioning of the verb “bend” at the end by keeping it there in French, fully conjugated and as oddly archaic as I perceive the original to be:

Caresseur de la vie où qu'elle aille.... je pivote en arrière comme en  
 avant,  
 Vers les moindres recoins écartés je tends (Whitman 2008, 71).

### **Celebrating contradiction**

The 1855 “Song of Myself” is a long poem and as such requires an endless attention to its macro and microstructures. My ambition was not to come out with a self-proclaimed French poem—which would have been illusory—but, to echo Antoine Berman again, with an American poem in French.<sup>20</sup> In the case of the 1855 “Song of Myself,” this is

<sup>20</sup> Berman notes about Pierre Leyris’s remarkable translation of Hopkins that admirable as it is, the resulting text is not “a genuine French poem but an English poem in French” (Antoine Berman. *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne*. Paris: Gallimard, 1995,

somehow rendered easier by Whitman through a plurality of voices, resulting from the poet's desire to impress on the reader the full extent of his poetic skills. This led me to endeavor to remain economical with my signifiers, precisely in an effort to render Whitman's signature stylistic devices.

At the end of the day, and to go back to my initial remark, I will now conclude that in translating Whitman's signature poem I regard my method not different from the method likely to have been adopted by any translator dealing with a short poem written in regular meter. I pruned my lines in order to keep them as compact as possible. This compactness seemed to me to be in keeping with Whitman's avowed reliance on contradiction, not an invitation to chaos and carelessness but a feature firmly kept under control and betraying a perfect sense of continuity and logic from the first line to the last. Hence, when perusing his famous statement on the matter ("Do I contradict *myself*? / Very well . . . then, I contradict *myself*; / I am large . . . I contain *multitudes*.", my emphasis, Whitman 2008, 168) the final alliterative repetition on *c* and *m* belies the deceitful casualness of the lines while echoing of the very first words of the poem: "I *celebrate myself*" (Whitman 200, 50). I chose to mimic this alliterative repetition and give it a twist in the resolution:

Je me contredis?  
 Eh bien soit . . . je me contedis ;  
 Je suis vaste . . . j'ai en moi multitudes. (Whitman 2008, 169).

In the final line, I decided to steer away from Whitman's alliterative strategy in order to introduce a twist, a pun not in the original and probably lost on all my readers but me: « J'ai en moi » (which sounds like "géant moi" or, literally "a giant, I"). Keeping the foreignness of Whitman central to my endeavor emboldened me to play with the poetry and appropriate it in keeping with the call for appropriation I can hear in "Song of Myself," the title this originally untitled poem finally was to take. Thus did I strive to keep true to an ethics of translation that was defined by Antoine Berman as "openness, dialogue, blending, and decentering" (Berman 1984, 16), an ethics of translation which seems to me to be in perfect keeping with Whitman's poetic project in 1855.