

ALBANIAN LITERATURE, AN OVERVIEW OF ITS HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

by
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1. Early Albanian Literature (15th-17th cent.)

The earliest intelligible records of written Albanian date from the second half of the fifteenth century¹. They consist mostly of words and short phrases discovered in foreign-language manuscripts. The first, and perhaps best known of these records, is a baptismal formula dating from 1462 which reads as follows: *Unte paghesont premenit Atit et birit et spertit senit* (I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost). The author of the formula was Paulus Angelus (ca. 1417-1470), Archbishop of Durrës and a close friend and counsellor of Scanderbeg (1405-1468).

The rise of early Albanian literature is closely linked to the fortunes of the Catholic Church in the southwestern Balkans and to the spread of Italian, specifically Venetian civilization. It was probably Italian and Catholic interests in combatting the spread of Islam in the Balkans that enabled a modest number of religious books to be published in Albanian. The first of these works were Latin and Italian texts translated into an as yet unsophisticated language, but later, more polished ecclesiastical texts were also written in Albanian itself. The authors of the major works of early Albanian literature were all clerics trained in Italy, where they came into contact with the enlightenment of the late Renaissance and with the ideas and ideals of Italian civilization. Their homeland, by contrast, remained an isolated and primitive backwater. Albania had no large urban centres, no adequate system of education and certainly no publishing facilities, which are the usual prerequisites for the development of written literature. It is thus to Catholic Italy that we must turn our attention for the birth of a new literature. Translations of religious texts into the vernacular had given and were giving rise to many of the national literatures of Europe. In Albania's case, it was a short-lived, though vibrant phase which ended abruptly with the Ottoman conquest and the rapid decline of Catholicism in the Balkans.

The first book published in Albanian, at least the first one we know of, is considered by many observers to be the most spectacular creation of all the history of Albanian writing. It is a 188-page Albanian translation of the Catholic missal, including many extracts from the Catholic breviary, psalms and litanies. Since the frontispiece and the first sixteen sheets of the only copy of the book we possess are missing, we unfortunately know neither its exact title nor its place of publication. In Albanian it is commonly known as the *Meshari* (The Missal). What we do know is that it was written in 1555 by one Gjon Buzuku, a northern Albanian Catholic cleric.

The Missal of Gjon (or John) Buzuku originally consisted of 110 sheets of printed text, of which 94 sheets now remain. Since the book contains well-known liturgical texts and excerpts

¹ A sensational discovery has very recently been made of a 208-page manuscript in Albanian dating from 1210. Its author is Theodor of Shkodër. When published, this work will revolutionize Albanian studies.

from the Old and New Testaments, it is not too difficult to interpret despite the complex orthography, the archaic language and the numerous printing mistakes and omissions. The 188 pages comprise about 154,000 words with a total vocabulary of ca. 1,500 different words, and are a veritable goldmine for lexicographers and historical linguists.

Little is known about the author of this old Albanian missal. The scant information we do possess about Gjon Buzuku comes from the colophon (postscript) of the missal which Buzuku wrote himself in Albanian, not unaware of the historic dimensions of his undertaking:

“I, Don John, son of Benedict Buzuku, having often considered that our language had in it nothing intelligible from the Holy Scriptures, wished for the sake of our people to attempt, as far as I was able, to enlighten the minds of those who understand, so that they may comprehend how great and powerful and forgiving our Lord is to those who love him with all their hearts. I beg of you from today on to go to church more often to hear the word of God. If you do this, may our Lord have mercy upon you. Those who have suffered up to now shall suffer no longer. May you be the elect of our Lord. He will be with you at all times if you pursue righteousness and avoid iniquity. By so doing, the Lord shall give you increase, for your harvest shall last until the vintage and the vintage shall last until the time of sowing. I, moreover, wish to finish my work if it please God. I began it in the year 1554 on the 20th day of March and finished it in the year 1555 on the 5th day of January. If perchance mistakes have been made in any part, I pray and beg of those who are more learned than I to correct them. For I should not be surprised if I have made mistakes, this being the very first work, great and difficult to render into our language. Those who printed it had great difficulty and thus could not fail to make mistakes, for I was not able to be with them all the time. Running a church, I had to serve in two places. And now I beg of you all to pray to the Lord on my behalf.”

It has been put forth convincingly that Gjon Buzuku did not live in Albania itself but rather somewhere on the northern Adriatic in the Republic of San Marco, perhaps in the Venetian region itself, where families of Albanian refugees had settled after the Turkish conquest of Shkodra in 1479. In Venice, Buzuku would have had greater access to the requisite literary education and to training as a priest than in Albania itself.

Judging from the traits of the northwestern Gheg dialect used in the text, Gjon Buzuku's family must have stemmed from one of the villages on the western bank of Lake Shkodra, possibly around Shestan, which is now in Montenegro. Elements of other dialects also occur, which would seem to confirm the assumption that Buzuku was born and raised outside of Albania, unless of course he was consciously endeavouring to employ a language more widely intelligible than his native dialect. Not only is Buzuku's language completely devoid of the strong Turkish influence in later Albanian, it also contains many surprisingly archaic features not otherwise recorded in the language. Due to the complexity of the writing system he practised, these features have as yet only been investigated in part.

The mystery of Buzuku's missal is compounded by the fact that only one copy of the book has survived the centuries. It was discovered by chance in 1740 in the library of the College of the Propaganda Fide by the Jesuit cleric Johannes Nicolevich Casasi (1702-1752) of Gjakova/Djakovica, known in Albanian as Gjon Nikollë Kazazi, when he was visiting Rome in his capacity as Archbishop of Skopje. He described his discovery as “an old Albanian missal totally frayed with age.” Casasi made a copy of fragments of the text, which he transmitted to Giorgio Guzzetta (1682-1756), founder of the Albanian seminary in Palermo. At the end of the eighteenth century, the book is known to have been part of the impressive collection of Cardinal Stephan Borgia, which later ended up in the Vatican Library.

Many observers have been puzzled by the rarity of Buzuku's Albanian missal and by the lack of Albanian books in the sixteenth century in general. The reason is to be found in Church history. The policies of the Catholic Church with regard to publications, in particular publications in the vernacular, vacillated substantially during the years of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and thereafter. In the spirit of a much-needed Reformation, the Church initially authorized some translations of ecclesiastical texts into the vernacular, but soon changed its course. In a reaffirmation of the traditional Catholic teachings of the Counter-Reformation, which put an end to the Renaissance in Italy, and in the general atmosphere of intimidation which reigned during the Inquisition, it soon put the very same books onto the Index and suppressed them. Particularly rigorous were the Index of 1554-1555, i.e. the very year Buzuku finished his missal, and the Index of 1559 under Pope Paul IV (r. 1555-1559).

Not only was Buzuku's missal, which was printed in a language no one in high Church circles could have understood, probably regarded as a heretical threat, it also soon became outdated. In 1563, one of the concluding decrees of the Council of Trent called for a revision of the two most important liturgical manuals used by the Church: the breviary and the missal. The reformed versions of these manuals appeared in 1566, together with a new catechism. Thus, even in the unlikely event that Buzuku's missal had escaped the attention of the Inquisition, it would soon have been out of date and unfit for use. Many liturgical and religious works are also known to have been suppressed or withdrawn from circulation in the subsequent thirty year period between 1568 and 1598. Seen in the light of the influence of the Council of Trent and the Inquisition, which was at its height at the time of writing, it is quite miraculous that even one copy of the Albanian missal survived.

