



Whitman in the Popular Media

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WHITMAN IN THE POPULAR MEDIA

Recently Whitman has been appearing frequently in some unlikely places: *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, the cinema, and newspapers across the country. He has been very much in the news in 1988.

Many newspapers this winter reprinted an article by Edward A. Gargan of *The New York Times* having to do with Zhao Luorui, a seventy-five-year-old retired professor of English at Beijing University who just finished a monumental ten-year task of translating *Leaves of Grass* into Chinese—the first full translation into that language. The translator tells Gargan:

Whitman is American. He is not colloquial. Certainly he has the rhythm of the spoken language, but it is not really colloquial. I try to follow that, the beauty of the spoken language. It's difficult to render idiomatic American style, but the thought is there. . . . The individual means everything to Whitman. The individual should have a chance for self-development. Whitman talks a lot about sex, you know. I'm not afraid, being an old woman. I try to be faithful.

Zhao's work fills about one thousand flimsy sheets stored beneath her desk. She now says she has completed the main part of the labor: "I've finished. Now I'm revising. I'll hand it in this year." Zhao was assigned the translation by a cultural committee in 1962, but the project was delayed for many years by a movement in China that criticized humanism, then by the Cultural Revolution. She characterizes her introduction to the translation as "more popular than scholarly. For the first time I'm trying to win an audience."¹

This past spring Whitman appeared in *Time* magazine and elsewhere in relation to the death of novelist Alan Paton, author of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, who died in Botha's Hill, near Durban, South Africa, in April of this year. Paton was long an admirer of *Leaves of Grass*, and *Time* prints a two-page incomplete "Literary Remembrance" which was found among Paton's papers. Here he writes about "the emotion I felt when I read certain pieces," and he says "I have just again read Whitman's threnody on the death of Abraham Lincoln." After quoting the first six lines of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Paton comments that this poem "is one of the most memorable tributes paid by any human being to another, and it is matched by the immortal words of General Jan Christian Smuts, at the graveside of his friend, fellow-soldier, and Prime Minister, Louis Botha, in 1919." Smuts, of course, was also one who championed Whitman as a man and poet.²

This summer Whitman has remained in the popular media through his association with baseball. He is frequently mentioned in the successful baseball movie *Bull Durham*, where one character assigns him to the "Cosmic All-Stars"; the movie concludes with Whitman's post-Civil War words about how baseball is "our game—the American game," and how it will "repair these losses, and be a blessing to us." And this May in *Sports Illustrated*, in a section called "From the Publisher," Donald J. Barr notes:

The long association between baseball and literature probably began in July 1846, when a reporter for the Brooklyn *Eagle* named Walt Whitman wrote, "In our sundown perambulations, of late, through the outer parts of Brooklyn, we have observed several parties of youngsters playing 'base,' a certain game of ball." Nowadays, if one were to perambulate through

Brooklyn's Prospect Park, one might find SI reporter Nicholas Dawidoff playing that certain game. And when his play is done, Dawidoff, 25, often heads for the nearest volume of poetry.

Dawidoff is shown standing, glove in hand, in front of the Brooklyn Bridge.³

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NOTES

1 Gargan's original article, entitled "Walt Whitman Sings Anew, But Now With a Chinese Lilt," appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* (16 February 1988), 1, 5. See also Shirley Horner, "About Books," *New York Times* (20 March 1988), New Jersey section, p. 34, where Professor Zhao's debts to Gay Wilson Allen are discussed. For a discussion of the place of Zhao's translations in the context of the history of Chinese response to Whitman, see Xilao Li, "Walt Whitman in China," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 3 (Spring 1986), 1-8.

2 *Time* (25 April 1988), 105-106. In 1895, Smuts completed a book about Whitman, but it remained unpublished until 1973 (*Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality*, ed. Alan L. McLeod [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973]).

3 *Sports Illustrated* 68 (9 May 1988), 4. For a full discussion of Whitman's associations with baseball, see Ed Folsom, "America's 'Hurrah Game': Baseball and Walt Whitman," *The Iowa Review* 11 (Spring/Summer, 1980), 68-80; and "The Manly and Healthy Game: Walt Whitman and the Development of American Baseball," *Arete: The Journal of Sport Literature* 2 (Fall 1984), 43-62.