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wait whitman: the politics of language

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**walt whitman**

**the politics of language**

**betsy erkkila**

In *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton recalls Henry James' admiration for Walt Whitman: on one occasion, she says, "James, in one of his sudden humorous drops from the heights, flung up his hands and cried out with the old stammer and twinkle: 'Oh, yes, a great genius: undoubtedly a very great genius! Only one cannot help deploring his too-extensive acquaintance with the foreign languages.'" <sup>1</sup> James' ironic comment sums up the critical attitude about Whitman's foreign borrowings; most critics join him in "deploring" Whitman's use of foreign languages. In *American Renaissance*, F. O. Matthiessen discounts Whitman's use of French words and phrases as "samples of the confused American effort to talk big by using high-sounding terms with only the vaguest notion of their original meaning." <sup>2</sup> In *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, Roger Asselineau treats Whitman's foreign borrowings as a sign of "the impoverishment of his inspiration" after 1856. <sup>3</sup> More recently, Larzer Ziff, in *Literary Democracy*, is similarly critical of Whitman's use of foreign terms. Speaking of the "mark of the beery crowd on Whitman," he says: "The mark is also present in the vulgarity of the ill-considered use of foreign terms and the tastelessness of his all-too-easy dismissal of certain British authors." <sup>4</sup> But Whitman's use of foreign languages is neither merely ignorant nor merely arrogant, as is commonly assumed: his foreign language experiments, like his experiments with language in general, are part of a debate about the relation between language and culture in America that reaches back at least as far as Captain John Smith's *Map of Virginia* (1612). Like Smith, who invented several neologisms to describe the unfamiliar flora and fauna of America, Whitman sought a new language to express the unique

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democratic geography of America; he used foreign terms as a means of expressing the pluralistic and racially diverse nature of democratic culture.

In using neologisms and foreign terms to assert the special nature of American political experience, Whitman is in the main line of the controversy over national language policy that came to a head during the revolutionary period. Briefly stated, the controversy centered first on the question of whether or not America should have a national language policy; and second, on whether Americans should write and speak in pure or American English. In 1781, John Witherspoon, the President of Princeton University, expressed alarm at the growing number of Americanisms he found in the speech of his countrymen: "I have heard in this country, in the senate, at the bar, and from the pulpit, and see daily in dissertations from the press, errors in grammar, improprieties and vulgarisms, which hardly any person of the same class in point of rank and literature would have fallen into in Great Britain."<sup>5</sup> Responding to the same lack of public speech standards, John Adams proposed that America consolidate and extend its political influence by establishing a national language academy. In 1780, he wrote to the Continental Congress proposing that they establish "the first public institution for refining, correcting, improving, and ascertaining the English language" in order to transmit American ideals of "liberty, prosperity, and glory."<sup>6</sup> Although neither a national language academy nor a national language policy was ever established, Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* became a sort of unofficial standard.

From the first, those favoring an American standard of English insisted on the connection between the American language and the American political system. "It is not to be disputed," said Adams in his letter to Congress, "that the form of government has an influence upon language, and language in its turn influences not only the form of government, but the temper, the sentiments, and the manners of the people."<sup>7</sup> Perceiving a similar connection between language and politics, Noah Webster wrote what is, in effect, America's declaration of linguistic independence: "As an independent nation," he says in *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789), "our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government. Great Britain, whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be *our* standard; for the taste of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline."<sup>8</sup> Webster's views—while put into practice by such writers as Joel Barlow in *The Columbiad* (1807)—were by no means universal. The concept of a new American language was vigorously attacked not only in the British press, but also by several prominent Americans, including Benjamin Franklin.<sup>9</sup> The case for the opposition was summed up in 1816 by the distinguished nineteenth-century linguist, John Pickering:

The language of the United States has perhaps changed less than might have been expected, when we consider how many years have elapsed since our ancestors brought it from England; yet it has in so many instances departed from the English standard, that our

scholars should lose no time in endeavouring to restore it to its purity, and to prevent future corruption. . . . As a general rule also, we should avoid all those words which are noticed by English authors of reputation, as expressions with which *they are unacquainted*; for although we might produce some English authority for such words, yet the very circumstance of their being thus noticed by well educated *Englishmen*, is proof that they are not in use at this day in England, and, of course, ought not to be used elsewhere by those who would speak *correct English*.<sup>10</sup>

