



<http://revueties.org>

**Revue TIES**

**7 | 2022**

*Speaking in Tongues:  
Celebrating Walt Whitman  
in Translation*

## Walt Whitman and Aleksandar Ristović

**Marko Avramović**

---

**ABSTRACT.** *This paper attempts to describe how Walt Whitman's poetry influenced one of the most important Serbian poets of the second half of the twentieth century, Aleksandar Ristović (1933–1994). Whitman's presence in this Serbian author's poetry can be traced starting from his fourth poetry collection, Weddings [Venčanja] (1966) where the character of the American bard also appears for the first time. Ristović's poetry written after that period includes several poems depicting or mentioning Whitman. Our paper focuses particularly on the poem "For Two and Two" ["Za dva i dva"], where Ristović addresses Walt Whitman directly. He did not merely invoke Whitman in his verse, but also his images and texts were inspired by the American poet's images and poems. This paper points out some similar images in Whitman's and Ristović's poetry, as well as several works where the Serbian poet involves specific poems by Whitman. We conclude with the statement that both poets favoured certain techniques, such as the catalogue and the direct address, and that Ristović possibly benefited from his experience of Whitman's poetry.*

**RÉSUMÉ.** Dans ce travail, nous présenterons l'influence qu'a exercée Walt Whitman sur la poésie d'Aleksandar Ristović (1933–1994), un des plus grands poètes serbes de la seconde moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Il est possible de suivre les traces de la présence de Whitman dans la poésie du poète serbe à partir de son quatrième recueil poétique intitulé Venčanja [Les Noces] (1966), où apparaît pour la première fois la figure du barde américain. Dès lors, les vers de Ristović font plusieurs fois mentions du nom de Whitman ou dépeignent sa personnalité. Dans le présent travail, nous consacrerons une attention particulière au poème « Pour deux et deux » [« Za dva i dva »], dans lequel Ristović s'adresse directement à Walt Whitman. Qui plus est, le grand poète serbe n'a pas uniquement invoqué Whitman dans ses vers, il s'est aussi largement inspiré de ses images poétiques. Nous indiquerons les images communes aux deux poètes tout en présentant des exemples concrets où le poète serbe entre en dialogue avec certains poèmes de Whitman. Enfin, nous soulignerons des procédés chers aux deux poètes (en tout premier lieu, l'usage récurrent du catalogue et de l'apostrophe) qui pourraient également témoigner de l'influence précieuse qu'a exercée l'œuvre de Walt Whitman sur la création poétique d'Aleksandar Ristović.

**MOTS CLÉS :** réception, influence poétique, poésie serbe, XX<sup>e</sup> siècle

**KEYWORDS:** *reception, literary influence, Serbian poetry, 20<sup>th</sup> century*

---

The reception of Walt Whitman's literary work in the ex-Yugoslav area is fairly unfamiliar in the English-speaking world and beyond. Thus, in what is today the most encompassing overview of Whitman's presence in various languages and countries—the comprehensive collection of papers *Walt Whitman and The World* (1995), edited by Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom—the chapter devoted to ex-Yugoslav space offers only basic data. The first collection of Whitman's poetry, published in Serbia in 1969 and edited by Tihomir Vučković, was one of the selections which was unfortunately omitted by Arthur Golden and Marija Golden, who mainly offered information on Whitman's editions in the former Yugoslavia in their text "Whitman in the Former Yugoslavia" (v. A. Golden, M. Golden 282–287). Only Whitman's Slovenian reception received more attention, in a separate part of that chapter written by Igor Maver (Maver 287–292).

Of course, Southern Slavic interest in Whitman and his reception were much more exciting than can be inferred from such summary overviews. In Serbia, his poetry attracted attention at the turn of the twentieth century, in the interwar period, as well as after World War II, which is the period we will deal with in this contribution.

Our paper will focus on the influence of Walt Whitman's poetry on the lyrical opus of Aleksandar Ristović (1933–1994), one of the most important Serbian poets of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ristović appeared in Serbian poetry in the first half of the 1950s in the pages of literary papers and magazines of the time, together with the other most important members of the second post-war poetic modernist generation. He published his first collection of poems in 1959, and his extensive poetic legacy was published in 1995, a year after his death. He wrote more than twenty poetry collections which were published in the poet's lifetime and posthumously, the most famous of which were *Nobody Around* [*Nigde nikog*] (1982), *Blind House and Its Visionary Tenants* [*Slepa kuća i vidoviti stanari*] (1985), *A Holiday of a Madman* [*Pražnik lude*] (1990) and *Cold Grass* [*Hladna trava*] (1994), and created one of the most extensive poetic opuses in Serbian poetry of the second half of the twentieth century. The range of Aleksandar Ristović's poetry, both formally and thematically, is huge. He wrote short poems similar to haiku, but also longer poems and narrative poems, as well as books that critics identified as verse novels (*Light as a Feather* [*Lak kao pero*] and *Some Boy* [*Neki dečak*]). In his verse, he tried to cover all the diversity of the emergent world. Perhaps the most characteristic poems of his opus may be those dedicated to everyday life and small things, as well as poetry itself. In his late verse, Ristović's poetry increasingly takes on grotesque characteristics. Behind emerging realities, an infernal world is indicated, and the dominant motive is death. In Serbia, and in the entire region of former Yugoslavia, Ristović was long considered an underestimated and neglected poet. It was not until after the poet's death that critics and new generations of poets recognized his work as one of the most important in the corpus of contemporary Serbian poetry. This revalorisation of Ristović's poetry was aided by its recognition by Charles Simić, a well-known Serbian-American poet who translated a selection of Ristović's poems and published

