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The Polylingual Meat and Bones of Whitman's American Language Body

Introduction

During the five years spanning the publication of the first and third editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman gathered samples of spoken and written language, and wrote on the language used, or still needed, in the United States. The first edition of *Leaves*, published in 1855, records his effort to break up with British and European cultural traditions, and his attempt to give form to a type of literary text weaving together personal and American quests for identity and recognition. With his paractatic poems, at one time lyric and epic, Whitman meant to both shape and mirror the uniqueness of the United States of America. And, indeed, he acted as a spokesman for his country's democratic, ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse inhabitants, portrayed as silenced by an English language modelled on British aristocratic and monologic institutions and culture.

Over the next five years, he increasingly reached out for words and expressions capable of projecting from the page the cosmopolitan world America had become. By the time he published his third *Leaves* in 1860, he had come to believe that the English language in America should be transformed into a hybrid world language, capable of condensing the *Kosmos*, the world-nation he thought his land had become. He estimated that through a number of

lexical and idiomatic graftings from the native and romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian) spoken in North America, and even from Latin, English could enrich the people who used it with a wider range of human and social experiences and feelings. In this way, American English could become a really democratic language where each different, gendered individual would have equal representation and visibility. Apart from his notebooks, which were his language bank and are now a scholar's treasure trove, the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* is where he tried to embody his ideas in a text that he considered the *corpus* of polylingual America. He believed that, as a linguistic body, American English, through words had already absorbed the lives of the human beings who had inhabited the land prior to colonization. In his time, it could still absorb the lives of all the others who had come, and were still coming, to America pursuing their dream of freedom and happiness.

Appropriately, in the third edition of *Leaves*, Whitman brought into focus New York City, where in his time, "no less than eighty different languages are in constant use" (Whitman, 1978: 676). It is true that his idea of language had its shortcomings, for he believed that the disappearance of native Americans could be compensated by the inheritance of names, words, and traditions left to their conquerors. But it also had vision.

The 1860 *Leaves* could have been the first step towards an exploration of the possibilities of language contact and linguistic hybridization. It was instead Whitman's last endeavor at acknowledging America's ethnic, linguistic and cultural complexity. The outbreak of the Civil War quenched Whitman's experimental enthusiasm and his cosmic, inclusive vision. The poet scaled down his agency, almost overnight transforming himself from a cosmic and cosmopolitan poet to a nationalistic one, a shaper of new and old myths for the United States. Little by little, he also dropped from his text most of the non-English words he had used. War had done its work of rallying everybody under the assimilationist umbrella.

As Simone Weil wrote over and over, the power of force is great (cf. Weil), so great that it may change the course of history, kill a culture or block its development. What follows is the story of the cosmopolitan language poet become the nationalist mythmaker

Walt's New World Language

In the same years in which the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* were published, sporadically before 1855, more or less regularly from 1856 to 1860, with peaks between 1856 and 1857, Whitman invested a conspicuous part of his energies in the study of language, a commitment he would continue with varying intensity for the rest of his life. Together with the published essays "America's Mightiest Inheritance" (1856), "Slang in America" (1885), and the posthumous *An American Primer* (1904), his scrapbooks and notebooks, loose sheets and jottings for planned lectures, all entirely devoted to language issues, testify both the poet's struggle with "linguists"¹ and the back-and-forth process tying his search for an American language to contemporary culture on the one side and *Leaves of Grass* on the other.² There is one main path, however, that we must tread if we wish to approach Whitman, the visionary shaper of the language of modernity, Whitman, the ideologue and theorizer of an English standard both democratic and American. He himself laid it for us with *Leaves of Grass*.

Walt Whitman or, in short *Walt*, in the different but mutually interchangeable roles he plays in *Leaves of Grass*, fuses with the person in the real world named *Walter* Whitman. *Walt* is the double in whom the author's self is free to expand. Like the portrait in the painting of Oscar Wilde's famous story, he carries the marks of age, change and the life experiences of his author. If we look carefully, in each edition we can detect a sometimes markedly different personality. Furthermore, this man is made in the image not only of his creator but also of his addressee – the person he himself creates with his words. Offering *Walt's* self, a self that is admittedly "without singularity"³ as the

¹ "Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders," (Whitman, 1855: 15).

² For an analysis of the development and changes in Whitman's study of language, see Camboni 2004. Scholarship on his language study and ideology is quite extensive: see in particular Southard (1984); Hollis (1985); Warren (1990); Bauerlein (1991), and Kramer (1992).

³ Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*. Vol. I: 160. From now on abbreviated as *NUPM* followed by volume and page numbers. The process of Whitman's creation of "Walt Whitman" as poetic alter ego can be detected in his titling of the first long poem in the 1855 *Leaves*. Originally untitled, the poem became "Poem of Walt Whitman,

connecting link between speaker and addressee, Whitman also draws his reader into the common terrain of the mirror-language of the text; where they meet.

