

The true alchemists do not change lead into gold; they change the world into words

William Gass, *A Temple of Texts*

The first William Gass Symposium, held on September 23, 2016, focused on international writing. The theme was fitting, given Gass's founding of the International Writers Center at Washington University in 1990, and given the symposium's focus on translation and its multilingual poetry reading. As originally conceived by Washington University's William Gass Fellow, Matthias Göritz and Associate Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature Ignacio Infante, the main idea behind the symposium was to recognize the crucial role played by Gass in promoting international writing in St. Louis and beyond, as well as to emphasize the importance of literary translation in Gass's own work as arguably one of the most acclaimed American essayists and creative writers of his generation. Sponsored by the Committee on Comparative Literature, Washington University Libraries, the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, and the Interdisciplinary Project in the Humanities, the day-long symposium highlighted the influence of Gass and brought together scholars and writers.

The program included welcome remarks by Director of Comparative Literature [Lynne Tatlock](#) and papers by Matthias Göritz and Ignacio Infante. Both Göritz and Infante broached the topic of translation, articulating the challenges of translating Gass's works into other languages. As Infante argued in his talk, "Gass's extremely relevant exploration of translation in this work has not received the critical attention that it deserves within the growing and expanding field of translation studies in general." A roundtable discussion included both Göritz and Infante and two additional guests: Lorin Cuoco, who co-founded the International Writers Center with Gass, and Stephen Schenkenberg, who edited and published *The Ear's Mouth Must Move: Essential Interviews of William H. Gass*, as well as the Reading William Gass [website](#).

The keynote speaker of the symposium was [Susan Bernofsky](#), director of the program Literary Translation at Columbia at Columbia University's MFA in Writing program. She is also an alumna of Washington University's MFA program, and during her talk, she recalled a seminar on Valéry she took with Gass while a student at Washington University. Bernofsky was invited to Washington University's as the Comparative Literature program's [William Matheson lecturer](#).

The symposium then moved from Umrath Lounge to Olin Library, where visitors enjoyed an exhibit featuring the William H. Gass Papers and documents from the International Writers Center Archive. Professor and Vice Provost Gerhild Williams gave opening remarks to the poetry reading, which included readings of Gass's Rilke translations by [Mary Jo Bang](#) and Matthias Göritz as well as poems read by Latvian poet and translator Kārlis Vērdiņš and

Slovenian poet and critic Katja Perat. Both Vērđiņš and Perat are also Ph.D. students in Comparative Literature's track for international writers.

Several local newspapers included stories on the symposium, including the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#), the [RiverFront Times](#), and [The Current](#) (the University of Missouri-St. Louis's student newspaper).