Gjon Buzuku was not a creator of literature per se. His missal, with the exception of the colophon, is simply a conglomeration of translations of Latin religious texts. But as author of the first Albanian book, it was he who can be said to have given birth to literary Albanian. Because the missal and any other religious texts in Albanian which may have existed in the mid-sixteenth century were suppressed by the Inquisition, an Albanian literary tradition which might have arisen here, based on the astounding achievement of Gjon Buzuku, was nipped in the bud and suppressed.

The second major work of early Albanian literature is entitled *E mbsuame e krështerë*, Rome 1592 (Christian Doctrine), a twenty-eight page catechism translated from the Latin catechism of the Spanish Jesuit priest Jacob Ledesma. It was written by Lekë Matrënga (1567-1619), known in Italian as *Luca Matranga*, an Orthodox cleric of the Italo-Albanian community of Sicily. Matrënga's work contains an introduction in Italian, an eight-line poem which constitutes the earliest specimen of written verse in Albanian, and the catechism itself, being religious instruction on church doctrines in the form of questions and answers. His Christian Doctrine is of historical and literary significance not only as the second oldest publication of Albanian literature, but also as the first work by an Italo-Albanian and the first one written in the southern Tosk dialect. All other early Albanian authors, Gjon Buzuku, Pjetër Budi, Frang Bardhi and Pjetër Bogdani, wrote in their native northern Gheg dialects.

Two generations after Gjon Buzuku follows the second major figure of early northern Albanian literature. Pjetër Budi (1566-1622), known in Italian as Pietro Budi, was the author of four religious works in Albanian. He was born in the village of Gur i Bardhë in the Mati region of the north-central Albanian mountains. He trained for the priesthood at the so-called Illyrian College of Loretto (*Collegium Illyricum* of Our Lady of Luria), south of Ancona in Italy, where many Albanians and Dalmatians of renown were to study. At the age of twenty-one he was ordained as a Catholic priest and sent immediately to Macedonia and Kosova, then part of the ecclesiastical province of Serbia under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Antivari (Bar), where he served in various parishes for an initial twelve years. In 1610 he is referred to as

‘chaplain of Christianity in Skopje.’ In 1616, Pjetër Budi travelled to Rome where he resided until 1618 to oversee the publication of his manuscripts, four works in Albanian comprising a total of one thousand pages, printed within the space of five years?

Budi’s most important work is the *Dottrina Christiana* or *Doktrina e Kërshenë* (Christian Doctrine), a translation of the catechism of Saint Robert Bellarmine. It was published in Rome in 1618 and is preserved in only one original copy. Of more literary interest than the catechism itself are Budi’s fifty-three pages of religious poetry in Albanian, some 3,000 lines, appended to the Christian Doctrine. It constitutes the earliest poetry in Gheg dialect. Much of it was translated from Latin or Italian, though some is original.

Frang Bardhi (1606-1643), known in Latin as *Franciscus Blancus* or *Blanchus*, is the fourth in the sequence of early Albanian writers of note. He is author of the first Albanian dictionary, published in Rome on 30 May 1635, which at the same time constitutes the first work in Albanian not of direct religious content. It was during his last year at the College of the Propaganda Fide when he was twenty-nine years old that Bardhi published the 238-page Latin-Albanian dictionary. The work, bearing the title *Dictionarium latino-epiroticum, una cum nonnullis usitatoribus loquendi formulis*, Rome 1635 (Latin-Epirotic dictionary with several common expressions), comprises 5,640 Latin entries translated into Albanian, and is supplemented by an appendix of parts of speech, proverbs and dialogues. The two stated objectives of the dictionary were to save the Albanian language from ‘bastardization’ and to help the Albanian clergy to learn Latin. The first of these goals may be seen within the context of the strong Turkish influence the Albanian language was undergoing in the seventeenth century.

Pjetër Bogdani (ca. 1630-1689), known in Italian as *Pietro Bogdano*, is the last and by far the most original writer of early literature in Albania. He is the author of the *Cuneus prophetarum* (The band of the prophets), the first prose work of substance written originally in Albanian (i.e. not a translation). Born in Gur i Hasit near Prizren about 1630, Bogdani was educated in the traditions of the Catholic church to which he devoted all his energy. His uncle Andrea Bogdani (ca. 1600-1683) was Archbishop of Skopje and author of a Latin-Albanian grammar, now lost. Bogdani is said to have received his initial schooling from the Franciscans at Čiprovac in northwestern Bulgaria and then studied at the Illyrian College of Loretto, as had his predecessors Pjetër Budi and Frang Bardhi. In 1656, he was named Bishop of Shkodër, a post he held for twenty-one years, and was also appointed Administrator of the Archdiocese of Antivari (Bar) until 1671. In 1677, he succeeded his uncle as Archbishop of Skopje and Administrator of the Kingdom of Serbia.

It was in Padua in 1685 that the *Cuneus prophetarum*, his vast treatise on theology, was published in Albanian and Italian with the assistance of Cardinal Barbarigo. Bogdani had finished the Albanian version ten years earlier but was refused permission to publish it by the Propaganda Fide which ordered that the manuscript be translated first, no doubt to facilitate the work of the censor.

The *Cuneus prophetarum* is considered to be the masterpiece of early Albanian literature and is the first work in Albanian of full artistic and literary quality. In scope, it covers philosophy, theology and science (with digressions on geography, astronomy, physics and history). With its poetry and literary prose, it touches on questions of aesthetic and literary theory. It is a humanist work of the Baroque Age steeped in the philosophical traditions of Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. Bogdani’s fundamental philosophical aim is a knowledge of God, an unravelling of the problem of existence, for which he strives with reason and intellect.

Though Bogdani’s talents are certainly most evident in his prose, his unaffected religious poetry is not devoid of a modest elegance. The basic corpus of his verse are the poems of the ten Sibyls, which are imbued with the Baroque penchant for religious themes and classical allusions.

It is Bogdani's use of the Albanian language which sets him apart from all other early Albanian writers. He has a conscious interest in old and forgotten words and a much richer vocabulary which he skilfully employs to form new abstract concepts. Bogdani philosophizes on scholasticism and theology with confidence and elegance whereas his predecessor, Frang Bardhi, fifty years before him, had experienced obvious difficulties in expressing abstractions of any kind. In Bogdani's work we encounter for the first time what may be considered a literary language. As such, he may justly bear the title of father of Albanian prose.

Other works of Albanian letters in the seventeenth century are few and far between, like the occasional palm tree on the horizon of a literary desert. None of these works is of particular literary value, though great cultural, linguistic and historical significance must be attached to anything written in Albanian in this period.

At any rate, the five Albanian writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Gjon Buzuku, Lekë Matrënga, Pjetër Budi, Frang Bardhi and Pjetër Bogdani, form the core of early Albanian literature. They bestowed upon it an initial breath of creative genius and a modicum of refinement and sophistication. Together with a small number of minor authors and no doubt others who have been lost to the annals of literary history, they gave birth to a rapidly evolving literature which was to be nipped in the bud, so to speak, by the tempestuous course of Albanian history. What might have been the solid roots of a dynamic national literature such as those which grew in the more fortunate regions of Europe in the seventeenth century were severed by the Turkish conquest and consequently by the decline and fall of Albania's somewhat ambivalent patron, the Catholic Church.