Embodiment

There is a metaphor that comes up time and again in the philosophical and philological discourses of the period in which Whitman first worked on *Leaves of Grass*: that of language as the element that “incarnates everybody.” From this image, he takes the lead to define the writer as the language master who can “embody,” i.e. translate, his people and his times into a different material substance capable of retaining the concrete form and spiritual reality of its sources. The word “embodiment,” as well as “incarnation,” is indeed a structuring metaphor for Whitman. It is the frame that holds together his created world, the American man that inhabits it, and the American language he is made to speak, all united within the single figure of a body or whole caught in an incessant process of formation and transformation.⁴

From the beginning, Whitman thought that his *Leaves* should form a “*Unity* in the same sense that the earth is, or the human body... or... a perfect musical composition is –”.⁵ While the earth and the symphony would also become viable metaphors for compositional unity, the human body was indeed to remain Whitman’s primary model. “A true composition in words, returns the human body, male or female – that is the most perfect composition,” he writes in *An American Primer* (Whitman, 1904: 27).⁶ And in one of his notes,

an American” in 1856, and simply “Walt Whitman” in the editions from 1860 to 1871–72. In 1881, it was re-titled “Song of Myself.” See the editions of *Leaves of Grass* in The Walt Whitman Archive.

⁴ On the textual and political facets of this body see Erkkilä (1989); Tapscott (1994); Camboni (2000).

⁵ Manuscript note, Trent Collection, Duke University.

⁶ Whitman left a number of pages and notes for a planned lecture that Horace Traubel gathered and edited, publishing them in book form under the title *An American Primer* in 1904. Whitman’s own planned title, “The Primer of Words,” underscored the prospective orator’s didactic intent, for he meant to democratically address American young men and women, orators, teachers, musicians, judges, and even presidents. The notes are reproduced in the third volume of *Daybooks and Notebooks*, p. 728 ff.

he goes so far as to define nouns as the meat and verbs as the bones of language (*NUPM*, V: 1967). In the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* the *corpus* of poems is already avowedly isomorphous⁷ with the body of *Walt*, the poet-American man-human being, that in turn is one with the American land, and the social body: one body becomes, then, the equivalent of the other in a transitive process of qualitative mutation of energy that keeps intact the content quantity. However, being a Romantic, Whitman imagines this body, or rather bodies, as living organisms, and represents them in the process of birth, growth, and maturation.

Taking Whitman at his word, I have treated his created *corpus* as a *living organism* and interpreted its behavior with the help of the Russian-Belgian physical chemist Ilya Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures. Adopting the paradigm for open, living, complex systems defined by Prigogine and his Brussels' school,⁸ I interpreted the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as an instance of a newly created organism, characterized by the dynamism, instability, open endedness and unpredictability which Prigogine finds distinctive of newborn organisms – be they physical, biological or social. Accordingly, I built a narrative of the development of the work as a living organism.

Evolving through seven editions and over 35 years (Cf. Folsom, 2005), the original elements constituting the 1855 *corpus* of *Leaves of Grass* – like all systems undergoing an irreversible process – went through a progressive articulation and complication while the body increased in size. Its parts developed according to different internal rhythms, while an overall non-linear evolution granted its internal growth. Being an open organism, moreover, the textual body interacted with the outside world *via* the author, with historical and personal events bringing about interior transformations and innovations that affected the very direction of its development.

Within this story, the first three editions can be read as so many phases of a process which, in analogy with the human organism, we could describe as one leading from birth to adulthood. Writing to Sarah Tyndale in 1857, Whitman himself phrases his vision of the one hundred poems he had put together as

⁷ I am indebted to Jurij M. Lotman's definition of culture and to the volume *Semiosfera* for the concepts and the terms of "isomorphism" and "semiosphere".

⁸ See in particular Prigogine (1991), and Prigogine and Stengers (1984). For a more extended application of Prigogine's theory to Whitman's work, see Camboni (1992).

of “the *true* Leaves of Grass,” the whole having finally assumed “an aspect of completeness” that made “its case clearer” (Whitman, 1961: 44). Though the third edition was not published until 1860, both the man and the text appear to have reached adulthood in the three years between 1855 and 1857, as the poems become increasingly personal and political. Less celebratory, the poet deploys performative authority as he tries to shape cultural and linguistic unity out of complexity and fragmentation, something that he believes politicians are unable to guarantee.⁹

Whitman did not consider his text, nor his man, nationally unmarked, creatures. On the contrary, in his poems as well as in his prose works, he maintained that he was shaping the «Personality» of the uniquely American man. And, indeed, the American continent and landscapes, as well as the history of the United States and its antecedents constitute the space-time framework in relation to which *Walt's* identity is defined. His present world is the context in which Whitman's hero-poet acts and moves.¹⁰ Moreover, *Walt* speaks in the first person. As the linguistic subject, he positions himself at the center of his world and, as he speaks, he both defines and organizes it and its relations. *Walt's* is the processual consciousness defining objects in the American space-time and giving them identity, recognition and duration as well. He shapes for himself the role of the cultural guide of a state that is only nominally one, united, nation. In his eyes, the republic of the United States still needs to give form to a relational, ethical, political, cultural and religious life moving in accordance with its democratic beliefs and its expanding geography.