them on two occasions.<sup>1</sup> Simić also named Ristović as one of the three most important Serbian poets in his anthology of English translations of Serbian poetry, *The Horse Has Six Legs* (published in America in 1992, and published again in 2010), together with the internationally acclaimed Vasko Popa and Novica Tadić<sup>2</sup>.

Similarly to other members of the second Modernist generation of Serbian poets after World War II, such as Ivan V. Lalić<sup>3</sup>, Jovan Hristić and Borislav Radović, Aleksandar Ristović was exceptionally well-acquainted with the trends in foreign and as well as Serbian poetry, open to various influences in modern foreign poetry and establishing a creative dialogue with them.

The reviews and appraisals of the Serbian poets' early poetry usually mention modern French poets as Ristović's inspiration, primarily Paul Éluard, Saint-John Perse, Paul Claudel and Francis Ponge. Thanks to his excellent knowledge of French, Ristović was best acquainted with French poetry, which he read extensively and translated. Yet, in his mature phase Aleksandar Ristović broadened the network of his literary allusions.

Ristović never concealed his inspirations or the influence of other artists, and thus in his verse he often mentions other authors – poets, writers, philosophers, artists, even scientists. Namely, there are several dozen artists' names, both worldwide and from the national tradition. Still, although Ristović read extensively in French poetry and knew it extraordinarily well, the first poet he explicitly mentioned in his poetry was not one of the mentioned coryphées of French twenty-century poets but Walt Whitman. Ristović mentions the author of *Leaves of Grass* in his early collection *Weddings* (1966), and more precisely in the fifth poem of the central cycle. Until then, Ristović had not explicitly mentioned the name of any poet name in his poetry. Even this mention is, at some level, indirect, since the man who appears in that poem is somebody who *impersonated* Whitman: “I see the man who posed as Whitman on Christmas land, lolling in a garden chair” [“vidim čoveka koji se izdavao za Vitmena na božićnoj zemlji zavaljen u baštensku stolicu”] (Ristović 1966, 41). This mention of Whitman will be the first of a series in Aleksandar Ristović's poetry. The poet will evoke numerous other writers and poets in his later lyrical texts, but Whitman's name is the one mentioned most often.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The first collection of Ristović's selected poems, titled *Some Other Wine and Light* and translated by Simić, was published by the Charioteer Press in 1989. The second edition was published by the Faber & Faber in 1999, titled *Devil's Lunch*.

<sup>2</sup> The poetry of Aleksandar Ristović impressed Charles Simić; a testimony of this is the fact that one of the poems from Simić's Pulitzer-winning poetry collection *The World Doesn't End* (1989) bears the subtitle “After Aleksandar Ristović.”

<sup>3</sup> Ivan V. Lalic (1931–1996) is also one of the translators of Whitman's poetry into Serbian. In his translation, a selection from *Leaves of Grass* was published in Belgrade in 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Aleksandar Ristović is not the only Serbian poet to mention Whitman in his poetry. Radmila Lazić, a leading Serbian poetess, included a poem titled “Whitman the Gardener” [Baštovan Vitmen] in her collection of poetry *Division of Roles* [*Podela uloga*, 1981], and one of the most prominent Serbian poets of the younger generation, Nikola Živanović, opens his most recent collection 22 (2019) with the poem “To Walt Whitman” [“Voltu Vitmenu”].

A few years later, Aleksandar Ristović wrote about Whitman's poetry. It was a review of the first Serbian selection of Whitman's poetry, published in 1969 and edited by Tihomir Vučković, who included some earlier translations by Ivo Andrić and Tin Ujević beside his own.<sup>5</sup> Although at the time he had already abandoned regular reviewing for Yugoslav periodicals, Ristović heralded this valuable publication. In his short review, he wonders about the contemporary reader's attitude towards this poet: "What is the (lasting) quality of influence of an important personality, implicitly present in his own work to such an extent that a 'conflation of selves' simply imposes itself on the reader?" (Ristović 1970, 613). Our poet wonders if the opus in question possesses closure and finality,

[...] or whether that attitude of readers is a living, creative relationship which always contains, in essence, a deliberate adoption (with a hidden motivation) of the poet's power to introduce into his own space (in his *image*, as Whitman would say) new members of the human community, the community he described in his poetry with so much hope, firmness and optimism. (Ristović 1970, 613)

In comparison with the poets who sing of the dark side of humanity (Ristović lists the examples of Poe and his own favorites, Baudelaire, Trakl and Vladislav Petković Dis)<sup>6</sup>, according to the poet, Whitman stands on the opposite side: "Something extremely bright, devoted to indicating and revealing, describing the immensity of humans, the strength of the individual incarnated in the multitude, in the community where the individual displays their full nature: spiritual and physical" (Ristović 1970, 614).

