

## “Re-mediating” William Blake in Croatia and Serbia

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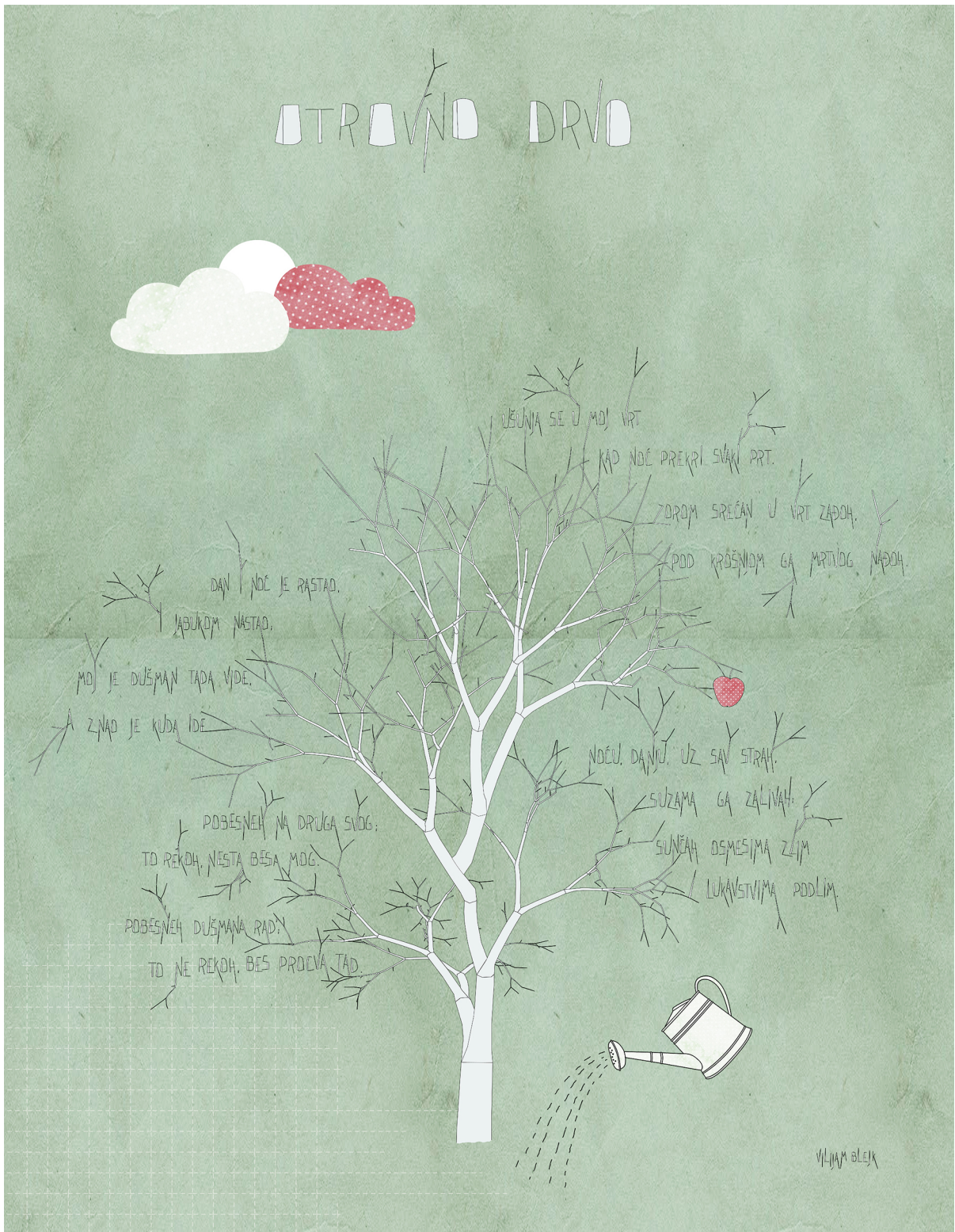
- 1 IN “The Most Obscure and Most Angelic of All the English Lyrical Poets,” my essay for *The Reception of William Blake in Europe*, I dealt with the works of one contemporary artist from Croatia—Zdenka Pozaić—and two from Serbia—Simonida Rajčević and Aleksandra M. Jovanić—who were influenced by Blake. Pozaić (b. 1940) is a graphic artist who in 2003 created *The Crystal Cabinet*, an artist’s book based on a Croatian translation of Blake’s poem of the same name. Rajčević (b. 1974) is an artist specializing in drawings who in 2010 used two works by Blake—“The Ancient of Days” and *Nebuchadnezzar*—as part of an atmospheric installation titled *Tamna zvezda (Dark Star)*, which also included quotations from Blake and other artists. Finally, Jovanić (b. 1976), a digital artist, in 2011 created an internet-based form centered upon a Serbian translation of “A Poison Tree.” Each project, although different, reflected Blake’s practice of combining text and image.
- 2 While my previous essay describes the works, relates their characteristics, and explains which of Blake’s works these artists were influenced by, this article approaches the subject from another perspective; it tries to answer how the artists first perceived Blake, how each of them understood him, and in what way the figure of Blake guided them.<sup>1</sup>
- 3 Through these works, Blake’s art and poetry have been transferred from a British setting into new cultural surroundings. In providing a more internal look at them, I intend to offer a detailed case study of the reception of Blake’s visual art in Serbia and Croatia, and to argue that these cases are representative of Linda Hutcheon’s “cultural adaptations” and “reformatting” (31, 16). And since these

