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trans. Zhao Luorui [review]

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## REVIEWS

*Cao Ye Ji. [Leaves of Grass]* Translated by Zhao Luorui. Two vols. Shanghai: Shanghai Translations Press, 1991. 1089 pp. [In Chinese.]

Whitman studies in the People's Republic of China have experienced ups and downs over the twentieth century, and though Whitman was criticized as a bourgeois poet by some Marxist critics, his contribution to the development of Chinese vernacular poetry has made him a focus of study in the Asian country, the evidence of which is the formidable number of articles, books, and translations that have been published since the early decades of the century. However, Chinese translations of Whitman's poetry in book form have mostly appeared since the 1950s—after the foundation of the People's Republic. The first significant but incomplete translation from *Leaves* was undertaken by Chu Tunan and it remained influential until the 1980s when the Chinese biographer of Whitman, Li Yeguang, completed the whole *Leaves* based upon Chu's earlier work. So the first complete translation of Whitman's oeuvre in mainland China was a combined but nevertheless commendable effort. However, the first single-handed translation of the complete *Leaves of Grass* was undertaken by a woman professor of American literature at Peking University, Zhao Luorui. Based on the 1965 Comprehensive Reader's Edition (edited by Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, and published in 1973 as a Norton Critical Edition), Zhao's version of *Leaves* in 1089 pages was published in 1991.

In 1987, previous to her translation and publication of the complete *Leaves*, Zhao Luorui's translation of "Song of Myself" was brought out by Shanghai Translations Press. She has also selected and translated another short volume of Whitman's poetry entitled *One Hundred Lyrical Poems by Whitman*. Therefore Zhao's complete version of *Leaves of Grass* is the culmination and fruition of her long-time engagement with Whitman. The two weighty volumes, including all the Whitman poems and his major essays as well as some pieces that do not appear in the Norton Critical Edition, are the work of a responsible translator and conscientious scholar.

Zhao's postscript to her translation of "Song of Myself" is used as one of four appendices at the end of volume two (1069-89). This short essay gives a panoramic view of the central poem in *Leaves of Grass*. Like most Whitman readers and scholars, Zhao points out that "Song of Myself" is one of Whitman's earliest and most representative poems, and one of the greatest of long poems ever written in the West (1071). In terms of understanding the original text and of organizing Whitman's ideas in Chinese, Zhao's handling of "Song" is her most impressive accomplishment. Repudiating critics who think Whitman was influenced by Oriental thought (Indian in particular) in writing "Song," Zhao stresses Whitman's difference from other poets and writers: "learned-

ness is not his forte; therefore if one must find a creative source for his poetry, it cannot but come from life, observation, and meditation; and to understand him, one must study his time, environment, his life, hobbies, views, and beliefs" (1073; all the English translations from Chinese herein are my own). Zhao also refutes Western critics who not only explore but exaggerate Whitman's "mysticism" and who "deny his profound realism and his full recognition of material existence and of advanced sciences" (1078). In his poetry, Whitman "sometimes materializes the abstract things, or abstracts the material things" (1077-78). The example she cites is the union of the body and the soul in "Song of Myself." Zhao believes that "the soul" in Section 1 is portrayed as a "concrete object outside one's body" while in Section 5 the union of the two is described as the mating of sexes which may be seen as "the concretization of the abstract" (1078).

Quoting the last stanza of Section 5, Zhao makes her point about Whitman's religious and world outlook: "The God herein is not the God Christians believe in; He is but a highest spiritual principle, similar to the friendship and love between comrades and the unity of humankind" (1078). Partly agreeing with Western scholars who equate Whitman's God with the "Transcendental soul," she insists that He is more like the democratic principle that Whitman always anticipated (1078). Zhao's comments in the postscript go nicely with her translation of the long poem, though there are moot points in both; one lies in her handling of the second line in Section 1: "And what I *assume* you shall *assume*, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (italics mine). Zhao has rendered "assume" as "take upon oneself" (59) while Chu Tunan has it as "say or speak" (*Leaves of Grass*, trans. Chu Tunan and Li Yeguang [Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1987], 61). An English or American reader would likely take it as "conclude" or "think." And, in comparing different editions of Section 24, Zhao apparently prefers the first and dislikes the 1881 revised edition which she actually translated: "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" (93). While Zhao thinks that "an American," "a kosmos," and "a rough" are all "necessary" in various other editions, she believes "Manhattan" in the 1881 edition is superfluous: "'Manhattan' is not necessary because Manhattan is no more than the birthplace and activity locus of the author; in this poem, the poet's national characteristics are much more important than his birthplace" (1070). This generalization makes one wonder why Whitman bothered to make four alterations of the same line over twenty-six years (1855-1881).

In the early 1980s when Zhao resumed work on *Leaves*, she planned "to introduce gradually, but without sacrificing accuracy, poems with themes that Chinese readers will find more controversial, such as some of the poems in 'Children of Adam'" (quoted in David Kuebrich, "Whitman in China," *WWQR* 1 [September 1983], 34). These pieces clearly include "I Sing the Body Electric," "A Woman Waits for Me," "Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals," "O Hymen! O Hymeneel!" and "Native Moments." The ideas presented in these poems, while singing the equality of the sexes, almost certainly run counter to Confucian notions of sexual relations; that may well be the reason why these poems were not rendered into Chinese before the 1980s. This is the part of Whitman that simply was not appropriated in the Confu-

cian country in the first eighty years of the century. Therefore, when Zhao decided to include these pieces, it was no doubt an act of scholarly seriousness and personal sagacity: there was a need for the Chinese reader to know the whole and “real” Walt Whitman—he was not just a poet who boasted democracy and freedom, but also one who advocated sexual equality and liberation. However, as Zhao concludes, Whitman’s “interest in and concern with sex is not lustfulness, but a necessary part of the structure of his mind” (1077).