Whitman's singing of the human being in its corporeality, "including the very spirit it creates" (Ristović 1970, 614), according to Ristović, is relatable for the contemporary reader, and "that poetic tumult of Walt Whitman lasts within him, not by the rules of a strict form, but by the fragmentation of a form that finds its harmony in something that could be labelled as a telling or testifying" (Ristović 1970, 614).

While praising Tihomir Vučković's selection and his new translations, Ristović underscores what this edition can offer:

---

<sup>5</sup> Ristović's library holds nearly all editions of Whitman's poetry available in contemporary Yugoslavia. Apart from the aforementioned collection published in the famous popular book series "Word and Thought" [Reč i misao] and signed by Ristović, it contains a selection of Whitman's poetry translated by Ivan V. Lalić (1974) and a selection from *Leaves of Grass*, translated by Hamdija Demirović and published in Sarajevo by Svjetlost (1984). Especially interesting is the fact that Ristović's personal library includes an English-language edition of Whitman's complete poems, with a hardcover created by Ristović himself. We are indebted for this insight in the poet's library, still in his Belgrade apartment, to his daughter, the eminent Serbian poet Ana Ristović.

<sup>6</sup> Vladislav Petković Dis (1880–1917) was one of the most important Serbian poets of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; he belonged to the Serbian Symbolist movement and heralded avant-garde trends in Serbian poetry.

Whitman's dispersive emotional rhetoric, his scale which can encompass the poet's understanding of the world as an open subject, always sought anew – the brotherhood of Christian (and, more generally, human) compassion, the great “road of liberty” of democracy and Hegelian dialectics in a unity of soul and mind. (Ristović 1970, 614)

The poet concludes with the ever-relevant views of Whitman on the inevitability of human earthly existence and the equality of all humankind. Ristović also stresses that Whitman's poetry presents readers with “a higher aspect of a lyrical sound that constantly, lastingly searches for its echo in others: the joy of rapprochement and the awareness that human stride and thought are one” (Ristović 1970, 614).

As these quotations make it clear, Ristović holds that Whitman's poetry has much to offer to a contemporary reader, and his answer to the stated dilemma is that one can read Whitman creatively, by adopting certain traits of that poet as a reader or another poet. It seems that Ristović singles out Whitman's “formal incompleteness” as an exceptionally important characteristic, which transforms into something the Serbian poet calls “telling and testifying”, as well as Whitman's views on the unity of mind and body.

After that review, Ristović would not write on Whitman's poetry in his essays again, but he would frequently mention his name in his own poems. We shall list only a few examples of Whitman's appearances in the pages of Ristović's lyrical poetry.

Whitman appears in the lyrical subject's mind, in the poem “Strawberries” [*Jagode*<sup>7</sup>] during his journey across America:

[Putujući Amerikom  
Imao sam celo vreme  
osećaj da mi je jedna strana lica žuta,  
a druga plava. Više puta  
mislio sam na Volta Vitmena,  
a onda otvorio Bibliju.] (Ristović 1990, 23)

\*

While travelling in America  
I felt for the entire time  
that one side of my face was yellow,  
and the other one blue. Several times  
I thought of Walt Whitman,  
and then I opened the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

It is not odd, especially considering that the lyrical self here is a poet, that he should think of Whitman while travelling across a new continent. That author has

---

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Ristović's verses were translated into English especially for this occasion by Tijana Tropin.

long been regarded not only as the most famous American poet but as one of America's symbols and makers of the American identity and American myth.

Whitman's name also appears in Ristović's posthumously published collections. In the voluminous poem or, rather, modern epic, *Skin and Bones* [*Kost i koža*], American landscapes are depicted repeatedly. Of course, Whitman's presence is inescapable in those images, and he becomes one of the many protagonists of that book. Thus, in scenes from Long Island:

[Valt Vitmen sedi  
Za istim stolom,  
Svetiljka obasjava  
Sveto pismo.] (Ristović 1995a, 52)

\*

Walt Whitman sits  
At the same table,  
The lamp shines on  
The Holy Writ.

In this book, Ristović portrays Whitman in the surroundings where he actually lived, on Long Island, and in New York. While describing the poet of *Leaves of Grass*, Ristović uses some well-known facts from this author's life:

[Valt Vitmen je  
u kolicima za paralptičare,  
hrani kukuruzom  
golubove na trgu.

Gleda u sneg  
na obližnjim krovovima,  
jedva da prepoznaje  
engleski jezik.

Za to vreme ga motre  
staromodni pederi  
iz susedne gostione  
kroz zaleđeno staklo [...]

Valt Vitmen čita  
iz male biblije,  
gori mu oko od  
nerazgovetnih uspomena.] (Ristović 1995a, 52–53)

\*

Walt Whitman is

in a wheelchair,  
feeding corn  
to the pigeons in the square.

