

STUDIES
IN MODERN ALBANIAN
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

by

Robert ELSIE

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Preface

Albania's long-standing isolation, and in particular the half a century of surrealist rule under the ever-vigilant Albanian Party of Labour, had an extremely negative impact on intellectual and cultural exchange. In Albania, these long dark years created a conspicuous lack of objective knowledge about the outside world, and in the Western world, they created an equally conspicuous lack of information about Albania, a country which, for most people, had ceased to exist until tens of thousands of refugees suddenly washed up onto the shores of southern Italy in 1991.

This volume comprises a selection of critical writings and reviews devoted to contemporary Albanian literature and culture as seen from a distant, but hopefully not blurred perspective. The primary aim of this work, originally published over the last ten years, has been to create an awareness for Albanian literature and Albanian culture at the international level.

Although many of these publications circulated among writers and intellectuals in Albania at the time of their issue, very few were ever republished there under the dictatorship, and those which were translated and printed in the Tiranë literary newspaper 'Drita' ,were abridged for obvious political reasons.

While perusing the present collection of literary reviews, the reader may wonder why certain works were chosen for review and others were not. I can offer no satisfactory reply. In general, it has always been my endeavour to present to the

Western reading public, works of Albanian literature which may be seen to be of major cultural significance. The books reviewed here are, however, obviously only a selection of many which could have been chosen.

With the collapse of communism in Europe, the American literary journal 'World Literature Today' devoted its issue of spring 1991 to "Literature and revolution in Eastern Europe." In addition to articles on literary developments in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, an article on Albanian writing was included. This article, which I entitled "Evolution and revolution in modern Albanian literature," offered the first substantial survey of modern Albanian literature since the fifties to be published in English.

In addition to the above-mentioned introductory article and the fifty-seven literary reviews, I have included a short and perhaps rather subjective essay on the Kosovo situation, a tragedy which gnaws at the souls of us all.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to those who have assisted me over the past years in my endeavours to present Albanian literature and culture to the English-speaking world. Many thanks go, in particular, to Flutura Greva in Washington, the once faithful Muse of the Writers' Union in Tiranë, for helping me with books and material.

Robert Elsie
Eifel Mountains, Germany
autumn 1995

Evolution and revolution in modern Albanian literature

*Tehut të shpatës kemi ecur rrufe,
Pastaj shpata ka ecur mbi ne.*

(The blade of the sword we came down in a dash,
The sword then came down upon us in a flash.)

Xhevahir Spahiu

Establishing a literary culture in Albania has never been an easy task, though not for want of artistic endeavour and creative impulses. All too often the tempestuous course of Albanian history has nipped the flowers of Albanian literature in the bud and severed the roots of intellectual culture.

Early Albanian literature of 16th and 17th centuries with its primarily biblical focus (religious translations and devotional texts beginning with the 'Missal' of Gjon Buzuku in 1555) might have provided a foundation for literary creativity in the age of the Counter-Reformation under the somewhat ambiguous patronage of the Catholic church, had not the banners of Islam soon been unfurled on the eastern horizons, had not tiny Albania been destined to bear the full brunt of the Turkish invasion. The Ottoman colonization of Albania which had begun as early as 1385 was to split the country into three spheres of culture, all virtually independent of one another: (1) the cosmopolitan traditions of the Islamic Orient using initially Turkish, Persian and Arabic as their media of expression and later Albanian in a

stylized *Aljamiado* literature, i.e. the so-called poetry of the *Bejtexhinj*, (2) the lingering Byzantine heritage of Greek Orthodoxy in southern Albania which produced a number of religious and scholarly works in Greek script in the 18th century, and (3) the awakening culture and literature of the Arbëresh (Italo-Albanians) in southern Italy, nourished by a more favourable social, political and economic climate and by the fertile intellectual soil of Italian civilization.

The stable foundations of an Albanian national literature were finally laid in the second half of the nineteenth century with the rise of the nationalist movement striving for Albania's independence from a decaying Ottoman Empire. The literature of this so-called *Rilindja* period of national awakening was one of romantic nationalism and provides an excellent key to an understanding of the Albanian mentality even today. As so often in the history of Albanian literature, writing in Albanian, by its very existence, constituted an act of defiance against the foreign powers ruling the country or dominating it culturally. Indeed, the Sublime Porte rightly regarded most Albanian cultural and educational activity as subversive, and as such saw fit to ban Albanian-language schools and the publication of all books and periodicals in Albanian. With no access to education in their own language, only a small minority of Albanians could hope to break through the barriers to literary creativity and intellectual thought.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catholic education facilities set up by the Franciscans and Jesuits in Shkodër (Scutari) under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian *Kultusprotektorat* paved the way for the creation of an intellectual élite in Albania which in turn produced the rudiments of a more sophisticated literature that expressed itself primarily in poetry. The culmination of Albanian literature before the Second World War is seen in the works of the talented

Franciscan pater **Gjergj Fishta** (1871-1940), once lauded as the national poet of Albania though from 1945 to 1990, for reasons more political than literary, ostracized from the Albanian Parnassus.

Indeed, virtually the whole literature of pre-war Albania was swept away by the political revolution which took place in the country during and after the Second World War, to be replaced by a radically proletarian and socialist literature in its infancy. The first minister of education and culture of the 'new' Albania, **Sejfullah Malëshova** (1901-1971), a self-styled 'rebel poet' who used the pseudonym *Lame Kodra*, nonetheless followed a relatively liberal course in order to encourage the reintegration of non-communists writers and forces into the new structures of power. His success was limited though as he very soon fell into disgrace as an 'opportunist' and was eliminated by *Enver Hoxha* (1908-1985) in a power struggle in 1946. *Malëshova* strangely enough survived his fall. This left-wing idealist who had once been a member of the Comintern, spent his later life in internal exile as a humble stock clerk in *Fier* where, for years on end, not a single inhabitant of the town dared speak to him. His only social contact was to play soccer with the children. Whenever anyone approached, he would pinch his lips with his fingers, betraying the vow of eternal silence which ensured his survival. *Malëshova* died of appendicitis in unimaginable isolation.

Most other writers and intellectuals who had not left the country by 1944 suffered a similar or worse fate. The Catholic writers of the north were of course among the first to be eliminated by the new regime: poet **Lazër Shantoja** (1892-1945) was shot in the spring of 1945; poet **Bernardin Palaj** ((1897-1947) died in prison in *Shkodër* ca. 1947; **Vinçenc Prennushi** (1885-1949), poet, folklorist and Archbishop of *Durrës*, was tortured in *Durrës* prison where he died in March

1949; **Ndoc Nikaj** (1864-1951), often called the father of twentieth-century Albanian prose, was arrested in 1946 at the age of eighty-two on the absurd charge of planning to 'use violence to overthrow the government' and died in Shkodër prison five years later. But repression was not confined to the Catholics. Dramatist **Kristo Floqi** (1873-1951) died in 1951 after several years in prison. Talented short story writer **Mitrush Kuteli** (1907-1967), pseudonym of Dhimitër Pasko, was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and spent at least three years in Tiranë jail and doing forced labour in the notorious swamp of Maliq near Korçë. With him in Tiranë was **Andrea Varfi** (b. 1914), later to be celebrated as a classic author of early socialist realism. Novelist and Spanish civil war veteran **Petro Marko** (1913-1991) spent 1947 to 1950 in prison in Tiranë, where he was often suspended in chains.

Enver Hoxha was deeply suspicious of Albanian writers and intellectuals and remained so to the end of his days. The intellectual freedom which had existed, ironically enough, under the pre-war Zog dictatorship and during the Italian occupation was snuffed out completely. The Party demanded nothing less than absolute obedience. The simplest means of eliminating questionable writers was to deny them access to publication. As a result, many a talented quill turned nolens volens to translating. Pantheistic poet **Lasgush Poradeci** (1899-1987), a twentieth-century classic, is said to have preferred to break his pencil in two rather than write the kind of poetry 'they' wanted. Instead, he rendered Burns, Pushkin, Lermontov, Goethe, Heine and Brecht into Albanian, before dying in absolute poverty. Respected intellectual **Petro Zheji** (b. 1929), spiritual father to a whole generation of Albanian intellectuals, is an admired translator of Aragon, Cervantes, Asturias, Goncharov and Sciascia, but never had access to publishing facilities for his own works imbued with symbolism; **Jusuf Vrioni** (b. 1916), Kadare's talented translator into French, spent

over a decade in prison because of his aristocratic origins before being allowed to work.

A handful of pre-war authors did manage to adapt. **Sterjo Spasse** (1914-1989) from Lake Prespa, for instance, whose early novels *Pse?!*, 1935 (Why?!) with its strongly nihilistic overtones and *Afërdita*, 1944 (Afërdita) portrayed the dilemma of the young intellectual in a backward rural society, wrote prose in the vein of socialist realism but never published anything convincing in his later years. The same is true of satirist **Nonda Bulka** (1906-1972).

The persecution of intellectuals, in particular of those who had been abroad before 1944, and the break with virtually all cultural traditions created a literary and cultural vacuum in Albania which lasted until the sixties, the results of which can still be felt today. No one will ever know how many gifted writers and artists were dispatched to do menial chores in dangerous branches of industry, or banished to the provinces forever, to internment in some isolated mountain village with no hope of return.

With Albania's integration into the Soviet bloc during the fifties, Soviet literary models were introduced and slavishly imitated. The verse, short stories and novels produced by the first generation of post-war Albanian writers were nonetheless for the most part not literary publications at all. They were politically motivated and educative in nature, often to the point of being clumsily didactic. Patriotism and the 'right' political convictions counted for much more than literary sophistication. *Lumi i vdekur*, Tiranë 1965 (The dead river), by **Jakov Xoxa** (1923-1979) from Fier, one of the rare works of the period with any literary merit, was modelled on the Russian *Tikhij Don* (And quiet flows the Don) 1928-1940 by Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov (1905-1984) and his *Juga e bardhë*,

Tiranë 1971 (The white south wind), on the latter's *Podnyataya tselina* (Virgin soil upturned) 1932-1960. *Një vjeshtë me stuhi*, Tiranë 1959 (Stormy autumn), by **Ali Abdihoxa** (b. 1923) was a complete imitation of *Molodaya Gvardija* (The young guard) 1945 by Aleksander Aleksandrovich Fadeyev (1901-1956). Among other representative authors of this period of Albanian literature were **Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi** (b. 1915) from Elbasan, subsequently a pre-eminent literary historian, **Shevqet Musaraj** (1914-1986) from the Vlorë region, **Fatmir Gjata** (1922-1989) from Korçë, and poets **Aleks Çaçi** (1916-1989), **Mark Gurakuqi** (1922-1977), **Luan Qafëzezi** (b. 1922) and **Llazar Siliqi** (b. 1924), none of whom were able to express any particular talent.

The writers of the fifties and early sixties started from scratch. They were inspired, if at all, by revolutionary pathos and an awareness of being the very first generation of a new literature and of a new Albania. The link between this literature and Marxist politics had been firmly cemented and the political message was the essential for those who wished to survive. Writers were encouraged to concentrate their creative energies on specific themes such as the partisan struggle of the 'national liberation war' and on the building of socialism. Subjects devoid of any redeeming educational value in Marxist terms were considered alien and taboo, and indeed still have been up to the present. 'L'art pour l'art' was quite unthinkable in modern Albania. Socialist realism gave writers the tools with which to create but, as an absolute value, it allowed them no alternatives. As a result, the vast body of writing churned out in the fifties and sixties proved in general to be sterile and exceptionally conformist. The subject matter of the period was repetitious and unelaborate texts were spoon-fed to the reader time and again without much attention to basic elements of style. Political education and fueling the patriotic sentiments of the masses were considered more important than aesthetic values. Even the

formal criteria of criticism such as variety and richness in lexicon and textual structure were demoted to give priority to patriotism and the political message.

A turning point came in the stormy year 1961 which on the one hand, marked the political break with the Soviet Union and thus with Soviet literary models, and on the other hand witnessed the publication of a number of trend-setting volumes, in particular of poetry: *Shekulli im* (My century) by Ismail Kadare, *Hapat e mija në asfalt* (My steps on the pavement) by Dritëro Agolli, and in the following year *Shtigje poetike* (Poetic paths) by Fatos Arapi. It is ironic to note that while Albania had supposedly broken with the Soviet Union to save socialism, leading Albanian writers, educated in the Eastern bloc, took advantage of the rupture to part not only with Soviet models but also with socialist realism itself. The attempt made to broaden the literary horizon in search of something new inevitably led to a hefty literary, and of course political controversy on 11 July 1961 at a meeting of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists. The debate conducted not only by writers but also by leading party and government figures was published in the literary journal *Drita* (The light) and received wide public attention in the wake of the Fourth Party Congress of that year. It pitted writers of the older generation such as Andrea Varfi, Luan Qafëzezi and Mark Gurakuqi, who voiced their support for fixed poetic standards and the solid traditions of socialist Albanian literature and who opposed new elements such as free verse as un-Albanian, against a new generation led by Ismail Kadare, Dritëro Agolli, and Fatos Arapi who were in favour of a literary renewal and a broadening of the stylistic and thematic horizon. The road to renewal was given the green light by Enver Hoxha himself who saw that the situation was untenable.

Though it constituted no radical change of course, no political 'thaw' in the Soviet sense, 1961 set the stage for a

quarter of a century of trial and error which has now led to much greater sophistication in Albanian literature. Themes and styles diversified and more attention was paid to formal literary criteria and to the question of individuality.

This first attempt to liberalize Albania's rigid literature and culture somewhat reached its peak in the early seventies in the wake of the Chinese cultural revolution, an echo of which had been felt in Albanian letters. Protagonists of the so-called liberal movement were **Todi Lubonja** (b. 1923), director of radio and television broadcasting, and dramatist **Fadil Paçrami** (b. 1922), party secretary for ideological affairs in Tiranë. They were accused on encouraging liberal trends and permitting Western ideas and influence to penetrate Albanian culture (more interesting plays and the broadcasting of Italian pop music and the Beatles on radio). The 11th song festival on 25 December 1972 served as a pretext in this in actual fact rather harmless movement to keep writers and artists, and consequently the whole country in tow. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the Central Committee on 26-28 June 1973, Enver Hoxha took the offensive and presented a report which must now be regarded as a hallmark in the annals of European obscurantism: *Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike kundër shfaqjeve të huaja e qëndrimeve liberale ndaj tyre* (Let us strengthen the ideological struggle against foreign manifestations and liberal attitudes towards them). The liberal movement was swiftly crushed and its two figureheads mercilessly condemned for their sins as deviationists and enemies of the people. Todi Lubonja was released from prison in June 1987 and Fadil Paçrami was finally freed from Kosovë e Madhe prison near Elbasan on 17 March 1991, two weeks before Albania's first multiparty elections.

What followed from 1973 to at least 1975 was a virtual reign of terror against Albanian writers and intellectuals, comparable in spirit at least to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s.

These years constituted the major setback in the development of Albanian literature and culture. Poets and prose writers began vying with one another in the proclamation of their revolutionary fervour and in their rejection of foreign and liberal influences. Those who were less convincing or whose publications were found to be tainted with liberality were banned to the provinces or landed in prison. The more fortunate simply lost their right to publish. Almost all major authors had a work withdrawn from circulation and 'turned into cardboard'. Learning foreign languages was effectively banned and those who already had the misfortune of knowing French or Italian found themselves in dangerously embarrassing positions. Artists and painters such as Maks Velo (b. 1935), Edison Gjergo (b. 1938) and Ali Oseku (b. 1944) were denounced at the Fourth Plenary Session and sent to prisons and concentration camps like the notorious copper mines at Spaç for agitation and propaganda, i.e. for having expressed a vague interest in Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali or Max Ernst.

The frenzy had largely subsided by 1978, but no deviation from the ideological course set by the Party was dared up to the death of Enver Hoxha on 11 April 1985. With the notable exception of Ismail Kadare, no Albanian writers were allowed to express any non-conformist views or even to leave the country. In April 1986, prose writer **Koço Kosta** (b. 1944) raised an eyebrow or two when he published the first part of a realistic short story *Ata të dy e të tjerë* (The two of them and the others) in the Tiranë literary periodical *Nëntori* (November) which contained some indirect criticism of the system. The author disappeared, banned to the tiny village of Greshicë near Fier and was denied rights to publish for three years, 'pour encourager les autres'. The second part of his short story, scheduled for publication in the May 1986 edition, was torn out of *Nëntori* at the last minute and replaced with something more acceptable. The watchful eye of the Party continued to channel

all literary creativity in the 'right direction' up to December 1990 which finally saw the first steps towards pluralism and democratization in Albania.

Despite the constraints of socialist realism, Stalinist dictatorship and corruption at all levels of society, Albanian literature made much progress in the seventies and eighties. The best example of creativity and originality in contemporary Albanian letters is **Ismail Kadare** (b. 1936), still the only Albanian writer to enjoy a broad international reputation. Kadare's talents both as a poet and as a prose writer have lost none of their innovative force over the last three decades and his courage in attacking literary mediocrity within the system brought about a degree of flexibility in socialist realism which enabled it to survive.

Born and raised in the museum-city of Gjirokaštër, Kadare studied at the Faculty of History and Philology of the University of Tiranë and subsequently at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow until 1960 when relations between Albania and the Soviet Union became tense. From the start, Kadare enjoyed a privileged relationship with Enver Hoxha, also from Gjirokaštër, which enabled him to pursue literary and personal objectives for which other writers would certainly have been sent into internal exile or to prison.

He had begun his literary career in the 1950s as a poet with verse collections such as *Frymëzimet djaloshare*, Tiranë 1954 (Youthful inspiration), *Ëndërrimet*, Tiranë 1957 (Dreams), and *Shekulli im*, Tiranë 1961 (My century), which gave proof not only of his youthful inspiration but also of talent and poetic originality in the vein of Russian poets Yevgeny Yevtushenko (b. 1933) and Andrey Voznesensky (b. 1933). Kadare's poetry was less bombastic than previous verse and gained direct access to the hearts of the readers who saw in him

the spirit of the times and who appreciated the diversity of his themes.

Kadare's international reputation up to the present rests entirely upon his prose, in particular his historical novels and short stories. His first prose work, and perhaps still his best known, *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* Tiranë 1963 (The general of the dead army), dealt with the immediate post-war years as seen through the eyes of an Italian general in the company of a priest on a mission to Albania to exhume and repatriate the remains of his fallen soldiers. The novel was published initially in 1963 and in a revised edition in 1967. After the success of the French-language edition (Paris 1970), it was widely translated (English, German, Italian, Romanian, Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, Swedish, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Greek etc.) and laid the foundations for Kadare's deserved renown abroad.

Kadare's works are a strict reflection of the vicissitudes of Albanian political life. In the seventies, he turned increasingly to historical prose, a safer haven, and became an unrivalled master of the genre. *Kështjella*, Tiranë 1970 (The castle), a work reminiscent of Dino Buzzati's *Il deserto dei Tartari* 1940 (The Tartar steppe), takes us back to the 15th century, the age of the Albanian national hero Scanderbeg (1405-1468), and in minute, carefully composed detail, depicts the siege of a mediaeval Albanian fortress, symbolic of Albania itself, by the Turks during one of their numerous punitive expeditions to subdue the country. The allusion to political events of the sixties seen by many critics was not unintentional. In 1961, Albania had stubbornly broken ties with the mighty Soviet Union, and after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, it felt the very real possibility of a Soviet incursion to bring the country back into the fold. No Albanian reader at any rate could be unaware of the analogy construed between the Sublime Porte and the Kremlin.

Next came *Kronikë në gur*, Tiranë 1971 (Chronicle in stone), a forceful novel set in his native Gjirokastër. *Nëntori i një kryeqyteti*, Tiranë 1973 (November of a capital city), set in Tiranë under Italian occupation in 1940, was, like *Dasma*, Tiranë 1968 (The wedding), less successful, a reflection of the 1973-1975 purge. *Dimri i madh*, Tiranë 1977 (The great winter), constitutes a literary digestion of the traumatic rupture of relations with the Soviet Union. In *Ura me tri harqe*, Tiranë 1978 (The three-arched bridge), Kadare returned to the mythical origins of Albania's haunted history to bring to life one of the most awesome motifs of Balkan legendry, that of immurement. It has been interpreted as an Albanian response to Serbian Nobel prize winner Ivo Andrić's *Na Drini cuprija* 1959 (Bridge on the Drina). Kadare is at his best with Balkan themes.

His following short stories and shorter novels were published in three collections: *Emblema e dikurshme*, Tiranë 1977 (Signs of the past), *Gjakftohtësia*, Tiranë 1980 (Cold-bloodedness) and *Koha e shkrimeve*, Tiranë 1986 (Epoch of writings), the latter two volumes being decidedly non-conformist by Albanian standards. The shorter novels appeared here in the form of short stories for editorial reasons. Among the best prose works contained in these books were: *Kush e solli Doruntinën?* (Who brought Doruntine back?, Engl. *Doruntine*) in which he once again revived his country's legendary past; *Sjellësi i fatkeqësisë* (The bearer of ill-tidings), also known as the 'Caravan of veils'; *Viti i mbrapshtë* (The dark year) set in the turbulent and ominous year of 1914, a cautious allusion to modern Albania; *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (The wedding procession turned to ice), a moving description of the Kosovo tragedy as experienced by a Prishtinë surgeon; the excellent *Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave* (The official of the palace of dreams); and *Prilli i thyer* (Broken April). In contrast to these shorter novels and short stories was the 700-page novel *Koncert në fund të dimrit*, Tiranë 1988 (Concert at the end of winter,

Engl. *The concert*), a monumental review of Albania's dramatic break with post-Maoist China in 1978, with overt criticism of the depersonalization of the individual under socialism. It returned to the epic proportions of 'The Great Winter' with which it has many parallels.

Ismail Kadare did his utmost to emancipate Albanian literature over which, in view of his talent and many privileges from Enver Hoxha, he reigned as an absolute monarch in the seventies and eighties. His unexpected departure from Albania and application for political asylum in France in October 1990 caused a good deal of consternation but he will no doubt return to his homeland when the time is right.

Kadare's overriding position in contemporary Albanian literature, compounded by his international reputation, has cast a shadow over all other contemporary Albanian writers. One of these who has had a far from negligible influence on the course of contemporary literature is **Dritëro Agolli** (b. 1931), head of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists from the purge of Paçrami and Lubonja in 1973 to 1990. Like Kadare, he made his name originally as a poet before turning to prose, and is widely admired in both genres. His first verse collections, *Në udhë dola*, Tiranë 1958 (I went out on the street), *Hapat e mija në asfalt*, Tiranë 1961 (My steps on the pavement), and *Shtigje malesh dhe trotuare*, Tiranë 1965 (Mountain paths and sidewalks), introduced him to the reading public as a sincere lyric poet of the soil and evinced masterful verse technique. One senses the influence of his training in the Soviet Union in this early verse, the spirit of Eduard Bagritsky (1895-1934) and Dmitri Kedrin (1907-1945) in particular. An attachment to his roots came to form the basis of Agolli's poetic credo, in particular in *Devoll, Devoll*, Tiranë 1964 (Devoll, Devoll) which begins as follows:

Po, Devoll,
i tillë qenkam unë,
Paskam marrë baltën tënde arave,
Në një trastë leshi
ndënë gunë,
Për t'ia sjellë
Lidhjes së Shkrimtarëve.

(Yes, Devoll,/I'm one of them,/I gathered your mud from the fields/in a woollen sack/under my coat,/to carry it/to the Writers' Union.)

With the cycle *Baballarët*, Tiranë 1969 (The fathers), his verse, however, lost much of its spontaneity and tilted towards 'official' poetry in the service of ideology. A prime example of such Party panegyrics enjoying wide publicity and official acclamation was *Nënë Shqipëri*, Tiranë 1974 (Mother Albania). By the time he became a member of the Central Committee and head of the Writers' Union, Agolli's talent as a poet was well on the decline.

Like Kadare, Dritëro Agolli turned increasingly to prose in the seventies. His strength lies in the short story rather than in the novel, although an exception can be made for his satirical novel *Shkëlqimi dhe rënia e shokut Zylo*, Tiranë 1973 (The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo), now available in a French translation (Paris 1990). Zylo is the epitome of the bureaucrat in a socialist society who uses his position to wield influence and to save his own skin. With subtle wit and often folksy humour, Agolli traces the day to day activities of comrade Zylo and his companion Demka in all their absurdity. An earlier collection of his short stories, *Zhurma e erërave të dikurshme*, Tiranë 1964 (The noise of winds of the past), had the distinction of being banned and... 'turned into cardboard'.

Among other major contemporary prose writers are: the above mentioned **Petro Marko** from Dhërmi on the Himaran coast, who paved the road to modernity before Kadare and is now being rediscovered; historical novelist **Sabri Godo** (b. 1924) from Delvinë; short story writer **Naum Prifti** (b. 1932) from Kolonjë; novelist **Dhimitër Xhuvani** (b. 1934) born in Pogradec on Lake Ohrid; **Skënder Drini** (b. 1935) from Korçë, much influenced in style by Kadare; **Teodor Laço** (b. 1936) from Dardhë near Korçë; **Kiço Blushi** (b. 1943) from Korçë; **Neshat Tozaj** (b. 1943) from Vlorë; **Fatos Kongoli** (b. 1944) from Elbasan; the above-mentioned **Koço Kosta** (b. 1944) from the Lunxhëria region; **Nasi Lera** (b. 1944) from the Korçë region, noted as an excellent stylist; **Zija Çela** (b. 1946) from Shkodër; **Betim Muço** (b. 1947) from Tiranë; **Roland Gjoza** (b. 1950) from Tiranë; **Valter File** (b. 1954) from Ersekë; short story writer and poet **Preç Zogaj** from Lezhë (b. 1957); **Teodor Keko** (b. 1958); short story writer **Elena Kadare** (b. 1943) and novelist **Diana Çuli** (b. 1951) from Tiranë; and **Mimoza Ahmeti** (b. 1963), no doubt the best among women prose writers.

The gradual refinement of style and the diversification of themes in Albanian prose of the seventies and eighties have been paralleled in modern poetry, too. The aesthetic appeal of poetic language, the relative freedom of expression offered by verse and the opportunity to pursue one's fantasies in a society which has been seemingly obsessed with industrial output, manufacturing statistics and the construction of dams continue to attract a good many Albanian writers to poetry rather than to prose.

