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ZENIT

UREDNIK DIRECTEUR
LJUBOMIR MICIĆ

ЗЕНИТ

Sadržaj: V. Poljanski / Nihilon I. Goll / Der Eiffelturm — Lj. Micić / O estelici purizma — Хлебников / Песма — N. Walden / Gedichte — S. Živanović / Zdravo Savremeniče — Bršadino mlo ilgno Vleno — Esperanto — E. Dundek / Dekonfuzijada — Teheng-Loh / Le Cheval — Lj. Micić / Protiv jugosl. antirusizma — L. Dymeš / Horká píseň v rímě — Lj. M. / O elektro-geniju Nikoli Tesli — Marinetti — Micić — V. Poljanski / Fahrt nach Brasilien — A. Čebular / V Parku V. Jugosl. izložba u Beogradu — Pozorište Pomičnih lutaka — D. H. K. Društvo Hrvatskih Pisara — Prosvećna politika i progon Ljubomira Micića — Iz Zenitističkog kriminala — Od uredništva.

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Zenithism

A 1920s Yugoslav Avant-Garde Movement

By Aleksandar Bošković and Steven Teref

Opposite page: *Zenit* magazine (June 1922). Images on pages 60 and 63 from *Zenit* as well.

Introduction

This selection of poems and prose for readers of *Harriman Magazine* is from a group of writers known as zenithists. Zenithism, an avant-garde movement in the former Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, flourished from 1921 to 1927. The movement was a melting pot of the various avant-garde movements circulating in Europe at the time; namely, futurism, expressionism, Dada, constructivism, and proto-surrealism. The zenithists not only embraced a pan-avant-garde aesthetic, which was remarkable for the time, but they also embraced the promotion of cross-genre or hybrid writing. Their cross-genre work comprised cinépoetry (the application of film techniques, such as montage, to writing); poetry-prose hybrids; and conceptual writing. The Barbarogenius, a Balkan version of Nietzsche's Superman, is the movement's archetypal figure.

The key representatives of zenithism are founder Ljubomir Micić and his brother Branko Ve Poljanski; the French-German poet Yvan Goll; the sailor Marijan Mikac; and the enigmatic Mita Dimitrijević, who

wrote under the nom de guerre MID (pronounced *mead*).

The primary publishing engines of zenithism were the magazine *Zenit* (Zenith) and the Biblioteka Zenit (Zenith Library), but the zenithists also published numerous one-off periodicals and pamphlets to circulate their work.

Transgressive by nature, the zenithists often ran afoul of the authorities. Micić faced obscenity charges for his book *Damn Your Hundred Gods*; a censored version of it was later published as *Rescue Car*. On account of the controversial material often found in its pages, *Zenit's* Zagreb office was closed due to political pressure in 1923, so the magazine moved to Belgrade, where its operation was eventually shuttered for good by the authorities in 1926.

The pieces featured here are by Micić, Mikac, Poljanski, and MID. Readers will note the eclecticism of the work. Zenithism was a movement in spirit, but not a monolith in style.

Ljubomir Micić's poems "barbarian omelet" and "syphon-soda-blood" are driven by the image and philosophy of the Barbarogenius. Marijan Mikac's poem "prayer of the blessed curse" features the emotive imagery of

expressionism fused with the cut-up logic of Dada. His poem "man's tango with a flea" could serve as a modernist send up of John Donne's "The Flea," in which the love interest of the latter is swapped out for a streetcar. Branko Ve Poljanski's "The Panopticon Passes through a Mirror" is an exemplar of the poetry-prose hybridity at which he excelled. The excerpt from *The Metaphysics of Nothing* and "Form Devours Spirit [I]" capture MID's pseudo-philosophical conceptual treatises on the nature of *nothing*.

This work is a mere sliver from our book *Zenithism (1921–1927): A Yugoslav Avant-Garde Anthology*, forthcoming from Academic Studies Press in 2022.

—Steven Teref and Aleksandar Bošković

Aleksandar Bošković is a lecturer in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian at Columbia University. He is the author of The Poetic Humor in Vasko Popa's Oeuvre (in Serbian, 2008) and the exhibition catalog Temporary Monument: Photomontages for Mayakovsky's Poem "To the Workers of Kursk" by Yuri Rozhkov (2015); and coeditor of The Fine Feats of the "Five Cockerels" Gang: A Yugoslav Marxist-Surrealist Epic Poem for Children (2022, with Ainsley Morse).