He watches the snow  
on nearby rooftops,  
barely recognizes  
the English language.

Meanwhile he's being watched  
by the old-fashioned faggots  
from the adjacent bar  
through frosty glass [...]

Walt Whitman reads  
from a small Bible,  
his eye aflame  
with blurry memories.

Apart from these allusions to Whitman's illness, his sexual identity and Biblical influences in his poetry, Ristović also positions Whitman within a contemporary world. The topography overlaps with the poet's own lifetime, but the time does not. Whitman considers his surroundings with a certain wonder, barely understanding the language he – in a manner of speaking – helped create. The language has changed, but the poet is still very much present in this space where he has left his mark.

The last collection Ristović published during his lifetime, *A Lamp for J.-J. Rousseau* [*Svetiljka za Ž. Ž. Rusoa*], mentions Whitman again. First in the poem "The graves of the Poets" ["Grobovi pesnika"], where the persona's wife reads 'the great poets' while the former imagines their graves:

[Moja žena čita velike pesnike. I dok  
ležimo jedno pored drugog pod zajedničkom svetiljkom,  
zamišljam njihove grobove, različita mesta. (Ristović 1995b, 86)]

\*

My wife is reading a book of great poets.  
While we tucked in bed under the same lamp,  
I imagine their graves in various places. (Ristović 1999, 61)

Of course, the persona imagines Whitman's grave first, and then the graves of Pushkin and Eliot. The image of each grave displays the character of the respective poet, or at least a popular view of his work. The description of Whitman's grave clearly indicates that this poet is a symbol of America, but also someone who appeals to young people, as well as members of the alternative rock culture, for whom his grave represents a place of pilgrimage:

[Grob Volta Vitmena, s granjem, cvećem, lišćem,  
s američkom zastavicom i praznim konzervama piva  
koje ostavi neko društvance mladića i devojaka. (Ristović1995b, 86)]

\*

the grave of Walt Whitman,  
with branches, flowers, leaves,  
the American flag and empty beer cans  
left by a party of young people. (Ristović 1999, 61)

Still, probably the most significant mention of Whitman in Ristović's poetry is the direct address made to the poet in the poem "For Two and Two" ["Za dva i dva"], from the collection *Resembling Shadows* [*Ulog na senke*], a book dominated by poetic subject matter. Although (as previously noted) Aleksandar Ristović mentions several dozens of other writers in his poetry, Walt Whitman is the only one whom he addresses directly.

This poem from *Resembling Shadows* explicitly highlights Ristović's debt and respect for the great author of *Leaves of Grass*. The persona in this poem speaks to Whitman as a visitor:

[Ne poteži to oružje Volt Vitmene  
Staro gundalo  
Ti koji si se toliko dugo izdavao za mog prijatelja  
Isprazni cev stavi municiju na sto  
Odloži karabin  
Mala sam ja meta za tebe] (Ristović 1981, 19)

\*

Don't draw that gun, Walt Whitman  
You old grouch  
You who posed as my friend for so long  
Empty the chamber put the bullets on the table  
Put that carbine away  
I'm too small a target for you

Apart from calling the American bard an "old grouch" and asking him to put his rifle away, the persona admits Whitman's superiority. In the following lines, the lyrical self presents himself to the American poet:

[Ja sam onaj koji ti dotura čistu odeću  
Košulju od lana  
Par dubokih cipela  
Šešir široka oboda i staračke naušnice  
Dolazim k tebi iz više razloga  
Kao trgovac homerskim strofama



Kao onaj koji se učio stihovima od drugih i čitajući druge  
 Pa dozvolio sebi da ti se okrene licem  
 I da ti licem u lice kaže ono što je naučio  
 I što je morao reći  
 Ne drugima no tebi] (Ristović 1981, 19)

\*

I am the one who slips you some clean clothes  
 A flaxen shirt  
 A pair of high-top shoes  
 A wide-brimmed hat and old man's ear flaps  
 I come to you for several reasons  
 As a dealer in Homeric strophes  
 As one who learned his verse from others and by reading others  
 And then allowed himself to face you  
 And, face to face, to tell you what he learned  
 And what he had to tell  
 Not to others but to you

Introducing itself as his servant, the persona comes to Whitman on an unusual pilgrimage and in order to test his own poetic craft. Even the act of giving clean clothes to the great poet can be understood metaphorically, as a renewal of his lyrical topicality. Although he “learned his verse from others and by reading others,” the last lines of the poem confirm the crucial importance of Whitman’s lyrical voice for the persona of this poem: “Hold your divine mouth to mine as long as I want to / Here’s your quaint weapon as a rose wrapped in paper” [“Drži svoja božanska usta uz moja dok god to budem hteo / Evo tvogjeg starinskog oružja kao ruže umotane u papir”] (Ristović 1981, 20). Besides striving unity between his own lyrical voice and Whitman’s, and the presence of the American poet’s voice in his own, the metamorphosis of Whitman’s rough and old weapon into a rose – otherwise one of Ristović’s central lyrical motifs – can also be interpreted as the presence of Whitman’s heritage and his necessary transformation into the poetry of the new, contemporary poet. The modern poet modifies Whitman’s devices and images into more subtle and fragile ones.

