STAGING THE UNKNOWN. ON GENTI KORINI'S METHODOLOGIES OF DECOLONISING THE GAZE

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'He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination – you know.'
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*[1]

Fear of the unknown is a natural instinct. Atavism. A subject of study in anthropology, psychology, sociology and religious studies. Over the centuries, we have developed a whole range of strategies for dealing with this fear – from jokes to relieve tension, to ridiculing the object of our fear in order to gain symbolic superiority over it, to violence to eliminate it. But also throwing ourselves completely into its embrace, to merge with its object in a transgressive act of religion or love. Its flip-side is fascination, which is bound to fear by the same force of attraction.

It was probably this primal fear of the unknown that accompanied Janko Lavrin, a Slovenian writer, linguist and journalist, on his 1915 journey through the Balkans, which until recently had belonged to the Ottoman Empire. He himself was born and bred in a small village on the border of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on the front line of several centuries of conflict between Western and Eastern cultures. After spending years in various European countries, including Tsarist Russia, Lavrin returned to the Balkans as a war correspondent for the conservative St Petersburg newspaper *Novya Vremya* [New Time] and crossed a previously impassable border for him: through Albania, which had been independent for only three years.[2]

In his book *V strane vechnoi voyni. Albanskiye eskizy* [In the Land of Eternal War. Albanian Sketches] published after his return to St Petersburg (1916), he presented the country in an unambiguously negative light, as one inhabited by 'savages' and 'bandits', with no respect for law or authority, full of 'bloodthirsty instincts,' ready to kill anyone 'out of sheer passion for the art.'[3] He found the local music to be unbearable 'noise', and the local hotels filthy, full of fleas and 'aboriginals'.[4]

1 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Library), 1996.
2 Miklavž Komelj, 'Janko, the Hero Who Refuses to Surrender,' in *Bloodless Murder* 'The Albanian Issue', 1916, Sezgin Boynik (ed.), (Helsinki: Rab-Rab Press) 2025; 103–04.
3 Andrei Krusanov, 'On Bloodless Murder', in ibid., 69. Translated by Pavels Smišlajevs.
4 Olga Strukova's commentaries on 'The Albanian Issue', in ibid., 59 and 63.

He also described the scale of emotions and reactions when encountering the unknown: 'When a person is travelling there, at the beginning everything frightens him, then surprises him, and eventually he resents everything. However he gradually gets used to the Albanian opportunities: leaving it all to chance, he quickly stops feeling frightened, resentful and even surprised.'[5]

Immediately after its publication in 1916, the book caused a storm among Lavrin's friends – a group of Futurist artists from St Petersburg with whom he had previously been associated, revolving around their irregularly published magazine *Beskrovnoye ubiystvo* [Bloodless Murder] (1915–16). They immediately began work on the next issue of the magazine – 'The Albanian Issue' – ironically dedicated to Janko Lavrin, whose main subject was a parody of the theses of his book. The author of *In the Land of Eternal War* became the subject of satirical drawings by several artists from the group along with a text by Olga Leshkova. She depicts Lavrin as Yanko I – proclaimed king of Albania by the local population during his accidental visit to the country. To prevent the new king from escaping (like his predecessors), he is glued to the throne to rule for less than two weeks, making a series of absurd decisions.

Leshkova shared the materials she was preparing for publication in the magazine with the young Georgian-Polish poet and artist Ilya Zdanevich, who was delighted with her text and the concept of the magazine, offered to contribute to it, and used them to create a performance *Yanko I, the King of Albania, a Tragedy in Albanian Language 28,000 Metres with Participation of the Prime Minister of Austria, 10,000 Fleas, Breshko-Breshkovsky and Other Vermin*.

The performance was created in a day and a half and staged in December 1916, with decorations and costumes 'in a Futurist idiom'[6] as part of a party in a private studio, attended by the author and his artist friends. Since the work remained unfinished on the day of its premiere, which was also its first and last performance, the audience was invited to join in a dance during the final act. The performance was written by Zdanevich in Zaum, a trans-rational language postulated by the

5 Ibid., 58.
6 Letter from O. Leshkova to M. Le Dentu (8 December 1916), quoted by: Andrei Krusanov, 'On Bloodless Murder', in *Bloodless Murder.*…, 73.

first Russian avant-garde, which here represented the 'Albanian language'.