Whitman's ideas on language grew out of this national debate about the American language. Like John Adams and Noah Webster, he insisted on the connection between American language and American polity. In a series of notes he wrote during the fifties in preparation for *Leaves of Grass*, he rejected the British model in both language and literature. Finding in British speech and writing a hierarchical system of monarchy and class that is alien to American democracy, Whitman asserts the need for a new language to express the new American republic. "These States," he says in *An American Primer*, "are rapidly supplying themselves with new words, called for by new occasions, new facts, new politics, new combinations."<sup>11</sup> Unlike Witherspoon, he declares his love for the rude words he finds in American newspapers, courts, debates and congress: "Do you suppose the liberties and brawn of These States have to do only with delicate lady-words? with gloved gentleman-words? Bad Presidents, bad judges, bad clients, bad editors, owners of slaves, and the long ranks of Northern political suckers (robbers, traitors, suborned), monopolists, infidels, castrated persons, impotent persons, shaved persons, supplejacks, ecclesiastics, men not fond of women, women not fond of men, cry down the use of strong, cutting, beautiful, rude words. To the manly instincts of the People they will forever be welcome" (p. 22). Recognizing the connection between linguistic systems and political systems, Whitman here suggests that the lady and gentleman words of an alien class might mask or impede the free growth of democracy in America.

In calling for a new American language, Whitman does not attempt to fasten the language to any ultimate model; his aim is always to keep language open, flexible and responsive to the changing contours of American democratic experience. In this, he is at odds with other poets of his time. Edgar Poe's pursuit of pure poetry engaged him in a perpetual struggle to strip language of its worldly dross; his experiments in the sound, meter and imagery of verse were part of an effort to push language "out of space—out of time." Emerson, too, is fundamentally ahistorical in his view of language. His oft quoted dictum, "Words are signs of natural facts," expresses a fixed and purist concept of language; in pursuit of some primitive state in which words are in absolute accord with things, the Emersonian poet must excavate his language—or fossil poetry—out from under the layers of culture in which it is embedded.

Standing flush with the naked universe, Emerson wrote poems that were removed, both physically and linguistically, from the life of his times.

For all his belief that “the experience of each new age requires a new confession,” he used a language that is—like the language of Bryant, Longfellow, Irving and Cooper—indistinguishable from the language of his English contemporaries. “Whatever differences there may be,” says British lexicographer Sir William Craigie, “between the language of Longfellow and Tennyson, of Emerson and Ruskin, they are differences due to style and subject, to a personal choice or command of words, and not to any real divergence in the means of expression.”<sup>12</sup> Whitman recognized Emerson’s “cold and bloodless” isolation from the life and language of America: “Suppose,” he says in an essay on “Emerson’s Books,”

these books becoming absorb’d, the permanent chyle of American general and particular character—what a well-washed and grammatical, but bloodless and helpless, race we should turn out! No, no, dear friend; though the States want scholars, undoubtedly . . . they don’t want scholars, or ladies and gentlemen, at the expense of all the rest. They want good farmers, sailors, mechanics, clerks, citizens—perfect business and social relations—perfect fathers and mothers. If we could only have these, or their approximations, plenty of them, fine and large and sane and generous and patriotic, they might make their verbs disagree from their nominatives, and laugh like volleys of musketeers, if they should please.<sup>13</sup>

If for Emerson the sources of language were in Nature, for Whitman the sources of language were in democratic culture, which included, but was not limited to, natural facts: “Language, be it remember’d,” says Whitman, “is not an abstract construction of the learn’d, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground.”<sup>14</sup> For Whitman, language was not removed from, but embedded in historic process. He celebrated the English language, not because he wanted to fit American experience into British speech patterns, but because the multi-ethnic roots of the English language made it the ideal expressive medium for American democratic culture:

View’d freely, the English language is the accretion and growth of every dialect, race, and range of time, and is both the free and compacted composition of all. From this point of view, it stands for Language in the largest sense, and is really the greatest of studies. It involves so much; is indeed a sort of universal absorber, combiner, and conqueror. The scope of its etymologies is the scope not only of man and civilization, but the history of Nature in all departments, and of the organic Universe, brought up to date; for all are comprehended in words, and their backgrounds.<sup>15</sup>

Like John Adams, Whitman equated the continued evolution of the English language in America with America’s role in the progress toward a political millennium.