In his utterances, *Walt* openly addresses the many who listen in order to attract those who are willing to follow. Consequently, as readers, we have to

⁹ An analysis of the poem “Beginners,” written between 1856 and 1857 but only published in the 1860 edition, helps to better understand Whitman's sense of ripening in the years when he was preparing *Leaves of Grass* 1860. It was in those years that, also thanks to an increasing number of readers and friends, he gained enough confidence in himself. Concomitantly, his will to make a political career out of writing poems reached full fruition. On this, see Camboni (2017: 217–220).

¹⁰ The idea of the spatiotemporal framework as the basis for identification comes from P. F. Strawson's *Individuals*. Paul Ricoeur's criticism of Strawson's theory as well as his own development of the idea of self and other in his *Soi-même comme un autre* have also contributed to my interpretation. On space as a social and political construction see Massey.

imagine/conjure to ourselves a fictional spatial context of dialogic immanence that brings together different temporalities, where the *I* who speaks, involves *You*, his addressee, in an equal, and reciprocal relation of exchange. This dialogue is a key element in the developmental story of *Leaves of Grass*; it accounts for the dynamics of its textual growth, in and beyond its historical and biographical limits. Dialogue, indeed, is not simply a formative element but the very foundation of the textual past, present and future meanings of *Leaves of Grass*. It is, moreover, the part of the textual organism capable of activating new textual systems. As a result, the dialogue between this poet-speaker and his addressee, reader or poet, builds the space for relationship, and multiple temporalities. It is the place of maximum opening. Well beyond the author Walter Whitman's intent, but not dissimilarly from the American Declaration of Independence, as a textual and linguistic place, *Walt's* dialogic utterance permits multiplicity and contemporaneous plurality, coming to be the sphere of "coexisting heterogeneity" (Massey: 1). The present of *Walt's* imaginary dialogue, once engraved into the historic time of direct (author)-text-reader confrontation, relates that present, and a definite space-time point in the nineteenth century, to the multiple, varied locations and open-ended futures of actual and prospective readers.

The language body and *Leaves of Grass* 1855, 1856, 1860

Given these assumptions, I concentrate here on the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* and on Whitman's concurrent language notes and articles. Proceeding from the text of these editions to the more strictly linguistic material and then going back to the text again, I could identify the interplay of themes, structuring frames and time rhythms making up a complex organization. Additionally, by focusing on the space-time coordinates in which Whitman's American poet is rooted in the first and third editions, I was able to bring to the fore internal differences in the two editions of *Leaves of Grass* and highlight the variety of ways in which they relate to the background *corpus* of linguistic material.¹¹

¹¹ In this, my approach differs radically from that of most other critics who have rarely paid attention to the temporal and thematic but also projectual threads connecting Whitman's

In particular, the short article “America’s Mightiest Inheritance,” published a few months before the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856),¹² and devoted to the philosophy of language and the history of the English language, is parallel in theme to the *Leaves of Grass* of 1855. The implementation program Whitman proposes in it, however, projects it towards the second and third editions of the work. These two editions, in turn, are closely related to “The Primer of Words” and to the “Words” notebook as well as to other manuscript notes and clippings collected mostly in the years 1856–60.¹³ Even so, as we shall see, the 1860 edition, is already projected beyond the frontiers of the universe represented in it and thus well beyond the ideological focus that had nourished both Whitman’s linguistic search and his language proposals earlier on.

1855: «Birthed»

In the 1855 *Leaves of Grass Walt*, the acting and speaking *I*, does not inhabit a precise place. He is the measure of the very place and time. Like the poet in the Preface, who “incarnates (his country’s) geography and natural life and rivers and lakes,” extending from coast to coast, from North to South, the *I* is isomorphic to America. His walking an imaginary road through American geography and history is a cognitive exploration of his own body and his own being. Yet, the speaking *I* presents himself as the American prototype of a modern, democratic, hence universal, human being. In the dialogical fiction this equivalence of American and Universal is fully mirrored by the *I* addressing himself to his own specular image. The *I* reflects the *you* and the *you* the *I*. Both of them, moreover, are made of a reality which, in turn, is not other from their own self but, being identical with it, is also inside the self. The idealized world this relation projects is one of many selves mirroring one another in their shared

language notes and essays to one or the other edition of *Leaves of Grass*. My quotations are from *Leaves of Grass. Facsimile Edition of the 1855 Text*, hereafter *LG 1855*, and from *Leaves of Grass 1860. The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition*, hereafter *LG 1860*.