Ilya Zdanevich then worked on finalising the play, which he called his 'dissertation in Zaum'. He even persuaded Olga Leshkova to compose Zaum music for it, and managed to publish the whole work (text and musical notation) in 1918 in Tiflis, Georgia. Nevertheless, *Yanko I, the King of Albania* was never to be performed again. After the 1917 revolution, any further work on completing 'The Albanian Issue' was abandoned, and the group revolving around *Bloodless Murder* magazine practically ceased to exist.[7]

After more than a hundred years, their work was taken up by Albanian artist Genti Korini.

ABOUT THE UNKNOWN BY THE UNKNOWN

A marginal magazine, practically unknown until recently, based on 'the aesthetics of the insignificant,'[8] intended for a microgroup of friendly readers, published by a fleeting circle of artists that existed for less than two years, was brought back to life from archival oblivion by researchers, as was the figure of Ilya Zdanevich.[9] Genti Korini reached for the marginal and unknown – the magazine *Bloodless Murder*, the uncompleted 'Albanian Issue', and the once-performed, unfinished play *Yanko I, King of Albania* – to tell the story of the unknown: Albania. What do the citizens of the European Union, to which the country is only just now applying for membership and which has only recently begun to timidly appear in travel agency offers, know about it? Indeed, what do people on other continents know about this small country on the Balkan Peninsula, which was cut off from the world by a communist regime for several decades of the twentieth century? How do they imagine it, if they have anything to base their ideas on?

7 One of the main group members, Mikhail le Dentu, died in 1917 while returning from the front. The others became involved in co-creating new institutions and universities in post-revolutionary Russia, joining, among others, the Left Block and Kazimir Malevich's circle of collaborators. Zdanevich emigrated permanently to Paris. See Sezgin Boynik, 'Introduction', in *Bloodless Murder…*, 10–11.

8 See Sezgin Boynik, ibid., 6.

9 Most importantly: Nina Gurianova, Alexandra Strukova, Mikhail Odeskii, Alexei Kruchenkykh, Marzio Marzaduri and Sezgin Boynik.

Genti Korini draws on historical sources to construct a multi-layered structure based on hyperbole, continuing the existing logic of the narrative. The first hyperbolisation was made by Janko Lavrin, who described Albania in 1916 through the prism of Orientalist fantasies and projections of his fears. The image he created is intensified and caricatured in *The Albanian Issue*, and in the experimental performance *Yanko I. King of Albania*, it enters into vibrations that cause the work to disintegrate in the final act and turn into a frenetic dance of actors and audience. Korini takes this disintegration and subjects it to further hyperbole.

He presents his version of theatre in Zaum, which begins with a conversation between two characters immersed in a timeless space (Ilya Zdanevich, author of the play *Yanko I, King of Albania*, and his alter-ego Lilith). They engage in a dialogue about Zaum and the 'pearl disease of language'[10] that needs to be cured, which gradually turns into a discussion about an undefined country and its unknown language, and finally turns into attempts to express oneself (in Albanian? in Zaum?), which reach the limits of language and break down into fragments of rhythms and images.

We see fragments of a performance played out in Zaum by puppets, mysterious figures in masks and ritual costumes performing a strange dance against the backdrop of abandoned buildings. We also see a desert landscape, geographically undefined, over which the sun rises or sets. The whole is accompanied by Korini's motto: 'It is not all true, but it is not all false either.'

Is this what Janko Lavrin saw during his journey through Albania? Or was it Yanko I, King of Albania, during his reign?

YANKO I KING OF ALBANIA AND THE POLITICS OF ENMITY

The character of Yanko I King of Albania is not only a satire on Janko Lavrin, but perhaps more so a hyperbolisation of the exoticising gaze with which he viewed Albania, as well as an analysis of both the structure of the gaze and the mechanisms

10 More on Pearl Disease: Ilya Zdanevich – Iliazd, *Le degre 41 sinapise: Lecture on Pearl Disease*, bie-bao series vol. 1 (Helsinki: Rab-Rab Press), 2021.

of the beholder. The image of the country that emerges from his diaries *In the Land of Eternal War* is permeated by a constant negative assessment of what is 'different' and previously unknown, but certainly imagined by the author and the subject of his fears, as someone raised in areas bordering the Ottoman Empire. Lavrin's gaze makes the object of his gaze exotic; thus, in accordance with the Greek root word *eksōtikós* – 'external', kept at a safe distance from the viewing subject.