The best known of the contemporary poets of Albania to have solved the dilemma of the poet with a fixed mission is **Fatos Arapi** (b. 1930) from the port city of Vlorë, author of

philosophical verse, love lyrics and poignant elegies on death. His first two collections, *Shtigje poetike*, Tiranë 1962 (Poetic paths) and *Poema dhe vjersha*, Tiranë 1966 (Poems and verse) evinced a more modern verse form than that of his contemporaries. Child of the Ionian coast, Arapi has never lost his fascination with the sparkling waters of the sea, the tang of the salt air and the intensity of Mediterranean light, all of which flood his verse. Indeed, beyond the echoing pathos of much of his revolutionary verse production on industrial and political themes in later volumes, his true poetic vocation can be seen in the creation of an equilibrium between the harmony of the waves and the rhythmic impulses of his being. Criticized in the 1973 purge for the volume *Më jepni një emër*, Tiranë 1973 (Give me a name), which was 'turned into cardboard' too, he withdrew and fell silent as the poet he is until 1989.

Other leading poets are: **Koçi Petriti** (b. 1941) from Korçë; Kosovo-born **Adem Istrefi** (b. 1942) whose more traditional poetry is imbued with the epic traditions of Kosovo oral verse; **Ndoc Gjetja** (b. 1944), a transparent lyric poet from Lezhë; **Ndoc Papeka** (b. 1945) from Tropojë in the north; the passionate **Xhevahir Spahiu** (b. 1945) from Skrapar; **Natasha Lako** (b. 1948) of Korçë, **Bardhyl Londo** (b. 1948) from Lipë near Përmet; archeologist **Moikom Zeqo** (b. 1949) of Durrës whose intellectual and metaphoric verse has been inspired in good part by the lost grandeur of his ancient Dyrrachium; **Preç Zogaj** (b. 1956); and the gifted **Rudolf Marku** (b. 1950) from Lezhë, whose recent collection *Udhëtim për në vendin e gjërave që njohim*, Tiranë 1989 (Voyage to the place of things we know), was well received. Of the poets of the younger generation who have made a promising start, mention may be made of **Mimoza Ahmeti** (b. 1963) from Krujë; **Erind Pajo** (b. 1972) and **Ervin Hatibi** (b. 1974), both of Tiranë.

But the literature of Albania itself is only half the story of Albanian literature. In Yugoslavia, Albanian is spoken by at least two million people (as opposed to three million in Albania), the language now being second there only to Serbo-Croatian. The centre of the Albanian population is the tormented Autonomous Region of Kosovo (Alb. *Kosova*) where the Albanians with their extremely high birth rate now make up over 90% of the population. Prishtinë, the capital of Kosovo, has up to the present been able to vie with Tiranë in almost every way as a focal point for Albanian literary and cultural activity and as a publishing centre for Albanian literature. The future of Albanian culture in Yugoslavia is however uncertain.

The Albanian literature of Kosovo was late to develop. It was the founding in 1949 of the literary periodical *Jeta e re* (New life) which gave voice to the young generation of Albanian writers in Yugoslavia and served as an initial forum for literary publication. While some monographs were published in the fifties, it was not until the mid-sixties that Albanian and Kosovo Albanian literature began to appear in print in Yugoslavia on a significant scale. The extreme political divergence between Yugoslavia and Albania which erupted in 1948 made it evident to Kosovo Albanians from the start that they could not look to Tiranë for more than moral support in culture and education. The preservation and fostering of Albanian culture in Yugoslavia under often hostile conditions was of necessity to be the concern of Yugoslav Albanians themselves. The formidable problems posed by widespread illiteracy and dire poverty among the Albanians in Kosovo, as in Albania, were compounded substantially by an unwillingness on the part of the Serbian authorities in Belgrade for many years to give the Albanians access to education and cultural facilities in their own language. Full cultural autonomy was first achieved after much delay under the constitution of 1974, though only in Kosovo itself. In 1989/1990, however, Kosovo de facto lost its limited autonomy

and freedom and was placed under direct Serbian military occupation. Immediately after the dissolution of the Kosovo parliament in the summer of 1990, the only Albanian-language daily newspaper was banned as was all Albanian radio and television broadcasting in Kosovo. The situation has been particularly dire for Albanian writers and intellectuals there. They constitute the greatest threat to Serbian rule over the region under the populist leader Slobodan Milosevic who has shown nothing but contempt for the demands of equality and human rights for the Albanian minority.

Desiring to overcome the cultural isolation from which it suffers and which has increased dramatically since the repression of the 1981 and 1989 uprisings, the present generation of young Kosovo writers is eager to lap up foreign influence and currents of contemporary European thought which have been rejected off hand in Tiranë. At the same time, this much more eclectic literature has lost surprisingly little of its traditional Albanian flavour. Its strength and dynamism are a direct result of the need perceived by Kosovo Albanians to defend their cultural values in a region plagued by ethnic conflict, political turmoil and economic collapse. Despite such overwhelming problems, Kosovo Albanians have always enjoyed and taken full advantage of intellectual freedom and liberty of expression at the cultural level which has enabled Albanian culture in Kosovo to develop much more rapidly and freely over the last two decades than in Albania itself.

Among the classic prose writers of the first generation were humourist **Sitki Imami** (1912-1983) from Gjakovë (Djakovica), **Hivzi Sulejmani** (1912-1975), born in Mitrovicë, who helped bring early Kosovo literature out of its regional focus and provinciality, **Ramiz Kelmendi** (b. 1930) from Pejë (Pec), and writer and dissident **Adem Demaçi** (b. 1936) of

Prishtinë, finally released in April 1990 after twenty-eight years in Serbian prison camps.

One of the leading contemporary prose writers of Kosovo is **Rexhep Qosja** (b. 1936), who is not only one of the most eminent and prolific literary critics in the Balkans, academician, and former director of the Albanological Institute in Prishtinë, but also author of anthologies and numerous scholarly monographs, including a three-volume history of Albanian literature of the Romantic period. Qosja has published one of the most widely admired and translated novels of recent years, *Vdekja më vjen prej syve të tillë*, Prishtinë 1974 (Death comes with such eyes). It is a work of original narrative technique and composition, 'thirteen tales which might constitute a novel'. The protagonist, Xhezairi Gjika, is a professional writer caught up in a frightening web of political intrigue, secret police, interrogation and torture, a world evincing definite yet subtly couched political allusions to the very real desperation felt by present-day Albanian intellectuals in Kosovo.

Among other prose writers of talent are the hermetic **Anton Pashku** (b. 1938) from Grazhdanik; **Nazmi Rrahmani** (b. 1941) from Ballovc near Podujevë, a prolific and popular novelist of Kosovo village life; **Teki Dërvishi** (b. 1943) of Gjakovë who, like Pashku, has penetrated the psyche of modern man with his novels and short stories; **Mehmet Kraja** (b. 1952) of Kështenjë in the coastal Kraja region of Montenegro; **Musa Ramadani** (b. 1944) from Gjilan; humourist **Arif Demolli** (b. 1949) of Gllogovicë, who since his imprisonment for a couple of years after the 1981 uprising has been able to publish little of his prose on the realities of Kosovan life; **Zejnullah Rrahmani** (b. 1952) from Ballovc near Podujevë, whose novel *Sheshi i Unazës*, Prishtinë 1978 (Ring Square) centred on the Kosovan obsession with liberty, on the death and resurrection of a city-state; and **Jusuf Buxhovi** (b. 1946) of Pejë whose novel

Shënimet e Gjon Nikollë Kazazit, Prishtinë 1982 (The notes of Gjon Nikollë Kazazi) evoked the figure of the eighteenth-century Gjakovan scholar who discovered the only surviving copy of the first Albanian book, Buzuku's 'Missal' (1555). The principle motif of the work is however not the life of Kazazi but the dramatic spread of the plague in eighteenth-century Gjakovë, an account not unsimilar to Albert Camus' *La Peste* 1947 (The plague).

Poetry has always been the vanguard of literature in Kosovo and has enjoyed more popularity among writers and the reading public there than prose. The writer widely considered to be the father of modern Albanian poetry in Yugoslavia, **Esad Mekuli** (1916-1993), was born not in Kosovo itself but in the legendary Montenegrin village of Plava on the Albanian border where national traditions are still held high. Mekuli, founder of the above-mentioned literary periodical *Jeta e re* (New life), whose editor-in-chief he remained until 1971, is a committed poet of social awareness whose outrage at social injustice, violence, genocide and suffering mirrors that of the pre-revolutionary verse of **Migjeni** (1911-1938) of Shkodër. Among the other 'classics' of modern verse in Kosovo are: the pensive **Enver Gjerqeku** (b. 1928) of Gjakovë; **Din Mehmeti** (b. 1932); tender lyric poet **Adem Gajtani** (1935-1982) from Podujevë; **Fahredin Gunga** (b. 1936) of Mitrovicë; **Azem Shkreli** (b. 1938), from the Rugova mountains near Pejë who is head of Kosovo Film Studios in Prishtinë; **Rrahman Dedaj** (b. 1939) of Podujevë; the versatile **Ali Podrimja** (b. 1942) of Gjakovë, probably the best-known contemporary Kosovo Albanian poet of all; **Eqrem Basha** (b. 1948) from Dibër; and critics **Sabri Hamiti** (b. 1950) and **Agim Vinca** (b. 1947), the latter from Veleshtë near Struga in Macedonia whose popular lyrical verse is firmly anchored in the soil of his place of birth.

In Yugoslavia, where the situation is now eminently precarious for the very survival of Albanian culture, writers and intellectuals have taken the lead, as elsewhere in eastern Europe. Literary critic **Ibrahim Rugova** (b. 1945) now heads the Democratic League of Kosova, the fledgling Kosovan alternative to the Serbian police state, and Rexhep Qosja has nolens volens become father figure and spokesperson of the psyche of the nation. Over the past ten years since the 1981 uprising, Albanian writers and intellectuals in Yugoslavia have been intimidated, humiliated, physically mishandled and imprisoned with or without trial on an almost systematic basis. Should multi-party elections and a democratic government ever come to Kosovo, which at present seems doubtful, these two writers could once again evince the predominance of literary and cultural activity in the process of democratization and renewal in eastern Europe.

In Albania itself, which has often been referred to by the press as the 'last bastion of Stalinism', political change in 1990 was as dramatic as it had been in the other countries of eastern Europe the year before. December 1990 saw the introduction of political pluralism and the first tentative steps towards democracy after decades of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and isolation.

Has there ever been dissent in modern Albanian literature? Yes and no. In a 'pro memoria' addressed to Enver Hoxha, writer **Kasëm Trebeshina** (b. 1926) warned the Albanian leader as early as 5 October 1953 that his cultural policies were leading the nation down the road to disaster. After seventeen years in prison, a comparatively light sentence as he notes, and twenty years of silence, Trebeshina has now resurfaced with a handful of other writers and artists [among whom **Lazër Radi** (b. 1916), **Kapllan Resuli** (b. 1935), **Frederik Rreshpja** (b. 1941), **Fatos Lubonja** (b. 1951),

Visar Zhiti (b. 1952) and **Bashkim Shehu** (b. 1955)] to see his prediction come true. Dissent there was - rare such acts of self-destruction and unspoken thoughts in the hidden recesses of the minds of every intellectual. But opposition? No. In an interview with the Voice of America in February 1991, Dritëro Agolli stated that all Albanian writers were conformists. In a sense he is right, and understandably so in view of the level of political control over the actions and very thoughts of all intellectuals, a control unparalleled in Europe and perhaps anywhere on earth. Every volume of poetry went through the hands of ten to fifteen politically vigilant reviewers before publication, every drama at least thirty (which helps explain the absence of good Albanian theatre). Never has there been an Albanian *samizdat* or even a publishing house in exile. Ties with the outside world were reduced by the Party to an absolute minimum and no Albanian writers, with the exception of Ismail Kadare, were permitted to go abroad. For forty-five years, Albania was a different planet, cut off from the world we know. Splendid isolation? No! There is now so much to catch up on and many uncertainties about what the future holds. But one thing can be said for sure. The most interesting period in the history of Albanian literature has just begun.

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A SURVEY OF RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Dhimitër Shuteriqi (ed.)
History of Albanian literature
[*Historia e letërsisë shqiptare*].
Tiranë. Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë. 1983.
629 pages.

The pressing need for a comprehensive and reliable history of Albanian literature has come one decisive step closer to being fulfilled by *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare* (History of Albanian literature), assembled by a team of scholars from the Institute of Linguistics and Literature of the Albanian Academy of Sciences, under the direction of Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi. The new literary history, which carries the blessing of the ruling state and party authorities, is an improved and much-expanded version of the two-volume *Historia e letërsisë shqipe* (History of Albanian literature, 1959, 1965), which was not only outdated but frankly unreliable, as are virtually all secondary sources of Albanian literature to date. It is divided into three sections: 1) old Albanian literature, 2) Albanian literature of the Rilindja or national renaissance, and 3) Albanian literature of the 1912-1939 period. Each is introduced by a chapter setting the material in its cultural and historical perspective.

The section on old Albanian literature provides treatment not only of the earliest Christian writers of northern Albania, such as Gjon Buzuku, Pjetër Budi, Frang Bardhi and Pjetër Bogdani, and of the eighteenth-century poets of the Moslem tradition, but also a survey of Latin humanists of Albanian origin and of the far from negligible production of the Arbëresh writers of southern Italy. The most extensive coverage, however, is given in the second section to the literature of the so-called Rilindja period, with stress as always on the patriotic virtues of the writers of the period rather than on their literary merits. This

approach is taken consciously and conforms to the party's stance that literature must serve the masses - i.e. in Albania's case, that any valid literary production must serve the cause of national independence and consolidation. Although it might be argued that scholars from socialist Albania have a tendency to idealize the ardent patriotism of nineteenth-century writers and to ignore an objective evaluation of their literary production, it cannot be denied that the nationalist element was predominant in the writing of a people struggling for independence from the decaying Ottoman Empire. Indeed, the very fact that a poet chose to write in Albanian at the time constituted in itself an act of political defiance against the Sublime Porte's edict banning Albanian-language books and schooling. It is not surprising, therefore, that Albanian critics still emphasize patriotism as a criterion of literary merit, a notion quite foreign to Western literature.

New is the third section on literature of the independence period up to World War II, including coverage for the first time of the long-neglected poet Lasgush Poradeci, one of the greats of the Albanian Parnassus, whose pantheistic verse, reminiscent of Eminescu, marks one of the high points of twentieth-century Albanian literature. His aesthetic objective of *l'art pour l'art* is in distinct contrast to the nationalist fervour of Fan Noli or the prerevolutionary outrage of Migjeni, not to mention the often drab uniformity of literary production in the fifties and sixties. In contrast to the earlier edition, more than passing reference is also made - though not devoid of polemics - to several of the Catholic writers of the pre-war period, in particular to Gjergj Fishta, who was once acclaimed as the national poet of Albania and whose clericalism and alleged pro-fascist leanings precipitated his fall to oblivion.

The index of authors and works as well as the selective bibliography contribute to making the new and, from the

Marxist-Leninist view at least, definitive history of Albanian literature indispensable as a basic reference for all Albanologists.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 59.3 (summer 1985)

Alexandre Zotos (ed.)
Anthology of Albanian poetry
[*Anthologie de la poésie albanaise*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. 8 Nëntori. 1983. 417 pages.

Poetry has always been the élan vital of Albanian literature; original prose is a much more recent genre, and drama, with very few exceptions of dubious quality, was virtually unknown before the twentieth century.

The present anthology of Albanian verse, complemented by parallel anthologies of prose and short stories (*Anthologie de la prose albanaise*, 1983; *Anthologie du récit albanais*, 1982), was compiled and translated in Albania for the Western reader. It comprises 230 poems by forty poets from the seventeenth century to the present day and includes brief biographical notes on all the writers, though with many of the inaccuracies of detail endemic to the Albanian literary review *Les Lettres Albanaises*, in which much of the verse first appeared in French translation. Readers of French with an interest in Albanian literature have indeed always been able to consider themselves more fortunate than readers of English, Spanish or German. Not only have French translations of many works of prose and poetry appeared in the above-mentioned journal and in separate Albanian editions, but at least eight of the major prose works of Ismail Kadare have been published in France.

Included in the *Anthologie de la poésie albanaise* are folk poetry, passages of verse from the religious writers of the seventeenth century, a sampling of the classic nineteenth-century poets in the long-standing tradition of romantic nationalist, and a good representative selection of modern poets from socialist

Albania. Among the latter are Llazar Siliqi, Fatos Arapi, Dritëro Agolli (president of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists), and Kadare, the only Albanian author to have gained wide international reputation. Also of note are two poets of the Greek minority, Pano Çuka and Niko Kacalidha, as well as two of Albania's very first generation of women poets, Natasha Lako and Zhuljana Jorganxhi. Lacking for a full view of contemporary Albanian verse, which makes up two-thirds of the anthology, are the imaginative and more experimental poets of Kosovo, the Albanian-speaking region of southern Yugoslavia, whose production might be said to offer a wider range than that of poets from Albania itself, and the Arbëresh writers of the Albanian-language minority in southern Italy.

Poetry is a very individualistic matter and often difficult to reconcile with a staunchly communist society. The position of the poet must, as a matter of course, conform to the function assigned to him or her by the powers that be. The critic Dalan Shaplllo in his preface defines the mission of poetry here as serving the masses, giving them spiritual sustenance and emotional satisfaction. The goal is of course ubiquitous in post-war Albanian literature, though fortunately combined with enough individuality on the part of the poets to save modern Albanian verse from the sterile panegyrics which party dogmatists often long for. The dilemma of a poet with an assigned mission has been solved with a good deal of diplomatic creativity. Most contemporary poets have managed to portray themselves as communist, nationalist and yet as individuals. The present volume offers the Western reader direct access to the hearts and minds of the best-known Albanian literati.

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Nebil Duraku (ed.)
The writers of Kosovo '43 - '83
[*Shkrimtarët e Kosovës '43 - '83*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1984. 424 pages

Is it peace, social harmony and a villa overlooking Lake Geneva that give birth to intensive literary production? Recent Palestinian and Northern Irish literature would seem to indicate the contrary. It is more likely in a climate of civil strife, ethnic tension and suffering that the Muse is disposed to visit, if the Elect have managed to survive.

The southern Yugoslav region of Kosovo is one such area we can expect a lot of in the years to come. The stage has been set. The ethnic Albanians who now make up 78 percent of the population and who have a birthrate that would make even the Irish dizzy are at odds with the Yugoslav federation. For the first time, universal education has taken effect in a region which until recently had more in common with the Third World than with Europe, and the line of unemployed graduates in the humanities is becoming disturbingly long. Was it not bad food at the university restaurant in Prishtinë that set off the full scale uprising of 1981, which led to the imposition of martial law in the region? The authorities in Belgrade are keeping a watchful eye on their Albanian compatriots. It is the tense political atmosphere in Kosovo that makes the absence of any reference to current politics and nationalism so conspicuous in the present volume.

'The Writers of Kosovo '43 - '83' marks the fortieth anniversary of publishing in Kosovo and constitutes the most extensive work to appear to date on modern fiction in the region. It was edited by the Kosovo Writers Union under the

guidance of Nebil Duraku, a reputed novelist himself. Duraku states that the work is not an anthology in the conventional sense of the word, compiled according to specific criteria, but rather a presentation of the widest possible range of Kosovo authors. Together with biographical and bibliographical material, it contains excerpts from the writings of no fewer than 198 Kosovo writers: 149 Albanians, 38 Serbs and 11 Turks, a strict reflection of the region's official ethnic balance. Serbo-Croatian and Turkish-language editions of the present volume are said to follow.

Represented are not only the classic authors of modern Albanian verse in Kosovo such as Enver Gjerqeku, Din Mehmeti and Esad Mekuli, and novelists of note such as Nazmi Rrahmani and Hivzi Sulejmani, but also a great number of the rising generation of restless, but of necessity apolitical young writers, most of whom are members of the Kosovo Writers Union. The selections are short, but sufficient to show how definitively Albanian literature in Kosovo has detached itself from the nationalist romanticism of the past and lunged towards an uncertain future.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 60.1 (winter 1986)

Ismail Kadare
Doruntine
[*Qui a ramen  Doruntine?*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1986. 175 pages

Once again Ismail Kadare plunges into Albania's legendary past, legendary in the purest sense. The story of Constantine and his sister Doruntine, alternatively known as Garentine, is one of the best-known in Albanian folklore - simple, yet as we see, with many possibilities:

An old woman had nine sons and one daughter. Eight of the sons had already died by the time the daughter was to marry a distant suitor. Because the aging mother was apprehensive about giving her consent to the marriage and thereby losing her daughter too, perhaps forever, the only surviving son, young Constantine, made a solemn pledge (*besa* in Albanian) to his mother to bring his sister back whenever the mother should express the desire to see her. Time passed, but of the surviving members of the bereft lineage, it was Constantine who died first. The old woman, now alone, regretted her decision, longed for her daughter, and cursed the dead Constantine for having broken his *besa*. Thereupon, Constantine, faithful beyond the grave to his pledge, rose from the tomb, mounted his horse, and set off in the night to find his sister, whom he returned to the arms of their dying mother.

Such is the Balkan legend which Kadare has skilfully transformed into the period thriller 'Doruntine' or 'Who brought Doruntine Back?' The action revolves around Captain Stres, a

minor official in mediaeval Albania who is responsible for sorting out the facts of the case and preparing a report: the daughter's unexpected arrival from distant Bohemia on a misty October night, the sudden death of mother and daughter, persistent rumours of an incestuous relationship - a desire so strong as to overcome death itself - the gravestone ajar, devious attempts by Church and State, and finally, a suspect. But who did bring Doruntine back? Those who enjoyed Umberto Eco's *Name of the rose* will not be disappointed by the atmosphere of mediaeval intrigue which Kadare offers.

Jusuf Vrioni's translation of yet another of Ismail Kadare's voyages into the myths and mists of his country's past is eminently palatable when compared to many translations from Tiranë, which often have the effect of discouraging interested foreign readers once and for all from delving into the pleasures of Albanian literature. It is to be hoped that not only Ismail Kadare, but also other contemporary Albanian novelists and poets will soon find their deserved place on English-language bookshelves. For the time being, aside from Kadare's *The general of the dead army*, Western readers will have to content themselves with French translations.

First published in: World Literature Today 60.2 (spring 1987)

Ismail Kadare
Epoch of writings
[*Koha e shkrimeve*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1986. 408 pages

Several completely different epochs of Albania's 'haunted history' are unravelled in Kadare's *Koha e shkrimeve* (Epoch of writings), a collection of two shorter novels, eight short stories and three sketches of his recent travels.

The first novel *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (The wedding procession turned to ice) evokes the explosive events of the Albanian uprising in the southern Yugoslav province of Kosovo in March/April 1981. The Albanian demand for republic status within the Yugoslav federation met with severe reprisals and the imposition of martial law by the Serbian authorities in Belgrade. Tension between the Albanians and Serbs, who have shared the plains of Kosovo for centuries, reached yet another tragic zenith that year; two peoples pitted against one another instead of united in a marriage of harmonious co-existence. It is to a such a union, rendered impossible by circumstance, that the title of the novel alludes. According to legend, the 'ora', spirits of Albanian mythology, would turn a wedding procession to ice before it reached the bride's home in order to impede what was simply not to be.

Kadare's allegory hovers over an unpleasant reality. We follow two days in the life of Teuta Shkreli, surgeon at a Prishtinë hospital during the bloody events, who finds herself caught up in a web of intrigue and incrimination. Who was responsible for the extra beds being set up in the ward the night *before* the uprising? Who removed the list of patients' names from the hospital files? Who was providing medical care to

enemies of the State? And were Serbians being sterilized by Albanian doctors, or vice versa? Teuta, aware of impending repression, senses that her allegiance to her people and to her profession outways her passive loyalty to the State.

Kadare is openly tendentious in this novel, in particular in his description of drunken Serbian ruffians longing for the good old days of Rankovic, the head of the Yugoslav security police, who was responsible for the systematic persecution of the Albanian population until his dismissal in July 1966. But one could not expect an Albanian writer of Kadare's stature to remain indifferent to an Aeschylian tragedy which has taken place so recently and to which the final act has yet to be written.

Viti i mbrapshtë (The bad year) takes us back to 1914, a dark page not only in the annals of European history, but a chaotic and decisive year in the struggle of the fledgling Albanian State for survival. What evils did the comet crossing the Albanian skies portend? It was anarchy that reigned and not the German Prince Wilhelm zu Wied, the choice of the European powers, who after much delay, disembarked at the port of Durrës (Durazzo) in March 1914 to accept the crown in his unknown little kingdom. His government under Turhan Pasha, composed for the most part of rivalling feudal landowners, however, controlled only a small part of the country and the proposed international control commission was unable to cope with the multitude of conflicting interests, not simply among the Albanians themselves, but also among the French, British and Dutch 'military advisors' and the ever expanding neighbouring States. In the midst of such chaos, rumours spread like wildfire. Was Prince Wilhelm to have himself circumcised as a gesture of good will towards the majority Moslem community, or had he perhaps been circumcised in secret already? Who knew but his wife, and perhaps the lovely Sara Stringa whose parties and receptions were the focus of social life for the rather skimmed

crème de la crème of Albania's newly improvised capital? As the warlords continued their struggle for power in the mountains, and Montenegrin, Serbian and Greek forces descended upon the country, the resident diplomatic corps was busy trying to interpret the possible significance of a plate of baklava presented to the British mission by the Turkish consul. After six months of inglorious rule, the well-meaning Prince was to set sail from Durrës, leaving a regency council to cope with the country's affairs, and the mysterious comet gradually sank below the horizon.

Of the short stories, *Sjellësi i fatkeqësisë* (The bearer of ill-tidings) once again takes up the theme of the individual ironically entangled in the machinery of overriding interests of State as Haxhi Mileti, a travelling salesman in the Ottoman Empire, purveys his veils to the outlying Balkan provinces.

Appendixed are sketches of Kadare's recent travels to his home town of Gjirokastër, to neighbouring Greece and to Paris where he records his impressions of meetings with actors Marcello Mastroianni and Michel Piccoli among others.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 61.4 (autumn 1987)

Ismail Kadare
Chronicle in stone.
London. Serpent's Tail. 1987. 288 pages

In 1971, the year of the publication of *The general of the dead army*, the first of his major works to be translated into English, Ismail Kadare published the novel *Kronikë në gur* (Chronicle in stone). The chronicle is that of the beautiful city of Gjirokastër in southern Albania under occupation during the Second World War. Known to the Greeks as Argyrocastron, the fabled city with its lofty fortress manors of stone looming from the mountainside over narrow cobblestone alleys, was successively occupied, as much of Albania at the time, by the Greeks, the Italians and the Germans.

Chronicle in stone offers not so much a portrayal of the grim historical events of a city under occupation, but a compelling mixture of the childhood observations, impressions and fantasies of an Albanian boy. Ismail Kadare, it might be noted, was himself born in Gjirokastër in 1936, as was the inscrutable Enver Hoxha a generation before him. Autobiographical in inspiration at least, the novel follows the young lad through the streets of his occupied city and through the realms of his own imaginary world as he views events and as he overhears and interprets bits of gossip, conversations and local superstitions. A neighbour he sees as Lady Macbeth; a cabbage in the market takes on the form of a severed head. Passing troops become Crusaders until he and his friends grow up to join a band of partisans, and the world of childhood fantasy finally gives way to that of our often savage maturity.