¹² The text of “America’s Mightiest Inheritance” is taken from *New York Dissected*, and hereafter abbreviated *AMI*.

¹³ Like the “Primer of Words” notebook, many other Whitman’s notes on language are reproduced in *Daybooks and Notebooks*, vol. III.

natural amplitude, individuality, equality and freedom. However, *Leaves of Grass* of 1855 becomes thematically united by the narration of a process: the passage from non-being to being. An idea is reiterated in its twelve poems: that of the birth of the subject of knowledge and of word, of *Walt*, the *I*-hero-kosmos. From this perspective, this edition does seem to be carrying out Emerson's envisioned birth of *the* American poet, capable of beginning a national literature.

In the as-yet-untitled poem "There Was a Child Went Forth," the moment of conception is focused on:

His own parents . . . he that had propelled the fatherstuff at night, and
fathered him . . . and she that conceived him in her womb an birthed him . . .
(*LG* 1855: 91)

The American poet-man is not "born," but "birthed." By using "birthed," the past of a verb of Anglo-Saxon origin, and by making it parallel to «fathered,» Whitman provides the mother with an active role in the procreative act. Furthermore, by insisting on the terminal aspect of the process which transforms the passive conception into an active "birthing," Whitman points to a symbolic moving out of latency, that is, to the poet's or man's will to orient and give cultural relevance to the natural events of conception and birth. The "birthed" individual is the "stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches" and that shall be "the fittest for his days" of his 1855 Preface (*LG* 1855: iii).

Less than one year after publication, the first paragraph of the Preface is echoed by the first paragraph of "America's Mightiest Inheritance" which no longer directs us towards the *heir* but towards "the best *inheritance* America receives from all the processes and combinations, time out of mind, of the art of man." This legacy, on which Whitman writes much less imaginatively than in the Preface and in his poems, is "The English language — so long in growing, so sturdy and fluent, so appropriate to our America and to the genius of its inhabitants," (*AMI*: 55). Whitman finds a consonant parallelism between the evolution of human languages and the history of the English language. As the light of human language moves from the East towards Western horizons, so does the current of "the English language," which "seems curiously to have flowed through the ages, especially toward America," (*AMI*: 59). "For present use" he specifies, and, he may as well have implied, as a sign of "manifest destiny." "The English language," he maintains

is by far the noblest now spoken – probably ever spoken – upon this earth It is a language for great individuals as well as for great nations. It is, indeed, as characterized by Grimm, the German scholar, a “universal language, with whose richness, sound sense, and flexibility, those of none other can for a moment be compared.” (*AMI*: 55)

As natural language “grows purely of itself and *incarnates* everything” and is such that “[n]o art, no power, no grammar, no combination or process can originate [it]” (*AMI*: 56), so does the English language. “So composed of all the varieties that preceded it,” it evolves naturally absorbing “what is needed by it” (*AMI*: 59). Unrestrained by individual choices or by social planning, the English language has grown because, whenever needed, “[o]bjects, acts, sentiments, art, wit,” “all these *have been furnished* with additional words from far and near” (*AMI*: 57). While people and societies disappear, language stays, Whitman maintains in “America’s Mightiest Inheritance.” What he considers a natural evolutionary principle ideologically justifies his disregard for the political and economic, or even simply human, causes which brought about both the internal growth and the geographic movement and expansion of the English language. This allows him to accept the rapid extinction of native Americans as a necessity and to mention their case as a contemporary instance of evolutionary logic:

Thus, also, the American aborigines, of whom a few more years shall see the last physical expiration, will live in the names of Nantucket, Montauk, Omaha, Natchez, Sauk, Walla-Walla, Chattahoochee, Anahuac, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Orinoco, Saginaw, and the like. (*AMI*: 58)

Whitman’s vision is perfectly in line with the progressive and scientific conceptions of his time. He conceives language, the English language in particular, as the final material substance, differing in quality but preserving in quantity the energy, or life, of the animated bodies which are converted or transformed into it. He is happy if a handful of words survives. Nouns, names and especially toponyms incorporated into the English language make up for the extinct tribes, and rather than a reminder of the power struggles that all but obliterated the American natives, just like their lands, have dutifully come to appear a natural part of the material and cultural world of the United States. Already in the 1855 edition, many native American names appear, but their

number greatly increases in the 1860 edition, implicitly defining a lexical map of the white Anglo-Saxon and European expansive appropriation of native territories. Paradoxically, Indian names and nouns in *Leaves of Grass* testify not so much the transformation of the actual physical bodies and historical societies into their language equivalent, but rather their complete and final loss. They are also one of the many unaccredited ways in which Native American culture has contributed to the growth and formation of the culture of the United States as we now know it.¹⁴