Whitman’s use of foreign languages in his verse was part of his effort to

capitalize upon and extend the potential of the English language as a democratic medium. Into the purity of New England English, he sought to introduce the ethnic and idiomatic color of American speech. In an essay on “The Spanish Element *in* Our Nationality,” he says,

We Americans have yet to really learn our own antecedents, and sort them to unify them. They will be found ampler than has been supposed, and in widely different sources. Thus far, impress’d by New England writers and schoolmasters, we tacitly abandon ourselves to the notion that our United States have been fashion’d from the British Islands only, and essentially for a second England only—which is a very great mistake. Many leading traits for our future national personality, and some of the best ones, will certainly prove to have originated from other than British stock.<sup>16</sup>

Whitman’s desire to keep language and literature open and responsive to the multi-ethnic sources of American nationality corresponded with his political desire to keep the country open to the immigrants who, after 1850, began coming to America in ever-increasing numbers.

With similar openness to the “widely different sources” of American nationality, Whitman once speculated that perhaps the sources of a truly native American music might be found not in the transplanted accents of New England English, but in Black dialect. This dialect, Whitman says in *An American Primer*, “furnishes hundreds of outré words, many of them adopted into the common speech of the mass of the people.” In black speech, Whitman finds “hints of the future theory of the modification of all the words of the English language, for musical purposes, for a native grand opera in America, leaving the words just as they are for writing and speaking, but the same words so modified as to answer perfectly for musical purposes, on grand and simple principles” (p. 24). Whitman’s insight is uncanny: he predicts the development of Black blues and jazz, which is, in effect, “a native grand opera,” and America’s single most important contribution to the world of music.

Although he did not draw upon the musical possibilities of black dialect in composing *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman did introduce several foreign terms—including Spanish, Italian and French—as part of his effort to evolve a native American idiom. “I sometimes think the *Leaves* is only a language experiment,” Whitman once confessed to his friend Horace Traubel, “that it is an attempt to give the spirit, the body, the man, new words, new potentialities of speech—an American, a cosmopolitan (the best of America is the best cosmopolitanism) range of self-expression. The new world, the new times, the new peoples, the new vista, need a tongue according—yes, what is more, will have such a tongue—will not be satisfied until it is evolved.”<sup>17</sup> Whitman used French more frequently than any other foreign language in his attempt to give America a cosmopolitan range of expression commensurate with the new world and the new peoples. In fact, it is particularly in Whitman’s vigorous and extensive use of the French language that we see the political dimensions of his foreign language experiments.

In a letter to the Princess Royal of England, written in 1797, the British etymologist, Sir Herbert Croft, reported that during the Revolutionary period Americans considered “revenging themselves on England by rejecting its language and adopting that of France.”<sup>18</sup> Although Whitman probably did not know that French had once been considered for adoption as America’s national language, his French usage emerged out of similar political sentiments. In championing the language and thought of France, Whitman was not blind to the political implications of his fiercely pro-French position. To be pro-French in early nineteenth-century America could never be a politically or morally neutral position, a mere preference for one nationality over another. In his book *America and French Culture*, Howard Mumford Jones says that in America during the early nineteenth century, “the French language was necessarily associated with writers and doctrines held to be atheistic, anarchic, and dangerous.”<sup>19</sup> If to some, France carried associations with the Enlightenment and Rationalism, to many it carried more vivid associations with political revolution, the Reign of Terror and the reputedly immoral and subversive novels of Eugène Sue and Paul de Kock. Britain, on the other hand, carried associations with monarchy, aristocracy, elitism and the caste system. Whitman’s persistent and sometimes aggressive use of the French language, particularly in his early writings, was a means of flaunting his pro-French sympathies and thus defying the more conservative political and moral attitudes of his countrymen. Just as in the Revolutionary period, American writing reflected the battle between pro-British and pro-French forces—between Federalists and Democrats, conservatives and liberals—so Whitman’s poetry, somewhat in the tradition of Philip Freneau and Joel Barlow, bears traces of a similar political struggle in the nineteenth century.