With the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, early Albanian literature suddenly withers and the first notable chapter of Albanian literary history comes to a rapid and definitive close. Not until the so-called Rilindja movement of national rebirth in the second half of the nineteenth century was literature in Albania to regain the vitality it experienced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The national literature had once again to start afresh.

2. Muslim literature in Albania (18th-19th cent.)

The Muslim Turks conquered most of Albania in the early years of the fifteenth century. The mountain fortress of Kruja was taken in 1415 and the equally strategic towns of Vlora, Berat and Kanina in southern Albania fell in 1417. By 1431, the Turks had incorporated southern Albania into the Ottoman Empire and set up a 'sanjak' administration with its capital in Gjirokastra, captured in 1419.

The first attempts in the early eighteenth century by Albanian writers, who had been raised in an Islamic culture to express themselves not in the languages of the Orient, but in their own native tongue, were just as decisive and momentous as the transition from Latin to Albanian had been for the creation of early (sixteenth and seventeenth century) Albanian literature.

The literature of the *Bejtexhinj*, as this period of Albanian writing is called, consists almost exclusively of verse. The poetry of this period, composed in Arabic script, was strongly influenced by Turkish, Persian and Arabic literary models in fashion at the time both in Istanbul and the Middle East. The subject matter was often religious, either meditatively intimate or openly didactic, serving to spread the faith. The speculative character of much of this verse derived its inspiration from the currents of Islam: from authoritative Sunnite spirituality to the intense mystical spheres of Shi'ite Sufism and later, to the more liberal, though equally mystical reflections of Bektashi pantheism. Some secular verse does occur too: love lyrics, nature poetry and historical and philosophical verse in which we encounter the occasional ironic pondering on the vacillations of existence from a world which is easily as exotic to the modern Albanians

themselves as it is to the Western reader.

The first major poet among the *Bejtexhinj* was Nezim Frakulla (ca. 1680-1760), alternatively known as *Nezim Berati* or *Ibrahim Nezimi*. He was born in the village of Frakull near Fier and lived a good deal of his life in Berat, a flourishing centre of Muslim culture at the time. Frakulla studied in Istanbul where he wrote his first poetry in Turkish, Persian and perhaps Arabic, including two *divans*. About 1731, he returned to Berat where he is known to have been involved in literary rivalry with other poets of the period, notably with Mulla Ali, mufti of Berat. Between 1731 and 1735 he composed a *divan* and various other poetry in Albanian, including an Albanian-Turkish dictionary in verse form. Although we do not possess the whole of the original *divan*, we do have copies of ca. 110 poems from it. Some of his verse was put to music and survived the centuries orally. Nezim Frakulla tells us himself that he was the first person to compose a *divan* in Albanian.

Frakulla's *divan* includes verse ranging from panegyrics on local pashas and military campaigns, to odes on friends and patrons, poems on separation from and longing for his friends and (male) lovers, descriptions of nature in the springtime, religious verse and, in particular, love lyrics. The imagery of the latter *ghazal*, some of which are devoted to his nephew, is that of Arabic, Persian and Turkish poetry with many of the classical themes, metaphors and allusions: love as an illness causing the poet to waste away, the cruel lover whose glance could inflict mortal wounds, or the cupbearer whose beauty could reduce his master to submission. Frakulla laid the foundations for a new literary tradition in Albania, one which was to last for two centuries.

Among other commanding representatives of Albanian literature in the Muslim tradition are: Hasan Zyko Kamberi, author of the poem *Paraja* (Money), a caustic condemnation of feudal corruption and at the same time perhaps the best piece of satirical verse in pre-twentieth century Albanian literature; Muhamet Kyçyku (1784-1844) whose verse marks the transition between the classical verse of the early *Bejtexhinj* and the Rilindja poets of the second half of the nineteenth century; Dalip Frashëri, a Bektashi leader from the southern Albanian village of Frashër, who is the author of an as yet unpublished literary epic in Albanian; and his younger brother Shahin Bey Frashëri, who also tried his hand at a Bektashi epic.

The Albanian *Bejtexhinj* were, on the whole, not poets of the calibre of the Persian and Arabic classics, whose literary sophistication sprang from a millennium of refined oriental civilization. They were, however, inventive and talented minstrels who created both a new Albanian literature based on the Islamic traditions of the Orient and a new, but as yet unpolished literary language. Albanian literature was written in Arabic script for over two centuries in all. It flourished throughout the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century until it was gradually replaced by the romantic nationalist literature of the Rilindja period, written primarily in a number of newly devised versions of the Latin alphabet. The Muslim tradition was kept up in Kosova, however, where verse was still being written in Arabic script as late as 1947.

3. **Italo-Albanian literature (18th-19th cent.)**

One strong branch of Albanian literature to evolve on its own outside the Balkans was that of the Italo-Albanians or Arbëresh of southern Italy. Sporadic groups of Albanians had found their way to Italy as early as 1272, 1388 and 1393, but mass settlement first began with the Turkish invasion of the Balkans which resulted in a great exodus of Albanians to Italy. All in all, the Albanians founded or repopulated about one hundred towns and villages in southern Italy, over half of which are to be found in the mountains of Calabria. Today, there are about fifty towns scattered throughout the *mezzogiorno* where Albanian is still to be heard. These

communities, comprising an estimated Albanian-speaking population of about 90,000, are located in seven regions: Abruzzi, Molise, Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily.

It is to the mountains of Calabria that we must turn for the first Arbëresh poet of real talent. Giulio Variboba (1724-1788), known in Albanian as *Jul Variboba*, is regarded by many Albanians as the first genuine poet in all of Albanian literature. Soon after his arrival in Rome, Variboba published his long lyric poem *Ghiella e Shën Mëriis Virghiër*, Rome 1762 (The life of the Virgin Mary), the only Arbëresh book printed in the eighteenth century. This loosely structured poem of 4,717 lines, written entirely in the dialect of San Giorgio Albanese and loaded with much Calabrian Italian vocabulary, is devoted to the life of the Virgin Mary from her birth to the Assumption. The strength of 'The life of the Virgin Mary,' interspersed as it is with folksongs, lies indeed in its realistic and down-to-earth style, often pervaded with humour and naivety, and in the fresh local colour of its imagery.

Girolamo De Rada (1814-1903), known in Albanian as Jeronim De Rada, is not only the best known writer of Arbëresh literature but also the foremost figure of the Albanian nationalist movement in nineteenth-century Italy. He was the harbinger and first audible voice of the Romantic movement in Albanian literature, a movement which, inspired by his unfailing energy on behalf of national awakening among Albanians in Italy and in the Balkans, was to evolve into the romantic nationalism characteristic of the Rilindja period in Albania. His journalistic, literary and political activities were instrumental not only in fostering an awareness for the Arbëresh minority in Italy but also in laying the foundations for an Albanian national literature.

It was in Naples in 1836 that De Rada published the first edition of his best known Albanian-language poetry, the 'Songs of Milosao,' under the Italian title *Poesie albanesi del secolo XV. Canti di Milosao, figlio del despota di Scutari* (Albanian poetry from the 15th century. Songs of Milosao, son of the despot of Shkodra). The Songs of Milosao, known in Albanian as *Këngët e Milosaos*, are a long romantic ballad portraying the love of Milosao, a fictitious young nobleman in fifteenth-century Shkodra. They were published in three different versions in 1836, 1847 and 1873. De Rada was constantly altering, improving and expanding this collection of lyric ballads of strong romantic inspiration from an Ur-Milosao in twenty cantos to a much lengthier final version of thirty-nine cantos.