The story of the evolution of the English language in “America’s Mightiest Inheritance” thus runs parallel to that of the American poet in *Leaves of Grass*, and in both cases, it spans the time that precedes and prepares birth in order to better unveil its necessity. In the poem later entitled “Song of Myself” (section 44), the speaking *I* declares:

I am an acme of things accomplished, and I an encloser of things to be.
(*LG* 1855: 50)

Time pulls individuals out of the dark and deposits them on the surface of a geographic, specific present. In this “universal process” (“I Sing the Body Electric”), the American poet-man appears, like Christ, in the fullness of time. The *I* is the apex and inclusive synthesis, extreme manifestation and perfection of the *movement* of time. Each birth and time are of the same worth, says Whitman. But this does not stop him from believing that the present is the time of culmination and completion:

All forces have been steadily employed to complete and delight me,
Now I stand on this spot with my soul. (*LG* 1855: 50)

For the American poet, and for the English language as well, appropriating the American soil, means *actively birthing* the American man, language, and culture. And yet, in Whitman’s representation, this process reaches back to the earth’s geological eras to be finally reunited with the beginning of all life. Whitman’s American man is one with the living universe itself:

¹⁴ On Whitman and American Indians see Folsom (1994).

Long I was hugged close . . . long and long.
Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have helped me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen;
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid . . . nothing could overlay it;
For it the nebula cohered to an orb . . . the long slow strata piled to
rest it on . . . vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it
with care. (*LG* 1855: 50)

“Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,” Whitman the writer cries out in his lines (*LG* 1855: 29) while Whitman the language searcher defines: “Kosmos,” a “noun masculine or feminine, a person who[se] scope of mind, or whose range in a particular science, includes all, the whole known universe” (*DN*III: 669). “Kosmos,” a word which resounds throughout the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, is the linguistic place, the juncture, the very stone on which Whitman founds his assimilation of man, cosmos, and language. Spelt with a “K” rather than with the common “C,” it also manifestly yokes Whitman’s poems to the *Kosmos* lectures of the famous biologist and geographer Alexander von Humboldt, Wilhelm’s brother, whose work had recently won the admiration of the American scientific and educated community.¹⁵ In this way, Whitman’s poetic discourse connects to the narratives of contemporary science. Or better, opting for the poet’s point of view, it gathers and transforms all these narratives into the cultural body of his evolving *Leaves*.

In the meaning Whitman gives to the word “kosmos” we uncover the narration of another beginning, another birth, that of an American literary tradition where his *Leaves of Grass* is not so much *one* of the discourses

¹⁵ In a long article entitled “Progress” (1857), which Whitman heavily marked and annotated (now among Whitman’s papers at Duke University, Trent Collection,) *Cosmos: a Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe* by Alexander von Humboldt, is reviewed at great length. It was the first English translation of the lectures held in Berlin in the winter 1827–28, but only written in 1843–44, and published with the title “Kosmos.” Cf. *Lives of the Brothers Humboldt*.

contributing to the American culture, rather it is *the text* where all discourses are interwoven. For it, Whitman finds a unique model: the Bible, God's own word, and the very text on which Anglo-American culture was built. The Bible, enclosing in a single book "theology, cosmogony, history, biography»,¹⁶ provided Whitman with the perfect example of thematic complexity and with a plurality of linguistic forms through which the gigantic stature of his divinely creative modern man might be thoroughly captured. Biblical language, moreover, also offered him a viable linguistic model, though not so much for its Anglo-Saxon core¹⁷ and much less for its highly evocative early modern English. Rather, he learned from it the lesson of a language – both in the original and in the King James Bible versions – true to the depths of human aspirations, and faithful to the places, times and the human community of which it was an expression.

Kosmos, therefore, is the man. Cosmic is also Whitman's text, as inclusive as the Bible. Cosmic, in "America's Mightiest Inheritance," must become the English language as well which, having reached America in the present, is also an "acme of the things accomplished," and "encloser of the things to be." With a "composite" body and a "simple, compact, and united" (*AMI*: 56–57) structure, Whitman believed English had the great qualities that would make it easily fit to, or "acclimated" (*DBN* III: 809) in the United States of his times. In the "acme of things" that was his present, Whitman perceived the epitome of the past. The many races and ethnic groups living on the American territory, with their different languages and cultures, embodied in the American present what had been delivered in history in subsequent times and different places. The complexity of the present was for him the starting point for building a higher level of simplicity. Only by assimilating in its unity a plurality of languages, American English could become a single code, and increase its potential for becoming not simply a national, but a universal, language.