It remains to be seen whether the legendary and mythical reality of Ismail Kadare can catch the attention of the English-

speaking public, as has that of Colombian best-seller Gabriel García Márquez, with whom a certainly convenient, though perhaps delusive parallel has recently been drawn.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 61.4 (autumn 1987)

Lasgush Poradeci.
The death of the pelican
[*Vdekja e nositit*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1986. 278 pages

At the end of 1987 the last great classic of 20th century Albanian verse, Lasgush Poradeci, expired at the age of eighty-seven. He had lived the final years of his life in his beloved town of Pogradec on Lake Ohrid, not far from the Yugoslav border, tending his garden à la Candide and studying the ever-changing moods of the lake. The rhythmic and gentle lapping of the waves had always been among the fundamental sources of his pantheistic verse.

Poradeci was born in Pogradec in 1899, being three days older than the 20th century, as he once remarked. He attended a Romanian-language school in Monastir (Bitola), Macedonia, a French Catholic lycée in Athens and the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest, where a sizeable colony of Albanian exiles had arisen. His stay in Bucharest was to have a decisive influence on his literary development. It was there that he met and befriended the Albanian romantic poet Asdreni (1872-1947), began publishing verse in various Albanian-language periodicals (*Shqipëri e Re* of Constanza and *Dielli* of Boston among others) and revealing a certain theosophical affinity to the Romanian lyric poet Mihai Eminescu. A scholarship provided by the Fan Noli government in 1924 enabled him to continue his studies of Romance and Germanic philology in Graz, Austria. From 1934 to the end of the war, he taught secondary school in Tiranë and thereafter worked for the state-owned Naim Frashëri Publishing Company until his retirement. His two major collections of poetry, *Vallja e yjve* (The dance of the stars) and *Ylli i zemrës* (The star of the

heart), were published in Romania in 1933 and 1937 respectively.

Though lauded by many a critic and connoisseur, this romantic aesthete, devoid of any redeeming ideological values, never enjoyed the total approbation of post-war Marxist dogmatists. An eclectic child of his age, Poradeci was and remains one of the many paradoxes of southeastern European literature. Kosovo critic Rexhep Qosja notes aptly that he felt like a Romantic, thought like a Classic, was as solitary and spiritually hermetic as a Symbolist and as precise as a Parnassist in the form of his verse. His stylistic finesse was indeed decisive in enriching and diversifying Albanian poetic metres.

Poradeci's position in Albanian literature has never been precisely defined. He had little in common with his contemporaries: the romantic Asdreni, the political Fan Noli or the messianic Migjeni, and imbued Albanian letters with an exotic element of pantheistic mysticism, introducing what he called the metaphysics of creative harmony. What other Albanian poet of his period would have devoted so much energy to the study of Sanskrit to comprehend the Veda?

Vdekja e nositit (The death of the pelican) is the first major edition of Poradeci's work to date and a befitting testament. Its editor, Kosovo poet and critic Sabri Hamiti, laments however that it is not yet his *opera omnia*. A few of the Albanian periodicals of the forties in which he published are not accessible for one reason or another and some of his later work is generally omitted, said not to be up to the standards of the Bucharest editions. The present volume offers, nonetheless, an unprecedented collection: 106 poems, an overview of criticism, notes from an interview with the aging poet in 1980 and a bibliography.

First published in: World Literature Today 62.2 (spring 1988)

Ismail Kadare
The great winter
[*Der große Winter*].
Kiel. Neuer Malik. 1987. 444 pages

The harsh winter of 1960/61 was indeed a momentous one in post-war Albanian history. It was that year which marked the break between Nikita Khrushchev and Enver Hoxha, and saw the definitive withdrawal of Albania from the Eastern bloc. Hoxha, after some stealthful manoeuvring in an internal power struggle in the fifties, had originally thrown the lot of his people in with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact to counter Tito's encroaching influence over the tiny Balkan state. Albania was not destined to become a republic in the Yugoslav federation, and the Soviet Union was more than willing to play the *deus ex machina*.

The winds of change, however, swept the communist world. When Khrushchev stopped grain deliveries in 1960 to show his displeasure at the Sino-Albanian alliance, Enver Hoxha countered haughtily, "We will eat grass rather than give in!" The humiliation for the proud but impoverished Albanians was particularly acute in view of a now famous remark Khrushchev had earlier made on a visit to Albania that mice in the grain silos of the Soviet Union consumed more grain than Albania was able to produce. Once again the Albanians were forced to fend for themselves, this time fully aware that they had no direct allies but the distant Chinese. Tension climaxed as Hoxha openly accused the Soviet Union of colonial politics.

'The Great Winter' portrays these moving events on two levels: the political and the personal, from the negotiating table in the Kremlin to the homes of the simple people of Tiranë.

The principal character of the novel is Besnik Struga, a Tiranë journalist, who finds himself assigned to the Albanian delegation as an interpreter and departs for Moscow as the first snows of the great winter descend over Eastern Europe. There he takes part in negotiations, receptions and high-level secret talks, experiencing political intrigue and power politics at first hand. Kadare has skilfully reconstructed much of the dialogue from the minutes of actual negotiations and from the memoirs of Enver Hoxha, offering us a unique glimpse into the machinery of the communist world of the period. The effect of his stay in Moscow is so shattering to Besnik Struga that his engagement to his girlfriend Zana, waiting at home in Tiranë, must be broken off.

Besnik is but one of many touched by the course of politics. Kadare also evokes a host of secondary figures from street-sweepers to aging exponents of the bourgeoisie caught unawares by the events of the great winter. Albanian students pursuing advanced education at the universities of Moscow and Leningrad are forced to interrupt their studies in mid-term and return home. The Soviet Union recalls all its advisors and, after tense negotiations, concedes to abandoning its strategically vital submarine base of Pashaliman ("Pasha's harbour") near Vlorë. Economic and political relations are definitively ruptured. Indeed nothing has marked the Albanian people in the last thirty years more than this break from the domineering and protective embrace of Holy Mother Russia. The novel concludes:

"At the beginning of March, following a storm surpassing in strength all the snowstorms of the winter, thousands of people clambered onto their roofs and balconies to fix TV antennas broken off or bent in the wind... But the TV antennas, the roofs themselves and the surrounding open countryside were still there. For

this reason perhaps, as they prepared to climb down again, the people shook their heads as if to say, 'Well, it was quite a winter anyway'."

The German version of Kadare's political epic is eminently palatable. It is, however, a sad commentary on the state of the art of translation to note that the translator of the *Great Winter*, who no doubt spent as much time rendering this epic novel into German as Ismail Kadare did writing it originally, is not even referred to by name. The same is true of the recent English edition of *Chronicle in Stone*. The curt reference "from the Albanian" is by no means sufficient to give credit where credit is due.

A minor note of criticism to this otherwise successful edition should also be made of the use of an acute accent on the author's name, handy at most in French, but quite superfluous in German or English and non-existent in Albanian, giving Balkan author Kadare (stress on the last syllable) an unfortunately Levantine air.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 62.3 (summer 1988)

Ali Podrimja
Happy ending
[*Fund i gëzuar*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1988. 72 pages.

The Albanian-language poet Ali Podrimja was born and raised in Gjakovë (Djakovica), a dusty oriental town in the southern Yugoslav autonomous region of Kosovo at the foot of the northern Albanian Malësia e Madhe range, a beautiful town known for its artisans and the purity of its Albanian. Like many other Kosovo Albanian literati of his age group (he was born in 1942), Podrimja studied Albanian language and literature in Prishtinë. Author of over a dozen volumes of verse since 1961, he has now found his niche in the literary establishment of Kosovo and is recognized both there and in Albania itself as a leading and innovative poet. His 1982 collection *Lum Lumi*, in particular, is said by some to have marked a turning point in contemporary Kosovo verse.

Fund i gëzuar (Happy ending) constitutes yet another outburst of Podrimja's Sisyphean obsession with the destiny of mankind, his unceasing and ironic attempt to grasp the needle of existence in a haystack of allegorical dichotomies - the past vs. the present, the peripheral vs. the nuclear, myth vs. reality, the specific vs. the general. The present volume, pursuing, though no doubt not culminating this quest, contains fifty-four poems divided into five cycles.

The first cycle, *A ju kujtohet* (Do you remember), evokes elements of Albanian history and mythology and the protagonists thereof. Here, as so often, resistance to foreign tyranny and the defence of freedom enter the realms of the allegorical. The figure of Scanderbeg, the Albanian national

hero (1405-1468) who dared to oppose the Turks in the fifteenth century, has lost none of its vitality as a source of inspiration in Albanian literature.

The second and third cycles, *A ju dëgjon harrimi* (Can oblivion hear you) and *Rekuiem për pyllin e prerë* (Requiem for the felled forest), which form the core of the volume, search out the haunts of the Albanian diaspora in Italy and Greece. The poet, having sung the symbols of resistance and traditional village culture, is acutely aware that the heritage of the Albanian-speaking Arbëresh of Calabria and Sicily and of the Arvanites of Epirus and the Morea is now awash in a sea of global media and high technology, in which resistance is regarded by many as poignantly futile, to say the least. Rarely has a modern Albanian poet, with the exception of Arbëresh writers themselves such as Vorea Ujko, been able to express the historical and cultural experience of the Arbëresh with such profundity.

The fourth and fifth cycles of *Happy Ending*, *Këngë shendi* (Song of joy) and *Hija ime* (My shadow) delineate the social, economic, political and ethical crisis of contemporary society with a variety of themes, casting an often ironic glance upon the throes of fate, upon longing, suffering and utopia.

Podrimja is a laconic poet. His verse is compact in structure, and his imagery is direct, terse and devoid of any artificial verbosity. Every word counts. What fascinates the Albanian reader is his compelling ability to adorn this elliptical rocky landscape, reminiscent of Albanian folk verse, with unusual metaphors, unexpected syntactic structures and subtle rhymes. Metaphors indeed abound in his work. Dritëro Agolli, head of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists in Tiranë, once said of Podrimja that he spreads metaphors as you would spread sugar over a plate of baklava.

Form and structure have not ceased to evolve in the work of Ali Podrimja, but it is primarily the introduction and treatment of new themes, though firmly anchored within the context of his classic obsession, which make 'Happy Ending' more like a new beginning to contemporary Albanian verse on the dusty and troubled plains of Kosovo.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 62.4 (autumn 1988)

Ismail Kadare
The caravan of veils. Tales
[*Die Schleierkarawane. Erzählungen*].
Oda Buchholz & Wilfried Fiedler, transl.
Berlin (East). Volk und Welt. 1987. 180 pages.

The *Schleierkarawane* or 'Caravan of veils' comprises three historical tales in German translation by the well-known Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, all of which focus on Albania under the yoke of the Ottoman Empire.

"I am pleased to be able to report to the mighty Sultan, vicar of the Prophet on earth, that all women and maidens in the greatest empire on earth are veiled."

Such is the culmination of the tale originally entitled *Sjellësi i fatkeqësisë - Islamo nox* (The bearer of ill-tidings - Islamo nox). It was the will of the Sultan that all females of the Ottoman Empire, both to the east and west of the Bosphorus, be veiled. The women of the Balkans, in particular the dark-eyed maidens of the remote Albanian mountains, Moslems only by name, had not yet appreciated how shameless their behaviour was, and so the Sublime Porte was forced to act. In a whole summer of intense activity, seamstresses from ten Turkish cities prepared half a million veils for the stubborn Europeans. Once delivered to the main storehouse in Istanbul, the veils were carefully bundled and eventually loaded onto the backs of Haxhi Mileti's mules. At this point, Kadare's story takes its course. We follow the caravan of Haxhi Mileti on its highly political trek to Albania to distribute the oriental apparel to the European women of the Empire. Haxhi, who is a faithful servant of the Sultan, manages to suppress his doubts about the ethics of his journey and carries out the imperial order to the letter. Or does

he? On his return to Orman Çiftlik, he is to be arrested and thrown into prison for the rest of his days. Was it political intrigue that sealed his fate or was it indeed the 'curse of the Balkan women'? Kadare uses the figure of Haxhi Mileti to revive an almost forgotten chapter of women's history, one not devoid of ramifications in our times, as the plight of women in present-day Iran shows.

The second tale, *Komisioni i festës* (The celebration commission), takes us back to 19th century Albania, again in the grips of the Ottoman Empire. In minute detail, Kadare depicts the intensive preparations for a celebration to mark the reincorporation of Albania into the Empire after the quelling of an uprising, and the subsequent treacherous massacre of five hundred Albanian nobles and warriors. The story is based on one of the most tragic episodes of Albanian history. In 1830, after the Russian-Turkish war, the Sublime Porte decided once and for all to rid itself of the Albanian nobility which was constantly up in arms against the Empire and which made use of every opportunity for revolt. In August of that year, Mehmed Reshid Pasha arrived at Monastir (Bitola) to proclaim a general amnesty to the rebellious tribes. In the course of the celebrations to mark the amnesty, his troops encircled and massacred five hundred chiefs and their families, thus exterminating virtually all the nobility of southern Albania in one fell swoop. Kadare brings to life all the cynicism and cold-blooded mendacity of politics in a stagnating and autocratic system.

The third story is more intimate in nature though more extensive in scope. *Breznia e Hankonatëve* (The lineage of the Hankonis) traces in 78 episodes the rise of the Hankoni family in the southern Albanian city of Gjirokastër, the author's hometown. Kadare highlights their industriousness, their superstitions, their petty conflicts and rivalries, their successes and failures, following them from generation to generation over

a period of no less than two centuries. Once again, the author shows his skills not only in delineating a family history, but also in portraying an era buffeted by the ironies of history and the throes of fate.

Translations in this volume are by Oda Buchholz and Wilfried Fiedler, noted Albanologists at the GDR Academy of Sciences in East Berlin and co-authors of an Albanian-German dictionary and of the most extensive grammar of the Albanian language to date.

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Mensur Raifi (ed.)

Roads lead only one way. A survey of modern poetry from Kosova.

John Hodgson & Fiona Cullen, transl.

Prishtinë. Kosova Association of Literary Translators. 1988.
235 pages

Acutely aware of the necessity of overcoming the isolation, both within Yugoslavia and in Europe, in which the budding literature of Kosovo (Alb. Kosova) is languishing, the Kosova Association of Literary Translators has published an English-language version of a selection of modern verse from the predominantly Albanian-speaking autonomous region.

Roads lead only one way comprises 139 poems written originally in one of the three languages of Kosovo: Albanian, Serbo-Croatian and Turkish. Represented in the anthology are the contemporary Albanian poets Esad Mekuli, Enver Gjerqeku, Azem Shkreli, Rrahman Dedaj, Fahredin Gunga, Ali Podrimja and Eqrem Basha, the Serbian poets Lazar Vu kovic, Radoslav Zlatanovic and Darinka Jevric, and the Turkish poet Hasan Mercan.

In contrast to the last anthology of Kosovo verse to have appeared in translation, *Dega e pikëlluar / The withered branch* Prishtinë 1979, which included only two poems by each poet, the present work offers selections of five to twenty-three poems per author which enable the perspicacious reader this time to grasp at least something of the particular style and flavour of each writer. Also included in the book are an introduction by writer and critic Mensur Raifi and bio-bibliographical notes about each of the poets.

The longest selection in the anthology is devoted to Azem Shkreli, an admired Albanian-language poet and writer of short stories and novels who was born in the Rugova mountains near Pejë (Pec) in 1938 (not to be confused with the dramatist and poet Adem Shkreli, two years his senior). Azem Shkreli, now head of 'Kosovo Film Studios' in Prishtinë, is an intellectual poet who, like his contemporary, Ali Podrimja, though highly expressive, is by no means verbose. His urban perception of things has given new significance to the reexamination of his experience with rural life among the rugged hill tribes of the Rugova district at the foot of the 'Mountains of the Damned', their traditional wisdom and way of life. Critic Agim Vinca has described him as a poet of ideas and profound judgments. Shkreli's perception can be succinctly summarized in the existentialist conclusion of his poetic 'New Testament':

"Our age cannot dare to age without us."

The translations by John Hodgson (from the Albanian) and Fiona Cullen (from the Serbo-Croatian) are functional and sufficiently faithful. To rhyme or not to rhyme, however, is one of the eternal questions which arise and which sooner or later all translators of verse must confront. Is it acceptable to translate rhymed lyric poetry without a rhyme in order to convey the message as clearly as possible and thereby produce only a sort of interlinear prose, or is one to recreate verse with a rhyme in order to preserve the poetic dimension, though at the risk of distorting the meaning of the original?

The first school of thought seems to predominate nowadays, no doubt, among other reasons, because our impoverished age is no longer producing the sublime poet-translators of the past who, with the flick of a quill, were able to generate pages of verse similar or even identical in rhyme and metrics to the original. The rhymed English versions of Mekuli,

Gjerqeku, Shkreli, Dedaj and Basha which Hodgson has produced, while by no means excessively stilted and unpleasant, simply make one inquisitive about the missing imagery of the original rather than satisfy our craving for 'real poetry'.

It is generally accepted at any rate that, with a very few exceptions, 'real poetry' is only to be had in the original and that translations can provide but a pale reflection, a reality we must come to terms with. As the Hebrew poet Chayyim Nachmann Bialik once put it: 'reading poetry in translation is like kissing the bride through the veil'. This said, translation still remains an obvious necessity and *Roads lead only one way* constitutes a welcome and significant addition to the few English translations which exist of Kosovo poetry and Albanian poetry in general.

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Teodor Laço
All the rivers flow
[*Të gjithë lumenjtë rrjedhin*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1988. 380 pages.

The Albanian uprising in the southern Yugoslav autonomous region of Kosovo in 1981 put an end to cultural relations between the region and Albania itself. Before that date, the Albanian-language universities of Prishtinë and Tiranë exchanged publications, professors and lecturers, and (occasionally expurgated versions of) books from Albania were widely available in Kosovo reprints just as (occasionally expurgated versions of) Kosovo authors were republished in Tiranë. Since 1981, however, political, economic and cultural relations between the two halves of the Albanian nation have been virtually frozen. The situation is especially difficult for intellectuals in Kosovo since the very possession of literary publications from Albania is dangerous, and listening to radio and television programmes from Tiranë is a crime subject to imprisonment, both activities being regarded by the authorities in Belgrade as signs of rabid "Albanian nationalism", the so-called cause of the Kosovo problem. At the same time, Kosovo novelists and poets cannot survive and maintain their cultural identity and integrity without contacts with the motherland. If the present political stalemate continues much longer, Albanian literature may very well divide into two separate literatures, each going its own way. The first signs of such a division have already become evident. Writers on one side of the border for instance now often have no idea of what is going on '*përtej malit*' (over the mountain).

For the present, Rilindja publishing company in Prishtinë is allowed to republish one novel from Albania per year. This

year's choice has fallen upon Teodor Laço's latest work *Të gjithë lumenjtë rrjedhin* (All the rivers flow).

Prose writer and playwright Teodor Laço was born in 1936 in Dardhë near Korçë in southeastern Albania. He studied agricultural science in Tiranë in 1958 before devoting his energy and talents to literature. His first novel, *Tokë e ashpër* (Rough land), published in Tiranë in 1971, dealt with the problems of the collectivization of agriculture in mountain regions. He has since published nine collections of short stories and four other novels, two of which have been badly translated in Tiranë, one into English (*The face-up*, Tiranë 1980) and one into French (*Le pré des larmes*, Tiranë 1985). Together with Ismail Kadare, Dritëro Agolli, Nasi Lera, Zija Çela, Skënder Drini and Agim Cerga, he has gained a reputation as one of the most widely read contemporary Albanian novelists.

Të gjithë lumenjtë rrjedhin focuses on the construction of Soborë reservoir and dam needed to irrigate 7,000 hectares of land. Arsen Morina, a hydraulic engineer, has been entrusted with planning the project which requires daring solutions, innovative thinking and a good deal of courage to counter the timidity and conformism of local officials. His main opponent throughout the novel is Bani Bashari, president of the District Executive Committee, who after some initially minor differences of opinion, begins to fight him tooth and nail in order to preserve his own status. Their conflict is symbolic of that between creative activity and the impediments placed upon it by bureaucracy and traditionalist attitudes. Despite a number of setbacks and failures during the various stages of construction and the perils to the very existence of the project from the scheming of Bashari and the other engineers, the young Morina succeeds gradually in gaining the confidence of Besim Golemi, First Secretary of the Party, and of his colleagues, and the reservoir and dam are completed with success.

Laço's work is a classic novel of Socialist Construction, not unlike Soviet literature of industrialization of the thirties (Ehrenburg, Gladkov, Leonov). The parallel is no particular surprise if we bear in mind that Albania of the eighties has, with a minimum of foreign assistance and know-how, begun the same painful industrialization process that Soviet Russia initiated in the twenties.

The broad outlines of the novel and the portrayal of the main characters are faithful to this tradition: Arsen Morina, a thoroughly positive hero representing all the virtues of the New Man, the classic bad guy and weakling in the figure of Bani Bashari, the infallible guidance of the Party and the standard happy end. With respect to its basic plot structure, it cannot be denied that *Të gjithë lumenjtë rrjedhin* is highly conformist, though the work does provide us with excellent insight into conflict-solving and decision-making processes in contemporary Albanian society.

The aforementioned conformity is compensated for to some extent by certain details of character portrayal. In his delineation of the two main antagonists, Laço shows that he is eminently skilled in analyzing and highlighting traits of character and in maintaining dramatic tension, but his characters never actually exceed the good-guy vs bad-guy stereotypes sufficiently to make them credible human beings with both virtues and flaws.

The title "All the rivers flow" is symbolic. It reflects not only the significance of hydro-electric power stations and irrigation for the development and survival of the tiny Balkan country, but also the flow of creativity and courage, the coming of age, of a distinct society and culture.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 63.1 (winter 1989)

Ismail Kadare
The concert
[*Koncert në fund të dimrit*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1988. 704 pages

Since 1963, Ismail Kadare has established a firm reputation as the master of the Albanian novel. His first work, and perhaps still his best known, *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (The general of the dead army) dealt with the immediate post-war years, during which we follow an Italian general in the company of a priest to Albania to exhume and repatriate the remains of his fallen soldiers. Kadare's second great novel of modern Albanian history, *Dimri i madh* (The great winter), focused on events leading to the dramatic break of relations between tiny Albania and the mighty Soviet Union in 1961, the divorce between the elephant and the mouse.

This year, Kadare offers us a new epic of recent Albanian history in *Koncert në fund të dimrit* (Concert at the end of winter, Engl. *The concert*), the symbolic title of which alone leads us to assume a continuity with *Dimri i madh*. And so it is. Just as *Dimri i madh* observed and studied the rupture of relations with the Soviet Union in all its ramifications, *Koncert në fund të dimrit* constitutes a monumental review of Albania's equally dramatic break with Mao Tse Tung's China in 1978. Kadare indeed began the 700-page novel at the time of rupture of the Sino-Albanian alliance and only completed it in 1988.

Relations between China and Albania had begun to sour with China's gradual opening to the West in the seventies. Its historic invitation to President Nixon to visit the Middle Kingdom was more or less the last straw. Enver Hoxha and the Albanian Party of Labour ceased viewing their only ally as a

bastion of Marxism-Leninism and decried 'revisionism' once again. The political scenario was virtually the same as it had been for the rupture with the Soviet Union: an ideological divergence of views, power politics, a strong-willed Enver Hoxha and the final departure of Chinese specialists from their only stronghold in the Mediterranean. The basic fabric of *Koncert në fund të dimrit* and narrative techniques employed in it also show strong parallels to *Dimri i madh*. Indeed, Kadare's epic version of events of but a decade ago, revives many of the familiar characters from *Dimri i madh*: Besnik Struga, Skënder Bermema and Marku, all seventeen years older and wiser. The novel is of course not lacking in polemics and unfortunately not devoid of anti-Chinese overtones either. Passages which criticize Mao Tse-Tung, the Cultural Revolution, the persecution of intellectuals in China and Chinese attitudes to Albania occasionally lapse into a Fu Manchu cliché of the 'inscrutable' Chinese character - so different from the European!

Kadare loves and generously employs symbols. The little lemon tree delivered to Silva Dibra's door at the start of the novel begins to bear fruit at the conclusion.

"Silva looked at the little tree in compassion. The whole world resounded with the din of meetings, plots, orchestras and fears, whereas the lemon tree, ignored as it was out on a corner of the balcony, was looking after what it had been raised for as a seedling: the production of its own fruit... Lost in thought, Silva smiled. Perhaps the world seemed incomprehensible to the lemon tree, too, if it had a conscience at all. As she closed the door to the balcony, for some reason she recalled the words of old Mrs Hasije: 'The Chinese? There were no Chinese here. We only saw them in our dreams'."

The Albanians are avid readers of Ismail Kadare. Virtually all literary critics in Albania and in Kosovo put him at least several notches above every other Albanian prose writer. The present work in a first edition of 20,000 copies was sold out in Tiranë bookstores within hours of its appearance on the market at the beginning of September 1988. In Yugoslavia, on the other hand, Kadare is a 'persona non grata' for political reasons, in particular, no doubt, for the publication of his novel *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (The wedding procession turned to ice). It goes without saying that none of his works is available in Kosovo or in the other Albanian-speaking regions of the troubled Yugoslav federation at the moment, much to the distress of Albanian readers there.

First published in: World Literature Today 63.2 (spring 1989)

Din Mehmeti
Neither on earth nor in heaven
[*As në tokë as në qiell*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1988. 95 pages

Albanian literature can no longer be considered a marginal phenomenon in Yugoslavia, the product of an obscure national minority down in the corner somewhere. Albanian now indeed constitutes the second most widely-spoken language in the Yugoslav federation (after Serbo-Croatian), and the Albanian minority, despite all the political problems inherent in adjustment and recognition, is slowly beginning to make its impact felt on Yugoslav culture and European letters. Though literary prose in Albanian is recent and drama has long been weak, poetry has always enjoyed a solid tradition both in Albania and Kosovo. Publishing statistics also reflect this penchant for verse: in Tiranë about 40% of literary publications over the past few years have been poetry, in Prishtinë up to 80%, something quite unimaginable in the rational West.

Din Mehmeti is among the best-known classical representatives of contemporary verse in Kosovo. He was born in 1932 in the village of Gjocaj i Junikut near Gjakovë (Djakovica) and studied Albanian language and literature at the University of Belgrade. He now lectures at the teacher training college in Gjakovë. Although he has published some prose, literary criticism and a play, he is known primarily for his figurative poetry which has appeared since 1961 in twelve volumes. His most recent book, a collection of seventy-eight lyric poems, is entitled: *As në tokë as në qiell* (Neither on earth nor in heaven).

