

NOTES



IVO ANDRIĆ'S RESPONSE TO WALT WHITMAN

AS WE APPROACH the 2019 bicentennial of Walt Whitman's birth, it is fitting to recall what Yugoslav writer Ivo Andrić (1892-1975), the 1961 Nobel laureate in literature, wrote about Whitman almost a century ago, in 1919.¹ He was at the time one of four editors of the literary magazine *Literary South* [*Književni jug*], which was published twice a month in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (present-day Croatia).² The magazine ran for two years and featured texts in both Latin and Cyrillic script. In the very first issue (January 1, 1918), Andrić published his translations of three of Whitman's poems ("To The States," "When I Peruse the Conquer'd Fame," and "Chanting the Square Deific").³ Then, in the November 1918 issue, his translation of "On the Beach at Night" appeared. His interest in the American poet did not cease there, and the 27-year-old Andrić published a subsequent article commemorating the centenary of the poet's birth in the August 1919 issue of the magazine.⁴

In this brief, seven-page essay, Andrić provides not only a then-mandatory biographical sketch of the poet but also weaves in astute literary criticism.⁵ Andrić narrates the story of Whitman's life as if it were a piece of art, connecting events in the poet's life to his work, making them inseparable. The fluency and ease of Andrić's lines allow readers to absorb Whitman and his philosophy, and a didactic voice pervades the text. This is why publishers of numerous editions of *Leaves of Grass* in Serbian have used Andrić's article as a preface.⁶

Andrić asserts this close connection between the poet's person and his words at the very beginning of the text: "It is not the kind of poetry from which a single word or line could be extracted, dissected, nor measured; it is a work of a lifetime and an expression of a personality; what is important is the entirety." Andrić goes on to compare Whitman's work to a strong drink, thus establishing a connection not only to Baudelaire, but to a Nietzschean Cult of Dionysus as well.⁷

Near the end of the article, Andrić stresses the idea that Whitman is beyond all definitions, that he contains multitudes, and that he is “a poet of the body and of the soul, a poet of freedom, joy, struggle, energy, a virgin land, and of hale, good, daring people, a poet of democracy, love, and religion, a poet of comradeship and of sacrifice, but also a poet of vice and misfortune which he duly recognized.” Andrić argues that Whitman eludes “European aesthetic molds” and goes far beyond such contemporaries as Emerson and Tennyson.

Andrić leaves the reader with the vision of Whitman as a “a rare, perfect, clairvoyant man,” who left his followers words that would lead to the simple yet all-encompassing love that he had harbored in himself all his life. Throughout the text, the author lauds Whitman’s poetry, arguing that its lines encompass a greater cultural milieu, than simply that of the U.S. in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Andrić wraps up the poet’s biography, one particular sentence connects Whitman’s lines to the hoped-for rejuvenation of Slavic nations: “medicine and joy for us is this poetry, much like a miraculous Japanese spring, it wishes to restore to humanity the delight of youth, and it is the refreshing scent of foreignness; there we rest a long way from our somber Slavic sorrow.”

Whitman’s words indeed have the power to cross national and linguistic borders, as Andrić rightfully observes some three decades after the poet’s death. While Andrić stopped writing about and translating Whitman after his piece was published, the poet clearly had a profound effect on his development into one of the most prominent Yugoslav literary figures of the twentieth century.

What follows is my translation of Andrić’s 1919 essay, the first translation from the original Serbo-Croatian into English. I have kept Andrić’s casual shifting of verb tenses, his free-flowing syntax, and his occasional obfuscations.

Walt Whitman (1819–1919): A Brief Recollection in Honor of the Centennial

So as to provide an image of Whitman's character and his poetry and to get a sense of its value and significance, it is neither enough to apply common place literary standards nor to apply European aesthetic molds. It is not the kind of poetry from which a single word or line could be extracted, dissected, or measured; it is a work of a lifetime and an expression of a personality; what is important is its entirety. It is a potent drink, the poetry of the highest passion and the most vigilant consciousness, where kindness is scarce, where there is very little calculated sensitivity;⁸ it was written by a heavy and somewhat sweaty hand, a hand with aged calluses, and a forehead with wrinkles above cheerful eyes: "I too am not a bit tamed; I too am untranslatable. I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." His life and his poetry go side by side and are tightly connected as the dark and light rings of growth and development in a tree's cross section.