Whitman’s use of the French language rises and falls with the political and social radicalism of his early years. He began to use French while he was editor of the *Aurora* in 1842, long before he had any intention of making it part of his politico-literary program. Advertising itself as “the acknowledged journal of the beau monde, the Court Journal of our democratic aristocracy,” the *Aurora* filled its columns with borrowings from the French in order to give its articles on New York social life an aristocratic tone.<sup>20</sup> As editor of the *Aurora*, Whitman employed a rather limited store of French words and phrases; these French flourishes were, like his dandyish dress of the time, no more than an affectation, a mannered appeal to the *beau monde*.

After his term as editor of the *Aurora*, Whitman ceased to adorn his journalism with borrowings from the French. Not until his trip to New Orleans in 1848 did French words and phrases become a recurrent feature of Whitman’s poetry and prose. Turning away from the French affectations of his early journalism, Whitman made a self-consciously literary use of the language in the articles he wrote for the New Orleans *Daily Crescent*. In a series titled “Sketches of the Sidewalks and Levees,” for example, his sketches of Dusky Grisette, the *marchande de fleurs*, and Timothy Goujon, the *ecailleur*, anticipate the linguistic experiments of literary realism. His

street-walking Grisette is an ancestor of Stephen Crane's Maggie. And his transcription of the oyster seller's dialect—"Ah-h-h-h-h a bonne marche—so cheep as navair vas—toutes frais—var fresh, Ah-h-h come and puy de veritable poisson de la mer—de bonne huitres—Ah-h-h-h-h!"—is an early attempt to capture the idioms of American street life.<sup>21</sup>

Writing of "New Orleans in 1848," Whitman says: "I have an idea that there is much of importance about the Latin races contributions to American nationality in the South and Southwest that will never be put with sympathetic understanding and tact on record."<sup>22</sup> His New Orleans sketches were his first effort to put on record the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nature of America: he used the French language to inject Latin color and idiom into the culturally dominant New England strain of American nationality. After his trip to New Orleans, Whitman's French usage became a key element in his struggle for a native American idiom.

In "America's Mightiest Inheritance," an article on the English language written for *Life Illustrated* in 1856, Whitman says: "Great writers penetrate the idioms of their races, and use them with simplicity and power. The masters are they who embody the rude materials of the people and give them the best forms for the place and time."<sup>23</sup> Commenting on the evolution of the English language, he points up the largeness of the French contribution: "The Norman Conquest of England brought in profuse buds and branches of the French, which tongue seems always to have supplied a class of words most lacking, and continues its supply to this day" (p. 56). Not content merely to penetrate and record the idioms of his race, Whitman assumed the role of agent in the evolution of an American language. In an "Appendant For Working-People, Young Men and Women, and For Boys and Girls," he includes, "A few Foreign Words, mostly French, put down Suggestively." Seeking, presumably, the best forms for the "rude materials of the people," Whitman lists the pronunciations and definitions of over one-hundred French terms that might be introduced into the spoken language. "Some of these are tip top words," he says, "much needed in English—all have been more or less used in affected writing, but not more than one or two, if any have yet been admitted to the homes of the common people" (p. 61).

Whitman's list was not as precipitate as it may seem. Of the French words that he put down "suggestively," over half had already appeared in Webster's 1848 *Dictionary*; and of those that did not appear, several could now be found in any standard dictionary. Among the latter are such commonly used French terms as *aplomb*, *brochure*, *brusque*, *nonchalant*, *restaurant*, *role* and *repertoire*. Seeking to hasten the process of language growth in America with a few implants of his own, Whitman had in fact anticipated the admission of many French terms into the homes of the common people.

In composing *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman carried on his campaign to enrich the American language through borrowings from the French. Here again, his French usage is not as ill-considered as critics have led us to believe. He incorporated in his verse only about thirty of the French words



that he suggested for general usage in 1856. Many of these terms, such as *accoucheur*, *cache*, *douceur*, *ensemble*, *encore*, *facade*, *mélange*, *persiflage*, *rapport* and *resume*, were listed in the 1848 *Dictionary*, and thus already had some currency in America. He also introduced into his writing several French terms that did not appear in his 1856 list, but most of these can also be found in the 1848 *Dictionary*. In fact, Whitman employed only a few French words—*mon cher*, *ma femme*, *mon enfant*, *en masse*, *trottoir*—that were not already a part of American English. By using French terms that were already a part of common parlance, Whitman sought to do for the American language what Chaucer had done for the English.<sup>24</sup>