Mehmeti's verse is one of indigenous sensitivity. He relies, as does Ali Podrimja, also from Gjakovë, on many of the figures, metaphors and symbols of northern Albanian popular verse to imbue and stabilize his restless lyrics with the stoic vision of the mountain tribes. Despite the light breeze of romanticism which transfuses his verse, as critic Rexhep Qosja once put it, this creative assimilation of folklore remains strongly fused with a realist current, at times ironic, which takes its roots in part from the ethics of revolt in the tradition of Migjeni (1911-1938) and Esad Mekuli (b. 1916). Mehmeti's poetic restlessness is, nonetheless, not focused on messianic protest or social criticism, but on artistic creativity and individual perfection.

As në tokë as në qiell is divided into five cycles: *Trimat e këngës simë* (The heroes of my song), *Bishat e bardha* (The white beasts), *Kujtesa e letrave* (The memory of letters), *Barka ime mbahu* (May my bark hold), and *Këngë për vete* (Songs for myself).

The title of the fourth cycle *Barka ime mbahu* is perhaps symbolic of the presence of Albanian letters or of the Albanian people in Yugoslavia today. It derives from the poem 'Dialogue with the Lake' composed in Struga on Lake Ohrid, the Yugoslav-Albanian border, during the Struga International Poetry Festival in August 1987:

*The lake has grown dark
The lake has gone mad*

May my bark hold

*On this side are your cliffs
Of bones*

On the other side immortal dreams

May my bark hold

*You once searched for a way out
In your heart*

The cape of hope is afar

*The blood-red flowers
Will arrive*

May my barrack hold...

First published in: World Literature Today 63.2 (spring 1989)

Namik Ressuli

Albanian literature.

Boston. Pan-Albanian Federation of America Vatra. 1988.

105 pages

An informative and readable history of Albanian literature is one of the desiderata of all those interested in Albanian culture. For those who can read Albanian, the *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare*, Tiranë 1983 (History of Albanian literature), is by far the most extensive literary history to date. The English-speaking reader has had to content himself with several differing and incomplete histories of Albanian literature and will have to continue to do so. Stuart E. Mann's *Albanian literature, an outline of prose, poetry and drama* (London 1955) is outdated and Koço Bihiku's *History of Albanian Literature* (Tiranë 1980), falsely subtitled 'Albanian literature from its origins to the liberation of the country from the Nazi-Fascist occupation', does include the present-day literature of socialist realism up to 1977 from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, but excludes both the authors of the twenties and thirties ostracized from the Albanian Parnassus and the literature of Kosovo.

The present monograph, translated from the Italian and edited by Eduard Liço, is a short (42 pages) introduction to Albanian literature by Namik Ressuli (1912-1985), noted Albanologist and former professor at the Oriental Institute of the University of Naples. It surveys Albanian literature from its origins to 1943 with emphasis on the Catholic tradition of Shkodër, plus a cursory overview of post-war and Italo-Albanian writing. Appendixed to the work are commemorative lectures on four major literary figures: Naim Frashëri, Gjergj Fishta, Faik Konitza and Fan S. Noli.

Ressuli's work serves its purpose as an introductory survey of Albanian literature up to the Second World War. Major detractors of the book are, however, the numerous, often critical printing mistakes and the translation, with confusing sentences such as: "But often these facts, brought into a picture infinitely larger by reference to known personalities, who had already attained universality, reached beyond a closed environment, thus they too become pure universal poetry" (p. 37) and, more amusingly "Motivated and encouraged by all Albanians without distinction of faith, he died tragically in 1623..." (p. 13).

Although Ressuli's critical remarks about the quality of much of early post-war literature may be valid, and though it is his perfect right to laud the undoubtable artistic merits of Gjergj Fishta and other mostly forgotten writers of the Catholic tradition who are usually ignored or scathingly treated by Marxist critics in Tiranë, it is distressing in a book published in 1988 and a sign of a lack of touch with reality to ignore the quarter of a century following the war, the very period in which Albanian literature in Albania and Kosovo came into existence for more than a very small class of pre-war intellectuals. Like it or not, this is the only literature which has ever actually been read by the Albanian people.

In all fairness though, it must be noted that most literary histories, as with dictionaries, are outdated by the time they appear. Despite these drawbacks and restrictions, Liço is to be commended for having made Professor Ressuli's short though informative historical survey of Albanian letters available to the English-speaking public.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 63.2 (spring 1989)

Ismail Kadare
Aeschylus or the eternal loser
[*Eschyle ou l'éternel perdant*].
Alexandre Zotos, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1988. 128 pages

For centuries, indeed millenia, the Mediterranean, marginally Balkan Greeks and the Balkan, marginally Mediterranean Albanians have regarded one another with a good deal of mistrust and skepticism. The Greeks have often been fearful of their wild and politically unpredictable northern neighbours of predominately Moslem origin and turned their backs on what they regarded as a cultural wasteland beyond the Hellenic pale. The Albanians, for their part, have always had qualms about Greek chauvinism and cultural imperialism fostered primarily by the Orthodox church which, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, did its utmost to stifle all signs of independent cultural activity in southern Albania. Despite this long period of stagnation and hostility, Greco-Albanian relations have improved substantially over the last five years and led to renewed ties, as if with an old and forgotten acquaintance. The 'de jure' state of war between the two countries was terminated recently with reciprocal visits by political leaders from the two countries, territorial claims have been put aside and a new border crossing was opened. Trade and cultural relations have begun to flourish and the two peoples are rediscovering one another for what they have always been: neighbours. Even Enver Hoxha stressed this in one of his last works, a book on relations with Greece entitled *Dy popuj miq* (Two friendly peoples).

It is nonetheless somewhat of a pleasant surprise that Ismail Kadare too, known up to now for his novels of Albanian

history, short stories and poetry, should turn his attention southward and present us with *Eschyle ou l'éternel perdant* (Aeschylus or the eternal loser), an extensive and well-researched essay on the ancient Greek dramatist (c. 525-456 B.C.).

What has attracted Kadare to the father of tragedy whom he calls an eternal loser, a hybrid being, half bathed in light and half envelopped in eternal shade? Of the 80 plays Aeschylus wrote, only 7 have survived the centuries, for one reason or another. This fact alone offers enough scope for imagination and speculation. How is one to approach Aeschylus who is but a shadow of himself? What would the literary world be like with all his plays and is a world conceivable at all without him? Kadare revives the past masterfully and, on the basis of the little material available, delineates a plausible personality for the founder of classical tragedy.

Some of the pathos of ancient Greece indeed becomes more comprehensible, more obvious, when seen through neighbouring Albanian eyes. The exotic opulence of the royal court of Xerxes, as portrayed in *The Persians*, reminds one of Albania's long experience at the hands of the Sultans and the Sublime Porte a millenium later. The tragedy of the house of Atreus in the *Oresteia*, the torment of individual family members passed on from one generation to the next, finds its notable reflection in the Albanian 'besa', absolute fidelity to one's sworn duty and one's destiny, a custom which entangled generations in the northern Albanian Alps in bloody vendetta and wiped out whole populations. And does the Homeric epic not find its last scion in the heroic and epic poetry of the Albanians and southern Slavs?

Many are the parallels between such seemingly diverse countries and ages, but more intriguing are the parallels in this meeting of minds between the Greek tragedian and the Illyrian bard himself. Kadare writes,

"As with every great writer, Aeschylus was conscious of the fact that, with respect to officials who, whatever their rank may be, represented power, he was a prince, not only of art, but of all his nation. As such, he ranked higher than any statesman, and the destiny of Greece weighed perhaps more heavily upon his shoulders than upon all the mechanisms of the Greek State."

Eschyle ou l'éternel perdant (Alb. *Eskili, ky humbës i madh*) is not Kadare's only contribution to his country's rediscovery of Greece. He has translated the *Oresteia* into Albanian and was the major contributor to a recent anthology of modern Greek poetry (*Antologji e poezisë greke*, Tiranë 1986) for which he translated folk songs and popular verse from the Akritas cycle onwards, as well as the poetry of Kostis Palamas, Constantine Cavafy, Miltiades Malakasis, Lambro Porphyras, Kostas Ouranis, George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis. The result is, however, not always what one would expect of a writer of Kadare's stature. Constantine Cavafy would turn over in his Alexandrian grave on hearing the key line missing from his 'Waiting for the Barbarians': "And now, what will become of us without the barbarians? Those people were a kind of solution". Kadare's version for some reason omits the last sentence.

Even worse is his puzzling addition of a line Cavafy never wrote and which appears in no other translation of the latter's classic poem 'Ithaca'. Equating the voyage to Ithaca with the course of experience, aging and life itself, the Greek poet concludes: "Wise as you have become, with such experience, you will come to understand what these Ithacas mean." Kadare's translation concludes, "Wise as you have become, with such experience, you will come to understand what these Ithacas mean, you will come to understand what the Fatherland means."

One wonders what obscure nationalist forces have led Kadare to such a radically new interpretation of the 'old man of the city'. Could it be that even he, the prince of his nation in Aeschylian terms, has had to bow to the pressure of some narrow-minded party dogmatist, to "officials who represent power?"

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Koço Bihiku (ed.)

Studies in Albanian literature 2. Problems of the Albanian literature of socialist realism

[*Studime për letërsinë shqiptare 2. Probleme të letërsisë shqiptare të realizmit socialist*].

Tiranë. Akademia e Shkencave. 1988. 671 pages

Contemporary literature in Albania is referred to simply as the literature of socialist realism. Just as government in Albania is in the hands of one omnipotent party allowing for no alternatives, literature falls within the scope of one all-encompassing doctrine, that of socialist realism. There are no 'hundred flowers blooming' as Mao Tse-Tung once put it, but rather one sturdy young plant, centrally watered and fertilized, which can be quite captivating at times as its blossoms open one by one. There is nothing accidental about this flower and about the direction modern Albanian literature is taking. It is planned in advance, as far as possible, as is all social and political change in the country. In view of this, it is no wonder that theoretical and practical studies on literature are at least as essential to an understanding of contemporary writing and thought in Albania as actual literary production itself. Whereas critics in Western countries play a secondary role in that they (in theory) simply react to literary publications as they appear, it is the writers in Albania who have been the ones to react to the road paved for them by critics and theoreticians.

Volume 2 of *Studime për letërsinë shqiptare* (Studies in Albanian literature), published by the Institute of Linguistics and Literature of the Albanian Academy of Sciences, is devoted, as its subtitle indicates, to the "Problems of the Albanian literature of socialist realism." It constitutes a major collection of studies on contemporary literature in Albania, prepared by critics and

specialists in Tiranë under the direction of Koço Bihiku. Known outside Albania primarily for his *History of Albanian Literature* (Tiranë 1980), Bihiku also edited volume 1 of "Studies in Albanian literature" (Tiranë 1981) which was devoted to the "Problems of Albanian literature of the period of national renaissance (Rilindja)".

The first section of the present volume investigates various aspects in the evolution of modern Albanian literature, such as the 'reflection of socialist realism in novels of the seventies and the first half of the eighties', the 'formation of poetry in modern literature' and 'characteristics of short stories in the sixties'. It also attempts a 'theoretical generalization on the experience of Albanian literature under socialist realism'. The second section of the work contains studies analyzing the creative processes of some of the best-known established writers of modern Albanian letters: Shevqet Musaraj, Jakov Xoxa, Ismail Kadare, Dritëro Agolli, Dhimitër Shuteriqi, Sterjo Spasse and Kolë Jakova.

Of particular interest is the survey given by Tiranë critic Jorgo Bulo of the works and 'creative path of Ismail Kadare' who has been the focus of attention of much modern criticism. Kadare's talents both as a poet and prose writer have lost none of their innovative force over the last three decades and his courage in countering literary mediocrity has given proof that socialist realism in Albanian literature is flexible enough to account for the delicate problem of individuality. Critics of socialist realism have often noted the danger this doctrine purveys of wearing away at the creative and personal impulses of the individual and replacing them with a bland mush of conformity and uniform production. Where would European literature and culture be, for instance, without the spirit of non-conformism, without the individualist whose ideas could provoke and even outrage his or her readers? In Albania's case,

edifying voices are distinct enough but the subject matter is often conformist and repetitious by Western standards. Although one would certainly not characterize modern Albanian literature by its surfeit of non-conformists and eccentrics, it is nonetheless providing requisite scope for individual creativity and originality. Kadare is one case in point and there are others, though not necessarily the established classics of proletarian letters under study in this book.

Volume 2 of *Studime për letërsinë shqiptare* provides a rudimentary overview of the development and pervasion of Albanian socialist realism in the past quarter of a century and thus a key to a better appreciation of modern writing in Albania.

It is to be hoped that a third volume of "Studies on Albanian literature" will follow to venture into the unexplored territory of younger writers of the post-Kadare generation or to come to terms with the diverse and creative literature of Kosovo, much of which is considered beyond the pale of socialist realism and, though read with pleasure in Albania when available, is rarely commented upon publicly.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 63.4 (autumn 1989)

Bardhyl Londo
Only Ithaca
[*Vetëm Itaka*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1989. 119 pages

The Albanians are most at home in their rugged and inaccessible mountains. Like the Romans, they have always distrusted the sea which has brought them nothing but grief. And yet, Albania's poets have retained a curious fascination for Ithaca, the saga of Ulysses and for the sparkling azure waters of the Ionian. No other island occurs more often in Albanian verse than this isle of Homeric fulfilment and Cavafian futility. Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) and Sulejman Mato (b. 1941), two established poets of the Albanian south coast, have made use of the Ithaca motif to transform the rhythmic waves of the Ionian Sea, which Greece and Albania share, into the pulse of poetic being.

In this tradition follows Bardhyl Londo (b. 1948) from the village of Lipë near Përmet in the southern interior of Albania who has built up a reputation as a leading Albanian poet of the eighties. Londo studied language and literature at the University of Tiranë, taught school for a number of years in his native district of Përmet and now works for the Albanian literary and cultural journal 'Drita', issued fortnightly in Tiranë. His latest volume of verse, *Vetëm Itaka* (Only Ithaca), which is his first book to have appeared in Prishtinë, is a compendium of the best of his work from three recent collections published in Tiranë: *Hapa në rrugë*, 1981 (Steps in the street), *Emrin e ka dashuri*, 1984 (They call it love) and, in particular, his well received *Si ta qetësoj detin*, 1988 (How can I calm the sea) which was awarded last year's Migjeni Prize.

Londo's lyrics depart from the concrete: details and moments of existence he has experienced, lived through

intensely and transformed into verse in a controlled, erudite manner. His poetry, which is written in standard meters and mostly rhymed, melodiously echoes the rich traditions of Tosk verse to the extent that Tiranë critic Razi Brahimi has placed him at the crux between the classical Rilindja poet and thinker Naim Frashëri (1846-1900) and the influential poet of the soil, Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931), now head of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists.

Vetëm Itaka is divided into five cycles, as all volumes of contemporary Albanian verse seem to be: *Drejt teje kam vrapuar* (I ran towards you) evincing Londo's fascination with roads and travel, *Vdekja e kish harruar* (Death forgot him) with verse dedicated to his predecessors, Albanian poets of the past such as Andon Zako Çajupi, Ndre Mjeda, Naim Frashëri, Migjeni and Lasgush Poradeci, *Rebelimi i shkronjave* (The rebellion of letters), and *Fund vere* (End of summer), both thematically varied, and *Vetëm Itaka* (Only Ithaca) devoted primarily to the figures and symbols of ancient Greece.

Is Ithaca the prerogative of the poet, the traveller and dreamer? Should Ithaca not be considered foreign to Londo's wilful compatriots so firmly entrenched in their mountain homeland and to their often matter-of-fact literature of socialist realism? The poet insists:

*We are all a little like Ulysses,
Even if we may not have a Penelope
We do have an Ithaca!*

Indeed in the final poem of the collection he concludes:

Only Ithaca remains.

*Ithaca for the child, Ithaca for genius,
It, the eternal,
Dreams,
 love,
 life,
 death:
Ithaca - man himself.*

First published in: World Literature Today 64.1 (winter 1990)

Mimoza Ahmeti
Especially tomorrow
[*Sidomos nesër*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1989. 80 pages

Women writers and poets are no matter-of-course phenomenon on the literary scene in Albania, a traditionally Moslem country in which virtually all women were illiterate forty years ago. There is therefore some justification here in treating them as such rather than simply as writers and poets (who happen to be women).

The first volume of verse for adults published by a woman in Albania was *Ëndrra vashërie*, Tiranë 1963 (Girlhood dreams) by Adelina Mamaqi (b. 1945). Other contemporary Albanian women poets of note include: Zhuljana Jorgaxhi (b. 1946), Natasha Lako (b. 1948), Adelina Balashi from Korçë, Elsa Ballauri, Beatrice Ballici from Elbasan, and in Kosovo, Flora Brovina (b. 1949) and Edi Shukriu (b. 1950). Prose by women was even later to develop, the first Albanian novel to be published by a woman being *Një lindje e vështirë*, Tiranë 1970 (A difficult birth) by Elena Kadare (b. 1943), wife of noted novelist Ismail Kadare.

Mimoza Ahmeti (b. 1963) from the famed citadel town of Krujë, north of Tiranë, might almost be considered the second generation of women writers to have arisen in mountainous Balkan country. She finished her studies of language and literature in Tiranë in 1986 and now teaches literature. Her first volume of verse entitled *Bëhu i bukur*, Tiranë 1986 (Be beautiful), was well received by critics.

I had first heard her name mentioned by the literary critics not of Tiranë, but of distant Prishtinë on the other side of

the impervious border which is busy dividing one literature into two. "Something new on our literary horizon, young, female and full of talent," they whispered. It was through the billows of cigarette smoke which always seem to shroud the established (male) poets of Albania that I caught my first glimpse of Ahmeti in November 1989 as she entered the headquarters of the Union of Writers and Artists in Tiranë to take part in a round table discussion on contemporary Albanian verse. In her demure blouse, pleated skirt and white socks, she cut more the figure of lanky Mediterranean schoolgirl attending a British public school than a reputed Albanian poet. Her views were listened to attentively and by no means condescendingly as one might have expected of the older literati.

The vision of poetry of which Ahmeti spoke on that occasion is exceptionally well expressed in *Sidomos nesër* (Especially tomorrow), her second book. This new collection contains 59 poems on intensely personal though at the same time universal themes, which have proven her to be a virtuoso of poetic technique. The directly accessible and by no means verbose language of her verse as well as its rhythmic perfection do seem to rise above the occasionally limp poetic production of some of her male contemporaries. Symbolically perhaps, Ahmeti begins her collection with the simple stanza:

*"We are young plants,
To be found everywhere.
We have burst into blossom."*

from a poem entitled 'Song of my generation'. Whether the modest transformations and attempts at renewal underway in modern Albanian prose will also affect poetry and evince Ahmeti indeed as a new generation remains to be seen.

First published in: World Literature Today 64.1 (winter 1990)

Rrahman Dedaj
Poetry
[*Poezi*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1989. 284 pages

A poet in constant evolution and one who has contributed substantially to the modernization of Albanian verse in Kosovo is Rrahman Dedaj. Dedaj was born in 1939 near Podujevë and studied Albanian language and literature in Prishtinë before becoming executive editor of Rilindja Publishing Company. His poetic works are characterized by rich, emotive expression, almost mathematical precision in structure and semantics and by his search for a balance between tradition and modernity.

Dedaj's first collection, *Me sy kange*, Prishtinë 1962 (With eyes of song), evinced both intimate and social motifs. In *Simfonia e fjalës*, Prishtinë 1968 (Word symphony), his sensitive lyrics took on more neoromantic tones, not unlike his fellow Podujevan poet Adem Gajtani (1935-1982) in many ways, with an Orphean world of blossoms and butterflies. Later volumes, in particular *Baladë e fshehur*, Prishtinë 1970 (Hidden ballad), *Etje*, Prishtinë 1973 (Thirst) and *Gjërat që s'preken*, Prishtinë 1980 (Things intangible) inaugurated a new stage in Kosovo verse, more attune to contextual symbols and myths. This neosymbolist verse often runs rampant with animal and plant metaphors caught up and preserved in disciplined, elliptical structures. His recent collections, *Jeta gabon*, Prishtinë 1983 (Life makes mistakes), and *Fatkeqësia e urtisë*, Prishtinë 1987 (The misfortune of wisdom), have been devoted more to historical and literary themes.

Poezi (Poetry) is Dedaj's first collection to be published in Tiranë, though he has long been a recognized master on both sides of the border. It is a compilation of the best of his verse from the seven above-mentioned volumes, verse which is no idle gift of the Muse, but a painful, parthenogenetic impulse from within the poet's mind, a creative impulse longing for liberation at any price, as he tells us in 'Obstinate Verse':

*"It strives to be born
It has no head.*

*If it came out of another head
It would forget
The pain which nourishes it.*

*If it came out without a head
They would give it a number
Instead of a name.*

*A number which people
Would add and subtract
Multiply and divide
Always mistakenly."*

First published in: World Literature Today 64.2 (spring 1990)

Neshat Tozaj
The knives
[*Thikat*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1989. 264 pages

Followers of recent Albanian history will recall the explosion several years ago of a small bomb on the compound of the Yugoslav Embassy in Tiranë, normally the epitome of tranquillity itself, which led to a minor diplomatic incident and which was never satisfactorily clarified. It is to incidents of this kind that Neshat Tozaj alludes in his startling novel *Thikat* (The knives). In the fictional story created by Tozaj, the tires of vehicles belonging to foreign diplomats in Tiranë are slit by person or persons unknown. The authorities immediately suspect a plot to undermine Albania's international relations and the *Sigurimi*, the ubiquitous and formidable state security department of the Albanian Ministry of the Interior, is called in to investigate. In the course of research, it becomes evident that the deed was not perpetrated for political reasons by the dastardly foreign agents or grotesque domestic 'traitors' so prevalent in other Albanian spy novels, but was simply the act of a dazed woman suffering from a psychopathic disorder. This turn of things is refreshing enough, but what would normally have been the end of the investigation becomes the beginning. Too much is involved for the investigators at the Ministry of the Interior to give up so easily. Had Enver Hoxha himself not stated that too many plots had been uncovered by the Party and not by the *Sigurimi*? They need a find. A full investigation gets underway and a treasonous plot must be uncovered by any means. Culprits, whether guilty or not, are to be sniffed out and convicted swiftly and mercilessly in the manner all too familiar to the inhabitants of Eastern Europe. With careers, prestige and influence at stake, power is flagrantly abused and basic human

rights are simply in the way. The omnipotent Ministry of the Interior seems to be on the verge of taking control of the other ministries, and even of the Party itself, of becoming a state within the state.

Thikat will certainly be read with great interest by many Albanians and no doubt by Albania observers abroad for its candid criticism of a 'theoretical' abuse of power. The first large edition of 15,000 copies was sold out quickly at any rate. Noted writer and critic Ismail Kadare, who is at the vanguard of the present literary campaign against mediocrity, 'schematism' (i.e. stereotyping) and timidity in contemporary Albanian writing, stressed the significance of the novel in an unusually long and favourable review in the 15 October 1989 issue of the Tiranë literary newspaper 'Drita'.

Author Neshat Tozaj was born in the village of Kallarat near Vlorë in 1943. He studied law at the Faculty of Political Science in Tiranë and has published ten volumes of prose on the so-called topic of vigilance, i.e. spy novels and short stories, many of which have been filmed. In his preface, Tozaj goes to length to stress that *Thikat* is a work of fiction and that any similarity to real persons is entirely coincidental, but he obviously knows what he is talking about. Tozaj himself works for the Ministry of the Interior.

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Sabri Hamiti
Literary self-knowledge
[*Vetëdija letrare*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1989. 567 pages

Though it is generally conceded on both sides of the border that the artistic level of Albanian prose is still higher in Albania than it is in the (as yet autonomous) Albanian-speaking province of Kosovo in southern Yugoslavia, it is to the troubled and tormented plains of the blackbird that we must look for the best literary critics. One of them is Sabri Hamiti (b. 1950) who, together with Ali Aliu (b. 1934), eloquent critic from Lake Prespa, Rexhep Qosja (b. 1936), academician and literary historian, Ibrahim Rugova (b. 1945), cast into the limelight of recent political events as spokesman of the democracy and human rights movement, Rexhep Ismajli (b. 1947), released last year from an unpleasant term of 'isolation' and beatings in Serbian prisons, and Agim Vinca (b. 1947), cogent expert in contemporary verse, has introduced more objective and demandingly structuralist methods to Albanian literary criticism, so often given to innocuous platitudes in Tiranë.

Born in Dumnicë near Podujevë (Podujevo) in Kosovë, Sabri Hamiti studied comparative literature both in Zagreb and at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, where the demigods of French structuralism brought their influence to bear, and finished his doctorate at the University of Prishtinë. He is the author of numerous volumes of prose, poetry and drama, but it is primarily as an innovative critic that Hamiti has left his mark.

Vetëdija letrare, which could be translated roughly as 'literary self-knowledge', is Hamiti's fifth book of criticism. It

was preceded by: *Variante*, Prishtinë 1974 (Variants), *Teksti i dramatizuar*, Prishtinë 1978 (The dramatized text) and *Kritika letrare*, Prishtinë 1979 (Literary criticism), written with critic Ibrahim Rugova, and *Arti i leximit*, Prishtinë 1983 (The art of reading).

Hamiti introduces new notions and concepts to the study of Albanian literature, insisting on an interpretation independent of extra-literary processes. By focusing on thematic codes, notions of textual status, and narrative and poetic structures valid for all Albanian literature, he sees this little-known literature as an structured organism which must be examined, as far as possible, without the optics, values and ideologies of the age in question. This stance alone is refreshing in view of the at times impervious ideological filter through which every printed word in Albania still must pass.

In addition to theoretical considerations, Hamiti applies his approach to a series of analytic studies on the authors whom he regards as having been turning-points in the history of Albanian literature from its beginnings in the sixteenth century to the present day: Pjetër Budi (1566-1622) and Pjetër Bogdani (ca. 1630-1689) of early Albanian religious literature, Italo-Albanian Girolamo De Rada (1814-1903), Pashko Vasa (1825-1892), Kostandin Kristoforidhi (1830-1895) and Naim Frashëri (1846-1900) of the Rilindja movement of national awakening in the nineteenth century, pre-war poets Andon Zako Çajupi (1866-1933) and the messianic Migjeni (1911-1938), as well as a number of contemporary writers of Kosovo and Albania, from poet Esad Mekuli (b. 1916) and prose writer Hivzi Sulejmani (1910-1975) to Anton Pashku (b. 1938), Nazmi Rrahmani (b. 1941), Vehbi Kikaj, a leading author of children's literature in Kosovo, prose writers Musa Ramadani (b. 1944) and Teodor Laço (b. 1936) and poet Nexhat Halimi (b. 1949).