Steven Teref's books of translation include Ana Ristović's Directions for Use—shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award, Best Translated Book Award, and the National Translation Award—and Novica Tadić's Assembly. His translations have appeared in the New Yorker, Columbia Journal, Brooklyn Rail, Vestiges, and elsewhere. He is currently translating the poetry of Milena Marković, an award-winning poet, playwright, and screenwriter.



barbarian omelet

We will drink up nine barrels of stars
And eat a thousand wagons of Serbian sky
If Balkan eyes do not peck at the brain of western culture
If eastern rainbows do not lap up European blood

What are we going to do with blood alone
Blood alone is a pest
And a pest is to everyone—genius

Yes
In pure blood we'll drown the eyes of your watery ideas
On the embers of our gaze we'll fry the brains of genius

BARBARIAN OMELET

Here comes the barbarogenius
Crazy zenithist barbarogenius
Barbarogenius: a beautiful image and an opportunity of
tempestuous thought
Barbarogenius: a rescue pilot of barbarian ideoplanes.

—Ljubomir Micić

translated by Dragana Obradović

syphon—soda—blood

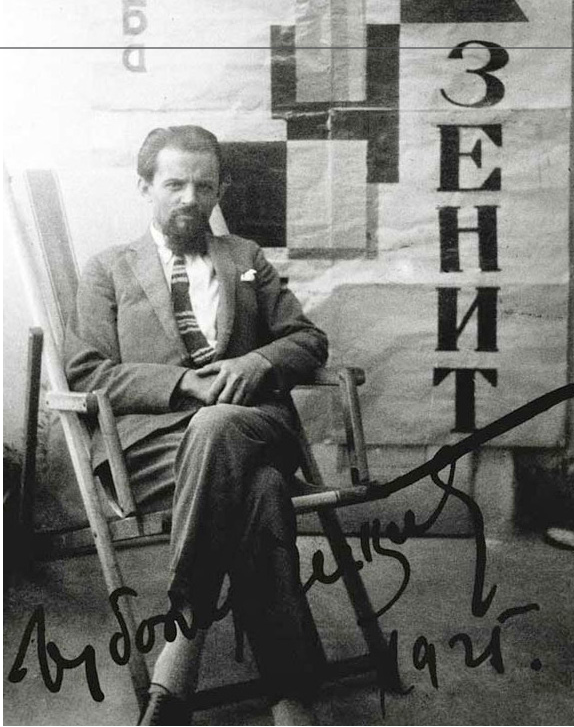
An excellent moussaka
Not to mention the sausages
Smoked ham and brandy just wonderful, eh
The centipede of a lie crawls in ministers' attics
And everything is empty in the books of European poets
Words are just greased wheels of ichor and marrow

Eyes bark the truth

Blood is the healthiest bathroom.
Syphon—soda—blood
In bottles of sweet wine and yogurt
In peasant shoes, the secrets of war and graves are kept.

—Ljubomir Micić

translated by Dragana Obradović



Portrait of Ljubomir Micić,
founder of Zenithism.

prayer of the blessed curse

Hey children
 Fingers are not toothpicks
 Our ears fill with the foam of the dying
 We are eternally suspended in the air
 A girl with deflowered legs cries
 Sharks howl
 I still think (modestly)
 My hat is sweeter than my heart
 I am not to blame
STARS BRING SALVATION
 Folly marks your victory
 THE SPIRIT doesn't trail the airplane
 The spirit rides on the airplane
 Or: the spirit creeps on sandaled feet.

—Marijan Mikac

translated by Vesna Jevtić

man's tango with a flea

In a box an owl on a string
 A hunchbacked fortuneteller points from over her glasses:
 A flea under the streetcar—how can it be!
 The flea takes a ride on a man
 The man takes a ride on a streetcar:
 All right
 When you talk about man
 You should put a flea on display
 How did you sleep last night
 “Good day” always sleeps well
 When “Good night” had a romantic duel
 All night long
 Today a man could be under the streetcar
 Tomorrow a streetcar might be on the back of a flea
 Fleas jump
 Hey joyful!
 A flea is not quite the last thing in the world.

—Marijan Mikac

translated by Vesna Jevtić

The Panopticon Passes through a Mirror

“Don’t worry, shoe, I’ll slip you on. Isn’t it nice seeing a bullfight and the boldness of the picador? That is real.”

It’s unclear from whose lips these words fell or for whose ears they were meant.

The day before yesterday they hanged a man for reasons quite just. On the one hand! But everyone has two hands unless they lost one fighting for their homeland and a just cause, and they now have a prosthesis. A person with two healthy hands would seek to know the reason they hanged the man, on the other hand. However, the one who shares the point of view of the hangmen, doesn’t have an “on the other hand.” It was cut off by Mr. Surgeon, who foresaw an evil future for it. Now, it doesn’t have any rights because it’s no longer a hand; it is—a prosthesis.

A hypothesis!

•

Many people, dogs, horses, etc. strolled in the afternoon. Everything entered the bright surface of the mirror. Everything transformed in the imagination and everything was dying.

Through the bright surface of the mirror entered:

churches and nuns
cars and grisettes
kings and invalids
newspapers and bricklayers
suns and moons
stars and notorious prostitutes
magazine editors and kangaroos.