When, at the end of his historical excursus, in "America's Mightiest Inheritance" Whitman proposes that the English language be integrated with words borrowed from other languages and encloses a dictionary of French words

¹⁶ These are words that Whitman underlined in the above-mentioned review article.

¹⁷ Or, at least not only for that. On this topic see Bernbrock. On the influence of "Anglo-Saxonism" in the nineteenth century see Cmiel and Kim.

(110 in all),¹⁸ he is certainly carrying the teaching of contemporary philology well beyond the intentions of its American, not to say British, adepts. Just as Anglo-Saxon acquired Latin words, and French words at the time of the Norman conquest, similarly, British English in America, he believed, should be “adapted still more to us and our future” (*DBN* III, p. 809), and acquire the many new words it needed from the other languages spoken in the country.

1860: Walt’s male, female, and polyglot world

The end of “America’s Mightiest Inheritance” leads, beyond the philological theme of the essay and beyond the 1855 *Leaves*, towards the 1856 and 1860 editions, where Whitman gave linguistic substance and form to the egalitarian and democratic principles of his ideal American man. Working towards this aim, in “The Primer of Words,” Whitman listed the areas of culture where new words were to be admitted or created, and called attention to the “higher laws” of grammar to be applied in order to implement the English language, in and for America, not forgetting to give relevance to the phonetic and graphic aspects of innovation. The notes gathered in the notebook “Words” add to the discursive character of the “Primer” the accurate observation of a close study of this or that aspect of language. We see him devote here particular attention to the sound and spelling of words. He went so far as to suggest a new phonetic system as an aid to the foreign or uneducated reader, or to adapt this or that French word to English. Rivalling with the Bostonian pronunciation in Webster’s *Dictionary*, he even advocated the national adoption of a vowel sound system closer to the English spoken in New York. Entire lists of words, new, slang or jargon words, nouns and names, which he copied down impartially from books or articles or directly from the human voice of a worker, make up a great part of his studies. They, like the long lists of the 1856 “Broad-Axe Poem,” eventually

¹⁸ When writing “America’s Mightiest Inheritance” Whitman, who was essentially monolingual, was being taught French by his friend William Swinton. With him he was also probably working on a text of etymologies entitled *Rambles Among Words* (cf. Hollis, 1959). Whitman, however, had had first hand experience of French during the few months spent in New Orleans in 1848 as articulately demonstrated by Louise Pound in 1926.

became the flesh and bones contributing to the growth of the textual body of his 1856 and 1860 *Leaves*.

In the 1860 *Leaves*, *Walt* the American man-poet (the *I* as acting subject) introduces himself while manifestly walking the streets of New York. Indeed, his walking along the streets of “Mannahatta,” “my city,” (*LG* 1860: 404) constitutes a leitmotif, a continual restatement of belonging and rootedness. He even takes leave from his addressee/reader with “a delicious” New-Yorkese “idiomatic phrase” (*DBN* III: 669): “So long.” Just as the city space is the center from which Whitman’s hero, the acting and moving *I*, leaves and to which he then returns, in the same way, New York is an inclusive and emblematic place, the epitome of America. In its process of growth towards maturity, Whitman’s man-text has decidedly become more American than cosmic. In some ways, its universal identity has become more and more synonymous with the cosmopolitan metropolis, and tendentially inclusive of all continental America. In the third edition of his *Leaves*, then, Whitman brings into focus not the extended American territory but the concentrated one of New York City where, in his time, “no less than eighty different languages are in constant use” (*DBN* III: 676).

In accord with the polyglot universe in which he is rooted, Whitman’s poet uses a polylingual code. In the opening poem, “Proto-Leaf,” he identifies the places he comes from or moves along with Indian names: Paumanok, Mannahatta, Kanuck. In his speech he repeatedly addresses his countrymen as “Americanos!,” but whenever he singles one out of many, he calls him “comrade” or even “camerado.” The readers or bystanders are warmly invited to engage in a dialogue with a reiterated “Respondez! Respondez!”. Elsewhere they are incited to follow *Walt’s* march through the land: “Allons!,” he repeatedly calls in “The Poem of the Road,” evoking *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem (*LG* 1860: 322 ff).

He sings in praise of “Libertad!”, addresses democracy as “Ma femme!”, and does not disdain to talk of “amours,” of “melanges” of words, of “poemets” or “philosophs.” The French word “fruitage” in the eleventh of the “Chants Democratic” echoes “feuillage,” which more evocatively replaces the English “leaves” (see “Apostroph” *LG* 1860: 105). Italian is called in to fill the void of “soft words” and to set the “No dainty dolce affettuoso I” against the bearded

man ready for “a challenge.” The poet shows off his Latin and emphatically evokes “Omnes! Omnes!” in “Proto-Leaf” only to appeal to “O Mater! O fili!” in the “Apostroph” which opens the “Chants Democratic.”