1. In 2019, each artist completed a survey that I had devised.

adaptations<sup>2</sup> are into different media, I further wish to argue that they can also theoretically be called “re-mediations” (Hutcheon 16).

- 4 We live in a “postmodern age of cultural recycling” (Hutcheon 3), where “the mediation and reformulation of the canon” (Hans Robert Jauss, as cited in Holub 10), as traditional notions of textual autonomy, are challenged as musts for a successful literary and art paradigm (Machor and Goldstein ix). Given that kind of reception context, my intention is to investigate whether Blake’s reaching these Croatian and Serbian artists was indeed a reception process or perhaps a “(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” or “an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (Hutcheon 8). I also wish to explore how they most strongly experienced Blake—as a poet, as a painter, or as a creative person known for his “unique integration of words and pictures” (Goode, “The Joy of Looking” 17).
- 5 How did these three artists first discover Blake? If they had read his poems, which editions did they use (the original English or translations)? The same question applies to his art: had they viewed his works in person, or in editions or monographs? Did they manage to become a personalized audience as a consequence of personalizing the work by Blake (Eaves, “Romantic Expressive Theory” 790)? How much did they like or understand Blake, “suspected of being a poet by painters, and of being a painter by the critics of poetry” (Ross 167)? Finally, in answering those questions, I would like to call upon Wai Chee Dimock’s “theory of resonance,” which challenges a historicism now practiced and based upon semantic synchronism by proposing a diachronic historicism (1060-61) and asking an important question: “How does a literary text sound when it is read twenty years, two hundred years, or two thousand years after it was written?”
- 6 For Jovanić, it was Blake the poet who first reached her. While she was preparing for the Belgrade Arts Academy entrance exam in 2002, a friend lent her a book of Blake’s poetry translated by Dragan Purešić (1998) and told her that she should pay special attention to “A Poison Tree” (“Otrovno drvo”), believing that she could use it to create an animation, which was one of the requirements of the exam. A key role in making the animation was played by sound, since Jovanić browsed the internet to find a recording of “A Poison Tree” in English. (Nowadays she cannot recall which website she visited.) The poem, its translation,

2. According to Hutcheon, adaptation can be described as: “1) An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works; 2) A creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging; 3) An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (8).



A screenshot from “Otrovno drvo” (“A Poison Tree”), Aleksandra M. Jovanić, 2011. “Otrovno drvo” is part of “Bajt ima osam bitova” (“Byte Has Eight Bits”), eight short interactive pieces. By permission of the artist. Jovanić used the “Poison Tree” animation, in different forms, for both the MA entrance exam and this PhD dissertation.

and its sound were all important components in Jovanić's first perception of Blake.