De Rada's other major literary work in Albanian is *Scanderbeccu i pa-faan* (Misfortunate Scanderbeg) which he considered to be his masterpiece. Again, this series of romantic ballads was published in a variety of editions reflecting the poet's state of mind at various ages. Broadly speaking, it covers the history of Scanderbeg's early exploits from 1418 to 1444 and is interspersed with many only vaguely related interludes. Scanderbeg, in actual fact, rarely appears in the work. Though 'Misfortunate Scanderbeg' contains many passages of moving verse, it is not the conventional epic about the Albanian national hero one might expect from an early torchbearer of the Albanian nationalist movement. It is distinctly meandering, particularly in later editions. Literary production of classical precision and conceptual unity was not De Rada's strength.

This said, Girolamo De Rada nonetheless remains a towering figure in the history of nineteenth-century Albanian literature. He was instrumental in waking the Arbëresh from their cultural obscurity and literary provinciality, and acted as a catalyst whose echo was clearly heard across the waters in Albania, as yet under the Ottoman yoke.

4. **Rilindja literature of the Albanian national awakening (19th cent.)**

The struggle for political autonomy within the languishing Ottoman Empire and the will for cultural identity and survival among a backward and religiously divided people crystallized

in the second half of the nineteenth century into the *Rilindja* (Alb: 'rebirth') movement of national awakening. This Rilindja period, which in its classical phase spans the years from the formation of the League of Prizren in 1878 to the declaration of Albanian independence in 1912, woke the Albanian people and united them into one linguistic identity, one culture and one nation. There was an intrinsic link between the goals of the nationalist movement in this period and the creative force of Albanian literature. Romantic nationalism accordingly became a dominant trait of expression in Rilindja literature. The cultural awakening, which went hand in hand with the national and political consciousness raising, stimulated and presupposed of necessity the use of Albanian in all walks of life, in particular in writing as well as for Albanian-language education, forbidden by the Porte.

Here lies the main reason for the sluggish evolution of Albanian literature throughout the Ottoman period. The Empire was divided not into national or ethnic groups, but into religious communities. The non-Muslim inhabitants of the Balkans enjoyed a certain degree of cultural autonomy, whereas the Muslim residents were considered by the authorities to be Turks and were thus forced to use Turkish. As such, the Greeks, Serbs, Romanians and Bulgarians of the Balkan peninsula, all Orthodox, were able to set up schools, to print books and newspapers in their native languages, to institutionalize their native cultures, and indeed to attain independence or at least a certain degree of political autonomy within the Empire. The Albanians, the majority of whom were now Muslims, did not have this right. As nationalist resistance grew, the Porte regarded all Albanian-language education, school and publications as subversive and continually reinforced its ban on them, thus plunging the whole country into unremitting darkness and ignorance. Any Albanian-language schools which did manage to open were soon shut down. Even into the twentieth century, the Ottoman authorities often went so far as to open people's handbags and correspondence, and search homes for anything written in Albanian.

Naim Frashëri (1846-1900) is nowadays widely considered to be the national poet of Albania. He spent his childhood in the village of Frashër where he no doubt began learning Turkish, Persian and Arabic and where, at the Bektashi monastery, he was imbued with the spiritual traditions of the Orient. In Janina (Iôannina), Naim Frashëri attended the Zosimaia secondary school which provided him with the basics of a classical education along Western lines. Here he was to study Ancient and Modern Greek, French and Italian and, in addition, was to be tutored privately in oriental languages. As he grew in knowledge, so did his affinity for his pantheistic Bektashi religion, for the poets of classical Persia and for the Age of Enlightenment. His education in Janina made of him a prime example of a late nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectual equally at home in both cultures, the Western and the Oriental. Naim Frashëri is the author of a total of twenty-two works: four in Turkish, one in Persian, two in Greek and fifteen in Albanian. In view of his sensitive position as director of the board of censorship of the Ottoman Ministry of Education, Naim Frashëri deemed it wise not to use his full name in many of his own publications, and printed only a 'by N.H.', 'by N.H.F.' or 'by N.F.' Since the Porte would not tolerate the publication of Albanian-language books in Constantinople, Naim Frashëri's best known works were published in Bucharest, where a substantial Albanian colony had settled and was flourishing and where an Albanian printing press had been set up by the *Shoqëri e të shtypuri shkronja shqip* (Society for the publication of Albanian writing) in 1886. The poetry volume for which he is primarily remembered, *Bagëti e bujqësija*, Bucharest 1886 (Bucolics and Georgics), is a 450-line pastoral poem reminiscent of Vergil and laden with the imagery of his mountain homeland. It proved extremely popular among Frashëri's compatriots and was smuggled into Albania in caravans.

Istori' e Skenderbeut, Bucharest 1898 (History of Scanderbeg), is an historical epic of 11,500 verses which Frashëri must have written in about 1895 in his last creative years and one which the author himself regarded as his masterpiece. The figure of the Albanian national hero

Scanderbeg, the symbol and quintessence of resistance to foreign domination, held a particular fascination for the intellectuals of the Rilindja period and for the common people. Though a fundamental work of Albanian romantic nationalism of the period, *Istori' e Skenderbeut* does not stand the test of time as a national epic. It suffers from the same artistic weaknesses to be found in Frashëri's other works and in many works of twentieth-century Albanian literature up to the present day: didactic and moralizing rhetoric and a black and white polarization of the protagonists into absolute saints and absolute demons huddling under a grey cloud of tear-jerking sentimentality.

The significance of Naim Frashëri as a Rilindja poet and indeed as a 'national poet' rests not so much upon his talents of literary expression nor upon the artistic quality of his verse, but rather upon the sociopolitical, philosophical and religious messages it transmitted, which were aimed above all at national awareness and, in the Bektashi tradition, at overcoming religious barriers within the country. His influence upon Albanian writers at the beginning of the twentieth century was enormous. Many of his poems were set to music during his lifetime and were sung as folk songs. If one compares the state of Albanian literature before and after the arrival of Naim Frashëri, one becomes aware of the major role he played in transforming Albanian into a literary language of substantial refinement.

It can be asserted without any hesitation that the Rilindja period was one of inestimable significance for Albania's political and cultural survival. In its political history, Albania evolved from an obscure and primitive backwater of the Ottoman Empire to take its place among the nation-states of Europe. Through its literature and cultural history, this age of 'rebirth' created an awareness for national identity and made the Albanian language the matter-of-course vehicle of literary and cultural expression for the Albanian people.

It was the Rilindja period, more than any other, which moulded Albanian literature and determined many of its subsequent characteristics. What followed in the independence years up until the Second World War was, to a large extent, simply the growth and refinement of a sturdy and thriving plant rooted in the blood-stained soil of that troubled and decisive age. Rilindja literature thus laid the foundations for the development of modern Albanian literature, not only in journalism and poetry, the *élan vital* of the period, but also in prose, drama and essays, which for the first time evolved into solid if not overly sophisticated literary genres. Twentieth-century Albania cannot be comprehended at all without an understanding of the Rilindja period and its culture.