Vetëdija letrare was honoured with the 1989 Rilindja award as best book of the year for its valuable contribution to the study of Albanian literature. In a reference to the increasingly hopeless political situation in Kosovo, Sabri Hamiti acknowledged in his speech of acceptance in February 1990:

"In accepting this award, my thoughts go out to all those who are striving at this difficult hour to create something of value in Albanian culture, to all those creative people who are aware that Albanian culture has always been a function not only of the creation of a national identity but also of its defence. Now that this identity is under dire attack and has come under conditions which threaten its very existence, culture and literature take on an even greater significance and function as their life grows more and more difficult."

First published in: *World Literature Today* 64.3 (summer 1990)

Adem Demaçi
The snakes of vendetta
[*Gjarpijt e gjakut*].
Ljubljana. Lumi. 1990. 84 pages

The republication of *Gjarpijt e gjakut* (The snakes of vendetta) is somewhat of a literary sensation thirty-two years since its first appearance in Yugoslavia in 1958. After over twenty-eight years in prison, its author, Adem Demaçi (b. 1936), whom many have referred to as Europe's Nelson Mandela, was unexpectedly released on 28 April 1990 at a time when a gesture of good will to the Albanian minority was long overdue from the Serbian government. He had been arrested in 1958 for criticizing the expulsion of tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of Yugoslav Albanians to Turkey on the pretext that they were actually Turks. In 1964, he was sentenced to a further fifteen years for allegedly organizing a Kosovo national liberation movement and for distributing student leaflets critical of the system. In 1976, he was sentenced once again in a mock trial to fifteen years in prison where he remained until 1990 as one of Yugoslavia's most prominent political dissidents.

Interestingly enough, 'The snakes of vendetta' is not directly related to Demaçi's political cause nor does it concern the political dilemma in Kosovo, but the 'other' problem to plague Kosovo Albanians: blood-feuding. It is a timely publication not only in view of the author's release and his continued political significance in Kosovo, but also amidst the present campaign to put an end to the senseless carnage. Those who might have thought that vendetta, which at the beginning of the century decimated the male population of entire regions of northern Albania, was nothing but a curious relic of the past would be surprised to know that it is still alive and well, and

living in Kosovo. Taking advantage of the current sentiment of unity and solidarity among Kosovo Albanians in the face of a ruthless Serbian determination to rule the impoverished province at any price, and of human rights violations unprecedented in Europe since the fall of Ceaușescu, a committee of Kosovo intellectuals was formed in 1990 and in the course of dramatic scenes during well-attended public rallies has managed to pacify over nine hundred cases of vendetta, including several among Albanian-Americans in the United States.

The title of the work derives from an allegory about three giant serpents of different colours which set upon three men - a Turk, his rayah servant and an Albanian - who, travelling in search of their destiny, enter a huge cavern inhabited by an old man, to take refuge for the night. In the darkness, the yellow serpent coils around the neck of the Turk and bites him in the forehead. The second serpent coils around the leg of the rayah and bites him in the heel. The blood-red serpent, hence the title, coils around the right hand of the Albanian and bites its victim in the finger. The next morning, the keeper of the cavern explains their fate to them:

"You, Turk, have been bitten by the serpent of leisure. You are destined to live a life without work. It is God's will that you reign and enjoy earthly pleasures. You, rayah, have been bitten by the serpent of suffering. You are destined to toil and moil your life long. God has ordained that you be the first to rise and the last to bed. And you, Albanian, you have been bitten by the serpent of blood feud. You shall slay your own brother, and your brother shall slay you until the end of time. God has ordained that you drink and vomit blood."

Gjarpijt e gjakut, published by a courageous little company in Slovenia, that Switzerland of the Balkans, and sold under the counter into Kosovo, is the passionate tale of a

conflict of generations, both of which Demaçi can understand and sympathize with. The patriarchal head of a conservative Kosovo family sees no alternative to upholding vendetta as the only means of preserving male honour, whereas the son comprehends its destructive effects and fights, in vain, to put an end to the feuding. In the end, the son entreats his own children to crush the head of the serpent.

Adem Demaçi, once the committed son striving for a better world, has now himself become something of a spiritual patriarch for the over two million Albanians in Yugoslavia. Since his release, he has stressed the need for a peaceful solution to the present political crisis, for passive resistance at the most, and has publicly reiterated the dedication to the work he published in Prishtinë in 1958:

*"Not to those who raise their hand in crime,
But to those who extend their hand in conciliation."*

First published in: World Literature Today 65.1 (winter 1991)

Natasha Lako
Quiet nature
[*Natyрэ e qetё*].
Tiranё. Naim Frashёri. 1990. 109 pages

The rare foreign visitor who happens to tour Korçё will return with the inevitable impression that this town, nestled in the mountains of southeastern Albania not far from the Greek border, has seen better days. But for the Albanians, Korçё is synonymous with the good life, a solid education, and with relative prosperity. It is perhaps for this reason that many an Albanian bachelor, when choosing a wife, still holds to the old motto *O korçare, o hiç fare* (Either a Korçё girl or nothing). Over the years, Korçё has furnished Albania not only with brides but also with more than its share of writers, intellectuals and people of talent. Foremost among them is poet Natasha Lako.

Born in 1948, Lako published her first poetry in 1964 (already ancient history for Albanian women's literature) and her first collection *Marsi brёnda nesh* (March within us) appeared in 1971. She is now the author of five volumes of verse, one novel and numerous successful filmscripts for New Albania Film Studios, and is the female poet in Albania to have received the greatest recognition, both nationally and internationally.

Natyрэ e qetё (Quiet nature) is a selection of eighty-one shorter lyric poems which show Lako at her best. There is a freshness in the metaphors and images of her verse as she travels through the spheres of time and place: Vesuvius, Homeric Athens in a public post office, tortured Prishtinё in the banal but multi-dimensional elevator of the veteran Hotel Bozhur, and inevitably the return to Korçё.

Lako is not only a woman poet but also a women's poet, and this aspect is more apparent than ever in 'Quiet nature', both in her feminist stance and in the said strength of women for sensing nuances of emotion and observing detail. Natasha Lako studies the world from her writing-table, accompanied by, or better, armed with her proverbial sewing needle:

*"My life as a women
Has delineated the expanse of my quiet nature:
A library book, pencil, a few sheets of paper
And a little sewing needle.*

*Whenever I take up a book to read
Or converse with you on paper
My golden needle remains alone
In the great expanse."*

Albania has never had a 'grande dame' of verse as have its Balkan neighbours, no Elisaveta Bagryana of the Bulgarians, no Desanka Maksimovic of the Serbs, to express the nation's soul or to mirror its emotions, and this, for the simple reason that until recently, it had no female writers at all. But a generation ago, virtually all Albanian women were still illiterate beasts of burden. However, times have changed in Albania as elsewhere, and if we hold out long enough, Natasha Lako may do us the favour.

First published in: World Literature Today 65.2 (spring1991)

Agim Vinca
Poetry hours
[*Orët e poezisë*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1990. 561 pages.

Since the abolition by force of the government of Kosovo (Kosova) in the summer of 1990, the firing of virtually all Albanians in management and executive positions (even Albanian medical staff from the hospitals), the banning of 'Rilindja', the only Albanian-language daily newspaper in Yugoslavia, and the suspension of all Albanian-language radio and television broadcasting in Kosovo, the future of Albanian culture and literature in Yugoslavia would seem precarious. Critic and poet Agim Vinca has noted:

"In the atmosphere in which we Kosovo intellectuals are living, we simply have no more time to deal with literature or to enjoy books... We languish in Kosovo like a wounded eagle."

That Agim Vinca, (still) professor of modern Albanian verse at the University of Prishtinë, has nonetheless found time and energy amidst what the Irish would euphemistically describe as 'the troubles' to publish a masterful 561-page collection of essays on Albanian and foreign verse is a tribute not only to his own perseverance, but also to the level of maturity that Albanian culture has attained in Kosovo, the poorhouse of Europe. *Orët e poezisë*, which can be translated either as 'Poetry hours' or 'The Muses of poetry', follows the author's *Struktura e zhvillimit të poezisë së sotme shqipe (1945-1980)*, Prishtinë 1985 [The structure of the development of modern Albanian poetry (1945-1980)], as one of the clearest statements on modern Albanian verse to date. In his essays on modern classics and

contemporaries we encounter studies on the Albanian poets: Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931), Fatos Arapi (b. 1930), Koçi Petriti (b. 1941), Ndoc Papeleka (b. 1945) and Natasha Lako (b. 1948), and on their Kosovo Albanian counterparts: Din Mehmeti (b. 1932), Azem Shkreli (b. 1938), Rrahman Dedaj (b. 1939), Ali Podrimja (b. 1942) and Qerim Ujkani (b. 1937), as well as on foreign authors ranging from Rabindranath Tagore to Charles Baudelaire, Federico García Lorca, Yannis Ritsos, Bertolt Brecht and Vladimir Mayakovsky. The volume also includes probing essays on poetic theory (typology and symbolism), various speeches and book reviews, three 'talks on poetry' and a complete bibliography of Albanian verse in Yugoslavia from 1981 to 1988. Professor Vinca's language is concise and concentrated, but it is the poet in him that makes his criticism such a delight to read.

Agim Vinca was born in 1947 in the Albanian village of Veleshta near Struga on the Macedonian side of Lake Ohrid and studied in Prishtinë where he finished his doctorate. In addition to criticism, literary studies and translations, he has published five volumes of popular lyrical verse firmly anchored in the soil of his native land. He is noted among other things for his astute judgments and in recent years, in particular, for his polemics with Serbian and Macedonian intellectuals on the future of the homeland they (still) share.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 65.2 (spring 1991)

Ismail Kadare

Broken April.

New York. New Amsterdam Books. 1990. 216 pages

When writer Bessian Vorpsi announced the destination of his honeymoon to friends and acquaintances at a dinner-party in Tiranë, he was met by a stunned silence. His young bride Diana, too, was taken aback at the thought of spending a holiday on a desolate plateau of the northern Albanian Alps. Would not the sparkling beaches of the Albanian Riviera or Italy, or even France have been more appropriate for protagonists of the upper middle class of pre-war Albania's budgeoning little capital. Some friends could understand that Bessian, as a writer, was fascinated by the prospects of a journey by car into the past, among the feudal and feuding mountain tribes of the north, a primitive society as yet untouched by modern civilisation. But what of his poor bride Diana? The more adventuresome envied her too, "You'll be escaping the world of reality for the world of legend, literally the world of epic that scarcely exists anymore."

Take two: a murder. Gjorg Berisha has accomplished what all his family and relatives insisted he must do: cleanse his honour by slaying his brother's murderer from the rival Kryeqyqe clan. There was no way out of the bloody rituals of vendetta, anchored in the ancient Canon of Lek Dukagjini. Whole families had been wiped out in the 'taking of blood' and now he too was obliged to follow suit, only to set himself up as the next victim. Everything was regulated by tribal law, including the thirty-day truce during which he would be allowed to spend his last days out in the sunlight and during which he would have to journey through the mountains to submit 'blood money' to the feudal *qeheja e gjakut* (blood steward), keeper of the records.

It was on Gjorg's journey to the bleak fortress of Orosh that he was startled to see one of the rare horseless carriages he had heard of, a vehicle conveying a beautiful young lady from the city. Diana, too, had not failed to notice the young tribesman on their way to the 'Inn of the Two Roberts'. Inevitably, Bessian's morbid fascination with the bloody custom and Diana's erotic attraction to Gjorg Berisha, a growing obsession which draws her indeed into the other world, lead to the couple's estrangement.

Though the plot is set in the 1930s, *Broken April* (Alb. *Prilli i thyer* 1980) has little to do with Ismail Kadare's other well-known novels of twentieth-century Albania: *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* 1961 (Engl. transl. *The general of the dead army*), *Kronikë në gur* 1971 (Engl. transl. *Chronicle in stone*), *Dimri i madh* 1977 (The great winter) and *Koncert në fund të dimrit* 1988 (Engl. transl. *The concert*). It must rather be ranked among the author's cycle of mediaeval tales (Albanian historians utilize the term 'mediaeval' rather liberally to include events well into the eighteenth century), in which myth and legend mingle with the harsh realities of Albanian history. Among the latter novels are *Kështjella* 1970 (The castle), *Ura me tri harqe* 1978 (The three-arched bridge), and *Kush e solli Doruntinën* 1980 (Engl. trans. *Doruntine*). Despite its mediaeval flavor, *Broken April* focuses on a timeless institution, one which has been endemic to the northern Albanian tribes until quite recently. In neighbouring Kosovo there have been virtually thousands of families discreetly entrapped in these bloody rites to this very day, though deprived of all the romantic frills of a 'blood steward' etc. The anti-vendetta campaign there, led by prominent Kosovo Albanian intellectuals, has recently resulted in the 'pacification' of more than nine hundred blood feuds.

Over the last thirty years, Ismail Kadare has invited the reader on many a fascinating journey into curious episodes of

Albanian history and into the more exotic aspects of its little-known culture. There can be no doubt that he has contributed more than any other author to the advancement of contemporary Albanian letters, both through his works and through his candid criticism of mediocrity and politically motivated stereotyping. He has clashed publicly on several occasions in recent years with critic Koço Bihiku, protagonist of an orthodox socialist realism, and has accused Albanian critics in general of impeding literary creativity. Most Albanian intellectuals agree with him, many of them openly now. If anyone can bring about a revolution in Albanian literature from within the political system it will be Ismail Kadare.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 65.2 (spring 1991)

Dritëro Agolli
The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo
[*Splendeur de décadence du camarade Zulo*].
Christian Gut, transl.
Paris. Gallimard. 1990. 286 pages

For the last two decades, contemporary Albanian writers have been condemned nolens volens to live in the shadow of Ismail Kadare whose last-minute emigration to Parisian exile in October 1990 and whose political ambitions will no doubt only increase his international literary reputation. One such writer is Dritëro Agolli, whose satirical *Shkëlqimi dhe rënia e shokut Zylo* (The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo) has now appeared in a well-received French translation by Christian Gut.

Comrade Zylo is the epitome of the well-meaning but incompetent *apparatchik*, director of an obscure government cultural affairs department to which his ego is intrinsically attached. His pathetic vanity, his quixotic fervour, his grotesque public behaviour, in short his splendour and his fall, are all recorded in ironic detail by his labouring and more astute subordinate and friend Demkë, who serves as a neutral observer. The turning-point in comrade Zylo's career finally comes when he expresses his views on a play:

"The drama is ideologically faulty. First of all, the negative hero inspires force. Did you notice him climbing a hill? What does this mean, my friends? It means he has mounted a pedestal, i.e. the hill. He should get off the hill and be tossed into a well. It is for the positive hero to climb the hill."

These words which, according to Agolli, were actually uttered by some subtle proponent of socialist realism in Tiranë at

the time, precipitate Zylo's fall when the play is later deemed a success by others higher on the ladder.

Comrade Zylo is a universal figure, a character to be found in any society or age, and critics have been quick to draw parallels ranging from Daniel Defoe and Nikolay Gogol's *Revizor* to Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera's *ert*. But it is doubtless the Eastern European reader who will best appreciate all the subtleties of the novel. A Bulgarian translation exists and Russian and German versions are now in preparation.

Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931) from the Devoll region of southeastern Albania has exercised a strong influence on the course of contemporary Albanian literature both as a prose writer and a poet of the soil. His other prose works include the partisan novels *Komisari Memo*, Tiranë 1970 (Engl. transl. *The bronze bust*, Tiranë 1975) and *Njeriu me top*, Tiranë 1975 (Engl. transl. *The man with the gun*, Tiranë 1983). Sixteen of his short stories have also been published in English in the volume *Short stories*, Tiranë 1985. Agolli is a member of the Central Committee of the Party and has served as president of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists since 1973 following the purge and condemnation that year of the liberals led by dramatist Fadil Paçrami and Todi Lubonja. 'The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo', his best novel by far, first appeared in 1972 in the Tiranë satirical journal *Hosteni* (The goad) and was published the following year. That it was published in Stalinist Albania, a country not exactly renowned at the time for its tolerance of anything even vaguely resembling criticism of the system, is no doubt linked to the fact that the character of Zylo was modelled in a negative manner on liberal journalist Jusuf Alibali, a friend of Fadil Paçrami and Mehmet Shehu. The novel thus served among other things to discredit Alibali, subsequently sent into exile, and the liberal movement which Agolli himself, almost

twenty years later and in a different age, has now nolens volens
come to accept.

First published in: World Literature Today 65.3 (summer 1991)

Ismail Kadare
The H dossier
[*Dosja H*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1990. 232 pages

In 1953, Milman Parry and Albert Lord caught the attention of the academy world with the publication of their *Serbo-Croatian heroic songs* which demonstrated that the Homeric tradition of epic verse was still alive and well in the Balkans. Their Sandjak bard Salih Ugljanin (b. 1866) was quite capable of reciting hours of Serbo-Croatian and Albanian epic verse on heroic deeds of times past.

The origins of epic verse in the Balkans are rather mysterious and controversial. To the outside observer, it is of little consequence whether the Albanian *këngë kreshnikesh* took their inspiration from the better known Serbo-Croatian *juna ke pjesme* or vice versa, but for scholars from the Balkans, many of whom still delight in the nationalist 'I got there first!' syndrome, the historical origins of all cultural phenomena can be of explosive political significance. The heartland of the epic bards seems to have been the mountainous terrain of Bosnia, the Sandjak of Novi Pazar, Montenegro and northern Albania, although most of the Albanian epic fragments are situated curiously enough in Jutbinë (Udbina), 50 km. northeast of Zadar in Croatia.

Another question which has been raised is that of a possible link between this Balkan heroic verse and the venerable epics of the ancient Greeks. Has the Homeric epic found its last scion in the heroic and epic poetry still sung by the Albanians and southern Slavs? It is an hypothesis which has particularly fascinated Albanian writer Ismail Kadare.

In the novel *Dosja H* (The H dossier), two fictive Irish-American scholars, Max Roth and Willy Norton, set off for the isolated mountains of pre-war northern Albania, tape recorder in hand, in search of the homeland of the epic. The two folklorists are intent on investigating the possibility of a direct link between Homeric verse and the heroic songs declaimed by the aloof Albanian mountaineers on their one-string 'lahutas'. The fieldtrip is somewhat of a puzzle to the Albanian authorities, in particular to the sub-prefect of the region who, just to be on the safe side, seconds a bumbling secret agent in the figure of Dullë Baxhaja, to observe and report on their activities and movements. The sub-prefect's wife Daisy, reminiscent of Diana Vorpsi in *Broken April*, is equally fascinated by the presence of the two male scholars. Suspicion is soon to arise among the native population that the intruders from abroad are indeed spies. Their quarters at the 'Buffalo Bone Inn' are eventually ransacked and the recording equipment which had captured their voices, destroyed. End of mission to Albania.

Dosja H, already available in the masterful French translation of Jusuf Vrioni as *Le Dossier H* (Paris 1989), as well as in Swedish and Greek, is a delightful satire on two innocent foreigners endeavouring to fathom the Albanian soul and, in particular, on the foibles of Albanian life at which foreign visitors often marvel: the Balkan love of rumours and gossip, administrative incompetence, and a childish fear or suspicion on the part of the authorities of everything foreign. By placing his tale in the 1930s once again, Kadare is able to take a safe sideswipe at his country's isolationist proclivities and at the bungling interference of the security apparatus in all spheres of contemporary life.

First published in: World Literature Today 65.3 (summer 1991)

Martin Camaj

Selected poetry.

Leonard Fox, transl.

New York. New York University Press. New York University
Studies in Near Eastern Civilization XIV. 1990. 207 pages.

Never has there been a tradition of writers-in-exile in Albanian literature. Whereas Russian and Polish, or indeed Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian literatures, the latter being comparable in size to the Albanian, would be unthinkable without the contributions made by writers-in-exile, little Albanian writing has been produced abroad or in exile, and that which does exist has had minimal impact on the mainstream of Albanian literature and culture. The Albanian-speaking world is simply too minute and too isolated a cosmos to have diffused its written culture far beyond the traditional areas of settlement.

This said, one name nonetheless comes to mind. That of Martin Camaj, an emigrant writer of far from negligible significance both for Albanian scholarship and for Albanian literature. Camaj was born in Temal, in the Dukagjin region of the northern Albanian alps on 21 July 1925. He received a classical education at the Jesuit Saverian college in Shkodër and studied at the University of Belgrade. From there he went on to do postgraduate research in Italy where he taught Albanian and finished his studies in linguistics at the University of Rome in 1960. From 1970 to 1990 he was professor of Albanian studies at the University of Munich and now lives in the mountain village of Lenggries in Upper Bavaria.

Camaj's literary activities over a period of forty-five years cover several phases of development. He began with poetry, a genre to which he has remained faithful, but in recent

years has also devoted himself increasingly to prose. His first volumes of classical verse, *Nji fyell ndër male*, Prishtinë 1953 (A flute in the mountains), and *Kânga e vërrinit*, Prishtinë 1954 (Song of the lowland pastures), were inspired by his native northern Albanian mountains to which he has never lost his attachment, despite long years of exile and, until very recently, the impossibility of return. Camaj's mature verse, as represented in the present volume, betrays the influence of the hermetic movement of Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970), a phenomenon quite unusual for Albanian letters. The metaphoric and symbolic character of his language has increased with time as has the range of his poetic themes. Leonard Fox's English version of the eighty-eight poems in this bilingual selection is surprisingly palatable considering the English version of Camaj's *Albanian Grammar* (Wiesbaden 1984), which remains quite baffling at times without a knowledge of German. Together with the Italian-language edition of Camaj's verse (Palermo 1985), the present volume will certainly help introduce to the international public the long undiscovered talents of an unusual though not always easy poet-in-exile.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 65.4 (autumn 1991)

Ismail Kadare

The general of the dead army.

Derek Coltman, transl.

New York. New Amsterdam. 1990. 256 pages.

"Like a proud and solitary bird, you will fly over those silent and tragic mountains in order to wrest our poor young men from their jagged, rocky grip." Such was the vision of the Italian general in the company of a laconic priest on his mission to Albania to recuperate the remains of his soldiers who had fallen some twenty years earlier. He began his duties with a sense of grandeur befitting his rank, "In the task he was now undertaking there was something of the majesty of the Greeks and the Trojans, of the solemnity of Homeric funeral rites." The general found himself in a sombre, rainy country with a sullen and resentful population as he set about his noble task of exhuming the bones of a dispersed army from Albania's muddy soil. Gradually, though inevitably, the general is confronted with the grim realities of the past and haunted by the futility of his mission. His lofty intentions had long since become a personal nightmare when the bones of the infamous Colonel Z are thrown at his feet by a deranged old woman.

The rain, which streamed down the windshield of the military vehicle put at the general's disposal, is a common metaphor in Ismail Kadare's prose and in his innovative verse. At the time of original publication in Tiranë in 1963, this constant downpour and many other features made *The general of the dead army* (Alb. *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur*) a step forward in Albanian letters. Grey stormclouds, mud and the humdrum reality of everyday life contrasted sharply with the otherwise obligatory sunshine and blithe victories of socialist realism. So did the Italian general. Here too we find a favourite device of the

Albanian writer who, more than any other, brought his country's literature out of its stylistic and thematic lethargy, that of a remote and haunted Albania as seen through the eyes of the innocent or uncomprehending foreigner. This optic not only gave contour to a European country which at the time was more isolated from the Western world than Tibet, but also helped Albanians themselves see their homeland as others might. This novel, still one of Kadare's best, marked the birth of contemporary Albanian prose. In 1961, Albania had broken with the Soviet Union and thus with Soviet literary models of the period. Though relations had ostensibly been severed to save socialism and socialist realism, the more daring writers of the age, Ismail Kadare, short-story writer Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931) and poet Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) who had all studied in the Soviet bloc, took advantage of the event to free Albanian literature of some of the political restraints which had been imposed upon it. *'The general of the dead army'* was one of the main fruits of this subtle revolt.

In 1970, after an emended edition (1967) of the Albanian original, *The general of the dead army* was translated into French by Jusuf Vrioni, who had spent twelve years in prison after the war before being allowed to work, and from the French into English the following year. Republication this year is a significant addition to New Amsterdam's Kadare programme. While one would and should normally decry such double translations in the field of literature, it must in all fairness be noted that Vrioni's French-language versions of some of Kadare's novels flow much more elegantly than do the Albanian originals. A number of these prose works was indeed published in French long before the Albanian-speaking public ever had access to them. If Kadare has always had a mind to the foreign reader, it is nonetheless among his compatriots that he has stirred the strongest emotions: unbounded admiration for his role as the 'prince of the nation' for whom loftier duties are said

to be at hand, saviour of a country and culture in peril, but at the same time misgivings and inimity among intellectuals caused by the memory of many a said Macchiavellian move in his past. Survival has never been easy in Albania.

Though he was a political conformist, and who could blame him for it at the time, Ismail Kadare was and remained a dissident in domestic literary theory, and a giant among Albanian novelists. His privileged relationship with Enver Hoxha enabled him to give full expression to his creative talents, to depass the narrow confines of what was then politically acceptable in Albanian letters, and he survived where others failed.

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Migjeni
Chronicles of a Northern city and other prose
[*Chroniques d'une ville du Nord et autres proses*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1990. 298 pages

There has been a stifling level of polarization in Albanian literature over the last forty-five years: self-confident and vociferous proponents of socialist realism, the literary doctrine which so marked the course of Albanian culture from 1945 to 1991, and quiet though equally determined proponents of pre-war literary currents and of the handful of writers now being rediscovered, who for one reason or another did not conform. One author all can agree on though is Scutarine poet and prose writer Migjeni (1911-1938).

Migjeni, acronym of Millosh Gjergj Nikolla, was born in the northern Albanian town of Shkodër (Scutari) where he attended a Serbian school. He studied at an Orthodox seminary in Bitola (Monastir) in Macedonia where he acquired a taste for Serbian, Russian and French writers and, being of partly Serbian origin, became perhaps the only author to bridge the cultural chasm separating the Albanians and Serbs. On his return to Albania, Migjeni abandoned his plan of joining the priesthood and took up teaching in the rugged northern Albanian Alps. He also began writing verse and prose sketches which reflect the life and anguish of a discerning intellectual in what certainly was and has remained the most backward region of Europe. The consumptive poet was, however, soon obliged to put an end to his career as a writer and teacher and seek medical assistance in Turin where his sister Olga was studying. After a short stay at a sanatorium, he died at the Waldensian hospital in Torre Pellice at the age of twenty-six, a tragic loss for Albanian letters.