- 7 The auditory aspect further chimes with Dimock's theory of resonance, which puts the centrality of the ear for literature against "the 'ocularcentrism' of Western culture" (Jenks 16).<sup>3</sup> The key aural concept that Dimock proposes is resonance, defined as "traveling frequencies of literary texts" or "the extent to which a text might be said to endure" (1061) or even "the experience of reading that lasts" (Cristofovici 2). This is also in line with aural notions of Romantic poetry, depicted by David Perkins as "an art realized in time by the voice" or "the interior performance of verse in solitary reading" (656, 655).<sup>4</sup> It was the sound of Blake's poem that "resonated" with Jovanić. In addition, there is the Benjaminian role played by the Serbian translation of "A Poison Tree," serving as a mode in itself that becomes an "echo," which can produce "the reverberation of the work in the alien one."<sup>5</sup> Thanks to the translation, the original poem reverberated via the ear of Jovanić.
- 8 In the cases of Pozaić and Rajčević, it was Blake the painter who first reached them. Pozaić remembers that he was mentioned by a teacher during an art class at the School of Applied Arts in Zagreb in the 1959–60 school year. Rajčević recalls that it was in 1992 that Blake was seriously mentioned for the first time, during a conversation with Nikola Šuica, an art historian and the editor of the special issue of *Gradac* (1990) dedicated to Blake. On the other hand, she avidly read poems by Blake that a friend lent her, not in the original English, but translated into Serbian (she cannot recollect the edition).<sup>6</sup> She does remember her favorite quotations, from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "He whose

3. Largely drawing upon the work of W. J. T. Mitchell, Robert Hughes, and Norman Bryson, Chris Jenks emphasizes vision as a skilled cultural practice, abstraction as a perspectival issue, and the role of the viewer as an interpreter.

4. In "How the Romantics Recited Poetry," Perkins argues that the Romantics would have heard poetry more than most of us do today, in the ear of the mind: "[The Romantic poets] stylized the delivery of poetry, widely differentiating it from natural speech and moving it closer to music" (661).

5. The German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) wrote his essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923) to question the binary of original and translation and to conceive of translation as an art form. Benjamin believes the task of the translator is in "finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original" (258), which can create "the reverberation of the work in the alien one" (258–59).

6. At that time, the only published edition of Blake's poetry in Serbia was *Blejk*, trans. Ranka Kuić (Belgrade: Narodni univerzitet Svetozar Marković, 1972). The only published Croatian editions were *William Blake: Vizije*, trans. Marko Grčić (Zagreb: Centar za društvene djelatnosti omladine, 1972) and *William Blake: Vječno evanđelje*, trans. Marko Grčić (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1980).

face gives no light, shall never become a star" (plate 7, E 35) and "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction" (plate 9, E 37).

- 9 By and large, *Marriage* is the most translated and most popular of Blake's works in Serbia and Croatia. In order to account for this, I will call upon John Villalobos, who claims that "proverbs were considered as problems, vexing complicated questions for the intellect" (250). Mike Goode gives a broader explanation of the popularity of the form, asserting that "proverbs can only become recognizable as such by circulating in many different contexts, and they can remain proverbial only by continuing to be applied in new ones" ("Blakespotting" 778). On top of the fact that proverbs can easily be adapted to different cultures and surroundings, both the Serbian and Croatian peoples like memorizing proverbial forms and have long been intrigued by them. A proverb has the "capacity to circulate apart from its original context without altering its lexical form" and the "ability to slip its context and circulate in this way" ("Blakespotting" 774). Hence, this aspect of proverbs gets close to Dimock's "resonance" and her view of texts "as objects that do a lot of traveling: across space and especially across time" (1061). As with Jovanić's first perception of Blake, Dimock's theory serves to illuminate how Rajčević experienced him.
- 10 Goode's observation that Blake's poetry "works to resist the idealist abstractions of the categories of reader, text, and corpus altogether, in the service of producing reading formations that cannot be identified or mapped according to existing strategies and technologies" ("Blakespotting" 772) aligns well with both Krebs's "rewriting of texts" in readers' heads (1) and modern reception study, which "examines the changing horizons of a text's many readers" (Machor and Goldstein xi). Goode refers to Paul de Man, who once observed that Blake's texts deconstruct themselves, and explains that Blake's proverbs prompt the reader "to appropriate and resituate [their] lines"—they defy "distinctions between the text, its author, and its reader" ("Blakespotting" 771, 776). Those views reveal the constructive act of Rajčević in her perception of Blake's proverbs from *Marriage*—she takes on the role of an audience that partakes in the making of meaning.
- 11 Since passing the Arts Academy entrance exam, Jovanić has not extensively read or researched Blake's work. When she created a new animation of "A Poison Tree" for her PhD project, she acquired *Izabrana dela* (2007), translated by Purešić and published by Plato, which she likes because it contains the original English in parallel with the Serbian translation, accompanied by Blake's illustrations. The illustrations, especially for *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, have helped her gain a better understanding of the way

Blake operated in “this hydra-headed scholarly area” of interdisciplinary art (Mulhallen 782).