5. Writing in the independence period (early 20th cent. to 1944)

The first decade of independence from the proclamation in Vlora in 1912 to the rise of dictator Ahmet Zogu in the early twenties was marked by extreme political turmoil, bloodshed and starvation in Albania. The formal political goal of the nationalist movement, i.e. independence, had been achieved, and Albanian had become the official language of the country, but the continuing political chaos gave writers and intellectuals within the country little time to reflect on new dimensions for a national culture. The Rilindja culture of romantic nationalism, deeply ingrained in Albanian literature, continued to make its influence felt throughout the independence period.

The most influential of all Albanian writers and publishers of the turn of the century was most certainly Faik bey Konitza (1875-1942), also spelt Konica. He was born in April 1875 in the now Greek village of Konitsa in the Pindus mountains, not far from the present Albanian border. After elementary schooling in Turkish in his native village, he studied, though from a Muslim family, at the Jesuit Saverian College in Shkodra which offered him not only some

instruction in Albanian but also an initial contact with central European culture and Western ideas. From there, he continued his schooling at the French-language Imperial Galata secondary school in Constantinople. In 1890, at the age of fifteen, he was sent to study in France where he spent the next seven years. He finished his studies at Harvard University in the United States, although little is known about this period of his life. As a result of his highly varied educational background, he was able to speak and write Albanian, Italian, French, German, English and Turkish. In 1897 Konitza moved to Brussels, where at the age of twenty-two he founded the periodical *Albania*, which was soon to become the most important organ of the Albanian press at the turn of the century. He moved to London in 1902 and continued to publish the journal there until 1909. In London he made friends with French poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) who stayed with him in 1903 and 1904.

Faik Konitza unfortunately wrote little in the way of literature per se, but as a stylist, critic, publicist and political figure he had a tremendous impact on Albanian writing and culture at the turn of the century. His periodical *Albania*, published in French and Albanian, not only helped make Albanian culture and the Albanian cause known in Europe, but also set the pace for literary prose in Tosk dialect. It is widely considered to be the most significant Albanian periodical to have existed up to the Second World War. Konitza valued a free exchange of ideas and he placed the columns of *Albania* at the disposal of his rivals whom he countered with caustic wit.

Faik Konitza's writings were nonetheless fragmentary and his actual literary production was minimal, a fact lamented by many of his compatriots during his lifetime. Aside from his numerous editorials and articles on politics, language, literature and history which appeared for the most part in *Albania e vogël* (Little Albania), a fortnightly supplement to his periodical *Albania*, that was published alternatively in Tosk and Gheg dialect from 1899 to 1903, Konitza did write what could be regarded as a novel, although he never completed it. This is the satirical *Dr. Gjëlpera zbulon rënjët e dramës së Mamurrasit* (Dr Needle discovers the roots of the Mamurrasi drama).

In his writing, Konitza attacked the often banal nationalist outpourings on the lofty virtues of the Albanian people and called for a more realistic and critical stance towards his nation with all its failings. The biting sarcasm with which he expressed his intransigence towards the naivety of his compatriots and towards the many sacred cows of Albanian culture and history let a breeze of fresh air into the aula of Albanian letters.

Fan Noli (1882-1965), also known as *Theophan Stylian Noli*, was not only an outstanding leader of the Albanian-American community, but also a pre-eminent and multi-talented figure of Albanian literature, culture, religious life and politics. Noli was born in the village of Ibrik Tepe (Alb. *Qyteza*), south of Edirne/Adrianopole in European Turkey on 6 January 1882. In April 1906, he set off for the New World and arrived in New York.

In this period, Orthodox Albanians in America were growing increasingly impatient with Greek control of the church. Tension reached its climax in 1907 when a Greek Orthodox priest refused to officiate at the burial of an Albanian in Hudson, Massachusetts, on the grounds that, as a nationalist, the deceased was automatically excommunicated. Noli saw his calling and convoked a meeting of Orthodox Albanians from throughout New England at which delegates resolved to set up an autocephalic, i.e. autonomous, Albanian Orthodox Church with Noli as its first clergyman. On 9 February 1908 at the age of twenty-six, Fan Noli was made a deacon in Brooklyn and on 8 March 1908 Platon, the Russian Orthodox Archbishop of New York, ordained him as an Orthodox priest. A mere two weeks later, on 22 March 1908, the young Noli proudly celebrated the liturgy in Albanian for the first time at the Knights of Honor Hall in Boston. This act constituted the first step towards the official organization and recognition of an Albanian Autocephalic Orthodox Church. In Albania, on 21 November 1923, Noli was

consecrated Bishop of Korça and Metropolitan of Durrës. He was now both head of the Orthodox Church in Albania and leader of a liberal political party, the main opposition to the conservative forces of Ahmet Zogu (1895-1961), who were supported primarily by the feudal landowners and the middle class. On 17 July 1924, Fan Noli was officially proclaimed prime minister and shortly afterwards Regent of Albania. For six months, he led a democratic government which tried desperately to cope with the catastrophic economic and political problems facing the young Albanian state. Noli subsequently spent several years in exile in northern Europe, primarily in Germany and Austria. Back in Boston, his great dream of an Albanian national church was fulfilled on 12 April 1937 when the Patriarch of Constantinople officially recognized the Albanian Autocephalic Orthodox Church.

Politics and religion were not the only fields in which Fan Noli made a name for himself. He was also a dramatist, poet, historian, musicologist and in particular an excellent translator who made a significant contribution to the development of the Albanian literary language. He has not been forgotten as a poet though his powerful declamatory verse is far from prolific. It was collected in a volume with the simple title *Albumi*, Boston 1948 (The album), which he published on the occasion of his forty years of residence in the United States.

Fan Noli's main contribution to Albanian literature was as a stylist, as seen especially in his translations. Together with Faik bey Konitza, Noli may indeed be regarded as one of the greatest stylists in the Tosk dialect of the Albanian language. Particularly impressive are Noli's translations of Shakespeare. His Othello (*Otello*) was printed in 1916 and his equally eloquent translations of Macbeth (*Makbethi*), Hamlet (*Hamleti*) and Julius Caesar (*Jul Qesari*) were all published in Brussels in 1926.

It is a pity that Fan Noli and Faik Konitza, these two greatest stylists of the modern Albanian language, who were both residents not of Albania but of the United States, should have devoted so little of their energies to creative literature. But such were the times. For historical and political reasons, the cult of nationalism has always had priority among the Albanians over the cult of the sublime. Though he wrote comparatively little in the way of literature per se, Fan Noli remains nonetheless a literary giant. He was instrumental in helping the Albanian language reach its full literary and creative potential. A modern literary language had been created, a language as yet in search of its literature.

By far the greatest and most influential figure of Albanian literature in the first half of the twentieth century was the Franciscan pater Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940) who more than any other writer gave artistic expression to the searching soul of the now sovereign Albanian nation. Lauded and celebrated up until the Second World War as the 'national poet of Albania' and the 'Albanian Homer,' Fishta was to fall into sudden oblivion when the communists took power in November 1944. The very mention of his name became taboo for forty-six years.

In August 1919, Gjergj Fishta served as secretary-general of the Albanian delegation attending the Paris Peace Conference. In 1921, he represented Shkodra in the Albanian parliament and was chosen in August of that year as vice-president of this assembly. His talent as an orator served him well in his functions both as a political figure and as a man of the cloth. In later years, he attended Balkan conferences in Athens (1930), Sofia (1931) and Bucharest (1932) before withdrawing from public life to devote his remaining years to the Franciscan order and to his writing. From 1935 to 1938 he held the office of provincial of the Albanian Franciscans. These most fruitful years of his life were spent in the quiet seclusion of the Franciscan monastery of Gjuhadoll in Shkodra with its cloister, church and rose garden where Fishta would sit in the shade and reflect on his verse.