In his description, Albania becomes a fantastical land suspended outside of time: 'In general, the spirit of these lands is not even that of the Middle Ages, but simply that of a prehistoric period…'[11] It is presented as if it had never existed; or as if it existed as a mythical space: everywhere and nowhere at the same time, once and never, a nowhere-place. Thus, it becomes a *pars pro toto* representation of all mythical lands or mythologised, exotic descriptions of places reached by European travellers or conquistadors, which consequently became 'minor cultures' with minor voice and minor importance.

Bloodless Murder magazine went a step further – from exoticising views to colonising actions. During his two weeks in power, King Yanko becomes famous primarily for the 'Lavranisation of the country', i.e., the order to mark all 'houses, trees, people and animals' with the inscription 'property of Yanko Lavrin,'[12] as well as to destroy all pianos and eat all the sweets available in the country.[13] His actions met with resistance only when, 'being unsatisfied with the reserves of his collections,' he decided to appropriate everything – he issued an order 'to inscribe "property of Yanko Lavrin" on all the Albanian fleas.'[14] The country's population protest, but wanting to maintain good relations with the king, they donate 'ten billion of the biggest Albanian fleas'[15] to his collection. As a result, Yanko, bitten by insects, secretly decides to flee the country, tearing off a piece of the throne to which he was glued.

I don't think I've ever come across a description that so accurately captures the basic characteristics of colonial and

11 Janko Lavrin, *V strane vechnoi voiny. Albanskiye eskizy* (Petrograd, 1916), 74; quoted from Olga Strukova's commentaries on 'The Albanian Issue', in *Bloodless Murder.*…, 59.
12 Olga Leshkova, 'Yanko I', in *Bloodless Murder.*…, 41.
13 Ibid., 43 and 45.
14 Ibid., 45.
15 Ibid.

imperialist practices in just a few pages: appropriation, a collection built on plunder, depletion of local resources and destruction of local culture, and finally, escape, while retaining some of the insignia of power.

Interestingly, after fleeing the country, Yanko finds himself with the prospect of a peaceful, middle-class life. The text also provides two interesting insights into the main character. First, he is portrayed as extremely narcissistic, characterised by 'megalomania and absolute self-complacency,' as well as by 'an inclination to engage in speculation, collecting and making money easily.'[16] He is also referred to impersonally in the text ('it') and as embodying 'features of almost every ethnicity in the world,'[17] which extrapolates and universalises the figure of King Yanko in both time and space.

Secondly, the motto for the entire story is the quote: 'The history of the Medes is dark and incomprehensible…' Admittedly, the footnote to the text explains that the motto refers to 'the phrase from the school textbook,' which 'became a proverbial expression at the turn of the twentieth century and meant a clumsy narrative with little content.'[18] However, in the opening section of the text, we find the statement: 'It is obvious that Yanko is a Mede [...] since we could hardly imagine anything darker and less comprehensible than the history of this human being.'[19] On the one hand, the main character of the whole story is defined by the unknown, and thus there is a reversal of the figure that writer Janko Lavrin used when describing Albania as 'the land of eternal war'. On the other hand, it is impossible to avoid references to the history of the Medes – an ancient people who inhabited what is now northwestern Iran and whose mythological origins are linked to Medea and her son Medos, the founder of the empire's first city. Medea, a 'barbarian' princess from Colchis – to whose origins she owed her 'wild temper' in Euripides' narrative – was supposed to have gone there on fleeing Greece, after murdering their children in revenge on Jason, feeling deceived and exploited by her unfaithful husband. Her angry act of murder seems to be trans-rational

16 Ibid., 54.
17 Ibid., 36.
18 See the commentary by Alexandra Strukova, ibid., 58.
19 Ibid., 37.

in nature: carefully planned, yet motivated by extremely strong emotions.[20] She leaves the soulless, utilitarian and rational West to go back to where she came from: the East.[21]

In *Yanko I*, we would again see a reversal: the mad Yanko returns to the North, to 'civilisation,' fleeing the southern, 'exotic' land. Achille Mbembe recalls the logic of this reversal when interpreting Fanon through Freud in *Politics of Enmity*. He draws attention to the mechanism of multiple feedback loops to which the primal 'destructive drive (with all its sadism and masochism), directed outward or projected,' is subject, which 'can be turned back inward or introjected.'[22] Within the framework of outward hostility (towards other cultures, migrants, strangers, the unknown), the target of destruction is therefore the Other living within.