- 12 Rajčević returned to Blake in 2009, when preparing for her installation *Tamna zvezda*, which contained lots of literary quotations (Bakić 595-97; Rajčević, “Izgubljeni raj”). As with Jovanić, Blake’s work was recommended by a friend, in a handwritten note containing lines from *Marriage*. The exhibition was a success; the employment of quotations from Blake<sup>7</sup> and other artists proved Slethaug’s view of citation “as a discursive technique that revisits and critiques other works for structural and thematic purposes as well as formulating new discourses” (30). Rajčević’s constructive reading of Blake’s proverbs, discussed earlier, prompted her to come up with a work of art that would formulate new discourses. That is why we can describe her work as discursive, but also postmodern in a Barthesian and Derridean way.<sup>8</sup>

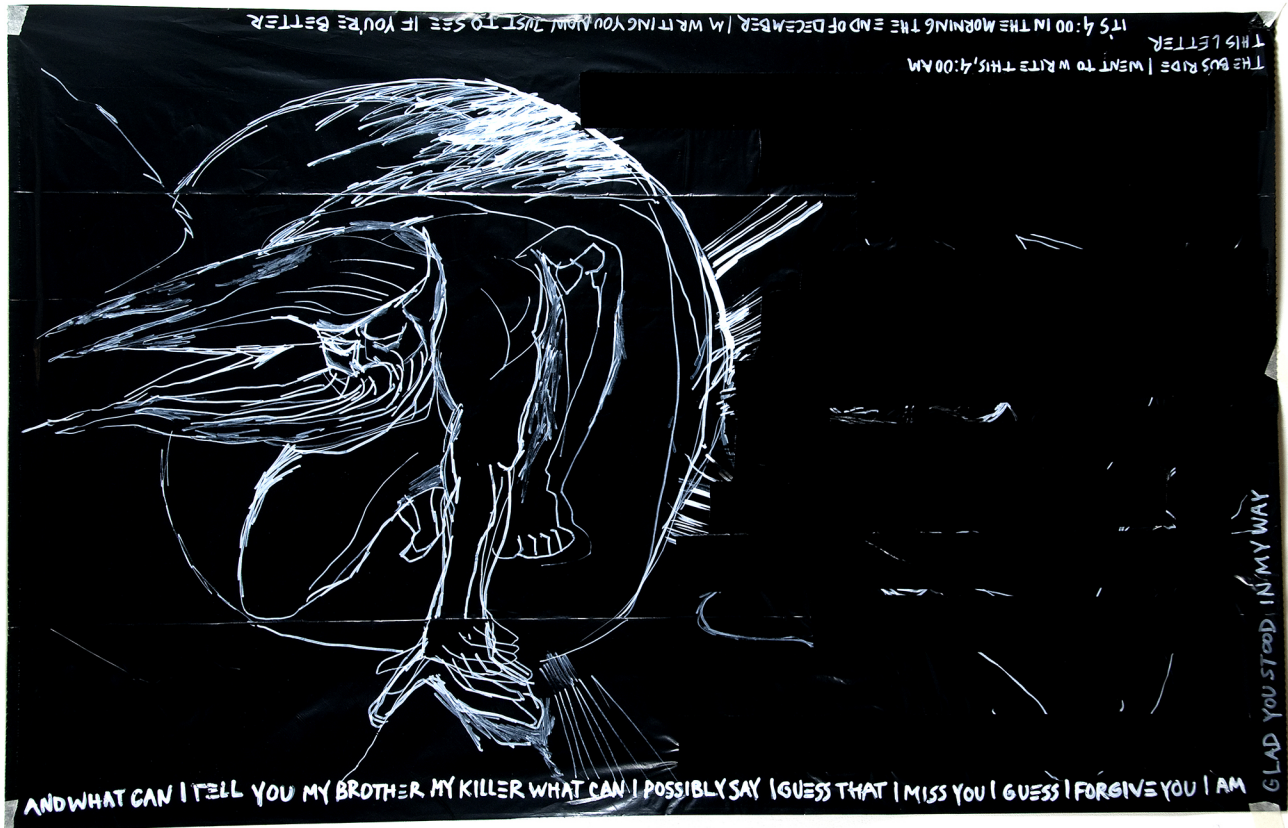
7. A quotation from the Notebook appears with a drawing of a portrait of Arthur Rimbaud: “If you have formed a Circle to go into / Go into it yourself & see how you would do” (E 516). See Bakić 596.