While French words and phrases are a consistent feature of all his writings, Whitman used a majority of these terms first and most frequently in the more experimental 1855, 1856 and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Critics have been quick to point up Whitman's more unfortunate uses of the French language in such passages as the following:

I sound triumphal drums for the dead. . . . I fling through my  
embouchures the loudest and gayest music to them  
(“Song of Myself,” 1855, 369)<sup>25</sup>

In most cases, however, Whitman's French is both precise and effective. When he speaks of “the grandeur and life of the universe” in the 1855 *Preface*; or when he says “The Secretaries act in their bureaus for you” in “A Song for Occupations” (84), his use of French terms seems quite natural. He frequently uses French to suggest sophistication and worldliness, as in “Faces” where he says: “I saw the rich ladies in full dress at the soiree” (74). At other times he uses French for hyperbolic and comic effect: “And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,” he exclaims in “Song of Myself” (664). In none of these instances is Whitman's French usage either vulgar or ill-considered.

Although Whitman's French usage was always framed by his political vision, the contexts within which he used the language ranged from the broadly programmatic to the intensely personal. In the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, for example, he used French as part of his effort to make death less terrifying. In his 1851 address to the Brooklyn Art Union, Whitman called upon artists to heighten the beauty and appeal of death: “Nay,” he says, “May not death itself, through the prevalence of a more artistic feeling among the people, be shorn of many of its frightful and ghastly features.”<sup>26</sup> Through the grace and subtlety of the French language, Whitman sought to transfigure the “spectral horror” and “mouldering skull” of death, and thus to create a more artistic feeling about death. In “Song of Myself” he refers to death as a rendezvous: “Our rendezvous is fitly appointed. . . . God will be there and wait till we come” (1197). The word rendezvous suggests death not as a culmination, but as a consummation of a love affair with the great Camerado.

Whitman also refers to death as an *accoucheur*: “To his work without flinching the accoucheur comes,” he says in “Song of Myself” (1282); and in “To Think of Time,” he says: “Not a day passes . . . not a minute or

second without an accouchement” (10). His choice of the word *accoucheur*—which Whitman defined in his 1856 list as *Man-midwife*—is particularly effective. For one thing, *accoucheur* suggests the same hopeful conjunction of death (*accoucheur*) and sleep (*coucher*) that we find in “The Sleepers.” But more important, the image of death as a man-midwife bringing deliverance and the association of dying (*accouchement*) with labor and childbirth give unique emphasis to the process of regeneration—personal, political, spiritual—that is the underlying theme of *Leaves of Grass*.

Associating France with a more open attitude toward sex and the body, Whitman also makes frequent use of the French language in a sexual context. For example, he uses French to heighten the ambiguity of the erotic dream sequence in “The Sleepers”:

I am a dance. . . . Play up there! the fit is whirling me fast.  
I am the everlaughing . . . it is new moon and twilight,  
I see the hiding of douceurs. . . . I see nimble ghosts whichever  
way I look,  
Cache and cache again deep in the ground and sea, and where it is  
neither ground or sea (32-35).

Here again, Whitman’s French usage cannot be faulted. The French words add to the rhythmic and tonal quality of the verse, at the same time that they whisper of hidden delights and half-formed erotic fantasies in the dream-state. The ambiguity of *douceurs*—suggesting softness, sweetness, honey—and the phrase *cache and cache*—with its suggestion of hole, hidden, treasure—intensify the erotic undercurrents of the passage.

On the verso of the only known manuscript page of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman listed three columns of words, presumably a trial vocabulary for the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Before each word, he wrote *c*, *f*, *g* or *l*, a code standing for the Celtic, French, Greek or Latin origins of the word.<sup>27</sup> These words, many of which appear in the 1856 “Broad-Axe Poem,” are one further indication of the seriousness with which Whitman sought an etymologically diverse language to match the pluralistic culture of America.