Migjeni was the first author to break with the lingering traditions of romantic nationalism in Albanian literature. His slender though powerful volume of 'Free Verse', which has been recently translated into English (Tiranë 1991), evinces a strong social ethic, not of sympathy with the poor and starving, but of sarcasm and outrage. Like the forty-three poems, which have alas been excluded from present volume, the twenty-two short tales and sketches of this poetic Zola, raising his voice in accusation, focus on suffering, hunger, squalor and injustice. As such, some like to regard him as a precursor of socialist realism whereas others see his reputation sullied by such an epithet. While Stalinist critics have delighted in viewing Migjeni as a product of 'pre-liberation' Zogist Albania, it has become painfully evident that the poet's message, after forty-six years of dictatorship of the proletariat, is now more topical than ever.

The present French translation is accompanied by a long introductory essay by Ismail Kadare, entitled 'The irruption of Migjeni into Albanian literature'. This subjective and somewhat superficial account of Albanian letters in the thirties strongly reflects the attitudes and prejudices of the Party of Labour, nor is his attempt at determining Migjeni's function entirely satisfactory. Written a year before Kadare's emigration to France, the introduction is more than anything revealing of the autobiographical irruptions of its inscrutable author. Kadare describes, for instance, the processes by which "under certain terrible and diabolically perfected dictatorships, the writer's profession becomes a veritable curse." This was one problem the young and messianic Migjeni, who gave free rein to his outrage and his passions, did not have to confront.

The tragic spirit of Migjeni, harbinger of modernity in Albanian letters, now hovers over a tragically divided land.

First published in: World Literature Today 65.4 (autumn 1991)

Ismail Kadare
Invitation to the studio
[*Ftesë në studio*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1990. 328 pages

Ismail Kadare
Albanian spring. Chronicle, letters, reflections
[*Printemps albanais. Chronique, lettres, réflexions*].
Michel Métais, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 321 pages

Ismail Kadare
From one December to the next. Chronicle, correspondance,
reflections
[*Nga një dhjetor në tjetrin. Kronikë, këmbim letrash, persiatje*]
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 262 pages

Eastern Europe breathed a sigh of relief when Joseph Stalin died in 1953. In Albania, incredible as it may now seem in retrospect - even to Albanians themselves - orthodox Stalinism survived unscathed and unabated for further thirty-seven years, bequeathing the country with a Sub-Saharan economy, little intellectual leadership and a culture in ruins.

For the first time in their lives, Albanian writers now have freedom of expression, and many are not entirely certain how to deal with it. It is no wonder that political journalism has become the immediate outlet of artistic creativity in this age of national calamity. Despite his no doubt sincere wish to be nothing but a writer, Ismail Kadare, too, has turned to politics to offer a personal literary digestion of the dramatic political upheaval which finally took place in Albania in 1990-1991.

Ftesë në studio (Invitation to the studio) was Kadare's last publication in Tiranë before his departure in the autumn of 1990. It contains a selection of thirty-two poems by the author who has otherwise neglected this genre in recent years; verse translations from the Greek, Chinese, French, Romanian and Russian; and most importantly, a series of reflections on literature and the arts, and current events. As Tiranë literature went, *Ftesë në studio* was extraordinarily candid at the time of publication and broke many a taboo. It is a subjective account which the author also takes advantage of to settle some old scores with rival writers such as B. Xh. (Bilal Xhaferi, who managed to flee to the United States) and K. R. (Kapllan Resuli), K. T. (Kasem Trebeshina) and A. P. (Arshi Pipa), all of whom spent long years in prison camps. One wonders at times at the depth of Kadare's Gjirokastrian vindictiveness. Trebeshina he calls a "mediocre writer but with boundless ambition" and Pipa "diabolical; to his misfortune mediocre; a denunciator; an absolute spy; an old hyena; a new Salieri; for whom the name Arshi Pipic, when the final consonant is removed, would be a more accurate description of the short unpleasant noise he makes in this life."

Printemps albanais (Engl. transl. *Albanian spring*) follows where *Ftesë në studio* left off. At the end of October 1990, a mere two months before the final collapse of the dictatorship, Ismail Kadare applied for political asylum in Paris. Here, the literary 'prince of the nation' completed a personal chronicle of events covering the transitional period from December 1989 to December 1990. Published in Paris in February 1991 together with the Albanian-language version entitled *Nga një dhjetor në tjetrin* (From one December to the next), it is the serious first work of its genre in Albanian literature. Kadare begins,

"These are the notes of a writer and, although the events in question have nothing to do with literature, they should be read from this perspective only. Seen otherwise, they could give a false impression, like a pair of glasses found by chance which rarely fit the eyes of the person who finds them."

The decisive twelve months in question were marked in particular by the initial panic caused among the 'red aristocracy' by the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu in December 1989 and by the wave of emigration via the German, Italian and French Embassies in July 1990, the straw that finally broke the camel's back. Kadare also publishes his correspondence with President Ramiz Alia in May 1990 as his contribution to the Albanian spring which followed a great winter. The second part of the book contains reflections on the tenacious Stalinist regime in Albania and on the nature of dictatorship in general.

Though his merit in raising the level of Albanian literature is incontestable, many observers at home and abroad, among whom Ardian Klosi, one of Tiranë's many critical voices, have been questioning whether the former court poet of the regime and pet writer of Enver Hoxha was actually the closet dissident he would have one believe he was. It would, however, be too facile for foreign critics to endeavour to pass judgment on anyone who survived the horror and brutality of the Hoxha regime. The spectre of Václav Havel need not torment Ismail Kadare. Albania was never Czechoslovakia where remnants of civilization lingered throughout the decades of dictatorship.

The tone of *Printemps albanais* is at times whiny and at times acrimonious. Again it is not devoid of the 'below the belt' polemics and petty vendettas noted in *Ftesë në studio*. It is, at any rate, fascinating reading for anyone interested in modern Albania and this, in the final analysis, is all that counts.

First published in: World Literature Today 66.1 (winter 1992)

Rexhep Ismajli (ed.)
Modern Arbëresh poetry
[*Poezia e sotme arbëreshe*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1990. 321 pages

The beginning of the nineties has seen the Albanian nation in a political and economic catastrophe having dramatic repercussions on contemporary literature and culture. Albania itself has nothing to show from forty-six years of 'splendid isolation' and Stalinist dictatorship but starvation and ruin such as Europe has not seen for half a century. Kosovo, for its part, is faced with a level of oppression and persecution unparalleled on the continent since the Second World War. Virtually all Albanian-language publishing companies have either gone bankrupt or been shut down within the space of one year. No money, no paper, no ink, no hope. Is there no isle of the bliss where the little flame of Albanian culture can be nourished and fostered under normal human conditions and continue to reflect in the radiant mosaic of European civilization?

One 'solid root' has survived the new Balkan apocalypse. The 100,000-strong Albanian minority in southern Italy are scions of refugees who fled Albania during the Turkish invasion after the death of national hero Scanderbeg in 1468. These 'Arbëresh' took refuge in the isolated mountains of Calabria and Sicily where they have remained to this day, cherishing, indeed fiercely guarding a minute and quite unique language and culture. It was a Sicilian Arbëresh writer, Luca Matranga, in 1592 who was first to record a poem in Albanian. Over the centuries, the Arbëresh have contributed to Albanian literature more than their numbers would warrant, in particular with the figure of Girolamo De Rada (1814-1903), a giant of the Albanian national revival.

And how is Italo-Albanian literature faring today? Not badly at all when one peruses the present anthology, *Poesia e sotme arbëreshe* (Modern Arbëresh poetry), compiled by Kosovo scholar Rexhep Ismajli (b. 1947). The 210 poems by 22 poets from Molise to the mountain villages of Sicily, an unprecedented collection, reflect more than simply the preoccupations of a minority culture. Arbëresh verse is intellectual verse, the pursuit of an educated handful of scholars, teachers and clerics giving direction to the aspirations of their people. One of the most popular and respected of these poets is Vorea Ujko (1918-1989), pseudonym of Domenico Bellizzi. He was a modest priest from Frascineto who taught modern literature in Firmo (Calabria) where his memory has been much cherished since his death in January 1989. Ujko's verse is bathed in the *gjaku i shprishur* (the scattered blood) of his ancestors. At the same time it far surpasses the lingering sentiments of romantic nationalism in earlier Arbëresh verse and the standard motifs of exile lyrics.

Though the long-range forecast for the survival of Arbëresh culture may be gloomy, as it is for all other minority language groups in Europe, a new generation of contemporary poets, among whom Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio (b. 1944), Agostino Giordano (b. 1950), Kate Zuccaro (b. 1955), Mario Bellizzi (b. 1957) and Anna Ventre (b. 1957), has not hesitated to take up Ujko's heritage and continue to give refined lyric expression to the Arbëresh experience as the century draws to a close.

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Ismail Kadare
The monster
[*Përbindëshi*].
Tiranë. Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve. 1991. 184 pages

Ismail Kadare
The monster
[*Le monstre*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 218 pages

Ismail Kadare, the scion of a small nation in which reality has often been difficult to stomach, has shown a long-standing predilection for impregnating his own reality with haunting legendry. The novel *Kush e solli Doruntinën?*, Tiranë 1980 (Engl. transl. *Doruntine*, New York 1988) transposes the Albanian legend of little Constantine and his sister Doruntine into a mediaeval whodunit. *Ura me tri harqe*, Tiranë 1978 (The three-arched bridge), of which an English translation will soon be on the market, focuses on the much grimmer Balkan tale of immurement.

Përbindëshi (The monster) is Kadare's most recent flirt with legendry and, at the same time, one of his earliest prose works. The Albanian original of the novel was first published in 1965 in volume 12 of the official Tiranë literary journal *Nëntori* (November), shortly after his initial success with the novel *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur*, Tiranë 1963 (Engl. transl. *The general of the dead army*, New York 1990). *The monster* was soon however to fall victim to Stalinist censorship, as the writer tells us: "An article vilifying *The monster* sufficed to exclude this tale from Albanian literature... it was savagely flogged,

forbidden and buried so deeply that it would take me over a quarter of a century to exhume it."

The monster in question is none other than the Trojan horse before the gates of sacred Ilium, though here it is a monster in a time warp. The fall of ancient Troy takes place both in the future and in the past of its characters. At times they remain unaltered while Troy transforms itself before their very eyes, changing form to become a modern city with cafés, an airport etc. At other times, it is the city which stays put while the characters change, traversing different phases to metamorphose into figures of our time. This distortion of time, without the Joycean stream of consciousness, was quite enough to unnerve Stalinist censors who were petrified at the very thought of possible political allusions, and the novel was conveniently forgotten. Who could blame the authorities for suspecting that the tale of the insidious conquest of Troy might, in the final analysis, be more about Albania than anything else?

The monster was, needless to say, an unusual publication for the Albanian literature of socialist realism of the sixties. Now, after republication of the novel in Prizren 1990 and Tiranë 1991 in an amended version which purges it of some of the infelicities of style which mark Kadare's early works, the assiduous Jusuf Vrioni has come out with another impeccable French translation, giving the international public access to what in many respects remains one of Ismail Kadare's most curious books.

First published in: World Literature Today 66.2 (spring 1992)

Ismail Kadare
The weight of the cross
[*Pesha e kryqit*].
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 213 pages

Ismail Kadare
Invitation to the writer's studio, followed by The weight of the cross
[*Invitation à l'atelier de l'écrivain suivi de le poids de la croix*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 558 pages

In no other city of Albania has the fight for survival been harder than in rocky Gjirokaštër near the Greek border. If Korçë in the southeast was blessed with a relative degree of prosperity (in Albanian terms) and Shkodër in the north knew how to survive the buffets of fate with a certain Mediterranean levity and nonchalance, Gjirokaštër epitomized the struggle and severity of being. This struggle is ingrained in the Gjirokaštërian mentality. Its people are go-getters, competitive and successful and perhaps, as their detractors note, somewhat less generous and hospitable than elsewhere, not as *bujar*, as the Albanians would say.

Gjirokaštër on the mountainside under the glaring southern sun has given birth to two figures of note who, though vastly different in their activities and talents, have set indelible marks on twentieth-century Albania: Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) and writer Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), born a mere two hundred meters from one another in houses, as Kadare tells us, linked by a street called *Sokaku i të Marrëve* (Alley of the Insane).

Pesha e kryqit (The weight of the cross) is Kadare's second work published in Parisian exile. It was originally conceived of as an appendix to *Ftesë në studio* (Invitation to the studio) and, no doubt for this reason, the two works are published together in the French-language edition here. These two volumes plus *Nga një dhjetor në tjetrin* (From one December to the next / *Printemps albanais*, Engl. transl. *Albanian spring*) constitute, at any rate, a sort of politico-literary trilogy. Although *Pesha e kryqit* is no less spiteful and acrimonious than the earlier two works, it does, at the same time, reveal many other facets of Kadare's personality, in particular his personal anguish and suffering during the direful years of living hell for Albanian intellectuals. It is the autobiography of a novelist under Stalinism who managed to publish his works but was never really certain what reaction the demi-gods of the Politbureau, and in particular the Omnipotent himself, would take. Though it was *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (The general of the dead army) which brought Kadare international fame, he tells us quite convincingly that it was *Dimri i madh* (The great winter) which ensured his physical survival. Enver Hoxha appreciated the portrait made of him in 'The great winter' and did not wish to jeopardize it. Kadare's liquidation would have been incompatible with the survival of the novel, a friend of the writer notes. Some of Kadare's other works never saw the light of day at all and are only being discovered now.

Albanians look up to Ismail Kadare as the literary 'prince of the nation' in the hope that he can give written expression to the trauma which they endured for almost half a century and which will linger on with them for many years to come. Indeed Kadare has succeeded in casting light on the inconceivably grim realities of 'people's power', though in a highly personal and subjective manner.

What the critical reader will miss in this work is a loftier vision of things. This is what separates *Pesha e kryqit* from the classics of eastern European liberation literature. The world of Kadare remains focused entirely on the personal dichotomy he creates between his 'friends' and his 'sworn enemies'. Nowhere does he make reference to the wounded soul of the nation, to the weight of the cross borne by his people during forty-six years of mute horror or even to the much more concrete agony of many of his fellow writers and artists. He is at all moments too obsessed - and can one blame him - with his own survival. Only time will tell if Kadare can extricate himself from his personal trauma and use his eloquent voice and talent to express what still must be said.

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Xhevahir Spahiu

A mad age

[*Kohë e krisur*].

Tiranë. Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve. 1991. 122 pages

The region of Skrapari at the foot of lofty Mount Tomorr, the legendary Father Tomorr of Albanian mythology, is noted for its excellent *raki* and its *Sigurimi* agents. Quite independent of this rather dubious fame, it is also the home of Xhevahir Spahiu (b. 1945), one of the most forceful, vociferous and talented poets of modern Albania, a voice of survival. During the 1973 purge of writers and intellectuals, dictator Enver Hoxha referred to Spahiu by name for having composed a short poem reminiscent, though by pure coincidence, of a line by Jean-Paul Sartre. Although the poet had never had an opportunity to enjoy the forbidden fruits of the later French philosopher, he was condemned as an existentialist (tantamount to the high treason) and survived only by the skin of his teeth, by channeling his passions into appropriate revolutionary fervour. After a couple of years he was, to his and our good fortune, allowed to publish once again. Now that the red tide has receded, he can go about the poet's business and is quite content to do so.

Xhevahir Spahiu is not a poet of reclusion or of pensive solitude. He is at his best with an audience. It is then that his eyes take on an elfish sparkle (*Xhevahir* in Albanian means diamond) and his voice begins to convey all the emotion of which true verse is capable. His audience is always enthralled. In a country in which until quite recently every poem, every word, every thought was subject to a dense filter of ideological and personal conformity, this habit of spontaneous and passionate

declamation on the otherwise bleak streets of Tiranë has made him something of a unique phenomenon.

Kohë e krisur (A mad age), written when Europe's most awesome dictatorship was in its last throes, is one of the first volumes of poetry to be printed by the newly-formed publishing company of the now semi-independent Albanian Writer's Union. Spahiu's verse is both entertaining and thought-provoking. The sixty-nine poems in this volume range from striking aphorisms and bons mots, at which Spahiu has always delighted, to passionate verse on the martyrdom of Kosovo, a tragedy in the making which gnaws away at the spirit of Albanians on both sides of the border. *Kohë e krisur* was awarded the 1991 Migjeni prize as the best volume of poetry of the year. In choosing this work, the members of the jury, composed of poets, critics and publishers, praised not only the book's profoundly humanitarian and democratic spirit and its dramatic impact, but also its anti-conformity. Albania has come a long way in one year.

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Shaip Beqiri

The challenge of genius: Kadare, exile, Kosovo

[*Sfida e gjeniut: Kadare. ekzili. Kosova*].

Prishtinë. Gjon Buzuku. 1991. 491 pages

The modest and mild-mannered Abdullah Zeneli (b. 1952) cuts an unlikely figure as a pioneer and saviour of the nation. After two years of repression and terror in Kosovo in which over 100,000 people have now been fired from their jobs for the sin of being Albanian, in which the university and many Albanian schools have been shut down, and in which writers, editors and publishers, following months without their salaries, have been forced out of their offices at the state-owned Rilindja Press building in Prishtinë, home of virtually all Albanian-language publications in Yugoslavia, a cultural genocide would seem only a matter of time. To add to the tragedy in Kosovo, publishing in Albania itself has ground to a halt, too, where after forty-six years of Stalinism, lethargy instead of euphoria has set in. In both countries, the introduction of a market economy is proving to be a sluggish and painful process. In early 1991, however, Abdullah Zeneli founded the Gjon Buzuku Press, the first ever private Albanian publishing company which has, against all odds, been operating successfully. Having made a provocative start with the republication in Kosovo of the forbidden novel *Gjarpijt e gjakut* (The snakes of vendetta), written by long-time dissident and human rights activist Adem Demaçi, and now with the short stories of the equally proscribed Martin Camaj, pioneer Zeneli has more than once had Serbian automatic rifles at the back of his neck and been taken off by the secret police for interrogation.

Sfida e gjeniut: Kadare, ekzili, Kosova (The challenge of genius: Kadare, exile, Kosovo), a new monograph on Ismail

Kadare by active writer and journalist Shaip Beqiri (b. 1954), would seem, at first glance, less controversial in comparison. Kadare's works were outlawed in Kosovo for a few years for his candid criticism of Serbian human rights violations and, in particular, for his short novel 'The wedding procession turned to ice' (*Krushqit janë të ngrirë*) about the 1981 uprising in Prishtinë, but many of his books have been republished recently without any problems. One of the ironies of fate and small gains from the total state of siege is that the communist authorities in Belgrade, now on the defensive and too preoccupied with their Croatian neighbours, no longer have the time or the technical capacity to read through every Albanian publication, to listen to the words of every song sung in the cafés of Prishtinë and Prizren, to repress every nascent sign of Albanian nationalism and throw all the transgressive editors, publishers, singers and musicians into jail.

It will therefore be to the utter delight of the Albanian reading public in Kosovo (left unwarned by the cover, title page and introduction of the book) to find a full-length reprint of the above-mentioned explosively political novel tucked away in the second half of the book. Shaip Beqiri and Abdullah Zeneli have obviously pulled off a coup.

'The challenge of genius' offers an extensive compilation of material on Kadare, with a strong focus on Kosovo. The book includes the writer's articles on the Kosovo question, interviews given by him from 1971 to 1991, declarations, essays and reports on his decision to seek political asylum in France in October 1990, and articles of literary criticism by Kosovo authors on his individual works, as well as a few poems. As such, it does not contain anything particularly new on Kadare, or on Kosovo for that matter, with the exception of the publication here of the above-mentioned novel.

In my review of 'The wedding procession turned to ice' (autumn 1987), I criticised its author at the time for being "openly tendentious in this novel, in particular in his description of drunken Serbian ruffians longing for the good old days of Rankovic." I would like to take this opportunity to withdraw this point of criticism, made in my naivety as to the basic goodness of human nature.

First published in: World Literature Today 66.3 (summer 1992)

Arshi Pipa

Contemporary Albanian literature.

New York. East European Monographs No. 305. Distributed by Columbia University Press. 1991. 175 pages

Over the last half a century, there has not been a single work of literary criticism published in Tiranë which is worth the paper it is written on. The cultural vacuum created by the forty-six-year Hoxha dictatorship blunted all critical thought and objective judgment-making. There has thus been a conspicuous dearth of serious studies on Albanian literature and Pipa's *Contemporary Albanian literature* is a welcome introduction to fill the void.

Arshi Pipa (b. 1920) himself was a literary figure of note in Albania until the communist takeover in 1944 and his internment there for ten years in concentration camps. His verse collection, *Libri i burgut*, Rome 1959 (The prison book), and his subsequent studies on Albanian literature and politics have confirmed him as a leading Albanologist. Despite his long years in American exile, Pipa has never lost his keen insight into the political realities below the bland surface of Albanian letters and culture. The first section of *Contemporary Albanian literature* is devoted to the all-pervading doctrine of 'Albanian socialist realism', firstly as a theory and then in its practical implementation throughout the grim decades of the Hoxha regime. Pipa's approach to Albanian socialist realism is highly selective, as he says himself. His judgments and at times irascible views are idiosyncratic, but more often than not, convincing. Much of this section is devoted to Ismail Kadare whose literary production has always reflected the vicissitudes of Albanian political life and whom Pipa regards as a dissident and heretic from the very start of his career.

The second section of the monograph, entitled 'Camaj's Poetry and Poetics', focuses entirely on the works of Martin Camaj (b. 1925) who, although still an outsider, may with time prove to be a central figure of Albanian literature. Camaj is a difficult author and not widely read as yet. Indeed he was completely unknown to the vast majority of Albanians until very recently. As such, the place reserved for him in this work is significant.

A point of criticism which must be made about the book, or at least about the use of such a comprehensive title, is the complete lack of treatment of the other half of 'contemporary Albanian literature', i.e. that written and published in Kosovo. Despite Belgrade's continual efforts to keep the 'Kurds of Europe' as uneducated malleable peasants, Kosovo has up to now been producing the best poets and most imaginative critics of the Albanian nation, without whom no work on modern Albanian literature can be complete. Pipa's monograph remains nonetheless the most original and interesting study to date of Albanian letters from the motherland, now liberated from itself.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 66.3 (summer 1992)

Kasëm Trebeshina
The season of seasons
[*Stina e stinëve*].
Prishtinë. Gjon Buzuku. 1991. 303 pages

An age of discovery has dawned in Albanian literature. Writers and intellectuals are now rediscovering foreign literature which, with the exception of selected works of the very 'progressive' left, was beyond their reach for half a century, thanks to the watchful eye of the Albanian Party of Labour. What is equally fascinating for them is the rediscovery of the other half of their own literature, works and authors outlawed and expelled from the Parnassus of the nation. Virtually all 'pre-liberation' authors of the thirties and forties, including the sublime national poet Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), were made to vanish at the flick of a Party wand.

Of the literary *desaparecidos* are also a number of writers from the fifties, among whom Kasëm Trebeshina. Trebeshina (b. 1926) studied at the Ostrovsky Theatre Institute in Leningrad. A committed communist at the time, but by no means a conformist, he was early to sever links with the Party and later with the Writer's Union in Tiranë. Of his voluminous writing from the late forties and early fifties, only one modest collection of poetry, *Artani dhe Minja*, Tiranë 1959 (Artani and Minja), and an anonymous translation of the plays of García Lorca were ever published.

On 5 October 1953, in an extremely rare act of open dissent in Albanian intellectual life, Kasëm Trebeshina sent a *pro memoria* to Party leader Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) warning him that his cultural policies were leading the nation down the road to disaster. He wrote:

"... Let us take a closer look at the contents of the literature of socialist realism, even the best of it. A good engineer, a bad engineer, a reformed engineer. A good peasant, a bad one, a reformed one, etc., etc. A good one, a bad one, a reformed one! ... socialist realism is directly linked to the ideas of French absolutism, both in theory and in practice... The Writers' Union itself is organized like an order of mediaeval monks. At the head of the order is a Grand Master and all are obliged to hearken as long as he carries out his functions as such. Do you realize that the distribution of 'functions' and 'privileges' in this manner is mediaeval?... I believe that the greatest destruction to come is going to take place in Albanian intellectual life. The people are going to lose confidence in the State and its leadership, and withdraw into themselves. In order to keep control of them, a need will arise to create a brutal Police State. And this will be but the start... The oppression of opinions, even within the party ranks, is becoming systematic and, in the end, this will give birth to a new monarchy. If things go that far, there will be terrible poverty and only the reign of unparalleled terror will enable you to stay in power. Such a regime will be much more dangerous for itself. A dampening and withdrawal of popular support will shake up the ranks of the leadership, too, which will gradually transform itself into a closed caste like a monarchy with no understanding of the historical realities of the twentieth century. At the end of this historical process you will be obliged to kill one another and the people will be drenched in blood."

It goes without saying that the Albanian dictator was not particularly amused by the letter. Following this voluntary act of self-destruction, Kasëm Trebeshina, the unpublished author of eighteen volumes of verse, forty-two plays, twenty-two novels

and short stories etc., vanished from the literary scene with little trace. After seventeen years in prison, with interruptions, a comparatively light sentence as he later noted, and twenty years of silence, Trebeshina has now resurfaced from the Balkan Gulags with a handful of other writers and artists to see that his predictions indeed came true.

Scholar and publisher Ardian Klosi (b. 1957) has now edited a number of representative prose pieces for the present volume, *Stina e stinëve* (The season of seasons), which for the first time, provide the reader with a glimpse into Trebeshina's fantasy world.

Trebeshina's tales are salted with a good dose of the absurd, or the seemingly absurd, and are in many ways not unlike those of another victim of Stalinist repression, Mitrush Kuteli (1907-1967). His inspiration is drawn from folk tales and from his allergic reaction to the official literary teachings of his age. What could be more innocent and yet more politically revealing than the universe of a child? Is the world an infant discovers around him the same place he will live in as an adult? Where does reality begin and end? The surrealist touch of what the author calls his 'symbolic realism' is one of the consequences of this conscious revolt against the predominant current of socialist realism which stifled so much creative writing in Albania for almost half a century.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 66.3 (summer 1992)

Gjergj Fishta
The highland lute. Third Edition
[*Lahuta e Malsisë. Botim i tretë*].
Rome. Qendra e Katolikëve Shqiptarë jashta Atdheut. 1991.
525 pages

Pal Duka-Gjini
The life and works of Gjergj Fishta
[*Jeta dhe veprat e Gjergj Fishtës*].
Rome. Provinça Françeskane Shqiptare. 1992. 299 pages

It is an unusual phenomenon indeed for a country to lose its national poet, but it happened in Albania. Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), a Franciscan priest and writer from Shkodër, was the greatest and most influential literary figure of his age, and produced a literary epic which, though some regard it as having been written a century too late, still ranks among the most impressive creations of all of Albanian literature. It is the work which gave artistic expression to the searching soul of his people.