8. Both Barthes and Derrida pointed out that it was postmodernism that helped reconsider the concept of fidelity within adaptation. As

- 13 Pozaić, who first encountered Blake the artist, read his poems as translated by Luko Paljetak: “I simply felt a closeness, an emotional excitement, as if the words were running through me” (Pozaić, “Blake and Visual Art”).<sup>9</sup> Again, this may be said to resemble both Dimock’s “resonance” and her notion of texts “as objects that do a lot of traveling,” as well as the traditional view of translation as a process implying the “moving or carrying across of the meaning” (Boria and Tomalin 14). The way that Paljetak’s

Slethaug argues, “The postmodern play and ‘pleasure’ of the literature-film intertext envisioned by Barthes and Derrida come from repetition with infinite variations that include numerous degrees of adaptation and citation. Perhaps ‘pleasure’ ... is even more exaggerated in citation because ... the farther away from the original text the adaptation or citation strays, the more likely it is to share in postmodern play and indeterminacy” (31). In this respect, Barthes’s “myth of filiation” is also important: “The quotations a text is made of are anonymous, irrecoverable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without quotation marks” (Barthes 60). This Barthesian concept is something that writers and film directors are constantly interrogating as part of the postmodern venture (Slethaug 30).

9. This and other translations of non-English sources are mine. Pozaić reveals that this was the translation published by Konzor (Zagreb, 2001).



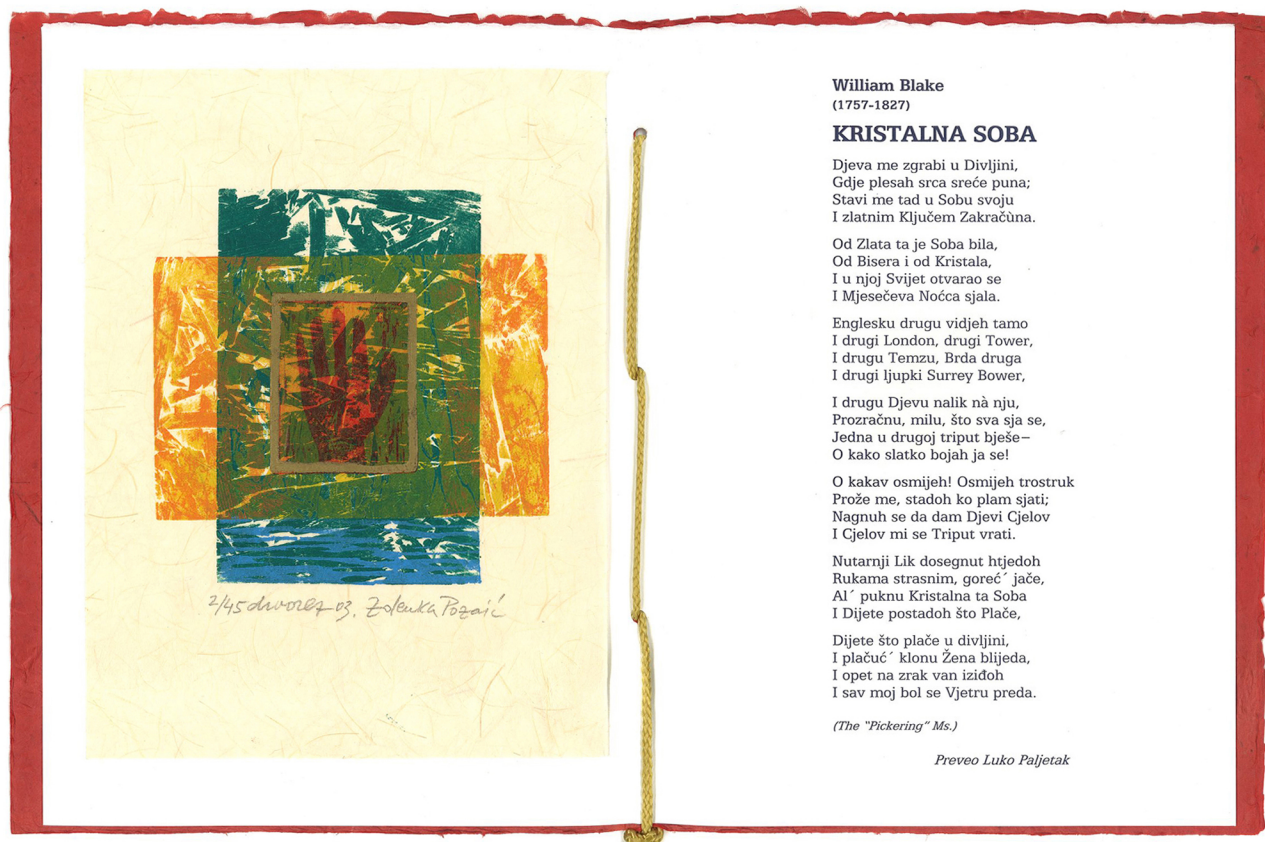
From *Tamna zvezda* (*Dark Star*), Simonida Rajčević, 2010. The quotations are from R.E.M. and Leonard Cohen. Oil-based marker pen on black plastic trash bag, 70 x 110 cm. By permission of the artist.



