

**PREFACE**  
**Albanistica - duemiladue**

**Robert Elsie**

It is difficult to imagine a European national literature whose greatest 20th century authors have received little or no critical attention over the years, but such is the case with Albanian literature.

Though the first book in Albanian was written in the year 1555, creative writing in that language is very much a 20th century phenomenon. The official use of Albanian had, after all, been banned under Ottoman rule, and it was only in the later *Rilindja* period leading up to Albanian independence in 1912 that the real foundations for this new literature were laid.

The first serious collections of European literature written in Albanian date from the 1930s: the prose works of Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975) and Mitrush Kuteli (1907-1967), and the poetry of Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), Lasgush Poradeci (1899-1987) and Migjeni (1911-1938). These promising beginnings were, however, brought to a swift demise at the end of the Second World War when communist partisans took power and set up a primitive Stalinist regime in Albania, a reign of terror which lasted unimpeded right up to 1990. Most writers of the pre-war period fled abroad, were executed, were sentenced to long terms in prisons and concentration camps, or were otherwise marginalised. Albanian literature, indeed Albanian culture, had been silenced. Of the above-mentioned authors, Koliqi managed to flee to Italy where he nurtured the tiny flame of Albanian culture in exile; Kuteli was sent to a concentration camp where he tried to commit suicide; Poradeci's quill ran dry when he was silenced and put to work as a lowly and uninspired translator of Soviet literature; Migjeni, a voice of genuine social protest, had the good fortune of being deceased, for he, too, would certainly have ended up in a concentration camp; and Fishta, once lauded as the 'national poet of Albania,' was turned into an anathema. For forty-six years, the very mention of his name in Albania was taboo and the reading of his books, such as the incomparable literary epic *Lahuta e malcis* (The Highland Lute), became a dangerous, indeed lethal pastime. The same is true of the works of Faik bey Konitza (1875-1942) and Martin Camaj (1925-1992).

The history of Albanian literature was thus rewritten to accord with an uncompromising Stalinist ideology. Socialist realism was presented as the great achievement of Albanian literature and the works of its new proletarian authors were glorified, preached and inculcated into school children and students of Albanian literature for almost half a century. The writers of genuine talent from before the socialist period were banned and largely forgotten.

It has only been since the fall of the dictatorship in 1990 that many of the major authors of 20th century Albanian literature have once again been published and made available to the reading public. The balance has been rectified and yet, good critical studies of the major authors are still lacking. Because of the ideological constraints imposed upon them for so many years, scholars from Albania itself were, until recently, unable to fulfil their roles in this connection. It is to Italy that we must turn for the best of genuine literary criticism in Albanian studies.

Italo Costante Fortino, professor of Albanian at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples, is one of the handful of scholars active in the field of Albanian studies in Italy. The initial volume which he edited in this series, *Albanistica Novantasette* (Naples 1997), offered a compilation of twenty-three papers devoted to Albanian linguistics and literary criticism. It is thus with great interest and high expectations that we welcome the publication of this second collection of Albanian studies, *Albanistica Duemiledue*, in particular because it

concentrates to a large extent on the major authors of 20th century Albanian literature who have been so long neglected.

The first section of this volume offers in-depth studies of the works of major Albanian writers: Arbëresh poet Vorea Ujko, Martin Camaj, Ernest Koliqi, Mitrush Kuteli, and Faik bey Konitza, as well as a paper on the unification of literary Albanian in the first half of the 20th century. The subject matter is new, as are the approaches taken by the scholars in question. Modern methodology has been conspicuously lacking in the history of Albanian criticism and, in this context, *Albanistica Duemiladue* makes a significant contribution.

The second section comprises shorter papers on various aspects of the works of seven major authors: Ndre Mjedja (1866-1937), Gjergj Fishta, Migjeni, Fan Stilian Noli (1882-1965), Mitrush Kuteli, Ernest Koliqi and Lasgush Poradeci. These papers are the fruits of lectures given in Naples by scholars from Tirana within the framework of inter-university co-operation and exchange between the Istituto Orientale of Naples and the Albanian Institute of Linguistics and Literature in Tirana.

The world of Albanian scholarship has traditionally evolved in three quite different geographical localities, all of which have suffered tremendously from a lack of proper support, maintenance and financing: 1) Tirana with its university and Institute for Linguistics and Literature; 2) Prishtina with university and Albanological Institute and, 3) southern Italy with its chairs of Albanian at the universities of Rome, Naples, Cosenza, and Palermo, etc. Political barriers, which existed in varying constellations in the Balkans, meant that scholars from one locality had little or no contact with the other two. There was very little exchange of information and experience and, as a result, Albanian studies languished for years, indeed for decades.

The opening of Eastern Europe, heralded in our case by the fall of the isolationist dictatorship of Albania in 1990 and by the liberation of Kosova in 1999, has brought about a totally different situation and is now offering new opportunities for a better flow of information and exchange of ideas, not only among the three traditional centres of Albanian scholarship, but with the world at large. This volume reflects these incipient changes and inaugurates the pursuit of significant progress in the long-neglected field of Albanian literary criticism.

Robert Elsie  
The Hague (Netherlands)  
April 2002

[published in: *Albanistica - duemiladue*, a cura di Italo Costante Fortino. Dipartimento di Studi dell'Europa Orientale (Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale," Naples 2002), p. 7-10.]