On the basis of frequent mentions of Walt Whitman in the Serbian poet’s works, and the aforementioned direct address, each reader of Ristović’s poetry will necessarily face the suggestion that Ristović saw the author of *Leaves of Grass* as a related poet who left a significant imprint on Ristović’s own poetic devices.

While tracing these lyrical similarities and Whitman’s influence, we should start with Ristović’s collection *Weddings*, in which, as we have seen, the poet mentions Whitman for the first time, thus creating and clearly marking the American poet’s presence in that collection.

Although the first collection of Whitman’s poetry in Serbia, reviewed by Ristović, did not appear until 1969, three years after Ristović’s own book *Weddings*, the poet,

then unacquainted with the English language<sup>8</sup>, had opportunity to read Whitman in translation. Ujević's famous translation of a selection from *Leaves of Grass* had been published in 1951 by Zora, in Zagreb. Apart from that, Ristović came into contact with Whitman's poetry in another, indirect way, although he may not have been aware of it at the time. Namely, most of the previously listed French poets whose influence is visible in Ristović's early poetry, above all Éluard, Saint-John Perse and Paul Claudel, admired Whitman greatly and were inspired by him.<sup>9</sup>

If we take a close look at *Weddings*, apart from the lines quoted where Whitman's name is mentioned, we can find numerous similarities with the poetry of the American bard. Whitman and Ristović both read the Bible and used a long line, bordering on prose. Besides the line form, the lyrical tone is identical. We can state that both Ristović and Whitman belong to the tradition of praise-poetry, which celebrates life in its totality. We can describe the traits of this lyrical style as follows:

Manifold traits of the sublime style are here: the visionary spirit and evocative tone, the irregular line length and harmonic use of sound, the sense of mankind as one great body, with personifiable characteristic, the exclamations and superlatives, and even the figures, of the restless river, the eternal shadow, and the voice of silence falling on the inward ear. (Miles 172–173)

If we want to discuss direct textual links between Whitman's poetry and Ristović's collection, one can highlight the sequences "The Boy from Eleusis" ["Dečak iz Elusine"], and "Weddings". By using "I see" as an apostrophe in the majority of those poems, these two poem cycles link Ristović's poetry directly to the American poet and his poem/cycle "Salut au Monde." It is also marked by the "I see" apostrophe, representing the beginning in most of its parts, but in that work the poet of *Leaves of Grass* demonstrates a poetics of looking and listening which is quite close to Ristović's.

In *Weddings* Ristović also starts using the cataloguing device, which would henceforth become one of his basic poetic devices. Of course, Whitman profusely uses that device in his poetry as well, in order to remove the borders between high

---

<sup>8</sup> According to the testimony of the poet's daughter, Ana, Aleksandar Ristović started learning English in his later years. Previously he read and translated French poetry.

<sup>9</sup> American scholar Betsy Erkkilä wrote about Whitman's influence on French poetry and his reception in France in her book *Walt Whitman among the French*. In her study, the author examines more closely, among others, Whitman's influence on Claudel ("Of the French poets, Paul Claudel most closely resembles Whitman in the form, substance, and vision of his work." (Erkkilä 118)), as well as Saint-John Perse ("The poet Alexis Saint-Léger Léger, who adopted the name Saint-John Perse [...] might also be included among the poets of this new spirit who received impressions from Walt Whitman. His exaltation of life, his cosmic spirit, and his use of a 'liberated' rhythmic verse in such early volumes as *Eloges* (1911) and *Anabase* (1924), place him in rapport with the Whitmanian currents of l'esprit nouveau." (Erkkilä 215). Although she hardly touches on surrealism in her research, at the end of her book, giving a brief overview of the further influence of Whitman's poetry, she mentions that the breath and spirit of this poet can be discerned in Paul Éluard's "cosmic love poetry" (Erkkilä 226).

and low, between what is important and what is insignificant: “Every particular has its place in the list, every list its place in the whole poem, and every whole poem its place in geography and universe. A smallness and greatness are equal in this cycle of meaning.” (Miles 173)

It can also be noted that the persona in Ristović’s book, especially in the first part “The Boy from Eleusis”, is quite similar to the persona in Whitman’s poetry, especially “Song of Myself”. Just as in that poem, the persona of Ristović’s cycle endeavours to self-identify and manifest himself. Like the persona in “Song of Myself,” omnipresent and all-compassionate, the persona in “The Boy from Eleusis” is diffuse and intimate with all people, even those who are ill and plague-ridden:

[Vidim decu u božićnoj postelji, i ja sam onaj koji gasi lampu i osmehuje se mahnuvši im;  
vidim okuženog bolešću i prilazim okuženom, i ja sam onaj koji uzima njegovu zdelu i prinosi je ustima;  
vidim sejača u polju sa pokojim drvetom, i ja sam onaj koji mu pomaže u rasturanju semena;  
vidim onog koji luta u šumskom drveću sa ubogom svetiljčicom i ja sam onaj koji ga izvodi iz šume, učinivši je razgovetnom.] (Ristović 1966, 16)

\*

I see the children in their Christmas beds, and I am the one who extinguishes the lamp and smiles at them and waves;  
I see the plague-ridden and I approach the plague-sick, and I am the one who takes his cup and carries it to the mouth;  
I see the sower in the field with a few trees, and I am the one who helps him scatter the seeds;  
I see the one who wanders among forest trees with a meagre lamp, and I am the one who leads him out of the forest by making it distinct.