Although Gjergj Fishta is the author of a total of thirty-seven literary publications, his name is indelibly linked to one great work, indeed to one of the most astounding creations in all the history of Albanian literature, *Lahuta e malcís*, Shkodra 1937 (The highland lute). 'The

highland lute' is a 15,613-line historical verse epic focussing on the Albanian struggle for autonomy and independence. It constitutes a panorama of northern Albanian history from 1862 to 1913. This literary masterpiece was composed primarily between 1902 and 1909, though it was refined and amended by its author over a thirty year period. It constitutes the first Albanian-language contribution to world literature.

In 1902 Fishta had been sent to a little village to replace the local parish priest for a time. There he met and befriended the aged peasant Marash Uci (1810-1914) of Hoti, whom he was later to immortalize in verse. In their evenings together, Marash Uci told the young priest of the heroic battles between the Albanian highlanders and the Montenegrins, in particular of the famed battle at the Rrzhanica Bridge in which Marash Uci had taken part himself. The first parts of 'The highland lute,' subtitled 'At the Rrzhanica bridge,' were published in Zadar in 1905 and 1907, with subsequent and enlarged editions appearing in 1912, 1923, 1931 and 1933. The definitive edition of the work in thirty cantos was presented in Shkodra in 1937 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the declaration of Albanian independence. Despite the success of 'The highland lute' and the preeminence of its author, this and all other works by Gjergj Fishta were banned after the Second World War when the communists came to power. The epic was, however, republished in Rome 1958, Ljubljana 1990 and Rome 1991, and exists in German and Italian translations. Gjergj Fishta chose as his subject matter what he knew best: the heroic culture of his native northern Albanian mountains. It was his intention with this epic, an unprecedented achievement in Albanian letters, to present the lives of the northern Albanian tribes and of his people in general in a heroic setting.

In its historical dimensions, 'The highland lute' begins with border skirmishes between the Hoti and Gruda tribes and their equally fierce Montenegrin neighbours in 1862. The core of the work (cantos 6-25) is devoted to the events of 1878-1880, i.e. the Congress of Berlin which granted Albanian borderland to Montenegro, and the resultant creation of the League of Prizren to defend Albanian interests. Subsequent cantos cover the Revolution of the Young Turks which initially gave Albanian nationalists some hope of autonomy, and the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 which led to the declaration of Albanian independence.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Gjergj Fishta was universally recognized as the 'national poet.' Austrian Albanologist Maximilian Lambertz described him as "the most ingenious poet Albania has ever produced" and Gabriele D'Annunzio called him "the great poet of the glorious people of Albania." For others he was the "Albanian Homer."

After the war, Fishta was nonetheless attacked and denigrated perhaps more than any other pre-war writer, and fell into prompt oblivion. The national poet became an anathema. The official Tirana 'History of Albanian Literature' of 1983, which carried the blessing of the Albanian Party of Labour, restricted its treatment of Fishta to an absolute minimum.

The reason for Fishta's fall from grace after the 'liberation' in 1944 is to be sought in the origins of the Albanian Communist Party. In July 1946, Albania and Yugoslavia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance and a number of other agreements which gave Yugoslavia effective control over all Albanian affairs, including the field of culture. Serbo-Croatian was introduced as a compulsory subject in all Albanian high schools and by the spring of 1948, plans were even under way for a merger of the two countries. It is no doubt the alleged anti-Slavic sentiments expressed in 'The highland lute' which caused the work and its author to be proscribed by the Yugoslav authorities, even though Fishta was educated in Bosnia and inspired by Serbian and Croatian literature. In fact, it is just as ridiculous to describe 'The highland lute' as anti-Slavic as it would be to describe *El Cid* and the *Chanson de Roland* as anti-Arab, but such were the times.

Yet despite four decades of unrelenting Party harping and propaganda reducing Fishta to a 'clerical and fascist poet,' the people of northern Albania, and in particular the inhabitants

of his native Shkodra, did not forget him. After almost half a century, Gjergj Fishta was commemorated openly for the first time on 5 January 1991 in Shkodra. During the first public recital of Fishta's works in Albania in forty-five years, the actor at one point hesitated in his lines and was immediately and spontaneously assisted by members of the audience - who still knew many parts of 'The highland lute' by heart.

Gjergj Fishta and the Scutarine school represented the mainstream of Albanian literature up until the Second World War - creative, innovative and yet traditionalist. Fishta had raised the little Balkan country to the level of literary sophistication which the more advanced nations of Europe had known in the second half of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century. This in itself was quite a significant step forward in view of Albania's tardy consolidation as a nation and its sluggish political and cultural development. This period of Albanian literature was to some extent, however, now losing touch with the realities of the independent Albanian state of the 1930s.

The road to modernity, and thus to Europe, was to be taken by two poets of a new generation, two outsiders who broke with the traditions of mainstream literature and gave Albanian culture its place in a contemporary Europe: the messianic Migjeni and the pantheistic Lasgush Poradeci.

Migjeni (1911-1938) was born in Shkodra and died in Italy at the age of twenty-six, a tragic loss for modern Albanian letters. He made a promising start as a prose writer, as the author of about twenty-four short prose sketches which he published in periodicals for the most part between the spring of 1933 and the spring of 1938. Ranging from one to five pages in length, these pieces are too short to constitute tales or short stories. It is thus far more as a poet that Migjeni made his mark on Albanian literature and culture, though he did so posthumously. He possessed all the prerequisites for being a great poet. He had an inquisitive mind, a depressive pessimistic nature and a repressed sexuality. Though his verse production was no more voluminous than his prose, his success in the field of poetry was no less than spectacular in Albania at the time.

Migjeni's only volume of verse, *Vargjet e lira*, Tirana 1944 (Free verse), was composed over a three-year period from 1933 to 1935. The main theme of 'Free verse,' as with Migjeni's prose, is misery and suffering. It is a poetry of acute social awareness and despair. Previous generations of poets had sung the beauties of the Albanian mountains and the sacred traditions of the nation, whereas Migjeni now opened his eyes to the harsh realities of life, to the appalling level of misery, disease and poverty which he discovered all around him. He was a poet of desperation who saw no way out, who cherished no hope that anything but death could put an end to suffering. Migjeni was a precursor of socialist verse or rather, in fact, the zenith of genuine socialist verse in Albanian letters, long before the so-called 'liberation' and socialist period from 1944 to 1990. Migjeni was, nonetheless, not a socialist or revolutionary poet in the political sense, despite the indignation and the occasional clenched fist he shows us. For this, he lacked the optimism as well as any adherence to political commitment and activity.

The road to modernity in Albanian literature was also taken by a poet of a very different nature, another outsider who, half a century later, is now regarded by many as the greatest Albanian poet of the twentieth century: Lasgush Poradeci (1899-1987). He is the author of two extraordinary collections of poetry. *Vallja e yjve* (The dance of the stars) and *Ylli i zemrës* (The star of the heart), published in Romania in 1933 and 1937 respectively, are indeed just as much a revolution in Albanian verse as was Migjeni's *Vargjet e lira* (Free verse). Primordial to the work of Lasgush Poradeci are the waters of Lake Ohrid on the Albanian-Macedonian border. It was in the town of Pogradec that he spent his youth, not far from where, at the foot of the 'Mal i Thatë' (Dry Mountain), the River Drin takes its source, and but a few kilometers from the famed mediaeval monastery of St Naum's just over the border. And there in retirement, he also

spent his last summers in a run-down little house of Balkan architecture, tending his garden and strolling along the lake with his dog. Lake Ohrid never ceased to fascinate and enchant him. He studied its hues, the reflection of light both upon its waves and in the depths of its sparkling waters, and observed the surrounding mountains cast their shadows over it.