He was born in West Hills, on windy Long Island, in the state of New York. His father was English, a sturdy carpenter of few words, and his mother was Dutch, from a Quaker family. At the age of twelve he was already a scribe in a lawyer's office, at thirteen he left the office and entered the printing trade, at the same time reading and writing a lot, then finds himself in New York at the age of seventeen, he has learned a craft, but writes for newspapers and weeklies; he soon leaves the city behind to become a teacher. At the age of nineteen he founds his first little paper, the *Long Islander*, where he is his own editor, publisher, typesetter, and which he delivers personally across the island, but the paper stumbles and goes out of business, and he returns to teaching children. In the year 1840, he takes part in the elections. First literary success: one novella in the *Democratic Review*. At the age of twenty-nine he departs for New Orleans to work as an editor, stays only a couple of months, but falls in love for the first time (first time for real), it is an intricate romance novel with an unknown woman which he kept secret all his life, even from his closest companions.

Having returned from the South, he becomes an apprentice to his father and learns the carpenter's trade. He built for five years, along-

side his father, wooden houses and barns across Long Island, and as was the case with teaching, he used his idle hours (these pauses were often arbitrary and long) for walks, day-dreaming, and reading. Apart from the entirety of English literature, he had also come to know, at least second-hand, the development of human thought from Buddha to the “Divine god Christ,” to Hegel, he also read Homer, Sophocles, and Rousseau. It was a booming time for him; in those days, in the hours of idleness or work, his personality would mature and the sense of the value of life would grow in him, of the unity of spirit and matter, of the beauty of everything alive, and of the point of the struggle between life and death. This mystical passion was nothing less than the feeling of connectedness with people, animals, and things, which was as intense as the feeling of connectedness with distant planets. Healthy ample, brimming with experience and knowledge, at ease in his soul, at the age of 34 he listens to his inner voice. Before his clairvoyant eyes—the wondering cerulean eyes of a child—the path of mankind and his own path open. He leaves his trade and sets to “write his book” because he had “felt the spirit of America and his own time.” He sorts out the fragments written during his leisure days and continues to write.

The inner gleam of his accompanying joy, the hardships and the passions, the voice of god, which came to him in the touch of nature and men, the great sense of development, the brotherhood of men and the beauty of the entire world, everything, everything that Walt Whitman was brimming with during his perspiring carpenter days, in the spring mornings, and during the winter walks across Long Island, everything had to be expressed in those unusual verses with a heavy rhythm.

In spring, when he was ready with his “song by Walt Whitman,” he had taken his strange manuscript with unusual punctuation and slightly wobbly orthography to a printing house on Cranberry Street and started, as he once did as a typesetter, to set his book and print it himself. In July that year, a small poetry collection was announced in the papers under the unusual title *Leaves of Grass*. As the preface to that collection, Whitman printed a “manifesto” about the American poet, whose call it was to liberate mankind by “faith and joy.” The

American poet “kisses the universe and has a mystical insight into the perfections beneath the perfections, because he can see the totality of things.” To speak in literature with such directness and ease of animals and the carefree felling of trees and grass is nothing less than a triumph of art. Considering himself suitable for the accomplishment of such a task, he adds: “May my intentions be as the ones of health, warmth, or power, may they be no more concerned if they are noticed or not.” This preface is followed by twelve poems, new both in content and form. Its content is the unique life of the soul and the body in all their manifestations, and its free-form verse without any “laws” but the requirement of human breath and the senseful pause.⁹ The manifesto is clear:

*One's-Self I sing, a simple, separate Person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse;
Of Physiology from top to toe I sing . . .
Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd, under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing.*

He has cast here the very first notes of the hymnic tone that would never leave his poetry again.

Great is life, true and mystical, wherever and whatever it may be! The book did not sell well, the critics were divided, but mostly negative, some reviews were outright devastating. Emerson was the only one to notice the importance and the novelty of the book; he writes to the then-anonymous author: “I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy... I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it.” Not confused by the failure, he sets about printing the second edition, wisely adding Emerson’s letter and new poems to it. The book was soon sold out. The third, and once again enlarged, edition contains the *Children of Adam* cluster which causes a tempest and exasperation in the god-fearing American society. He is accused of being immoral, and, even for Emerson himself, the way Whitman speaks of the body and its strengths and beauties, of sex, of the significance and the relation between sexes, is far too strong and drastic. Even before the third edition, he was declared by

one London critic to be a “blasphemous, tasteless hackney writer of the shallowest kind.”