We can remember a similar part of Whitman’s text and compare it with Ristović’s own:

Coming home with the silent and dark –cheek’d bush-boy, (behind me he rides at the drape of the day)  
Far from the settlements studying the print of animals’ feet, or the moccasin print,  
By the cot in the hospital reaching lemonade to a feverish patient,  
Night the coffin’d corpse when all is still, examining with a candle; (Whitman 55)

Or, for instance, the following part of “Song of Myself”:

I am bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,  
And for strong upright men I bring yet more needed help. (Whitman 64)

There are other similar images in these two texts, as well as others by the two poets. In Whitman's work, the following image can be found:

I am a free companion, I bivouac by invading watchfires,  
I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with bride myself,  
I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips. (Whitman 56)

A similar scene describing a visit to a woman in bed can be found in Ristović's collection:

[I ja sam čovek koji je došao iz polja, i stavljam svoje cipele mokre od rose  
i ja sam onaj koji vas zatiče u postelji, i vi ustajete okrznuti njegovim krilom u  
nedoumici;  
i ja sam čovek koji vas vidi razrogačenih očju, sa šakom na ustima, zaštićene  
ukrućenim platnom] (Ristović 1966, 14)

\*

And I am the man who arrived from the field and I take off my shoes wet with dew  
And I am the one who finds you in bed, and you rise in doubt, brushed by his wing;  
And I am the man who sees you, eyes wide, hand over mouth, protected by a stiff  
canvas;

The persona in Whitman's famous "Song of Myself" is a tramp and a flaneur who establishes close contact with everyone he encounters:

I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)  
My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods,  
No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,  
I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,  
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,  
But each man and woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooking you round the waist,  
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.  
(Whitman 72)

Something similar could be claimed regarding the persona in Ristović's book. But, unlike his analogue in Whitman's poetry, he limits himself to forests and fields:

[Dodirujem bilo koju od onih stvari na koje nailazim u polju i u kući gde me  
očekuju;  
dodirujem, isto tako, njihova lica okrenuta k meni kad ih zateknem za stolom i u  
cvetnjaku;  
moja je šaka na njihovom ramenu i moj glas je pomešan sa njihovim u razgovoru;  
moj duh biva opčinjen i mi se udaljujemo zajedno, posrćući.] (Ristović 1966,12)

\*

I touch any of those things I find in the field and in the house where they await me;  
 I touch, as well, their faces turned towards me when I encounter them at the table  
 and in the flower-garden;  
 my hand on their shoulder, my voice joined with theirs in our conversation;  
 my spirit is enchanted, and we depart together, stumbling.

Among all of Ristović's poetry collections, Whitman's direct influence as well as Whitman's poetry as subtext and pretext are most visible in *Weddings*. However, open allusions to and quotations from Whitman's poetry are present in Ristović's later poetry collections as well. Moreover, some poetic devices Ristović found in *Leaves of Grass* have remained a lasting part of his lyrical strategies. Here we will concisely point out some other encounters of Ristović's and Whitman's lyrical texts.

Another of Ristović's poems from the period when he addressed Whitman directly in *Betting on the Shadows* can be linked to this poet unequivocally. This is the poem "Future Poets" ["Budući pesnici"], which was published in a magazine in 1980, and never appeared in any of Ristović's poetry collections. The title of this text evokes Whitman's famous "Poets to Come". However, while in Whitman's poem those to come are expected to deliver the most important things, while the poem's author only writes "one or two indicative words for the future" (Whitman 11), Ristović's "future poets" are identical or very slightly different in comparison with the poets of the past: "Future poets use the rope, the lamp, the sharpened quill or the paper knife / in the same manner as poets past, since their dreams are of the same matter but their prudence is different" ["Budući pesnici upotrebljavaju uže, svetiljku, zašiljeni pero ili nož za sečenje hartije / na isti način kao pesnici prošli budući da su im snovi od iste građe, no im je promišljenost različita"] (Ristović 1980, 409).

We could, therefore, advance that Ristović takes a slightly polemic stance towards Whitman in this poem. This is not strange, since Ristović is writing from the very perspective of those "poets to come" foreseen by Whitman. And those who arrived are not superior to past ones, they also toil while creating their works: "future poets shuffle their rhymes, quite content with their discontent, / while the winter day rolls frozen balls between everyday objects" ["budući pesnici natežu oko rime posve strpljivi sa svojim nezadovoljstvima, / dok zimski dan kotrlja zamrzle kugle između predmeta za svakidašnju upotrebu"] (Ristović 1980, 409). The only difference between ancestors and descendants is the *prudence*. Perhaps we can understand that prudence as poetic self-awareness, and a certain scepticism regarding poetry, stemming from it.