ZAUM AND DEGRAMMATISATION

The language of Zaum, used both in *Yanko I* performance and in Genti Korini's video theatre, was designed at the turn of the twentieth century as trans-rational – transcending what is conscious and rationalised by incorporating the unconscious into rationality. Degrammatisation and poetic-musical form were intended to establish new channels of communication and connection between the rational and the non-rational in Zaum. The language was also meant to be a kind of strategy of resistance against the rationalist and emotionally and spiritually detached thinking of the West.[23]

In one of her recent essays devoted to the art of Antoni Tàpies, contemporary anthropologist Rita Segato, when referring to Derrida, writes about degrammatisation as a necessary and only possible means of expression and communication today, in times of catastrophe.[24] In the face of contemporary barbarism, brought about by rationality and language, in Segato's proposal, the non-rationality of the poetic sign and the encounter with the unknown constitute our ethical duty. In her view, the artist has a special ability to 'capture the present' and sense 'the future, destabilised and threatening'; the artist thus opens him/herself (and us) up 'to exposure to the unknown, [...] the uncertainty of incompleteness, of the unfinished.'[25] Referencing Hannah Arendt, Segato even proves how uncertainty is a value – as opposed to the cruel certainty and logic offered by regimes.[26]

By staging the unknown, Genti Korini's video work exposes the viewer to an encounter with it as part of an immersive experience. The hyperbole he uses pushes exoticisation to its limits, beyond which it disintegrates. This process is accompanied by the disintegration of language and, parallel to this process, entry into a world in which the human figure disappears and is replaced by representations in the form of objects – puppets and masks. It is as if we were dealing with a break in the chain of signifiers and signifieds, and after reaching the limit of the representative power of words, we encountered the source emitting our projections: the Other.

The work poses questions about the 'Albanian issue' and examines the very structure of the colonial gaze understood as a transhistorical term. Isn't every gaze upon the other, by definition, colonising – that is, exoticising in a de-subjectifying way? The methodology used by Korini, on one hand, means reversing this gaze. On the other, it means immersing the unknown in timelessness, both in history and beyond, as well as in its trans-geographicality. A place in the sun – an object of desire, fascination and fear – can be found both nowhere and everywhere, outside the subject and within.

20 For deeper analysis of emotions appearing in Euripides' play see: Maria Michella Sassi, 'The Medea Syndrome', in *Philosphical Inquiries*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2017), 91–106.

21 This cultural contrast or even a clash of civilisations is particularly evident in Pier Paolo Passolini's film interpretation of *Medea*. See: Massimo Fusillo, *La barbarie di Medea: itinerari novecenteschi di un mito,* https://www.indafondazione.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/1-fusillo.pdf, accessed: 27 February 2026.

22 Achille Mbembe, *Polityka wrogości*, translated from original version to Polish by Urszula Kropiwiec (Karakter: Kraków, 2018), 109; translated from Polish to English by Małgorzata Ludwisiak.

23 See: Noemi Smolik, *How the Sun Was Defeated and the Chicken Coop Declared a Place of Scientific Discovery – a Story Rediscovered,* p. 31 in this publication.

24 Rita Laura Segato, 'No hay ley, no hay gramática: el camino agrammatical permite que nos comuniquemos en tiempos de catástrofe', in: *Tàpies y yo: una exegesis recíproca* (Museu Tàpies, Barcelona, 2025), 47–56.

25 Ibid., 56; translation of the quotation from Spanish to English: Małgorzata Ludwisiak.

26 Rita Laura Segato, 'La incerteza como valor', in: *Tàpies y yo…*, 81–83.