Throughout the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman used the French language not only to reflect the pluralism of democratic culture, but to connect American experience to the enlightened and republican heritage of France. Thus, the French language is a constant feature of the poems of international sentiment and cosmopolitan philosophy that first appeared in the 1856 *Leaves*. In “Poem of the Road” he uses the French term *Allons!*—perhaps an allusion to the first word of the revolutionary “Marseillaise”—as an exhortatory refrain to invite the people of all lands to join in the progress toward freedom and regeneration on the open road of life; and he makes frequent use of French words in such other 1856 poems of universal philosophy as “Poem of Salutation,” “Broad-Axe Poem” and “Poem of the Sayers of the Words of the Earth.” In fact, through all editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman’s favorite borrowings from the French are terms suggestive of unity and solidarity—*rapport*, *ensemble*, *en masse*, *rondure*, *melange* and *resume*.

The years preceding the Civil War were the period of Whitman's greatest productivity and his most sustained thought about the connection between the American language and democratic culture. Horace Traubel tells us that the notes on language collected in *An American Primer* were "largely written in the rather exciting five years before the war."<sup>28</sup> During this same period, Whitman wrote his article on the English language, "America's Mightiest Inheritance." And, according to C. Carroll Hollis, in 1859 Whitman co-authored with William Swinton a book on language titled *Rambles Among Words*.<sup>29</sup> Here again, in a section attributed to Whitman, language is treated as an outgrowth of national polity: "Over the transformations of a language the genius of a nation unconsciously presides—the issues of Words represent issues in the national thought."<sup>30</sup> Language, says Whitman, must reflect the multiplicity of habits, heritages and races that make up American nationality: "The immense diversity of race, temperament, character—the copious streams of humanity constantly flowing hither—must reappear in free, rich growth of speech. From no one ethnic source is America sprung: the electric reciprocations of many stocks conspired and conspire. This opulence of race-elements is in the theory of America" (p. 288). Once again, in naming the diverse roots of American English, Whitman singles out the French contribution: "How much has the French language been to the English! How much has it yet to give! Nation of sublime destinies, noble, naive, rich with humanity, bearers of freedom, upholding on her shoulders the history of Europe for a thousand years!" (p. 290). Here Whitman makes clear the connection between his fondness for the French language and France's political role as the enlightened bearer of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—a role that he explores in the 1871 poem "O Star of France."

It is almost as if Whitman saw the proliferation of French terms in English as one more means of ensuring the republican vigor of America. Thus, the period of his most concentrated thinking about language as an index and instrument of democratic culture also coincided with his most extensive use of the French language in his writings. Into the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman introduced more French terms than in any other edition. He used many French words in the 124 new poems of the 1860 *Leaves*, but he also added several French terms to his earlier poems.

In the 1860 edition, Whitman began organizing his poems into the experimental groupings that anticipate the ultimate structure of *Leaves of Grass*. Two of these groupings—one political, the other sexual—have French titles. In the political cluster, *Chants Democratic*—subtitled "And Native American"—Whitman uses the French term *chants* coupled with the proper foreign inversion. The French title may have been prompted by the *chansons* of liberty and internationalism of Pierre-Jean Beranger, the French national poet with whom Whitman identified in his early years. The *Chants Democratic* are introduced by a poem with the French title "Apostroph," which begins:

O mater! O fils!  
O brood continental!

Here again, Whitman uses French terms (“O fils!”) and the French-sounding inversion (“brood continental”) to express his cosmopolitan theme: his democratic chants are not only songs of native America, but “joyous hymns for the whole earth.” It was also in the 1860 *Leaves* that Whitman changed the title of his most famous poem of international embrace from “Poem of Salutation” to the much more effective “Salut Au Monde!” It was an auspicious change: the French title would catch the eye of later French writers and advance Whitman’s fame and influence in France.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the *Chants Democratic* cluster, which Whitman broke up and regrouped in later editions, the cluster of poems on sex and the body, to which he initially gave the French title *Enfans d’Adam*, became one of the central and most controversial groupings in future editions of *Leaves of Grass*. In this cluster, Whitman carried on his campaign to, as he says in the 1856 *Preface*, “celebrate in poems the eternal decency of the amativeness of Nature, the motherhood of all,” and to strike out against “the fashionable delusion of the inherent nastiness of sex, and of the feeble and querulous modesty of deprivation.”<sup>32</sup> In selecting the title *Enfans d’Adam* for his group of poems on procreation and amative love, Whitman called attention to their sexual content: the French title would trigger popular notions about the sexual openness and freedom of the French. Looking to the French as an antidote to the deeply rooted Puritan sensibility of America, Whitman used *Enfans d’Adam* as another means of championing “their frankness as opposed to our hypocrisy” in sex directions.<sup>33</sup>