Once they passed through the mirror they turned to stone.

Boom! Something cracked open.

It was the noggin of an American potato king.

•

Great is the song of the whirlpool. The whirlpool is the first and the last sense of the nonsensical. If anyone can spit out the word

Nonsense

Then sense exists!

What is the sense of the nonsensical? Nonsense!

And what is *nonsense*?

It is a very nice notion of something, of which even the hellish human brain can’t conceive.

The point is that it occupies such a superb place in the world of our notions.

What exists beyond notions?

Beyond notions is that which cannot fly through the surface of the mirror.

What is a mirror?

A mirror is an object without which the notion of the object would be incomprehensible. The object exists just as long as it can reflect.

In the stone city of San Francisco there is an opium den. To experience another world which can’t be penetrated by an ordinary citizen, you need to expose the body to agonizing cramps—for the revelation of a new world where one can live disembodied—fluidly.

A trance! A trance! A trance!

Oh, how insanely boring it must be for one who is unfamiliar with the pleasures of life beyond concrete forms, beyond sausages and *čevapčići*.

Tangible forms are ground in the mill. The grinding continues into an ethereal rebirth. And then every object attains its true face:

IT ISN’T

That **isn’t** is precisely the shortcut for Mr. Donkey to reach the hay.

Isn’t = Is.

Is = Isn’t.

(Don’t be ashamed by confusion, dear reader!)

•

In your eyes, my dear, flickers the strangest spell of the gods, who lost their invaluable believers today.

Nobody believes in anything anymore!

We only believe in negation

Modern-day fornicators believe **in negation**

Negation is the source of all goods

Amen!

—To live through tomorrow, today must pass. If that doesn’t come to pass—ah—then the horrifying, peaty, and stinking swamp of time would emerge.

Always tomorrow

Always tomorrow

Always tomorrow

Eternity has 777 eternities.

—Branko Ve Poljanski

translated by Maja Teref and Steven Teref

From *The Metaphysics of Nothing*

The world has always been largely divided into two factions: those who find and determine the path and those who *CLEAR* it. In times when it's been hard to see the path and when there has been no one to illuminate it, humanity has walked down a blind alley (Ribarska Street) and culture has fallen into a downward spiral.

The feeling and appearance of impoverishment in the face of history was greatest at a time when yesterday's goals and ideals were exhausted and tomorrow's not yet found. Our own age is consumed by such a fever.

The road to truth has been *CLEARED* on yesterday's paths; humanity has struggled to exhaust all possibilities marked by the previous generation's milestones.

But there, among those who must reveal the further path, it does not look promising. Listening carefully, a man hears a heavy, perhaps desperate, sound, like that of souls possessed by a secret, unintelligible fear. As if they were confronted by a primordial *SCREAM* which, as in the paralysis of a dream, cannot be *ARTICULATED* but instead transfixes the pained, despairing grimace and the cold *LAUGHTER OF HORROR*. Is this the birth of a new pain or a new poverty for which there is still no appropriate word?

Or is it just a *REFLECTION* of the void which froze the horrified human soul? Or perhaps both?

Literature, philosophy, arts of all kinds speak into this night, mauled by the language of scared wild animals who, surrounded by hunters, do not know where to run and how to save themselves!

—MID [Mita Dimitrijević]

*translated by Aleksandar Bošković
with Andrea Bogojević and Jennifer H. Zoble*

Form Devours Spirit [I]

Astonished and horrified—I inform you—that—the whole—world—issue of validity—is taking big steps—to meet me.

To the greatest extent for the whole country in general, as a superorganic being, there is an increasing headlong reduction of all positive authorities. It is the embryo of future progress which is negative because the spirit does not need authority since it is itself authority.

It is still true, one-sidedly twofold, that Death is important as the ultimate authority for the dead living spirit, for its unrecognized, negative right; but as to the progress of the spirit, death is only the *FIRST FORM*. The spirit is negative and as such the opposite of positive death. Death, therefore, plays before the progress of the spirit, changes its form (“the Earth is round”), decreases positively, to appear to the spirit as more charming, negative, smaller. Thus, there is *NOTHING* where death, through its play, shows itself to be less than the spirit, which is *BEHIND NOTHING*, and which, negatively, is most concentrated in *NOTHING*.

The spirit, which encompassed the beings of the Earth, does not lose sight of the Earth's nature and its positive interest to be lost in its own visibility, so that with its positive metamorphoses, it confuses the progressive spirit with the feminine, and devours what is positive from itself: *NOTHING*. That is why the diminishing positive authorities, in their solemn manifestations, are more and more nervously denouncing, annulling the word *NOTHING*. The whole cosmic obviousness of the spirit, therefore, they represent in the game of renunciation: “it is *NOTHING*,” and they are afraid of *NOTHING*.

—MID [Mita Dimitrijević]

translated by Aleksandar Bošković ■

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