Lahuta e Malsisë (The highland lute) is a 15,613-line historical verse epic in thirty cantos, focusing on Albania's struggle for autonomy and independence and in particular on border conflicts between the fiercely independent northern Albanian tribes and their equally fierce Montenegrin neighbours from 1858 to 1913. This literary masterpiece, which we may regard as the first Albanian-language contribution to world literature, was composed between 1902 and 1909, though it was constantly refined and amended by its author over the following thirty years. The definitive edition of the work was presented in Shkodër in 1937 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the declaration of Albanian independence. After exile reprints in

Rome (1958) and Ljubljana (1990) and translations into German (1958) and Italian (1968), the present full-length edition of 'The highland lute', published by the 'Albanian Catholic Centre Abroad' in Rome, is the first to make the epic accessible once again to the reading public in Albania itself.

The Albanian Franciscans in Rome and Assisi have also come out with a monograph on Fishta's life and works by Pal Duka-Gjini (pseudonym of Daniel Gjeçaj), the first major study of the Scutarine poet and dramatist in half a century. This 299-page monograph, 'The life and works of Gjergj Fishta', contains an extensive biography of the poet, an overview of his works, and comments and views on Fishta made by domestic and foreign authors. As such, it is a highly useful compilation, though nothing revolutionary from a scholarly point of view.

Up to his death on 30 December 1940, Father Gjergj Fishta was lauded as the national poet of Albania, indeed as the Albanian Homer. Gabriele D'Annunzio called him the 'greatest poet of the glorious people of Albania'. After the war, however, Fishta was attacked by the new rulers, and denigrated more than any other pre-war writer, and fell into prompt oblivion. The national poet had become an anathema.

The reason for Fishta's fall from grace after 1944 is to be sought not in his life or works, but rather in the origins of the Albanian Communist Party which took power under Enver Hoxha and Mehmet Shehu. In July 1946, Albania and Yugoslavia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance which gave the Yugoslavs effective control over Albanian affairs, including the fields of education and culture. It is no doubt the said 'anti-Slavic sentiments' expressed in 'The highland lute' which caused the work and its author to be proscribed by the Yugoslav authorities. In actual fact, 'The highland lute' is no more anti-Slavic than the *Chanson de*

Roland or the *Poema de Mio Cid* are anti-Arabic, but such were Balkan sensitivities. After relations with Yugoslavia were broken off in 1948, expressions of anti-Montenegrin or anti-Serbian sentiment would certainly no longer have been considered a major sin in Party thinking, but an official position had been taken with regard to Fishta and, possibly with deference to the new Slavic allies in Moscow, it could not be renounced without a scandal. Such was the fear of Gjergj Fishta in later years that even his bones were dug up secretly and thrown into the river.

Despite four decades of unrelenting Party propaganda reducing Fishta to a 'clerical and fascist poet', the people of Albania, and in particular the inhabitants of Shkodër did not forget him. After almost half a century, Gjergj Fishta was commemorated openly for the first time on 5 January 1991 in his native Shkodër. During the first public recital of the poet's works in forty-five years, an actor at one point lost his lines, and was immediately and spontaneously assisted by his large audience - who still knew 'The highland lute' by heart.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 67.2 (spring 1993)

Besnik Mustafaj
A summer of no return
[*Un été sans retour*].
Christiane Montécot, transl.
Arles. Actes Sud. 1992. 201 pages

For decades, Albanians used their novels more for propping up furniture and potted plants than for reading and entertainment. Not until the appearance of the novels of Ismail Kadare did readers, with socialist realism coming out of their ears, begin to take a genuine interest in their own literature. Students in the dorms, even factory workers, remember spending nights on end wide awake, lapping up Kadare's books and passing them on to their impatient friends as quickly as possible. They were like a breath of fresh air.

It was not only the readers who took note of the new stylistic devices used by the literary 'prince of the nation' in his better novels of early years, *The general of the dead army*, *Chronicle in stone*, and *Broken April*, but also a whole generation of up and coming young writers who suddenly realized that you did not have to be French, English, Italian or Russian to write a good book.

Besnik Mustafaj is one of the leading proponents of this post-Kadare generation of prose writers. His *Un été sans retour*, a shorter novel in thirteen chapters, was begun in 1985 and originally published, together with various short stories, in Tiranë in 1989 under the title *Vera pa kthim* (Summer of no return). Translated into French by Christiane Montécot, it is the first non-Kadare Albanian novel of the last decade to have become accessible to the Western public. The plot seems simple enough. Gori's sudden return to his wife Sana after long years of

absence and their equally abrupt departure for holidays on the coast mark the beginning of a slow and insidious process of estrangement between the two. Gori, we later discover, has returned from the Nazi concentration camp of Mauthausen, an appellation no doubt re-interpreted by most Albanian readers as Spaç, Burrel or Qafë-Bari of the communist regime. Discreetly woven into the plot is the Albanian and Balkan legend of little Constantine, which was already utilized, though more directly, by Ismail Kadare in his 1979 novel *Doruntine*.

Born in the wild mountainous region of Tropojë in northern Albania on 4 September 1958, Besnik Mustafaj became a prominent figure in Albania's painful struggle out of four decades of Stalinist dictatorship and has played a role in the democratic renewal of his country, a renewal which will hopefully soon be matched by a cultural renaissance out of years of literary lethargy. At an Albanian cultural festival held in Brussels in early December 1991, the writer noted aptly that it is only when you leave and re-enter a room you have been in for a long time that you realize how stale the air is. Indeed some descriptive passages of the present novel seem longish and vapid, a lingering reflection no doubt of the stale air and moral values of the period in which they were written.

It is a rather sad commentary on the state of Albanian literature that no contemporary Albanian writer up to now has been able to match Ismail Kadare on the domestic market or in international renown. Besnik Mustafaj nonetheless offers promise that things are beginning to change and it is to be hoped that more talented young writers of the post-Kadare generation, like him, will soon find their place in Western bookstores.

Also by the same publisher is a collection of Mustafaj's political essays entitled *Entre crimes et mirages. Albanie*, Arles 1992 (Albania, between crimes and mirages). After four decades of forced silence, the Albanians have much to tell us.

First published in: World Literature Today 67.2 (spring 1993)

Ismail Kadare
The pyramid
[*La Pyramide*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1992. 230 pages

It would seem to hold true that absolute monarchs have a predilection for pyramid-form monuments in order to exemplify the hierarchical structure of their power. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that the last representative monument set to the memory of Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) before the collapse of the system he perfected was the pyramid-form 'Enver Hoxha Museum' erected on the main boulevard of Tiranë. It was a prestigious construction of shining white marble, crowned with a huge blood-red star made of plastic, a symbol which was discreetly removed together with all the relics after the fall of the regime. The building itself, even after three years of democracy, is still by far the most impressive in the country and has something menacingly eternal about it.

At the time of its construction, Tiranë's huge marble pyramid was secretly regarded by many students and writers as the epitome of human folly. One of the delightfully blasphemous slogans of the early Albanian student movement, the force which finally persuaded the aging Stalinists to give way to a less surrealist form of government, was "*piramida diskotekë*", i.e. that the Enver Hoxha Museum, known by then to virtually everyone in the country as "the pyramid", should be transformed into a discotheque for the students and young people of the Albanian capital which was, and still is, bereft of nocturnal amusements.

A direct and imaginative reflection of Ismail Kadare's fascination with this once much-lauded and secretly reviled museum is to be found in his intriguing historical novel 'The pyramid'. Like so many of the Albanian writer's works, it can only be understood properly if read as a political allegory. 'The Pyramid' is the mind-boggling tale of the conception and construction of the Cheops pyramid in ancient Egypt, but also of absolute political power and indeed of human folly.

Cheops, the Egyptian pharaoh, realized that he had dismayed his courtiers when he vowed one autumn morning to break with tradition by not constructing a pyramid as his predecessors had done. The pharaonic establishment and the power of custom and conformity were, however, to prove all too strong. Cheops was soon convinced by the high priest Hemiunu that a pyramid was more than simply a tomb.

"It is power, Your Majesty. It is repression, might and money. It will also blind the masses, suffocate their spirit and break their will. It is monotony and detrition. It will be your best bodyguard, my pharaoh, it is the secret police, the army, the navy, the harem. The loftier it rises, the more minute you will seem in its shadow, and the more minute you are, Sire, the better you can act in all your glory."

And so, the Egyptian masses set to work on an absurd construction in the desert, just as, four and a half millenia after them, the Albanian people set to work on the building of literally hundreds of thousands of cement bunkers throughout the country to defend themselves against a supposedly imminent imperialist invasion, and on the construction of a marble mausoleum for their own pharaoh.

'The pyramid' was originally published in the form of a short story which was serialized in the very first issues of the opposition newspaper *Rilindja Demokratike* in January 1990. In Parisian exile, Kadare subsequently expanded the tale to create the present seventeen-chapter novel which has now appeared in the French translation of Jusuf Vrioni. The Albanian original of the novel has not yet been published, a phenomenon by no means unusual for Kadare's works.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 67.3 (summer 1993)

Ferdinand Laholli

Enough of this bitter paradox. Poetry 1980-1990

[*Mjaft ky paradoks i hidhur. Poezi 1980-1990*].

Tiranë. Pasqyra. 1992. 95 pages

In July 1990, one of the most dramatic events of recent Albanian history took place. About 5,000 starving refugees who had sought asylum in the German, French and Italian embassies in Tiranë arrived by boat in the port of Brindisi in southern Italy. They had camped out on the embassy compounds for over a week with little food, water and medical care in order to gain their freedom and to bring forty-six-year-old Stalinist dictatorship in Albania to its knees. In both objectives they succeeded. They were simple people for the most part, unskilled workers, farm labourers, the dregs of Albanian society as they were to be called, people who were now about to embark on a gruelling 48-hour train journey to Germany and who had no idea of what awaited them in the outside world. Among them was a poet.

Ferdinand Laholli (b. 1960) was born and raised in the mournful internment camps of the muddy plain of Myzeqe around Lushnjë. His father had escaped from Albania fifteen days before the poet's birth. Laholli and his remaining family were, in accordance with Albanian custom, automatically declared enemies of the people and consigned to spend the next thirty years of their lives in internment, without the benefits of normal education, housing and jobs. Of his father, Laholli learnt only that he had managed to get to America, the promised land, and had died there.

Savër, Gradishtë and the other internment camps in Myzeqe, though primitive, were not completely devoid of

intellectual stimulus. After all, many of the most talented people in Albania were in prison or in internment. Of their cherished possessions, all that these innocent victims of Stalinist repression had been able to take with them into internment were their dreams, their thoughts and their language.

Ferdinand Laholli spent his first year of freedom at a refugee centre in Lower Saxony. There, he spent most of his time in his room writing, and liberating himself from the anguish of his past. The result of this year of monastic contemplation is the poetry collection *Mjaft ky paradoks i hidhur* (Enough of this bitter paradox). It is Laholli's first collection of verse after a good number of poetic contributions to the numerous little Albanian-language periodicals now appearing in Western Europe.

Ferdinand Laholli is a representative of a new generation of poets in Albanian literature. They are young writers who, for the most part, have never had the benefits of formal literary training or of a thorough education for that matter. But what is important, they are poets who are free to express genuine sentiment and emotion without self-censorship from fear of what the editor at the state publishing company might have to say.

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Fatos Arapi
We, the grief of lights
[*Ne, pikëllimi i dritave*].
Tiranë. Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve. 1993. 78 pages

Contemporary verse in Albania took its course in the early sixties. It was the creation of three writers in particular: the multi-talented and inscrutable Ismail Kadare (b. 1936) from Gjirokastër, later to become the first Albanian novelist to enjoy an international reputation, poet of the soil and short story writer Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931) of the southeastern Devoll region, and the poet's poet par excellence, Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) from the coast near Vlorë.

It was this generation of writers, educated in the countries of the Eastern bloc, with which Albania was then allied, that first endeavoured to break with the cumbersome propaganda of partisan verse and of 'boy meets tractor' lyrics, and began, ever so discreetly, to circumvent some of the constraints of socialist realism imposed upon it by the Stalinist regime. Fatos Arapi's first collection, *Shtigje poetike*, Tiranë 1961 (Poetic paths), was like a fresh breeze from off the Ionian Sea after years of stale conformity. Arapi transfixed in his verse bedazzling sunlight, the rhythmic breaking of the waves and the salty tang of the air from his native Albanian Riviera.

Now, after a dozen volumes of verse, some of which reflecting more than anything the vicissitudes of Albania's political life, we encounter a different poet. Gone is the nervous and impetuous young man searching the sparkling expanses of the Ionian for his inspiration, vanished is the optimist by political necessity. In *Ne, pikëllimi i dritave* (We, the grief of lights), we encounter a mature, pensive writer, 'an abandoned temple' as he

sees himself. Fatos Arapi, now 'hand in hand with tragedy', contemplates matters of the heart and seems to find much solace in the theme of love, ubiquitous in this collection of fifty-six poems.

The volume offers an overview of Arapi's work from the final decade of the dictatorship, poems which, to a large extent, remained unknown and unread in Albania itself, though they were published in Prishtinë by Ali Podrimja in 1991 in an initial version entitled *Dafina nën shi* (Laurel in the rain). Widely admired though Arapi is, it remains to be seen whether the poet's hapless compatriots, on the threshold of social and cultural disintegration in Albania and in the shadow of the apocalypse in Kosovo, will find enough peace of mind and inner strength at the present moment to read and enjoy such nostalgic reflections.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 67.4 (autumn 1993)

Ali Podrimja
The smile in a cage
[*Buzëqeshja në kafaz. Das Lächeln im Käfig*].
Hans-Joachim Lanksch, transl.
Klagenfurt. Wieser. 1993. 129 pages

Kosovo (Alb. *Kosova*), the restless Plain of the Blackbirds, in the southern part of what was once Yugoslavia, still remains to a large extent a *terra incognita* of European literature, despite the excellent poets it produced during the ever so brief flourishing of Albanian culture there. From the fall of the dreaded Serbian minister Aleksandar Rankovic in July 1966 to the bloody quelling of the 1981 movement for equality and republic status, Kosovo enjoyed a fleeting period of relative freedom and prosperity. It was during those years, after decades of suffocation, that Kosovo Albanian culture came of age. University education in Prishtinë took root, and publishing and cultural activity advanced substantially. The suffocation has now resumed with even greater intensity since Slobodan Milošević's coup d'état in July 1990.

Of the many daring poets, prose writers and critics of the generation that grafted Western European ideas onto the traditionally tribal culture of the northern Albanian mountains and the fertile plains of Kosovo, one writer has emerged as a figure of international literary stature.

Ali Podrimja has remained an elliptic poet over the years and one of harsh, uncompromising metaphors. The rock, the snake, the wolf, the distant riverbank and the lonely stone tower haunt his verse. The poet's work was marked more than anything by the suffering and distress of his youth. A deprived childhood in Kosovo and the early death of his parents gave the

young Ali Podrimja little opportunity to relish in the joys of life and little time to take flight into the spheres of the sublime. Profoundly shaken in later years by the death of his son Lumi, Ali Podrimja is now faced with the possibility of yet another tragic loss, that of his country. The poet must come to terms with the cruel and overwhelming reality that his whole people have fallen victim to the ravenous appetite of the wolf.

In the summer of 1992, the city of Munich invited the poet to spend a few months of seclusion at a villa on Lake Starnberg in the Bavarian Alps, a stay which gave him temporary respite and an opportunity to extract himself emotionally from the Balkans, to breathe freely, and at the same time, to reflect on the sombre fate of his people.

*"God gave them nothing, not even grass
Only snakes and stones"*

It was a period of profound creativity for the writer who has now become the literary representative of his people at the international level. In his most recent verse, Podrimja's stoic composure has, not surprisingly, been overlaid by a new, political dimension which was previously marginal in his work. Poems such as the 'Black angel of Sarajevo' and 'Wandering with wolves' evince not only his sense of helplessness and anguish, but also his growing bitterness at Europe's indifference.

The forty-one poems of the present bilingual (German/Albanian) edition entitled 'The smile in a cage' constitute Ali Podrimja's second major verse collection to appear in German translation. In preparation at the present are editions of his works in English and French which will offer the international reading public further opportunities to discover a recusant voice and a little known culture.

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Visar Zhiti

The memory of the air. Poetry

[*Kujtesa e ajrit. Poezi*].

Tiranë. Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve. 1993. 209 pages

Visar Zhiti is one of the many talent writers of modern Albania to have suffered appalling persecution for no apparent reason at all. Born on 2 December 1952 in Durrës as the son of a stage actor, he grew up in Lushnjë where he finished school in 1970 and taught in the northern mountain town of Kukës. Zhiti showed an early interest in verse and had published some poems in literary periodicals. In 1973, he was preparing the collection *Rapsodia e jetës së trëndafilave* (Rhapsody of the life of roses) for publication when the purge of intellectuals broke loose at the infamous Fourth Plenary Session of the Party. Zhiti, whose father had earlier come into conflict with the authorities, was selected as one of the numerous scapegoats in the arts to terrify the intellectual community. The manuscript of the verse collection which he had previously submitted to the editors of the Naim Frashëri Publishing Company was now re-interpreted as containing grave ideological errors and as blackening 'our socialist reality'. There was nothing the poet could say to his interrogators to prove his innocence.

After five years under the people's own Damocles Sword, Visar Zhiti was finally arrested on 8 November 1979 in Kukës, where he was still teaching, and spent the following months in solitary confinement. In order to retain his sanity, he composed and memorized ninety-seven poems (pencil and paper were of course forbidden in jail). Sentenced in April 1980 to ten years in prison for 'agitation and propaganda', Zhiti was transferred to Tiranë prison and from there to the infamous concentration camps from which many talented Albanians never

returned: the copper mines of Spaç in Mirdita and the icy mountain camp of Qafë-Bari near Fushë Arrëz. Released on 28 January 1987, he was then permitted to work in a brick factory in his native Lushnjë until the end of the dictatorship. In autumn 1991, the poet fulfilled a dream and spent a year working in Italy, and tasting freedom for the first time. Visar Zhiti is now director of the Naim Frashëri Publishing Company which had once abandoned him to his fate.

Kujtesa e ajrit (The memory of the air), a volume ninety-nine poems, follows the author into the very soul of the dictatorship which he encounters incarnate in a prison skull. They are moments of terror, of revulsion, of despair and of hope. What distinguishes Zhiti's poetry from other volumes of 'prison verse' is his absolute reverence for the humane. This chronicle of contemporary horrors is devoid of animosity and of that ever so Albanian characteristic - an inexorable call for revenge.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 67.4 (autumn 1993)

Zejnullah Rrahmani
The Albanian national journey
[*Udhëtimi arbdhetar*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1992. 271 pages

The novel *Udhëtimi arbdhetar*, which can be roughly translated as 'The Albanian national journey', is a metaphoric exploration into the essence of Albanian being. The title is of significance to Kosovo Albanians in particular. With all the routes of escape along their perilous journey as a nation now being blocked - no forward, no return, not even a staying put - Zejnullah Rrahmani takes flight into the fantastic and the mythical, leading us to a time/place where illusion and reality become one.

The literature of Zejnullah Rrahmani, who was born in the village of Ballovc in northern Kosovo in 1952, is a Proustian fusion of prose and poetry, and some of his texts are indeed sublime art. Rrahmani's basic theme has always been Albanian resistance, not only to current Serbian domination and aggression, but, in a more general sense, as the will of the Albanians as a people to survive and to transport their ethos into a more secure future. Typical of Rrahmani's poetic treatment of Albanian identity have been the early novel *Zanoret e humbura* (The lost vowels), Prishtinë 1974; *E Bukura e Dheut* (The Earthly Beauty), Prishtinë 1977, inspired by the Albanian folk tale of the same name; and the 510-page novel *Sheshi i Unazës* (Ring Square), Prishtinë 1978. Professor Rrahmani teaches literary theory and is currently dean of the University of Prishtinë, now in the underground after its forced closure by the Serbian military in 1992. Together with the equally experimental Anton Pashku, Zejnullah Rrahmani is considered one of the leading stylists of contemporary Albanian prose in Kosovo.

Whether the down-to-earth reader in Albania itself will have any inclination for Rrahmani's nationalist fantasies is questionable, but Albanian readers in former Yugoslavia, now like everyone else in the Balkan quagmire more obsessed than ever with their national identity, will certainly be willing to take the plunge.

Udhëtimi arbdhetar is a novel with an historic dimension, but for an entirely different reason. It is very likely that it will enter history as the last novel published by Rilindja Press in Prishtinë, the company which has printed over 90% of Albanian-language books and periodicals in what was once Yugoslavia. Now, Albanians are no longer allowed to set foot in the Rilindja Press building in the city centre. Like the university, Albanian secondary schools, radio and television, this venerable institution of Albanian-language culture has been wilfully snuffed out by the Belgrade authorities. Ethnic cleansing can be mute and bloodless, too.

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Jorgo Bllaci
The voices of the night
[*Zërat e natës*].
Tiranë. Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve. 1993. 207 pages

Jorgo Bllaci is a poet of classical proclivities whose refined and engaging verse remained hidden from the public eye for almost a quarter of a century. Born in Gjirokastër in 1938, he worked as a modest teacher and translator before his arrest and imprisonment in the early sixties. Bllaci was one of the many scapegoats sacrificed at the time by the Albanian Party of Labour to terrify the intellectual community into submission. Following his release in 1967, the poet was graciously 'permitted' by the communist authorities to make his living as a construction worker and was unable to resurface as a writer until 1990. It is therefore a two-fold delight to note the appearance of the present volume after so many years of silence. *Zërat e natës* (The voices of the night) offers a collection of elegant flowing verse composed by the poet between 1957 and 1990.

In his youth, during the years of the Soviet-Albanian alliance, Jorgo Bllaci was able to study Russian, a language which at the time provided the Albanians with their only window on the outside world. Steeped in the poetic visions of Pushkin, Lermontov and Esenin, Jorgo Bllaci now finds himself to be one of a dying breed in Albanian culture. The classical meters and form of many of the sixty original poems included in the present collection are a lingering reflection of one of the few positive influences Holy Mother Russia may ever have had upon Albania.

As a lyrical appendix to 'The voices of the night' are Bllaci's felicitous renderings of Chinese (Tu Fu), Persian (

Rumi, Sa'adi), Russian (Pushkin, Blok, Esenin), Ukrainian (Shevchenko), Polish (Tuwim), Modern Greek (Solomos, Zalokostas, Paraschos, Krystallis, Palamas), Italian (Carducci), German (Heine, Goethe), British (Burns, Keats, Byron) and American (Longfellow, Frost) poets. Both his original verse and his meticulous translations evince Jorgo Bllaci as a resonant and perceptive poet undaunted by a long night of oblivion.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 68.1 (winter 1994)

Ismail Kadare
A moonlit night
[*Clair de lune*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1993. 133 pages

Ismail Kadare
The Great Wall, followed by the Blind Firman
[*La Grande Muraille, suivi de Le Firman aveugle*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1993. 137 pages

When 'A moonlit night' was originally published in Albania (as *Nata me hënë*) in January 1985 it caused something of a scandal. It was one of the rare occasions under the dictatorship during which Ismail Kadare ventured to take up a contemporary theme. As Stalinist Albania was not a country noted for its excess of tolerance in any respect, one had to tread with extreme caution in dealing with social realities, and in particular with anything vaguely associated with sex. Albanian prose on contemporary themes had consisted up to then of standard panegyrics on the creation of the perfect communist society and on the conversion of the workers and intellectuals to the new obligatory religion. Kadare chose a topic which seemed safe enough at first glance. Women's liberation from the yoke of patriarchal society had, after all, been one of the great goals of the Party during the late 1960's. What place had petty bourgeois morality in a socialist society?

While walking home with her would-be boyfriend one moonlit night, young Marianne happens to wonder out loud whether love is a stronger emotion in men than in women. Her peer group soon gets wind of her rather innocent verbal

meanderings, though, and in a stifling atmosphere of petty gossip, jealousy and ill-will, the whole machinery of social control comes down upon her. At an organized 'meeting' of her fellow workers, matters get out of hand and Marianne is publicly required to present a medical certificate of virginity, as definitive proof of her good moral standing in the community.

'A moonlit night' was banned a few months after publication, not so much for its peripheral treatment of sex, but for its harsh and very realistic portrayal of how the mechanisms of the infamous workers 'meetings' of the period, the very memory of which every Albanian still dreads, could destroy the life of an innocent individual.

This being said, it is evident that 'A moonlit night' is more than simply a political statement. The past two or three years since the fall of the dictatorship have show that Albanian society, closely-knit and very much moulded by and subject to traditional patriarchal values, is and remains basically intolerant. Social constraints on women and on sexual behaviour are features of this society which have transcended political ideology. As such, a re-edition of this work in Albanian would do no harm.

In a separate volume, Kadare offers readers two other short stories, 'The Great Wall' and 'The Blind Firman', both of which provide his favourite mixture of historical fiction and political allegory.

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Dritëro Agolli
The belated pilgrim
[*Pelegrini i vonuar*].
Tiranë. Progresi. 1993. 270 pages

Have readers not had enough of Dritëro Agolli, head of the party-controlled Union of Writers and Artists from the purge of the liberals in 1973 to the end of the dictatorship in 1990, and cynosure of the official literary establishment of communist Albania, and now, a leading politician of the opposition Socialist Party to boot? Somber dealings, his opponents and critics would say, somber not only in view of the daily electricity cuts in the Albanian capital, but also because of all the mud-slinging in and around the Albanian parliament.

No, in fact, readers have not had enough. Dritëro Agolli, short-story writer and poet of the soil, is a rare voice of humanity and sincerity in Albanian letters. He is a poet who, despite the vicissitudes of public life, has managed to remain true to himself and to his readers.

Pelegrini i vonuar (The belated pilgrim) is Agolli's first volume of verse since *Udhëtojt i menduar* (Pensive I wander) of 1985, and his first book ever written without an eye to the invisible censor. It is an impressive collection of 217 previously unpublished poems in which we encounter a new chapter, not only in the life of the poet, but also in the struggle of his people for survival.

It will be years before the Albanians recover from the decades of isolation, inhumanity and terror they lived through under the surrealist reign of Enver Hoxha. Like victims of a sudden traffic accident, they are only now waking, slowly and

painfully, to understand what hit them in the first place. Gone is the trepidation, but also gone are the all-encompassing ideals and values of that age. The aging poet is left to pick up the pieces and start again.

*"A pilgrim I have been for ages
I wander through a land of vanished hopes
Separated unwittingly from my caravan."*

In a postscript, Agolli confesses:

"For poets of my generation, an age of disappointments and dilemmas has dawned, an age in which to re-evaluate what we produced, without forgetting or denying those fair and humane values we brought forth. But the fortress of ideas and ideals which we believed in, some of us completely, others partially, has all but collapsed, and in its walls burn the fires of our dreams. Those fires have awakened a different type of verse..."

If comprehending the past enables people to deal with the present and prepare for the future, Dritëro Agolli's verse - the bread of life, as a younger writer recently put it - will certainly be of assistance to the Albanians in digesting the collective trauma that nation has suffered.