In *An American Primer*, Whitman observes: “Probably there is this truth to be said about the Anglo-Saxon breed—that in real vocal use it has less of the words of the various phases of friendship and love than any other race, and more friendship and love” (p. 29). Following up on this observation, Whitman introduced into *Leaves of Grass* several French terms of friendship and love, including *amie*, *compagnon*, *mon enfant*, *mon cher* and *ma femme*. The themes of amativeness and adhesiveness—heterosexual love and the love between men—in the 1860 *Leaves* are underscored by the recurrence of several French terms of affectionate address. However, Whitman’s use of these terms also reveals some of his sexual ambivalence. Only in his addresses to abstractions does he employ the affectionate term *ma femme*—my woman, my wife. In the 1860 “Proto-Leaf” (later titled “Starting from Paumanok”), Whitman addresses Democracy as *ma femme*, and he ends “Calamus, no. 5” with these lines:

For you these, from me, O Democracy to serve you,  
ma femme!  
For you! for you, I am trilling these songs.

In “France, the 18th Year of These States,” he addresses France as *ma femme*: “I will sing a song for you, ma femme.” Addressing Democracy and France as *ma femme*, Whitman reveals the depth of his affection for both; but he never uses the personal term in his addresses to real women.

More than finding new words for heterosexual love, Whitman was

interested in supplying French terms of affectionate address to the “young men of these States,” who, as he says, “never give words to their most ardent friendships.”<sup>34</sup> If he employed *ma femme* only in his addresses to abstractions, he frequently used such terms as *amie* [*sic*], *mon cher*, *mon enfant* and *compagnon* in his intimate addresses to men. In “Proto-Leaf” Whitman asks the young man:

What do you seek, so pensive and silent?  
What do you need, comrade?  
Mon cher! do you think it is love?

Similarly, at the end of “Poem of the Road,” he says:

Mon enfant! I give you my hand!  
I give you my love, more precious than money,  
I give you myself, before preaching or law.

Associating France with the spirit of *fraternité* and a freer relationship between the sexes—“either sex to either sex,” as he once said—Whitman found in the French language words to express some of the ardor of his own Calamus emotions.

After 1860, Whitman dropped the use of *mon cher* in “Proto-Leaf” and *mon enfant* in “Poem of the Road.” Perhaps uncomfortable with the depth of tenderness for men that his French terms only half disguised, he changed the French *mon cher* to the more paternal *dear son*; and he replaced *mon enfant* with the more impersonal *camerado*. However, he retained the use of *ma femme* to address Democracy and France in all future editions of *Leaves of Grass*.

The deletion of *mon enfant* and *mon cher* is characteristic of the kinds of changes Whitman made in later editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Moving toward the good gray image of his war years, Whitman toned down the more personal and confessional element in his earlier poems, particularly as it related to his Calamus emotions. In the 1867 *Leaves*, he also discarded the *Chants Democratic* cluster and changed the title of *Enfans d’Adam* to *Children of Adam*. More cautious and less experimental in his later years, Whitman eliminated many of the French terms in his earlier poems; and in the poems written after 1860, he used the French language more sparingly. Although he continued to make sporadic use of such old favorites as *rapport*, *resume*, *en masse* and *rondure*, he introduced few new French terms into his later poetry. He relied upon such terms as *debris*, *promenade*, *grandeur* and *rendezvous*, which had been thoroughly assimilated in American English. When he introduced new French words into his 1867 Civil War poems, they were such commonly used military terms as *bivouac*, *accoutrements*, *manoeuvre* and *reveille*. Only when he returned to cosmopolitan and international themes, in such poems of the 1870’s as “Song of the Exposition,” “Proud Music of the Storm,” “Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood” and “Passage to India,” did he use the French language as vigorously as in his earlier period.

In a 1976 address to the Bicentennial Conference on Early American

Literature, Robert Spiller commented on his exclusion of Jews and Blacks from his analysis of American national character:

Only immigrations from European countries other than Great Britain followed a course close enough to our model to suggest inclusion here, even though the remarkable achievements of the Jews and the blacks in contemporary American literature suggest that—given a slightly different model—their contributions to our culture would lend themselves to similar analyses.