But Whitman follows his path daringly and carelessly, with a saintly zeal and with the shamelessness of a child he exults:

Celebrate you, act divine—!

On the issue of that sensual side of his poetry, for which he was later attacked and persecuted, and because of which he is more read and loved in Europe than in America, his best biographer H. B. Binns writes: “The physical rites of love were beautiful to his sight; and he sought to tear away the obscene draperies and skulking thoughts by which they have been hidden.” By examining the depths of passions, he had found—God.

At that time a war between the Southern and the Northern states broke out in 1860. Whitman’s brother George responded to Lincoln’s call for volunteers. Whitman himself did not enlist (certainly not out of fear, as he was later accused). Having heard that his brother had been shot, he immediately set out for the front lines, but found him instead in Washington, half ill. There, a bright period began for him, the last great ascent of Whitman’s life; instead of returning home to his work, he took up nursing the wounded. He spent all four years of the war right there in Washington, wheeling, comforting, dressing and helping the wounded and sick soldiers, enemies and soldiers of the Union alike. He lived on sending write-ups to papers in New York. His potent, cheerful expression soon became beloved and known among all the wounded lying in Washington hospitals. Still young, but grey as a sheep, with a rosy tan, tall and broad-shouldered, always in a shirt with an upturned collar and rolled up sleeves, carrying a coat over his hand, elastic in his gait, good, gracious and smiling—he was known as such and beloved not only by the wounded, but by the whole town. The wounded spoke for many years about a “Walt with the face of an angel.” During those arduous years he had given all he had and for the first time—at the age of 45—his health started to deteriorate.

The product of those war years was a small collection entitled *Drum-Taps*. In these poems Whitman does not glorify war, but the

solidarity, the energy, the faithfulness, and the audacity of the living, and the sorrow, the beauty and the significance of the dead. The war ends in victory. Whitman gets a position as a clerk and stays in Washington. The word about his work in the hospitals had spread far, earning him respect by many. His friend, journalist and author O'Connor, writes the first important essay about him ("The Good Gray Poet"). M. Rossetti (the brother of D. G. Rossetti) publishes in England a selection of Whitman's poetry. After a victorious war, he is disappointed, having seen that when the slaves are liberated they do not cease being slaves, and there is nothing too sacred for professional politicians to profane. America: a republic, a unity, progress, democracy, freedom; his life's dream, the effort of the war years and the subject of the most elated poems; will a united America be able to live up to that dream? He doubted only for a second, but then believed even stronger, expressing his doubt and his visions in a political tract titled *Democratic Vistas*. He saw that the task of his democracy—the democracy of America and the world—was to create a grand and free *personality* in every individual and at the same time create a strong sense of *solidarity* in that same individual.

After Lincoln's assassination, he wrote a whole sequence of poems to honor the president, poems which were frequently recited. During that time, Whitman was preparing the fifth edition of his *Leaves of Grass*; his boss, a rigid Methodist, spotted on his desk an edited copy of the book, and having seen how immoral and coarse his clerk Whitman's poems were, he immediately fired him. Whitman's friends jumped to his aid and found him a better and freer position in another office.

In the tenth year of his stay in Washington, he had a stroke which took away mobility from the whole right side of his body. He hadn't even started recovering when he received the news from Camden that his mother was on her deathbed. He travels to Camden; his mother dies, and he remains with his brother and his wife, ill and impoverished. It was as if his mother's death took away half of his own life ("It was the great dark cloud of my life"). Although among family, in that desolate suburb of Philadelphia he felt lonely. Far away from his old friends, severely ill, poverty was slowly setting in. His grand health had been broken, he could feel the touch of pain for the first time,

and poems from that time (the poem of the universe, the one about a California tree, and the prayer of Columbus) bear a “shadow” of those years. He used to sing:

*I am too full of woe!
Haply I may not live another day. . . .*

But even then he celebrated transience and the sense of death, as well as life. He was bound to his room for three years, and it seemed that all had left him. But in spring of 1876 his health started improving, he heard from his friends from England, mainly Rossetti, who wanted to help him financially, his income had risen; he can afford to live in the country in a peaceful villa; he recovers quickly. At that time he befriended his best friend M. [sic] Gilchrist. Having recovered, he travels the West. He rides on a locomotive through the prairies. He stays in St. Louis with his brother Jefferson. In the city park, he gathers children around him and tells them stories, and all the children passionately love this “Kris Kringle.”