First published in: World Literature Today 68.3 (summer 1994)

Lazër & Josef Radi
The walls of twilight. Poetry
[*Muret e muzgut. Poezi*].
Tiranë. Lilo. 1993. 160 pages

Albania may be lacking in many things nowadays, but it is not lacking in poets. The Albanians as a people, both in Albania and in Kosovo and western Macedonia, have an almost mystical attachment to their language and to verse. Few people there may have the desire or patience to read local novels, but it is no rarity to hear of impoverished factory workers or simple farm labourers, who live on almost nothing but bread and water, spending the remains of their exiguous wages on a volume of verse. It is a country in which an intellectual, ravaged by half a century of prison and internment, can still find the peace of mind to devote himself to the pleasures of verse and the energy to publish a volume of poetry after such an unspeakable ordeal.

Lazër Radi, who was born in Prizren (Kosovo) in 1916, raised in Shkodër and who finished his legal studies in Rome during the Second World War, spent *forty-six* years of his life in Albanian prisons and internment camps... and survived. He was arrested for political reasons in November 1944, the very month of the said 'liberation', and was only released after the fall of the dictatorship.

In his first volume of published verse, *Muret e muzgut* (The walls of twilight), Lazër Radi presents a pensive cycle of fifty-four poems composed from November 1945 to February 1991, many of which were preserved for years in a plastic container hidden in a field - underground verse in the finest

sense of the word. They are poignant poetic reflections imbued with anguish, suffering and hope.

'The walls of twilight' is a curious collection in some ways. It is, in fact, two volumes in one, for it contains the poetry of the father and of the son. Jozef Radi was born in January 1957 and spent virtually all of his life trudging along with his family from one squalid internment camp to the next. Under Enver Hoxha, the political arrest of an individual meant, as a matter of course, the internment and/or persecution of his entire family, right down to the second cousin once removed. Jozef Radi was thus born a slave in a so-called classless society with nothing but his language and dreams to his name. The seventy-eight poems of Jozef Radi, encompassed in three cycles, stand on their own merit in this collection and offer sufficient proof of the engaging poetic talent of a writer no longer in the shadow of his more illustrious father.

Lazër and Jozef Radi are but two names in a whole new generation of poets and writers now giving birth to another chapter of Albanian literature, that of the aftermath.

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Rexhep Qosja
Death comes with such eyes
[*La mort me vient de ces yeux-là*].
Christian Gut, transl.
Paris. Gallimard. 1994. 321 pages

It has now been exactly twenty years since the first publication of Rexhep Qosja's *Vdekja më vjen prej syve të tillë* (Death comes with such eyes), perhaps the most powerful and engaging prose work to come out of Kosovo since the rise of Albanian literature there. The novel, or as the author more aptly calls it "thirteen tales which could become a novel", was written in the years following the Brioni Plenum of July 1966, which put an end to the reign of Yugoslav vice-president Aleksandar Rankovic (1909-1983) and which allowed the two to three million Albanians in Yugoslavia to breathe somewhat more freely.

'Death comes with such eyes' is the fictive tale of school teacher and writer Xhezair Gjika who is caught up in a frightening web of political intrigue and betrayal. It is also a literary digestion of the sombre Rankovic era. Gjika's is the fate of the intellectual in a totalitarian state, to be hunted down, interrogated and tortured by the secret police. His treacherous crimes consist of his 'non-conformist' writing and a dream he mistakenly told a friend of.

Writer Rexhep Qosja (b. 1936) is one of the most eminent and prolific literary critics in the Balkans. An academician and former director of the Albanological Institute in Prishtinë, Qosja is author of anthologies and numerous scholarly monographs, including a three-volume history of Albanian literature in the romantic period. His recent 500-page

monograph *Populli i ndaluar*, Prishtinë 1990 (The proscribed nation), chronicles Kosovo's hopes and anguish in a disintegrating Yugoslavia. Now somewhat of a father figure of the nation, Qosja advocates peaceful but more active opposition to Serbian colonial rule than the passive resistance propagated by President Ibrahim Rugova and the present Kosovo government in exile.

The French translation of this novel by Christian Gut, complete with a preface by Ismail Kadare, is the first western translation of a major work of Kosovo Albanian prose and, as such, is extremely welcome. The author was unable to travel to Paris for presentation of his book, nor is he allowed to leave Kosovo at all. After his trip to Tiranë last year, the Belgrade government confiscated Qosja's passport, as they do to all Kosovo Albanians who venture to leave 'Yugoslavia' without the Serbian exit visa which they alone are obliged to apply for.

In March 1994, Professor Qosja was present at and injured during one of the ultimate acts of barbarity in the conscious annihilation of Kosovo Albanian culture. The Belgrade authorities, after closing down radio, television and higher education for the Albanian majority, had served notice, quite coincidentally, that they also needed the modern structure housing the venerable Albanological Institute in Prishtinë. Researchers and staff at the Institute had been working magnanimously for the last three years, deprived not only of their salaries, but also of heating and light. On 8 March, a Serbian paramilitary unit, forcing its way into the building, beat up and expelled the occupants, among whom Rexhep Qosja, under the very eyes of the (Serbian) police. Arbitrary arrests and torture continue in Kosovo in an on-going saga.

In view of the resumption of mass repression in Kosovo, now even more intense and systematic than in the Rankovic era,

Rexhep Qosja's 'Death comes with such eyes' has taken on the very dimensions of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

First published in: World Literature Today 69.1 (winter 1995)

Eqrem Basha
The snail's march
[*Marshi e kërmillit*].
Pejë/Pec. Dukagjini. 1994. 207 pages

Written culture in Kosovo experienced a sudden and quite unexpected burst of creativity in the seventies, only a few years after the founding in 1969 of the University of Prishtinë, then the only serious institute of Albanian-language education in the Balkans. The Albanian majority in Kosovo was first granted full cultural autonomy and linguistic equality with the ruling Serbian minority under the Yugoslav constitution of 1974.

It was during this brief blossoming of education and culture, which lasted up until the imposition of martial law by Belgrade in 1981, that Kosovo Albanians were first able to access the currents of European thought and literature. A good number of Albanian students from Prishtinë, Prizren and Pejë, and from neighbouring Macedonia, managed to study abroad, in France in particular, and lapped up the currents of intellectual discussion in a period of political change and social revolution. The works of contemporary philosophers and sociologists were first made available in Albanian and Serbian translations, and 'Theatre of the Absurd' found its way onto Kosovo stages.

Eqrem Basha, born in Dibër in western Macedonia in 1948, is an author who epitomizes this generation in many ways. He studied at the University of Prishtinë and, in the period from 1971 to 1982, published seven volumes of original short stories and innovative verse as well as translations of the dramatic works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Eugène Ionesco. Later on, he worked for the drama section of Prishtinë television until its definitive abolition by Serbian forces in 1989.

Like other Kosovo writers of his generation, Eqrem Basha was not uninfluenced by the fantastic and the absurd, and it is this aspect which predominates in the present volume of short stories. *Marsha e kërmillit* (The snail's march) is a collection of sixteen tales which evoke the spheres of fantasy that average mortals never experience, at least not without the help of recreational drugs. Basha's journeys may be fantastic, but they are not always pleasant. The tale *Dy vetë përgjojnë zbrazetinë* (Two individuals on the look-out for emptiness), for instance, in compact dialogue and reduced imagery, mirrors the solitude and futility of existence in the tradition of Samuel Beckett.

Basha's obsession with the absurd is, in a certain sense, a reflection of the culture of the seventies. As is the case with a number of other contemporary Kosovo writers, however, this obsession may also reflect the fact that reality for Albanians there, in the shadow of the apocalypse, has become too difficult to stomach. A collection of Eqrem Basha's prose is forthcoming in a French translation.

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Hasan Hasani

Lexicon of Albanian writers 1501-1990

[*Leksikon i shkrimtarëve shqiptarë 1501-1990*].

Prishtinë. Shkëndija. 1994. 350 pages

Up to now, Albanians in search of a monograph containing biographical and bibliographical information on their own literature have had to consult foreign-language works: the *Dictionary of Albanian Literature* (New York 1986) by the present reviewer and *Anafora stên albanikê logotekhnia 1500-1986* (Iôannina 1987) in Greek by Lambros Malamas.

With publication of his long-delayed and much-awaited 'Lexicon of Albanian writers 1501-1990', Kosovo writer and poet Hasan Hasani (b. 1947) provides a great service not only to the Albanian reading public at large, but also to domestic and foreign specialists. The monograph includes basic biographical and bibliographical material on no less than 1,381 Albanian writers and literary figures of note, and includes numerous photographs. The abundance of data which Hasani has managed to gather and compile is impressive, given the circumstances under which he was forced to work. Literature from Albania was not and, for political reasons as yet, is not widely available in Kosovo. Books still have to be smuggled into the country just as they were during the Ottoman Empire. Despite this inconvenience, Hasani's treatment of writers from Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and abroad is surprisingly complete. No authors have been excluded for political reasons, which, in itself, is refreshing for Albanian publishing.

Literary lexicons are 'works in progress' and, even without such unforeseen delays, are usually outdated by the time they are published. A thousand details could be discussed and

criticized, and no doubt will be by a flurry of commentators in Tiranë and Prishtinë. The present reviewer will confine himself to one general remark of criticism in what is otherwise a valuable contribution to Albanian scholarship.

In their latent nationalist conflict with the southern Slavs, Kosovo Albanians long had a tendency to ignore the fact that the People's Socialist Republic of Albania was not the paradise on earth they had dreamed it must be. Any open criticism of Enver Hoxha's regime was considered unpatriotic in intellectual circles in Prishtinë. Authors proscribed in Albania, such as Gjergj Fishta and Ernest Koliqi, were never republished in Kosovo, which might otherwise have served as the site of a free press in exile. As such, scholars in recently liberated Tiranë have reservations about their Kosovo brethren, regarding them in many cases as responsible for intellectual collusion with the Stalinist regime.

While Hasani exercises no direct censorship, and notes some cases of arrest and imprisonment, he ignores or politely glosses over the vast majority of the heinous crimes committed against writers and intellectuals during the long decades of Stalinist rule in Albania. The execution or death in prison of noted figures of early twentieth-century literature, such as Kristo Floqi, Ndoc Nikaj, Vinçenc Prennushi, Lazër Shantoja, Terenzio Tocci, and Ndre Zadeja, were well known in the eighties to any observer wishing to know. Equally unmentioned are the imprisonment in concentration camps or otherwise barbarous treatment of post-war writers such as Jorgo Bllaci, Mustafa Greblleshi, Minush Jero, Halil Laze, Petro Marko, Zyhdi Morava, Mehmet Myftiu, Fadil Paçrami, Frederik Rreshpja, Kapllan Resuli, Bashkim Shehu, Ibrahim Uruçi, to note but a few. A cold and scholarly neutrality is not reprehensible in itself, but in this case, the innocent reader is vastly misled about the realities of modern Albanian literature.

While Hasani's lexicon has many merits and is certainly a welcome addition to Albanian studies, it may only serve to exacerbate the latent conflict. One wonders, nonetheless, whether the critics in Tiranë who will take him to task severely for his omissions will be the same individuals who, five years earlier, would have denounced him as a traitor for the very mention of many a non-conformist author.

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Fatos Lubonja
The final slaughter
[*Ploja e mbrame*].
Tiranë. Marin Barleti. 1994. 172 pages

In its hundred years of existence, Albanian drama has produced virtually nothing of exceptional interest. Early twentieth-century theatre offered little more than tear-jerking nationalist melodramas and superficial farces, and the post-war plays of socialist realism were uniformly trite to the point of boredom or acute nausea. It is thus a pleasant surprise that Fatos Lubonja has chosen this genre for his first literary publication.

'The final slaughter', subtitled 'a novel in the guise of a play', is a compellingly imaginative re-interpretation of the Oedipus legend of ancient Thebes, in which the mute horror of Stalinist Albania seems to have struck root. The power-hungry and isolated Oedipus does not go blind, but rather falls victim to intrigue and self-deception, which ultimately lead to his downfall. Forboding the final slaughter are raging torrents that lash the city and a long ensuing drought. It is a sombre play, devoid of hope and sanguine expectation, and one befitting the tragic fate of its author.

Fatos Lubonja was born in Tiranë in 1951, son of the well-known Todi Lubonja, head of Albanian radio and television and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the early years. After the 1973 purge of the liberals, both father and son found themselves in concentration camps. Fatos himself, a student of theoretical physics at the time, was sentenced to a total of 21 years in prison, ostensibly for a hidden novel in diary form, which was discovered by the *Sigurimi*. It was in the infamous Burrel prison in 1988-1989 that he wrote

Ploja e mbrame, circumstances which more than help to explain the pessimistic undertone of the play. Carefully hidden from the boorish prison guards, the drama was pencilled minutely onto one hundred thin leaves of cigarette paper which the author, to our good fortune, managed to preserve until his release on 17 March 1991.

Despite its pensive mood and indeed mournful message, 'The final slaughter' conveys an atmosphere of exalted dignity, due in good part to its language. The author has consciously chosen to borrow many expressions and archaic linguistic elements from the pre-war Scutarine authors of the north, in particular from Gjon Shllaku's noted translation into Geg dialect of the Iliad. The text does not make easy reading, especially for Albanians from the south, but is more than worth the effort.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 69.2 (spring 1995)

Azem Shkreli
I know a word of stone. Poems
[*Ich weiß ein Wort von Stein. Gedichte*].
Hans-Joachim Lanksch, transl.
Klagenfurt. Wieser. 1993. 105 pages

The town of Klagenfurt in southern Austria is regarded by many western travellers as the gateway to the Balkans, the last outpost of civilization before express trains slow to a snail's pace and lug intrepid passengers over into Europe's savage southeast. It is perhaps no coincidence that a small publishing company here has been doing its utmost to present Balkan literature and culture to the Central European public (and receiving the occasional letter bomb for its efforts). After three collections by Ali Podrimja, the Wieser Press has now published the volume 'I know a word of stone' by his fellow Kosovo Albanian poet, Azem Shkreli.

Like Podrimja, Azem Shkreli (b. 1938) is from western Kosovo, born in the shadow of Albania's Dukagjin highlands, in a region which the Serbs contrivingly refer to as Metohija. Shkreli was first introduced to the international public as a major contributor to the anthology *Roads lead only one way. A survey of modern poetry from Kosova*, Prishtinë 1988, and subsequently by his collection *The call of the owl*, Prishtinë 1989, English translations in both cases by John Hodgson. The present German-language edition of his works is a compilation of seventy-nine poems written and published from 1960 to 1993. The range of this volume is sufficient both to savour the particular style of the poet and to sense something of his lyric development over the last three decades. In his mature works, Azem Shkreli remains a writer of elliptical, syllabic solitude, - a pensive, lone shepherd in the rocky highlands of his native land.

With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the volume 'I know a word of stone' should conclude with a pilgrimage, undertaken in March 1993, to the Bavarian grave of exiled Albanian poet Martin Camaj (1925-1992). Here Azem Shkreli muses at the headstone of the master, which was offered him posthumously by the inhabitants of his native Dukagjin mountains:

*"For stones and poets must be
Scattered on earth, so be this one too belonging to us,
We bear no grief, yet never in vain
Is pain felt at Martin's stone."*

First published in: World Literature Today 69.2 (spring 1995)

Kim Mehmeti
Fatusha's fate.
[*Fati i Fatushes*]
Tetovo (Macedonia). Fi & Ga. 1994. 133 pages

With a conscious attempt underway to eradicate Albanian culture from the fertile fields of Kosovo, writing and publishing in western Macedonia have taken on greater significance as heir to Albanian literary traditions in former Yugoslavia. The official results of the Macedonian census, released in November 1994, point to the fact that the Albanians now make up about a quarter of the population of (the former Yugoslav Republic of) Macedonia, and although they still have few of the linguistic rights which their Macedonian-language neighbours enjoy (government services, road signs, normal access to radio, television and higher education in their own language), they are able to write and publish freely. Once in the cultural shadow of their compatriots in Kosovo, the writers of Tetovo, Gostivar and Skopje are now coming increasingly to the fore with their publishing activities to take up the slack, so to speak.

The first serious generation of Albanian writers in Macedonia included such noted figures as prose writer and poet Murat Isaku (b. 1928), poet Abdylazis Islami (b. 1930), both of the Tetovo region, and subsequently writer and scholar Luan Starova (b. 1941), poet, prose writer and playwright Resul Shabani (b. 1944), both of Skopje, and Xhabir Ahmeti (b. 1945) of Tetovo. Among the many rising names of the present generation (poets in particular), mention may be made of: Nehas Sopaj (b. 1954), Shkëlzen Halimi (b. 1961), Avni Halimi (b. 1965), and last but not least of prose writer Kim Mehmeti (b. 1955).

Kim Mehmeti was born near Skopje where he now lives and works. Among his early publications are the short story collections *Pluhuri që mbin* (The Sprouting dust), Skopje 1986, *Dënesje* (The Sighing), Prishtinë 1988, *Bolero* (Bolero), Prishtinë 1991, *Fati* (Fate), Skopje 1992, and the short novel *Shtatë net dënesje* (Seven nights of sighing), Prishtinë 1990, as well as a number of works in Macedonian.

The present volume, *Fati i Fatushes* (Fatusha's fate), is a collection of five short stories in the original narrative style for which Kim Mehmeti is now recognized. Life in the remote Albanian settlements of western Macedonia, upon which Mehmeti focuses, evolves at its own pace and is marked by custom and tradition. The ominously abandoned 'House at the End of the Village,' as the first tale is entitled, makes the villagers ill at ease and confronts them with a gnawing sense of guilt and shame. Indeed, ponderous instincts, sexuality and deep-rooted neuroses lie at the heart of much of Kim Mehmeti's prose, latent forces which the author takes delight in exposing with the help of the delirious village drunks and other slightly deranged figures who inhabit his tales. It is this obfuscatory atmosphere of unconscious or partially unfathomed instincts which the slightly deranged reader, for his part, should enjoy in the disturbing tales of Kim Mehmeti.

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THE LAST ALBANIAN WAITER

Impressions from a journey to Kosovo, 1992

As an Albania specialist, I always enjoy returning to Prishtinë in the southern Yugoslav province of Kosovo. It is not the exciting culture shock of Tiranë, and possesses none of the beauty and refinement of a European capital, but it does have an atmosphere and charm of its own, in a run-down sort of way.

The Grand Hotel in Prishtinë has seen better days. The economic collapse of Kosovo is visible in every corner of the building, which was once the architectural pride of a new Yugoslavia. Five neon stars still shine from the rooftop, although at least four of them should have been removed many years ago. But no matter, I have always felt at home here, and in the venerable Hotel Bozhur.

The Grand Hotel was strangely quiet on my arrival after a gruelling six-hour bus ride from ugly Belgrade. My delight, at long last, at being able to test my as yet rudimentary Albanian was dampened at the reception desk by a polite but quite definitively Serbian '*Molim?*' [Can I help you?]. We settled on English.

After a few hours in Prishtinë, it all became painfully evident. What I had heard at home in Germany was true. Virtually all the Albanian staff at the hotel had indeed been fired and replaced by Serbs. And not only at the hotel. 115,000 Albanians were out on the street in less than a year after the Serbian government seized power in what had been the Autonomous Region of Kosovo. Should I ask why at the

reception desk? Would the question be considered provocative or simply naive? Should I stay at the Grand at all or look for another hotel? The Bozhur would no doubt be the same and I could not envisage a smoky Albanian *han* [inn] in private ownership in downtown Prishtinë. 'You are a foreigner,' I reminded myself, 'Do not meddle in Balkan politics on your first day in Yugoslavia.'

The hotel lobby was serene: black leather sofas, plastic plants, a few people drinking at the bar and a businessman reading a newspaper in Cyrillic characters. Much like the lobby of any big hotel. 'Do they all know?' I wondered. 'And if they do, what do they think?' Everything looked so normal. I felt uneasy and decided to go out for a walk to gather my thoughts.

In contrast to the external appearance of the building and its surroundings, the restaurant of the Grand had managed to retain something of its original dignity. Almost romantic lighting, table flowers, even a pianist playing '*Strangers in the Night*'. Individuals, couples and small groups of well-dressed patrons wining and dining. I could have been out for dinner in Germany or in the United States.

I insisted on using Albanian to order my meal and a glass of red Kosovo wine, and managed to make myself understood. As I sat listening to the lull of the music and studying the faces of the guests, it suddenly dawned on me that everyone in the room was speaking Serbian. There was not a single Albanian patron in the restaurant, or anywhere else in the hotel. Were the Albanians, who make up 92% of the population of Kosovo, no longer allowed into their own hotel? Were they perhaps boycotting it? I did not know. My immediate reaction was frustration, fury and helplessness. I would not have patronized a restaurant which refused to cater to Blacks or Jews. By this

time, I was so upset that I could not eat the meal placed in front of me. This was, after all, 1992, not 1935.

The spectre of Nazi Germany arose before me as I watched the guests laughing, joking and enjoying their meals, seemingly oblivious to the injustice. I pictured myself in the 1930s in an elegant restaurant in Berlin. Music, fashionable patrons dining by candlelight without a care in the world in a hotel recently made *judenfrei* [free of Jews].

The next evening I was served by an Albanian-speaking waiter, the last one. Fatmir was in his mid-twenties and had worked at the restaurant of the Grand Hotel for several years. While the other waiters were busy in the kitchen for a moment, I asked him how it had all taken place and why. "Almost all the Albanians have been thrown out," he whispered. "What can we do? They are hiring Serbs with no qualifications at all. Now they have introduced new uniforms with the Serbian cross on them." "And what will you do?" I asked. "We are Moslems," he shrugged, giving an embarrassed smile. "We have a crescent and a star, you know, but not a cross. The Orthodox, the Serbs, have the cross. But perhaps they won't do it after all. They seem to change the regulations daily." It was at this point, when I was filled with a mixture of indignation and confusion, that my eyes fixed upon the crosses which had been discreetly embroidered into the waiters' jackets. I had noticed the crosses for the first time on nationalist posters in Belgrade and had later seen them sprayed black on walls and etched into the hotel elevator.

Since the Serbian government seized power in mid-1990, the population of Kosovo has been cast into limbo to starve in what is already the poorhouse of the European continent. Only those families who have relatives abroad, in Germany or Switzerland, can survive. A few of the 115,000 victims of power politics had the consolation of a polite lie that they were

redundant, but most of them were told the truth, "You are Albanian."

One afternoon, I talked to Professor Zenel Kelmendi, a leading Kosovo surgeon. After 27 years of teaching at the Faculty of Medicine, he was dragged out of the university building one morning in August 1990 in handcuffs. What did his Serbian colleagues, with whom he had worked for so many years in the same operating theatre, say? "You don't know Kosovo," he replied. "They were the ones who called the militia."

Virtually all the Albanian hospital staff have now been replaced by Serbs, exceptions being made only in cases where no qualified replacement can be found. In the maternity ward in Prishtinë, where 40-50 children used to be born every day, only three to five women now dare give birth.

I also learned that in the first six months of 1991, Albanian schoolteachers had received no salaries. Their Serbian counterparts, who often teach in the same school buildings, had their salaries doubled and trebled during this period. The excuse is 'parity with Serbian teachers in Belgrade', where wages are higher. Why do the Albanian teachers continue working? "If we don't, they will close down the school. That is what they're aiming at," a high school teacher from Prizren told me.

Serbs and Albanians have been living together on the 'Plain of the Blackbirds' for centuries, and history has made enemies of them as it has of the Jews and Arabs in Israel and of the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. After the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Serbia was awarded Kosovo, which it had coveted for centuries as the cradle of Serbian civilization. The inclusion of the province into the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes left almost half

the Albanian population outside of their Albanian homeland. The Kosovo Albanians, who now make up the second largest language community in Yugoslavia (after Serbo-Croatian), did not fare much better under their Serbian rulers than they had under the Sultans. Hundreds of thousands of Albanians were forcibly expelled to Turkey up to 1960 under the pretext that they were Turks, and Serbian colonists settled the newly vacated farmlands. The memorandum on the 'Expulsion of the Albanians' and the colonization of Kosovo, prepared by noted Serbian historian Vasa Cubrilovic (1897-1990) and presented to the Belgrade government on 7 March 1937, reads like a watered-down version of the minutes of the German Wannsee Conference of 1942.

The systematic persecution of the Albanians in early post-war Yugoslavia finally ceased with the overthrow of Tito's vice-president Aleksandar Rankovic (1909-1983) in June 1966. Yugoslav-Albanian relations improved in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and full diplomatic ties between the two countries were established in February 1971. This brought about a political thaw for the Kosovo Albanians. In 1968, they had won the right to fly their national flag, and in November 1969 the University of Prishtinë, the only Albanian-language institution of higher education in Yugoslavia, was opened. Full cultural autonomy was first achieved, after much delay, under the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution.

The semblance of autonomy and freedom which the Albanians enjoyed in the 70s was brought to an abrupt end in 1981. The popular demand for republic status and equality with the other peoples of the Yugoslav federation, a demand supported by over 90% of the population of Kosovo, was met with tanks and automatic rifles.

Throughout the 1980s, the political and economic situation in the province deteriorated, and inter-communal relations took a drastic turn for the worse. It was a harbinger of what was to come for all of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The Serbian military invasion of Kosovo in the summer of 1990 brought the province to the verge of civil war. The elected parliament and government of Kosovo were deposed, the only Albanian-language newspaper *Rilindja*, banned, and all Albanian-language radio and television broadcasting shut down. Since then, 'emergency legislation' has facilitated the direct takeover of all of Kosovo's industry and the firing not only of Albanian management, but of all employees of the 'inferior race'. Nowhere since the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania have human rights in Europe been so flagrantly and so systematically violated as in Kosovo.

Fatmir, the last Albanian waiter at the Grand Hotel, disappeared, no doubt to join the swelling ranks of hungry and angry young Albanians. On my last day in Prishtinë, I ventured to ask the other waiters what had become of him. "He is on his holidays," one of them answered with a smile.

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About the author

Albanologist Robert Elsie was born in 1950 in Vancouver, Canada. He studied at the University of British Columbia, graduating in 1972 with a diploma in Classical Studies and Linguistics. In the following years, he continued his post-graduate studies at the Free University of Berlin, at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris, at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in Ireland, and at the University of Bonn, where he finished his doctorate in 1978 at the Linguistics Institute.

From 1978 on, he was able to visit Albania several times with a group of students and professors from the University of Bonn, visits which first awaken in him an interest in the culture of the tiny and, at the time, exotic Balkan country. For several years in a row, he also attended the International Seminar on Albanian Language, Literature and Culture, held in Prishtinë. From 1982 to 1987, he worked for the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bonn. Robert Elsie is the author of numerous books and articles, in particular on various aspects of Albanian affairs, including:

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