The spelling of “apostroph,” in turn, is in itself a proposal of assimilation of French words into the English spelling system. All the ‘savan’s, ‘philosoph’s, and ‘habitan’s named witness an assimilated language, where the final vowel or consonant has been dropped to fit the French sound into the English spelling.

By adopting words from other languages, Whitman obeyed ideological, grammatical, and representative principles as well as his own personal taste. He welcomed social and literary French words, most of which are personal or agent nouns (like “chansonnier” or “accoucheur”). It is their gentler sound he likes, but he is also both reminiscent of his New Orleans experience and aware of the French language spoken in the country at large (including Canada, a name he always spells with a “K”). From Italian he borrows musical terms but also words signifying warmth and sweetness. Magniloquent words come from Spanish. He even calls on Latin and Greek for a contribution. In short, the language spoken by Whitman’s man in his 1860 *Leaves* is an English whose diachronic evolution is overtaken by the synchronic co-presence of many languages. The result of this is a visible transformation of the language. Historical time, compressed into the American present, is here not so much a resumé of the past as an anticipation of what Whitman believes will happen in the future.

It is also worth noticing that often Whitman chooses words for their pure sound value. A fact that not only reveals the poet’s aural sensibility but, going beyond his romantic idea of a spoken language adhering to the body and closer to the spirit, does point to Whitman’s efforts to enrich the repertoire of sounds and of rhythms available to English speakers. In this direction I believe, we must interpret his note on “the nigger dialect,” where he maintains that “The nigger dialect has hints of the future theory of the modifications of all words of the English language, for musical purposes, for a native grand opera in America” (*DBN* III: 730, Cf. Griffin).

Moving from words and sounds to grammar brings us to a famous passage from Whitman’s “Primer of Words”:

The Real Grammar, – he writes – will be that which declares itself a nucleus of the spirit of the laws, with liberty to all to carry out the spirit of the laws, even

by violating them, if necessary. – The English Language is grandly lawless like the race who use it. – Or Perhaps – rather breaks out of the little? laws to enter trully the higher ones. (*DBN* III: 735, question mark in the quotation)

Whitman is clearly aware of the complexity of language, and does not limit himself to simply distinguish between the faculty of language in human beings (the “belched words” in “Song of Myself”), and actual historical languages, but between deep linguistic structures which he calls “spirit of the laws,” and the social conventions and power structures that impose specific formal and lexical usages.¹⁹ Complying with this spirit, he proposes grammatical adjustments to guarantee full representation of the two sexes and thus to measure language to the present. In this way, not only does he prove himself sensitive to the petitions of the newly founded American women’s emancipation movement, but also aware of the active presence of women in society and the equality implied in a representative democracy. The large female audience was after all responsible for what has been called the “feminization of American culture,” and as a writer aspiring to reach as many readers as possible Whitman may have planned to attract women as much as male workers. Many words meant to represent “the perfect equality of the female with the male” (*LG* 1860: 114) are to be found in the 1860 *Leaves*.

Here lands female and male,
Here the heirship and heiress-ship of the world –
...
Here Spirituality the translattress. . . . (*LG* 1860: 9)

This we read in “Proto-Leaf.” The sexually polymorphous heir of the first *Leaves* has acquired the potentiality of becoming two heirs: man and woman.

A little further on, we find the description of probably recurring scenes, with an audience caught “listening to the orators and oratresses in public halls.” This scene, by the way, is a clear example of how Whitman actually ‘typifies’ words and situations, so that everyone might project in them his or her own particular experience. On another occasion, the differentiated suffix for gender was integrated with a common gender ending, as in the following note:

¹⁹ In his *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, II, Émile Benveniste distinguishes between a « niveaux historique » and a « niveau fondamental » in every language (Benveniste: 94).

All through, a common gender ending in ist as –

lovist	}	both
hatist		masc
		&
		fem

– hater m.	}
hatress f.	

(*DN* III: 666).

This time, Whitman’s aim was to create a third suffix, to refer to people of both sexes. In the sixteenth of the “Chants Democratic” we find: “They shall train themselves to go in public to become oratists, (orators and oratresses)” (*LG* 1860: 189). His idea was to extend gender endings to more words than the English language allowed at his time, and possibly to force the gender system of Romance languages into the English grammar in order to press for a formal and semantic correspondence between language and social reality.

However, for all of Whitman’s emphasis on the equality of the sexes, I have counted only two or three instances of feminine gender endings in words referring to women in the world outside the text. Most of the time, he uses gender suffixes to represent abstract ideas embodied in a woman’s shape, a use he will continue after 1860.