Despite some of the more notable failures in Whitman's foreign language experiments (and there were not as many howlers as critics have led us to believe), he should be credited with proposing a "slightly different model" of American national character. It is a model that grew out of the American Revolutionary period—a model that set itself in opposition to those who would fix and define American language and culture according to British standards. But it is also a model that participates in the current debate about bilingualism and national language policy in America.

If American language and literature are merely British English writ large, then perhaps Whitman erred in his attempt to incorporate a range of foreign terms into his national epic. Perhaps, in fact, he should have heeded the early warnings of John Witherspoon and John Pickering and used no word in his public speech and writing that did not come sealed with the British imprimatur. But if American language and literature are to reflect not only the *New English* mind in America but also the entire mind and culture of the American people, then perhaps Whitman was ahead of his time. Whitman's foreign language experiments anticipate the modernist efforts of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot to broaden the expressive power of English through foreign borrowings. Whitman also anticipates contemporary efforts to restructure American language and literature according to a broader, less racially and sexually biased definition of American national experience.

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#### notes

1. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York, 1934), 186.
2. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, 1941), 530; for further discussion of Whitman's French usage, see also Louise Pound, "Walt Whitman and the French Language," *American Speech*, 1 (May, 1926), 421-430; and K. H. Francis, "Walt Whitman's French," *Modern Language Review*, 51 (October, 1956), 493-506. Pound's article is descriptive, presenting a partial inventory of Whitman's French usage. K. H. Francis is more critical: Whitman, he argues, used French words "with absolute confidence (even though some of them are wrongly employed), and with the dogmatic ebullience which is so typical of his whole output."
3. Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, II (Cambridge, 1962), 237.
4. Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy* (New York, 1981), 246.
5. Reverend John Witherspoon, *Pennsylvania Journal and The Weekly Advertiser* (1781), in *The Beginnings of American English*, M. M. Mathews, ed. (Chicago, 1931), 16.
6. *The Works of John Adams* (Boston, 1852), VII, 249; in Mathews, 42.
7. *Ibid.*, 41.
8. Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789; reprinted Gainesville, Florida, 1951), 20.
9. H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York, 1936), 11.
10. John Pickering, *A Vocabulary or Collection of Words and Phrases which have been supposed to be peculiar to the United States of America* (1816), in Mathews, 72.

11. Walt Whitman, *An American Primer*, Horace Traubel, ed. (1904; reprinted San Francisco, 1970), 5. Subsequent references will appear in the text.
12. Sir William Craigie, "The Study of American English," *Society for the Purity of English Tracts*, No. 27, 1927; 203.
13. Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, Floyd Stovall, ed. (New York, 1963), II, 516-517.
14. "Slang in America," in *Prose Works*, II, 573.
15. *Ibid.*, 572.
16. *Prose Works*, II, 552-553.
17. *An American Primer*, Foreword.
18. Herbert Croft, *A Letter, From Germany, to the Princess Royal of England; on the English and German Languages* (London, 1797), 8n.
19. Howard Mumford Jones, *America and French Culture: 1750-1848* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1927), 200.
20. *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora*, Joseph J. Rubin and Charles H. Brown, eds. (Pennsylvania, 1950), 2.
21. *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, Emory Holloway, ed. (Garden City, 1921), I, 213.
22. *Prose Works 1982*, II, 601-602.
23. *New York Dissected*, Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari, eds. (New York, 1936), 56. Subsequent references will appear in the text.
24. For a discussion of Whitman and Chaucer see Michael Dressman, "Whitman, Chaucer, and French Words," *Walt Whitman Review*, 23 (June, 1977), 82.
25. *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, Malcolm Cowley, ed. (New York, 1959). Subsequent references will appear in the text.
26. *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, 243.
27. In the Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress; see also C. Carroll Hollis, "Whitman and Swinton: A Co-operative Friendship," *American Literature*, 30 (January, 1959), 443.
28. *American Primer*, Foreword.
29. Hollis, 425-449.
30. William Swinton, *Rambles Among Words* (New York, 1859), 291. Subsequent references will appear in the text.
31. See my study *Walt Whitman Among the French: Poet and Myth* (Princeton, 1980).
32. "Prefatory Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson: *Leaves of Grass* 1856," *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, Harold Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds. (New York, 1965), 737.
33. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, IV (Philadelphia, 1953), 223.
34. *American Primer*, 15.