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In Memoriam: Rip Torn (1931-2019)

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IN MEMORIAM: RIP TORN (1931-2019)

The actor Rip Torn, who died on July 9, 2019, at the age of 88, memorably played Walt Whitman twice during his heralded career. The first time, he impersonated a younger Whitman, from 1855 when he issued the first *Leaves of Grass* on through the Civil War and up to his first stroke. It was a CBS production entitled “Song of Myself,” which aired on March 9th, 1976. I remember alerting my students and taking my phone off the hook to watch the show myself. The network ran the following advertisement in the *New York Times* on the day of the television broadcast: “Many consider him one of the greatest Americans who ever lived. Others have branded him shameful, immoral. Tonight you decide!” The emphasis, of course, was not on the poetry but on the idea that the Good Gray Poet was also the Good Gay Poet. It was during the 1970s that the American Psychological Association had just removed homosexuality from its list of pathologies. Clearly, CBS was hedging its bet on whether the show’s emphasis would be widely approved. Although Whitman’s father had died before the first edition was published, the CBS drama had the old man trying to talk his son out of issuing the book because of its “immorality.” It also subtly suggested that Whitman had been fired from his government job for being gay, and the poet’s brother, George Whitman, as regarding his brother as “a dirty old man.” None of these assertions were true. On the third, George testified after his brother’s death in 1892 that “any charge that he led a miscellaneous life” was false.

Rip played an older Whitman in the 1990 Canadian movie *Beautiful Dreamers*, which dramatized his time visiting the alienist and disciple Richard Maurice Bucke in 1880 at the insane asylum he oversaw in London, Ontario. Here the social message was to challenge the negative attitude towards the mentally retarded. Unlike other such psychologists involved with such patients, Dr.

Bucke in the film treats them humanely, as human beings instead of near animals. Whitman, who actually did visit Bucke in Canada, champions his cause. In fact, if I remember the plot correctly, the poet freely communicates with the insane and wins their trust.

At the time of the CBS production I had never heard of Rip Torn, but that was to change after *Beautiful Dreamers* when I began—after the Iowa Centennial Conference in 1992—to write Whitman’s biography, which appeared in 1999 as *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. I don’t remember exactly how Rip and I first got in contact, but it may have been through my sister Mary Loving, a public relations specialist, who got the job of PR person for Rip when he played on Broadway in Horton Foote’s last play, *Young Man from Atlanta*, in 1995. Rip was very devoted to Whitman and interested in my work on the poet’s biography. I think I even had dinner with Rip, my wife Cathy, and my sister at Elaine’s in New York City, a famous watering hole for actors and writers, including Norman Mailer, whom Torn famously hit with a hammer during the filming of Mailer’s movie “Maidstone.” (Mailer in retaliation tried to bite off part of Rip’s ear!) When my Whitman biography came out, I appeared at the Barnes & Noble bookstore in Union Square along with Rip and Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds. My sister got Rip to attend. He arrived somewhat ruffled in clothing and wearing a fisherman’s cap. Carrying a tattered paperback copy of *Leaves of Grass*, he gave a reading of “O Captain! My Captain!” Afterward, I never again thought dismissively, like so many scholars, of Whitman’s most famous poem because of its conventional verse. As Rip began his reading, the actor suddenly remembered that he was still wearing his hat and quickly removed it. It was as if we were transported back in time to the Great Emancipator’s funeral.

When Roger Asselineau of the Sorbonne died in 2002, I arranged for my university, Texas A&M, to purchase his Whitman library, which had every edition of *Leaves of Grass* except the first (which the Texas A&M Library quickly acquired) as well as every

foreign translation of the book then in existence. The first edition of *Leaves* became the Library's three-millionth book (I think we now have 5 or 6 million), and to celebrate we held a small conference on Whitman in College Station. Present among the participants were Ed Folsom and Whitman collector Ken Reed. But the real celebrity visitor was Mr. Elmore "Rip" Torn, who—as we soon learned—had begun his college career as an agriculture major at Texas A&M. After one year he transferred to the University of Texas at Austin, where he became a drama major, and the rest was history. At the opening ceremony for the newly acquired first edition of *Leaves*, Rip read another poem, I believe. More memorable to me was his response at the roundtable the next day. When somebody asked him a scholarly question about Whitman, Rip said, "If you want an actor to say something, you have to give him some lines." Rest in Peace, RIP.

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