Both direct textual links and allusions to Whitman's opus can also be found in Ristović's later poetry. Thus, in the poem "For Future Enjoyment" ["Za buduće uživanje"], written in 1992, the persona turns from his path in order to smell some lilacs. While smelling its flowers, he thinks of Ovid, however:

[I takođe na jednog drugog pesnika, koga  
 ne mogu pomenuti iz posebnih razloga, ali koji takođe  
 nalazi izvesnu sličnost jorgovana i slogovima stihova.] (Ristović 1995c, 59)

\*

And also of another poet, whom  
I cannot mention for particular reasons, but who also  
finds a certain similarity between lilacs and syllables of verse.

Although the lyrical self of Ristović's poem refuses to directly name that "other poet", it can only be Walt Whitman, the author of the probably best-known poem on lilacs in world literature, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." In Ristović's poem we have an allusion to that famous Whitman poem, which finishes with these lines: "Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim" (Whitman 284). Unlike the previous poem, which only evokes Whitman's poem, the second part of Ristović's "Lone Spider" ["Pauk samotnik"] directly borrows images and words from a poem by Whitman.

The lyrical self compares the spider of Ristović's poem with himself, after mentioning his activity – wrapping the fly caught in silken threads:

[Pozdravljam te, ti samotni sebičnjače,  
nalik si mi tek u jednom što ovde neću pomenuti,  
dok smo u svem drugom posve različiti.] (Ristović 1995c, 133)

\*

I salute you, you lone self-seeker,  
we are alike in one thing only, which I will not name,  
and in all other things quite different.

The fact that the lyrical subject stresses that he avoids stating this similarity with the spider explicitly points towards the conclusion that the interpretative key can be found somewhere else, namely another poem. This identification with the spider, who is, moreover, called a loner and who produces silken threads, unambiguously indicates Whitman's famous poem "A Noiseless Patient Spider," which served as a subtext in Ristović's poem. However, unlike Whitman's poem, in which the poet's soul and the spider are compared implicitly through a juxtaposition of their acts, Ristović explicitly states the resemblance between the lone spider and the lyrical self, but omits the reason for it. The evocation of Whitman's poem makes it clear that Ristović's persona attempts, like a spider, to wrap the world in his metaphorical threads. It also seems that Ristović's poem, more than Whitman's, emphasizes the spider's loneliness, and thus the poet's.

Finally, Ristović prepared his testamentary poetry collection, *Cold Grass*, but died before its publication. Its title discreetly evokes Whitman's celebrated poetry collection. In Ristović's late poetry, cold grass is the symbol of death, and Whitman's legacy – the image of the poet whose existence continues in a different manner, as grass – is often present in Ristović's late poems. One of his most remarkable texts

using that motif is the short poem “Alive, as Well” [“I živ takođe”], where the lyrical subject directly addresses the grass:

[Pozdravljam te, ti hladna travo.  
Za koju godinu  
golicaće me po licu tvoji korenčići.

Biću mrtav da mrtviji ne mogu biti.  
I živ takođe.] (Ristović 1994, 88)

\*

Greetings, cold grass.  
In a year or two  
Your tiny roots shall tickle my face.

I will be dead as dead can be.  
Alive, as well.

Apart from the direct links enumerated between the poems of those two authors, there also exists a similar use of certain poetic devices. Both for Whitman and for Ristović, the cataloguing device is fundamental. Both poets use it as an instrument to encompass all the details of earthly life. Both manage to encompass an enormous range of living beings and objects in their poems. By abolishing the division between important and irrelevant, both poetic and non-poetic, Whitman showed in his poetry a love of small things, and this could also be attractive to Aleksandar Ristović, whose poetry, especially in his mature age, was marked by writing about what is tiny or marginal, and seemingly non-poetic. “In particular way, Whitman naturalized the sublime: he located it in individual bodies and souls, not only by specifying the sublime, but by generalizing and expanding the human” (Miles 174). The same could be said for Ristović, who gave value to almost all small beings and things:

[Miš je od zlata,  
od zlata su kornjača i pauk,  
stonoga isto tako  
i kamačak kojim pokušavaš da je ukloniš  
nr pomičući se s mesta  
odakle se vide i drugi zlatni predmeti i bića. (Ristović 1985, 82)]

\*

The mouse is golden  
and so the turtle and the spider  
and even the centipede,  
and the pebble with which you try  
to get rid of it  
without leaving your bench,

from which one can view many other things and golden beings. (Ristović 1999, 36)

There is yet another distinctive characteristic shared by Whitman's and Ristović's poetry, namely the apostrophe, i.e. direct address. Poems written in the second person and the repeated use of apostrophe are a trait of Whitman's poetry: "Yet *I* is not the pronoun that most markedly distinguishes Whitman's poetry [...] *You* is. Whitman doesn't say you as often as he says I, but he does use the second-person pronoun more pervasively than any other major poet" (Railton 7). For instance, it is difficult to enumerate all the beings Whitman addresses in "Song of Myself." He speaks to the soul, the reader, to some unspecified *you*, but also to his own limbs, to the senses, to the idle, to pupils, to the splendour of sunshine, to man, woman, priests of all times, to the ages of man, etc. A similarly innumerable quantity of beings and objects addressed by the persona is also a characteristic of Aleksandar Ristović's poetry.