Whitman’s linguistic ideas were not necessarily put to use in his poems. In his notes we see him at work building a paradigm of pairs of names in reciprocal relation. Following the example of “employer-employee,” he tried “offender-offendee,” “server-servee,” “lover-lovee”, “hater-hatee” (*DBN* III: 675), pairs however, which he would never introduce into his text. Whitman’s proposals went in the direction of existing structural rules in English. If for no other reason, they are innovative because he stretched the rules, beyond use and habit, and applied them freely. This holds for neologisms too. His democratic poet was for him to be “alimitive” and “amative” in analogy with “perceptive.”

To summarize, Whitman’s lexical integrations with borrowings from other languages and his extension of grammatical rules obey a “humanistic” design of the author. Humanity is incarnated in both sexes and neither sex nor human feelings or actions, neither good nor evil, must be foreign to language.

The American being represented in the 1860 edition of *Leaves* is, then, both male and female furnished with a polylingual language, rooted in New York, the city-America. Universal only because the America it incarnates encloses the world and all the past in its present.

And yet, the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* is kept together by a dialogical frame that creates a dynamic opposite to that of representation, and constitutes the element that projects the text beyond that stage. In the dialogic fiction, Walt, the speaking *I* no longer addresses “you whoever you are,” but “you, camerado.” And the camerado is not either man and/or woman, but selectively man. In choosing as receiver of his leaves-messages another man, the poet as a speaking subject builds on this privileged relationship not only the future of the text but the future of the American identity represented.

The West, Slang and the Virile America

In the following editions, the space in which Whitman's ideal man is rooted, is indeed the West, space of the different American identity: not universal, not bisexual, but first manifestly homosexual and finally overwhelmingly patriarchal and monolingual.

The new American will be a virile man. He will also assume a woman's re-generative and maternal role (while women and their petitions will be cut down to size together with their linguistic presence, cf. Camboni, 1992, n. 9). His language will be less ‘universal’ and more indirect, as slang is in “The Western States of the Union” which are “the special areas of slang, not only in conversation, but in names of localities, towns, rivers, etc...”²⁰ “Slang in America” is the last article on language published by Whitman. Though mindful of Emerson's view of the metaphorical, re-generative power of language, and probably of old notes, the text of Whitman's article conveys a narrower perspective and limited point of view than his previous articles and notes. Rooted in the West, slang is the language spoken by a man and addressed to

²⁰ Published in the *North American Review* of November 1885, it was later included in *November Boughs*. Now is available also in The Walt Whitman Archive.

a man in a world that is linguistically isolated and spatially defined – a closed, American world, folding in upon itself.

Exemplary of the new direction, and of a political attitude in tune with present-day presidential ideology, are the following lines, in the 1867 edition of “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” afterwards removed:

America isolated I sing;
I say the works made here in the spirit of other lands, are so much
poison to These States.
How dare these insects assume to write poems for America?
(Whitman, 1980: 192).

Aware of the cohesive, society-creating function of language, in the years between the second and third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman probably tried to condense in a single but comprehensive poetic discourse a language that, by displacing the English monolith and disconnecting it from its historical sources, could create the space for its becoming the English of Americans. But the energy, self-confidence and personal stance that had prompted that experiment were already exhausted by the time the third edition was published, as the blue-book towards the 1861 edition testifies.

Today, Whitman’s linguistic experiment is not so much to be valued for its representativeness as for anticipating some of the the directions American culture and the English language in America would be taking. In a positive and in a negative sense, his “vista” was certainly far more forward looking than the poet himself, and far more than his society and the historical circumstances of his time, could bear.

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The Polylingual Meat and Bones of Whitman's American Language Body

Summary

In the same years in which the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* were published, Whitman invested a conspicuous part of his energies in the study of language, a commitment he would continue with varying intensity for the rest of his life. By the time he published the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1860, he had come to believe that the English language in America should be transformed into a hybrid world language, capable of condensing the *Kosmos*, the world-nation he thought his land had become. He estimated that through a number of lexical and idiomatic graftings from the native and romance languages English could enrich the people who used it with a wider range of human and social experiences and feelings. In this way, American English could become a really democratic language where each different, gendered individual would have equal representation and visibility. This essay explores the connection between the finished text of the *Leaves* and its author's search for an American language by focusing on the metaphor of "embodiment" and on the poem's hero, *Walt* Whitman, in the different but mutually interchangeable roles he plays. It argues that, by offering *Walt's* self as the connecting link between speaker and addressee, Whitman draws his reader into the common terrain of the mirror-language of the text. It argues, as well, that the outbreak of the Civil War quenched Whitman's experimental enthusiasm. Almost overnight, Whitman transformed himself from a cosmic and cosmopolitan poet to a nationalistic shaper of new and old myths for the United States.

Keywords: comparative literature, Walt Whitman, American English, *Leaves of Grass*, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, polylingualism

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, Walt Whitman, amerykańska odmiana angielskiego, *Żdźbła trawy*, kosmopolityzm, nacjonalizm, polilingwizm