Apart from the two main poetry collections of the thirties, Poradeci published some verse in literary journals of the late thirties and forties, in particular in Branko Merxhani's cultural monthly *Përpyjekja shqiptare* (The Albanian endeavour). With the rise of Stalinism, however, the venerable quill of Lasgushi, as he was to be affectionately known to posterity, began to run dry. Though secretly lauded by many a critic and connoisseur, this romantic aesthete, devoid of any redeeming ideological values, never enjoyed the approbation of post-war Marxist dogmatists.

Poradeci's subjects, his structures and language were very much attuned to southern Albanian oral literature, in particular to Tosk folk verse from which he drew a good deal of his inspiration. Mitrush Kuteli (1907-1967), who edited his *Ylli i zemrës*, called him "the only Albanian poet to think, speak and write only in Albanian." Lasgush Poradeci is at the same time an artist of truly European stature. He combined the verbal sensuousness of Charles Baudelaire, the aesthetic philosophy of form and the discerning elegance of Stefan George, the humanity and philosophy of Naim Frashëri, and the cosmic immortality of his Romanian master, Mihai Eminescu. Scholar Eqrem Çabej (1908-1980) said of him that he was the "poet whom Albania would one day bequeath to the world," and although Poradeci's verse does not lend itself particularly to translation, time may prove Çabej right.

For almost a quarter of a century after the declaration of political independence on 28 November 1912, Albanian writers and intellectuals continued to draw their inspiration from the ideas and ideals of the nineteenth-century Rilindja movement. By the thirties, however, Albanian culture had entered a new phase. An influx of new ideas from abroad and a higher level of formal education among intellectuals flung open the gates to cultural advancement. For a decade, Albanian literature and culture flourished as never before, initially in Shkodra and later in Tirana and throughout the country.

Within the space of five years in the mid-thirties, an advance in quality was made in literature. In poetry, Lasgush Poradeci published his breathtaking lyric collections *Vallja e yjve* 1933 (The dance of the stars) and *Ylli i zemrës* 1937 (The star of the heart); the consumptive Migjeni managed to send his slender *Vargjet e lira* 1936 (Free verse) to press before it was banned and before death put an end to his brief literary career; and Gjergj Fishta came out with the definitive version of his incomparable epic *Lahuta e malcís* 1937 (The highland lute), in thirty cantos. Albanian prose witnessed the publication of the nihilist novel *Nga jeta në jetë - Pse!?* 1935 (From life to life - Why!?), by Sterjo Spasse (1918-1989); of Ernest Koliqi's (1903-1975) second collection of short stories, *Tregtar flamujsh* 1935 (Flag merchant); of the much-read novel of social criticism *Sikur t'isha djalë* 1936 (If I were a boy) by Haki Stërmilli (1895-1953); and of Mitrush Kuteli's first volume of tales *Nete shqipëtare* 1938 (Albanian nights). Migjeni, too, published twenty-four of his trenchant prose sketches in periodicals within the five years from 1933 to 1938 and completed the manuscript of his unpublished *Novelat e qytetit të veriut* 1936 (Tales of a northern city). In drama, Etëhem Haxhiademi (1902-1965) captivated the discerning public with his classical tragedies which, though not revolutionary in conception or content, evinced a linguistic refinement previously unknown to the Albanian stage.

Intellectual life in the mid-thirties and early forties had reached unprecedented heights, a zenith in Albanian written culture. A modern literature had been created in Albania and the nation had finally come of age. It was a brief blossoming in the shadow of the apocalypse to come, which would snuff out all genuine literary production for about twenty years.

6. Albanian socialist realism and beyond

Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) and the new partisan leaders who took power at the end of November 1944 were suspicious of Albanian writers and intellectuals of all political hues, regarding the vast majority of them as representatives of the 'ancien régime.' A very few writers such as Vangjel Koça (1900-1943) and Vasil Alarupi (1908-1977) had been genuine proponents of fascism, and a number of intellectuals, while not fascists themselves, had collaborated with the Italian and German occupants in one way or another. Most wanted simply to survive in an age of turmoil.

Many figures of note in Albanian intellectual life fled the country before or during the communist takeover: Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975), Mehdi bey Frashëri (1874-1963), Mid'hat bey Frashëri (1880-1949) and Karl Gurakuqi (1895-1971) to Italy, Branko Merxhani (1894-1981) to Turkey, and left-wing writer Tajar Zavalani (1903-1966) to Britain.

Others cherished the illusion that, having survived the war, they could come to some sort of arrangement with the new communist leaders and work actively with them on the building of a new Albania, a new socialist society. Soon, however, the demagogy of Enver Hoxha, the Stalinist show trials under General Mehmet Shehu (1913-1981) and the witch hunts under Koçi Xoxe (1917-1949) made it apparent that liberation and the ideals of socialism were a façade for brutal dictatorship and terror. Neither indoctrination nor education became the primary means of persuasion but naked fear. The immediate post-war period had become an apocalypse for Albanian writers and intellectuals.

Writers of the Scutarine Catholic school suffered particularly. General Mehmet Shehu, in a public address in Shkodra on 28 January 1945, had called the Catholic stronghold a 'nest of reaction' and warned that church leaders would receive their 'just' rewards before the people's court. Playwright Ndre Zadeja (1891-1945), poet Lazër Shantoja (1892-1945), poet Bernardin Palaj (1894-1947), novelist Anton Harapi (1888-1946) and publicist Gjon Shllaku (1907-1946) were executed. Poet and archbishop Vinçenc Prennushi (1885-1949) died in prison after gruesome torture, as did prose writer and publisher Dom Ndoc Nikaj (1864-1951), the father of twentieth-century Gheg prose. Other intellectuals of note to be executed included Arbëresh publisher Terenzio Tocci (1880-1945), editor Nebil Çika (1893-1944), Bektashi writer Baba Ali Tomori (1900-1947) and poet Manush Peshkëpia (1910-1951).

Among the many other writers and intellectuals who were arrested and imprisoned during the witch hunts after the Second World War were noted playwrights Kristo Floqi (1873-1951) and Etëhem Haxhiademi (1902-1965), Muslim writer and publisher Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu (1878-1952), minister of education Mirash Ivanaj (1891-1953) and poet Gjergj Bubani (1899-1954), all of whom died in prison; short story writer Mitrush Kuteli (1907-1967), novelist Petro Marko (1913-1991), poet Sejfulla Malëshova (1901-1971), short story writer Musine Kokalari (1917-1983), poet and scholar Arshi Pipa (1920-1997), Bektashi poet Ibrahim Hasnaj (1912-1995), poet Nexhat Hakiu (1917-1978), poet Andrea Varfi (1914-1992), translators Jusuf Vrioni (1916-2001) and Pashko Gjeci (b. 1918), novelist Mustafa Greblleshi (1922-1986), publicist Dionis Miçaço, poet Kudret Kokoshi (1907-1991), novelist and editor Andon S. Frashëri (1892-1965), humorist and indefatigable translator Mid'hat Araniti (1912-1992), linguist Selman Riza (1909-1988), critic Filip Fishta (1904-1973), folklorists Donat Kurti (1903-1969) and Stavro Frashëri (1900-1965) of Kavaja, and writer Lazër Radi (1916-1998) who was released in 1991 after an incredible forty-six years of prison and internment.