From *Tamna zvezda (Dark Star)*, Simonida Rajčević, 2010. The quotations are from Courtney Love and Patti Smith. Oil-based marker pen on black plastic trash bag, 70 x 110 cm. By permission of the artist.

translation of “The Crystal Cabinet” influenced Pozaić to create her artwork of the same name demonstrates Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere’s notion that “translation ... is never innocent,” because there is “always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed” (quoted in Boria and Tomalin 8); Paljetak’s translation was transposed into Pozaić’s woodcut. In Gunther Kress’s view, this transposition can also be classified as a “transduction” of the poem, “since the meaning-material has been moved from one mode to another”—from writing to image. Paljetak’s translation is a “transformation,” because the original poem “has been moved from one mode into the same mode”—from writing to writing (Boria and Tomalin 15). In this case, there is also a change of culture (English to Croatian) involved, thus invoking terms such as “intracultural” and “intercultural,” as Eirlys Davies argues (Boria and Tomalin 15).

14 During her studies in Zagreb, Pozaić discovered an interest in creating bibliophile editions, which has remained the main characteristic of her work as a whole. These editions, specifically her representation of “The Crystal Cabinet,” are reminiscent of Blake’s illuminated books, which were produced in a limited number of copies. They thus show “the capacity of poetry to function across media” (Langan and McLane 242), but also display Blake’s world as “the world of the medium” (Viscomi 43). Interestingly, those handmade books by Blake “have been closely bound up with his posthumous fate” (Eaves, “On Blakes” 415), “almost as if William Blake anticipated this and invented himself for the discipline [of the history of books and the nature of print culture], or at least for the ‘interdiscipline’” (Mulhallen 782). In Croatia, Pozaić’s works have been warmly received by critics, who have traced within them the presence of Blake’s esotericism and Whitman’s ecstasy (Bakić 594).



“Kristalna soba” (“The Crystal Cabinet”), Zdenka Pozaić, 2003. Woodcut in colors, 12 x 12 cm. Dimensions of the bibliophile edition, 19 x 25 cm. Words and Pictures series, printed in 45 copies. By permission of the artist.

- 15 We have heard about the figure of Blake the painter being present in the cases of Pozaić and Rajčević. But how familiar was each of the three artists with Blake’s visual work?
- 16 Jovanić admits that she only “superficially knows” his art: “The fact that he was both painter and poet was inspirational in terms of analyzing relations between the written and the visual, and through their mutual combinations” (Jovanić, “Blake and Visual Art”). In general, it is impossible to take Blake’s pictures as translations of his poems; he was proficient in both media and “consciously used them as differing modes of expression” (Butlin 19). This interdisciplinarity (word and image) helped him to express “a single Poetic or Prophetic Genius. Only through this genius could eternal truths be apprehended by the artist and passed on to his fellow men, and this alone was the justification of art” (Butlin 17). The interdisciplinary media that Blake created may be taken as a way to challenge the audience “not to see the words or the pictures,” thus achieving the “improvement of sensual enjoyment and revelation of the infinite to the imagination” (Goode, “The Joy of Looking” 17). This multimedia aspect is what mainly attracted Jovanić: “Combining media—text and illustrations—is what had the greatest influence on me” (“Blake and Visual Art”) and is where she finds connections between her work and Blake’s. As noted, she cites *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as a complete artistic and poetic work that she particularly likes.
- 17 Engelstein observes that Blake’s combination of words and images with his relief-etching method was “no marriage of opposites, but a recognition of semblance. He acknowledged and celebrated not only the materiality of language, but the multiplex nature of this materiality which exists in the visual form of the words, in their sound, and even in their feel on the tongue” (81). These aural aspects of his process make another point of connection with Dimock’s resonance, previously discussed in our artists’ experiences of Blake.
- 18 Rajčević is more familiar with Blake’s art than with his poetry, claiming that when it comes to his art, “I have always