As the years pass, he regains his old bodily strength and the sharpness of mind. He travels to Boston, edits new, enlarged editions, recites and speaks at banquets that are thrown in his honor, visits Emerson, and lives to see the state attorney once again ban his book “for indecency.” But the editions—perhaps due to the ban—sold out. The incomes are substantial enough that he can afford to buy a small house on Mickle Street in which he lived until his death. On the day of his sixty-ninth birthday he has another stroke—seventh in total. He never recovers or leaves his bed. He had been ill for a long time, but rarely sad, and he still found life full of joyful changes and pleasures beyond measure. He passes seventy; tormented by his illness and bound to his small room that resembled a ship cabin overstuffed and full of books, letters, and newspapers, he still enjoyed the “sharp scent of wood which burned in the furnace and the wet printing ink from the proof sheets.” (In his later years he enjoyed champagne and conversations.) He was visited by the countless friends he had. But, in pain, he grows ever weaker; all final poems serenely speak of death; he is saying goodbye:

*Good-bye my Fancy!
 Farewell dear mate, dear love!
 I'm going away, I know not where . . .
 Long have we lived, joy'd, caress'd together;
 Delightful!—now separation—Good-bye my Fancy!*

He died in the spring of 1892.

Writing of Whitman's poetry, a Frenchman called it "*une lecture difficile*," medicine and joy for us is this poetry, much like a miraculous Japanese spring, it wishes to restore to humanity the delight of youth, and it is the refreshing scent of foreignness; there we rest a long way from our somber Slavic sorrow. But we are ashamed to admit that we cannot define him, for he derides definitions and defies formulas. Everything that can be said of him, does not exhaust him; he is a poet of the body and of the soul, a poet of freedom, joy, struggle, energy, a virgin land, and of health, of good and daring people, a poet of democracy, love, and religion, a poet of comradeship and of sacrifice, but also a poet of vice and misfortune which he duly recognized. "I know a sea of sorrow, despair, doubt, unfaithfulness," a poet of human pride and of great human compassion, who sang to a Brooklyn prostitute:

*My girl,
 Not till the sun excludes you, do I exclude you!*

He is all that, and much more than that because he eludes every predetermined definition. Even for his greatest contemporaries, R. W. Emerson and Tennyson, he was "a great, colossal Something." He called himself "Walt Whitman, a Kosmos," and we'll leave him with that dark name, full of meaning, and let him, as he sang himself, free, accompanied, considerate joyfully walk the world with his countless poems.

*Till we saturate time and eras, that the men
 And women of all races, ages to come
 May prove brethren...*

And this is a brief recollection to honor the centennial, of the great comrade Walt Whitman, not only a daring poet, but much more: a rare, perfect, clairvoyant man, who has left all friends, poets, and fighters of generations to come with a legacy of his deathbed words, words of simple efficient love: “The future of the world is one of open communication and solidarity of all races.”¹⁰

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NOTES

- 1 Andrić was a novelist and short story writer, although he began his literary career as a poet; his best known novel is *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945).
- 2 Most of the issues are available online at the Digital National Library of Serbia, under the “Newspapers and magazines” section.
- 3 The original translated titles are: “3,” “Kad čitam . . .,” and “Državama.”
- 4 *Književni jug* (Zagreb) 4 (August 1, 1919), 49-55.
- 5 The text is taken from Ivo Andrić’s collected essays, *Istorija I legenda: eseji I*. (Beograd: Prosveta, 1977), 157-165. Translations are my own.
- 6 One such edition is Volt Vitmen, *Vlati Trave* (Beograd: Ateneum, 2001).
- 7 A prominent Serbian poet, Ivan V. Lalić (1931-1996), made the same connection in his essay “The Poetry of Walt Whitman,” which is, like Andrić’s piece, often used as a preface to Whitman’s books of poetry in Serbian. See, for example, Volt Vitmen, *Vlatitrave: izabranepesme* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1974).
- 8 This rather obscure phrase in the original Serbo-Croatian is: “tu se veoma malo računa sa osetljivošću.”
- 9 Andrić apparently means something like “the well-timed pause.”
- 10 This statement is attributed to Whitman by Edward Carpenter in his *Days with Walt Whitman* (London: George Allen, 1906), 40 (although Carpenter does not claim these were the poet’s “deathbed words”).