Thanks to this, as some have defined it, illocutionary feature or vocative technique, Whitman's poetry, as well as Ristović's, has performative features: "A more colloquial way to indicate the crucial place "you" occupies in many of Whitman's poems is to say that they are performances" (Railton 7). That is why it seems that the poetry of both poets happens at the moment when we are reading it. As Railton says of Whitman's "Song of Myself": "Song of Myself" is not a poem about 'what happened'; instead, the poem itself, like any performance, is what is happening as it being read" (Railton 9). As an example of Ristović's poetry of this type, we can cite a whole series of poems from one of his most famous books *Nobody Around*, in which he addresses various creatures, things and phenomena, such as pigs in the poem "Flirting with a pig" ["Udvaranje jednoj svinji"]:

[Pridi mi, ti svinjo koja se odevaš u dvorsko ruho  
dok dolaziš ravno iz brloga, sitne oči okrećući u stranu,  
imam razumevanja za tvoje snobiranje ili za tvoju oholost. (Ristović 1982, 19)]

\*

Come to me, you who dress yourself in court finery while wallowing in the mud,  
come to me with your piggish eyes averted.  
I have some understanding for your embarrassment and for your vanity.  
(Ristović 1999, 8)

But also he addresses inanimate objects such as ropes in poem "Meditation on the rope" ["Razmišljanje o užetu"]:

[Nećeš izdržati moju težinu, ti uže,  
prekinućes se upravo onog časa kad budem pomislio da su mi pod rukom  
toliko puta pomenuta večnost i jedan jedini predmet posve neodređena oblika.  
(Ristović 1982, 32)]



\*

You won't be able to bear my weight, O rope!  
 You'll break the moment I begin to think  
 this must be that long-promised eternity  
 with its one and only blurred object rising before me. (Ristović 1999, 7)

The entire poetry collection thus takes on the characteristics of the event that takes place before us. By naming his interlocutors, the persona brings them out of non-existence into existence at the moment we are reading this book.

Precisely because of the poetic procedures mentioned, but also the thematic determinations that represent a constant feature of Ristović's poetry after the book *Weddings*, Whitman is a key poet for Aleksandar Ristović. The poetic generation to which Aleksandar Ristović belonged, by opening its works to the influences of the world's most important modern poets, played a great role in the modernization and transformation of contemporary Serbian poetry. While for some of Ristović's contemporaries, such as the aforementioned Ivan V. Lalic and Jovan Hristic the poetry of T. S. Eliot played an extremely important role, he turned to Walt Whitman's poetic experience, which was more in line with his poetic sensibility. Thanks to him, Ristović created a work of poetry in the Serbian language, with which he managed to cover almost all the diversity of life and almost all its aspects. Ristović also expressed his gratitude to the great American by often evoking his character in his verse. Bearing in mind the similarity of their poetic strategies, his dialogue with some of Whitman's poems, as well as the frequent mention of Whitman himself in his poetry, we can freely label Aleksandar Ristović as the most expressive Serbian Whitman of the second half of the twentieth century.

### Works Cited

- ERKKILA, Betsy. *Walt Whitman Among The French*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- GOLDEN, Arthur. Golden, Marija. "Whitman in former Yugoslavia". *Walt Whitman and The World*. Ed. Gay Wilson Allen, Ed Folom. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995. 282–287.
- MAVER, Igor. "Whitman in Slovenia." *Walt Whitman and The World*. Ed. Gay Wilson Allen, Ed Folom. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995. 287–294.
- MILES, Jhosephine. "The Poetry of Praise." *Whitman, A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Ed. Roy Harvey Pearce, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall Direct, 1962.
- RAILTON, Stephen "As If I Were With You': The Performance of Whitman's Poetry". *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*. Ed. Ezra Greenspan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 7–26.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Venčanja*. Beograd: Nolit, 1966.

- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. "Volt Vitmen: *Vlati trave*, Rad, Beograd, 1969." *Književnost*, Knj. 50, sv. 6 (1970): 613–614.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. „Budući pesnici“. *Savremenik*, god.26, knj. 51, sv. 6 (1981): 409.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Ulog na senke*. Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1981.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Nigde nikog*. Beograd: Nolit, 1982.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Slepa kuća i vidoviti stanari*. Beograd: Nolit, 1985.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Praznik lude*. Beograd: Prosveta, 1990.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Hladna trava*. Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1994.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Kost i koža*. Beograd: Nolit, 1995a.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Svetiljka za Ž. Ž. Rusoa*. Beograd: Nolit, 1995b.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Pesme 1984–1994*. Beograd: Nolit, 1995c.
- RISTOVIĆ, Aleksandar. *Devil's Lunch. Selected Poems*. Translated and introduced by Charles Simic. London-New York: Faber and faber, 1999.
- WHITMAN, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Signet Classics, 2013.