been truly interested and impressed by him” (Rajčević, “Blake and Visual Art”). Her favorite is *Nebuchadnezzar*, which she had the opportunity to view at the Tate in 1990. Another work she especially likes is “The Ancient of Days,” which she has seen online. She admires these two pieces “because of their strength, fear, mysticism and expression, which are a very unusual combination of the feelings that a work of art can provoke,” and also because of “his [Blake’s] deep immersion into the universal themes.” She finds Blake’s art quite narrative, since,

when transformed into the form of textual illustration, the narrative takes a small piece of Blake’s visual strength and expression, and through drawing, image, and the palette communicates with the spectator on a level surpassing any simple analysis. (“Blake and Visual Art”)

This reveals that Blake’s “expression” is among the things that Rajčević is most attracted to. In “Romantic Expressive Theory and Blake’s Idea of the Audience,” Morris Eaves describes that a face in a painting is “expressive” when it displays the emotion of the character it represents, but Blake “identifies the expression of the characters in a work of art with the feelings of the artist,” even reaching the “extreme of subjectivity” (787) and internalizing the Romantic concept of expression.<sup>10</sup> Eaves asserts that

the ideal reader for both Blake and Wordsworth is someone with a fully developed mind and heart whose powers of intellect and passion are equal to those of the poet. The reader is not a passive receptacle or an impassive judge; the poem is not an instrument of stimulation or an object to be judged by a set of external standards. To judge a poem, the reader must enter into an intimate relationship with it. (793-94)

Accordingly, by applying the Romantic expressive theory, Blake identifies with the audience, for he, himself, is the ideal viewer and reader. Rajčević claims that his expression “communicates with the spectator on a level surpassing any simple analysis” (especially via drawing, in her opinion) (“Blake and Visual Art”). Blake’s drawings are an integral part of his art; Viscomi mentions the popular eighteenth-century opinion that “sketches and drawings exercised the viewer’s imagination more than finished works” (33). Drawing represented both the “indeterminate and determinate,” the “fundamental artistic act” (Viscomi 40, partly quoting Eaves, *William Blake’s Theory of Art*).

10. “Internalization” is the term adopted by Harold Bloom in, for example, his essay “The Internalization of Quest-Romance,” where he takes Romantic romance to be “internalized” (10), pointing out that “the hero of internalized quest is the poet himself” (8).

And Rajčević’s view is that through this “fundamental artistic act” and “expression” Blake actively engages with his internalized audience, taking it beyond the level of the ordinary, hinting at the symbolic. That is why Viscomi claims that the viewer’s task is to figure out “a work’s various symbolic meanings” (34).

- 19 The kind of symbolic meaning that Rajčević feels in Blake’s art is also sensed by Pozaić, who admires his visionary and spiritual powers. Those powers were intense, as Butlin points out, and were “combined with a vocabulary coloured by the great religious writings of English literature” (Butlin 20). This is further to accentuate the combination of the poetic and the visual, or “a unity of artistic purpose, or ‘Poetic Genius’” (Butlin and Hamlyn 12) present in these Croatian and Serbian cases of the reception of Blake’s art. Pozaić is most impressed by Blake’s drawings and also by his watercolors, which further influenced her understanding of his peculiarity as a painter and his being set apart from other British artists of his time. As Bindman explains,

He refused from early in his career to paint in oils. He later rationalized this extraordinary decision as a moral preference for a clarity that could be achieved in line engraving and watercolor, but was impossible in the “blotting and blurring” medium of oil. (87)