In her preface, Zhao suggests that there are many good poems in “Children of Adam” and “Calamus”—“most of them among his best” (7); she believes that the former cluster emphasizes erotic love while the latter focuses on the spiritual aspect, namely, friendship between men. To her, the term “adhesiveness” refers to democracy (the collective), which is also comradeship between men (10). She asserts that these poems should be read, not individually, but in connection with Whitman’s complex life philosophy and his broad interests (12). The translator stresses the realistic element in Whitman’s poetry, though she acknowledges that, while the first three editions of *Leaves* accentuate “the material basis of the soul,” later poems allow the soul to prevail as Whitman goes through a transition from “the more conscious realism to a romanticism slightly tinged with mysticism, where ‘God’ is more like the ‘Transcendental soul’” (21).

The second volume of the translation begins with “Memories of President Lincoln.” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and “O Captain! My Captain!” are well-known pieces in China; they are very well handled and, to me, Zhao’s Chinese versions effectively capture the original flavor. In order to demonstrate Lincoln’s significance in Whitman’s poetry and life and to help Chinese readers better understand the poet’s feelings for the assassinated president, Zhao also has translated, as an appendix, Whitman’s eight journal entries on Lincoln during 1863-1867 (1043-68). Whitman’s relation with Lincoln has been sufficiently discussed in China, so Zhao spends little time on the issue in her preface except to point out the poet’s great respect for the wartime president. At the end of the second volume, Zhao has included four appendices: “Whitman on Himself,” “Whitman On Lincoln,” “Postscript to ‘Song of Myself,’” and finally, “Chronology of Walt Whitman’s Life and Work.” Zhao also adds her translation of Whitman’s three anonymous reviews of his own book (not originally in the Norton edition); Zhao justifies this by stating that these reviews “are rich ‘self-vindications’ that have great reference value, and it is wrong not to study them. So I make bold to render them here” (1023). Apparently Zhao was determined to present to her audience a complete Walt Whitman.

Zhao’s philosophy of translating *Leaves*, again as David Kuebrich records it, is that “She rejects the idea of a free translation in favor of being as faithful as possible to the original. Striving for a meticulous fidelity to both Whitman’s content and style, she revises repeatedly in search of a judicious blend of accuracy, fluency, and what she speaks of as ‘idiomatic grasp’” (34). These are no doubt high ideals, though more often than not fidelity is impossible in any translation. Zhao nonetheless is faithful to Whitman’s style, sometimes so much so that she does not even bother changing the original English structure to suit the Chinese syntax, which potentially creates difficulty for the reader.

As to the content, Zhao did strive to achieve faithfulness, though the result sometimes turns out to be less than desirable, as some Chinese critics have already pointed out. One example, “For You O Democracy” (201), may suffice here: in “I will make divine magnetic lands,” “lands” is translated as “country” or “nation” with “magnetic” as its qualifier and “divine” as a supplement; in “I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks” of the second stanza, Whitman seems to have used “make” in the sense of “create,” while Zhao’s Chinese version uses it as an accusative verb, making the line wordy and redundant; Zhao’s rendition of the last line, “For you, for you I am trilling these songs,” translated back into English, is: “For you, for you, I am publishing these songs in a trembling voice.” Had it been translated as “chanting (or singing) these songs with a trill” it would sound more musical and clear-cut. It is only to be expected that such a massive translation would encounter some criticism in China after its publication. Just as Whitman’s poetry is not all great or flawless, some of Zhao’s versions are not entirely above question either. What is admirable is Zhao’s collegial and graceful response to the criticism of her work, one good example of which is her “Translation, A Difficult Business,” an essay she published in *Chinese Translators Journal* (No. 4 [1991], 53-58) in response to a criticism of her translation of *Leaves of Grass*. Zhao agrees with some of the things her critic points out and dismisses others she thinks impertinent; however, she candidly admits that she learned a lot from her critic’s article and that it is important for translators to discuss translation techniques.

Zhao spent more than ten years on the weighty project of translating Whitman whole, the completion of which is itself an admirable achievement. I admire Zhao for courageously taking up and finishing the translation of *Leaves* single-handedly, especially considering she did it while in her seventies. Zhao’s work is solid proof that Whitman commands great respect in China in the late twentieth century. Despite criticisms, the appearance of her new translation marks a high point in Whitman’s reception in China, and it offers the Chinese reading public a better chance to know the nineteenth-century American bard.

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*Dail Glaswellt: Detholiad o Gerddi Walt Whitman. [Leaves of Grass: Selection of Walt Whitman’s Poems].* Translated and edited by M. Wynn Thomas. Cardiff: Yr Academi Gymreig. 93 pp. [In Welsh.]

“I too,” Whitman declared, “am untranslatable.” His barbaric yawp has nonetheless sounded across the roofs of the world in many languages throughout this century, and that *crochlais barbaraidd* can now also be heard in Welsh.

It is surprising, in a way, that this should be the first Welsh translation, since Whitman’s poems have some strong affinities with Welsh cultural and poetic traditions. Whitman’s passionate faith in “the common people” has an obvious parallel, with some of the same origins, in the egalitarian concept of *y werin*, the idealization in the 19th century and after of “the folk” as the principal sustainers of Welsh culture. The public role of the poet, articulating his