- 20 Like Rajčević, Pozaić experienced Blake’s works at the Tate, but over twenty years before, during her long summer stays (1965–69) in Richmond, Windsor, and London. Prior to that, she had only been able to see reproductions of his works in *Enciklopedija likovnih umjetnosti (Encyclopaedia of Art)*, the edition published by Leksikografski zavod FNRJ in 1960.
- 21 Pozaić finds Blake “grand in his mystical and visionary trance” (Pozaić, “Blake and Visual Art”), thus hinting at the reasons why he was considered an outsider throughout his life: “His combination of lofty artistic ambition with mysticism and multimedia craft, ... duly subordinated to his identity as a poet, could serve as yet another sign of his outsider status” (Eaves, “On Blakes” 414). A further reason can be found in his possessing “creativity as a visionary thinker, with his own views on everything,” ranging from God to politics to art (Butlin and Hamlyn 12). Rajčević believes it was “an issue of the contradictions in his work, and not just his individuality”:

Blake’s both prophetic and zen tone in literature is terribly strong and mythological, but at the same time the Romantic notions in his artistic expression mirror the many contradictions in the work itself—and not only in Blake’s personality—so that it could never manage to gain popularity or general acknowledgement. What people do not

understand and what they cannot perceive continues to be unpopular. (Rajčević, "Blake and Visual Art")

So, to this outsider status of Blake's, Rajčević adds some Romantic undertones.

- 22 But what exactly does it mean to call a writer a Romantic? David Simpson suggests that this would traditionally "signal an interest in such categories as genius, nature, childhood, and imagination, perhaps along with some assumed response to the French Revolution" (170). But in the case of Blake, it could mean "Blake as (Hegelian) Romantic, the poet of modernity itself," or as "both a Romantic and an anti-Romantic" (Simpson 172), or as "a window into Romanticism" (Pozaić, "Blake and Visual Art"), or as an artist thinking beyond the limits of time, who has "only by coincidence been placed within the context of Romanticism" (Rajčević, "Blake and Visual Art"). In discussing Romantic notions, Edward Larrissy says that Blake's qualities are "supposed to differentiate him from other Romantics." Larrissy argues that

he was central in the retrospective construction of a Romanticism that was acceptable to the twentieth century, ... assisted in the gestation of innovative writing in the modern period, and ... this kind of centrality is continuing into the twenty-first century. (1)

Rajčević further colors notions of Blake by associating him with pop culture, mentioning Jim Jarmusch's film *Dead Man* and Blake's influence on Aldous Huxley, thus explaining that the reason for his popularity today is the fact that he represents "the sign of something new about to happen" (Eaves, "On Blakes" 414).

- 23 All of the cases above—Pozaić, Rajčević, and Jovanić—give a more internal look at the reception of Blake in Serbia and Croatia in terms of perceiving and understanding him. They are also representative of the process of cultural adaptation, involving "migration to favorable conditions: stories travel to different cultures and different media" (Hutcheon 31). Blake's art and poems—"stories"—traveled to Croatia and Serbia and were represented there via graphic art, drawing, and digital art. Cultural adaptation is a process resembling biological adaptation.<sup>11</sup> As Slethaug asserts,

The term "adaptation" is commonly used in physiology to mean a sense organ adjusting to varying conditions or in

11. Hutcheon (31) notes that in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Richard Dawkins suggests "the existence of a cultural parallel to Darwin's biological theory: 'Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution.'"

biology to the species' mutations in coping with changing circumstances as part of the evolutionary process. Thus, whether in art, physiology, or biology, adaptation does not bear the stamp of originality, but of mutation and permutation of a preexisting original. (16)

From this "biological" perspective, Blake's work served as a "preexisting original" that mutated and permuted within changing circumstances as part of its cultural adaptation. As Hutcheon asserts, biology considers adaptation as "successful replication and change," and therefore cultural adaptation may work in a similar way (xxvi). And because the Blake adaptations were into different media, they can also be called "re-mediations," whilst the process itself may be called "reformatting" (Hutcheon 16).

- 24 These "re-mediations" of William Blake in Croatian and Serbian art testify to the changes in the paradigm of literary and art scholarship. They display

the ability to wrest works of art from the past by means of new interpretations, to translate them into a new present, to make the experiences preserved in past art accessible again; or, in other words, to ask the questions that are posed anew by every generation and to which the art of the past is able to speak and again to give us answers. (Jauss, as quoted in Holub 3-4)

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