The persecution of intellectuals, in particular of all 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 intellectuals and budding writers of talent were dispatched over the

following years to labour in dangerous branches of industry, or banished to the provinces forever, to internment in some isolated mountain village with no hope of return.

Albanian cultural politics in the early years of the Soviet-Albanian alliance were very much influenced by Zhdanovism, the literary doctrine formulated by Andrey Aleksandrovich Zhdanov (1896-1948) which wreaked such havoc in Russian literature and culture. Albanian writers were encouraged to concentrate their creative energies on specific themes such as the partisan struggle of the so-called 'national liberation war' and the building of socialism, and to avoid the cosmopolitan influences of the West. The political message was the essential element for those who wished to survive. Subjects devoid of any educational value in Marxist terms were considered alien and taboo. Albanian literature, which had evolved so rapidly in the mid-thirties, had virtually disappeared. The country had become a literary wasteland.

The first turning point in the evolution of Albanian prose and verse, after a quarter century of stagnation, came in the stormy year of 1961 which, on the one hand, marked the definitive 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 (b. 1936), *Hapat e mija në asfalt* (My steps on the pavement) by Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931), and in the following year *Shtigje poetike* (Poetic paths) by Fatos Arapi (b. 1930). It is ironic to note that while Albania had broken with the Soviet Union ostensibly to save socialism, leading Albanian writers, educated in the Eastern bloc, took advantage of the rupture to try to part not only with Soviet models but also with socialist realism itself. Though it constituted no radical change of course, no liberalization or political 'thaw' in the Soviet sense, 1961 set the stage for a few years of serenity and, in the longer perspective, for a quarter of a century of trial and error, which led to greater sophistication in Albanian literature.

The three decades of Stalinist dictatorship which were to follow the breaking off of relations with the Soviet Union in 1961 established a clear and fixed path for the evolution of modern Albanian letters. What Stalinist rule also did, however, was to impede Albanian writing from evolving into a literature comparable to that of the more developed countries of Europe. A high degree of conformity continued due to the extreme level of pressure exerted upon writers and intellectuals throughout the rule of Enver Hoxha. Successful writers learned how to lie low and present what they wished to express in thick layers of political wrapping, so that only the trained eye of an experienced reader could comprehend the analogies being drawn. As such, Albanian literature remained political, but in a sense radically different from that intended by party dogmatists. In the rare moments when political pressure abated somewhat, some interesting works were produced and published. Due to the particular political circumstances in the country, it is, therefore, impossible for us to speak of good writers in modern Albanian literature but only of good books which managed to squeeze past the censors at the right moment. In other words, the quality of a novel or volume of poetry depended just as much on the year of publication as upon the talent of its author. 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 that of 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 four decades. His courage in attacking literary mediocrity within the system brought a breath of fresh air to Albanian culture.

Born on 28 January 1936 in the museum-city of Gjirokastra, Kadare studied at the Faculty of History and Philology of the University of Tirana and subsequently at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow until 1960 when relations between Albania and the Soviet Union became tense. He began his literary career back in Albania with poetry, but turned

increasingly to prose, of which he soon became the undisputed master and by far the most popular writer of the whole of Albanian literature. Ismail Kadare lived the next thirty years of his life in Tirana, constantly under the Damocles Sword of the Party. He was privileged by the authorities, in particular once his works became known internationally. Indeed, he was able to pursue literary and personal objectives for which other writers would certainly have been sent into internal exile or to prison. But Kadare knew well that liberties in Albania could be withdrawn easily, by a stroke of the tyrant's quill. Though some observers in Albania silently viewed him as a political opportunist and many Albanians in exile later criticized him vociferously for the compromises he made, it is Ismail Kadare more than anyone else who, from within the system, dealt the deathblow to the literature of socialist realism. There is certainly no doubt that he used his relative freedom and his talent under the dictatorship to launch many a subtle attack against the regime in the form of political allegories which occur throughout his works. Ismail Kadare was thus the most prominent representative of Albanian literature under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha and, at the same time, its most talented adversary. His works were extremely influential throughout the seventies and eighties and, for many readers, he was the only ray of hope in the cold, grey prison that was communist Albania.

At the end of October 1990, Ismail Kadare left Tirana and applied for political asylum in France. His departure enabled him, for the first time, to exercise his profession with complete freedom. His years of Parisian exile were productive and accorded him further success and recognition, both as a writer in Albanian and in French. He has published his collected works in eleven thick volumes, each in an Albanian-language and a French-language edition, and has been honoured with membership in the prestigious Académie Française.

Prose in Albania remained weak throughout the communist dictatorship. Ismail Kadare's talent and overriding position in Albanian literature, compounded by his international reputation, cast a shadow over all other contemporary prose writers, and not without reason. Many writers tried their hand at novels and short stories throughout the long decades of the communist dictatorship, but the awesome level of social and political control over individual thought and the cultural isolation under which the Albanians were forced to live for so long prevented most of them from producing works which can stand the test of time. It was not talent and potential that Albanian writers lacked, but rather a positive, creative and stable environment in which to develop this potential. Political fluctuations meant that a work of quality could be accepted one year for publication and then banned the very next. For several decades writing in Albania was a potentially lethal pastime.

Martin Camaj (1925-1992) is an emigrant writer of major significance to modern Albanian prose and poetry. He was born in the village of Temal, in the Dukagjin region of the northern Albanian alps, and benefited from a classical education at the Jesuit Saverian college in Shkodra. Camaj studied at the University of Belgrade and from there he went on to do postgraduate research in Italy, where he taught Albanian and finished his education 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 lived in the mountain village of Lenggries in Upper Bavaria until his death on 12 March 1992. Camaj's academic research focussed on the Albanian language and its dialects, in particular on those of southern Italy. He was also active in the field of folklore.

Camaj's literary activities over a period of forty-five years cover several phases of development. His first major prose work was *Djella*, Rome 1958 (*Djella*), a novel interspersed with verse about the love of a teacher for a young girl of the lowlands. This was followed, twenty years later, by the novel *Rrathë*, Munich 1978 (*Circles*), which has been described as the first psychological novel in Albanian. It is the author's most extensive prose work, one which he took fifteen years to write. After *Shkundullima*, Munich 1981 (*Quaking*), a collection of five short stories and one play, came the novel *Karpa*, Rome 1987 (*Karpa*), which is set on the banks of

the river Drin in the year 2338, a long prose work which Camaj preferred to call a parable. General themes which occur in Martin Camaj's work are the loss of tradition, loneliness in a changing world, and the search for one's roots. Needless to say, his works only became known to the Albanian public after the fall of the dictatorship. Up until then, only a handful of people in Albania had ever heard of him.

One writer who has had a far from negligible influence on the course of contemporary literature is Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931), who was head of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists from the purge of Fadil Paçrami and Todi Lubonja at the Fourth Plenary Session in 1973 until 1992. Agolli was born to a peasant family in Menkulas in the Devoll region near Korça and finished secondary school in Gjirokastra in 1952. He later continued his studies at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Leningrad and took up journalism upon his return to Albania, working for the daily newspaper *Zëri i Popullit* (The People's Voice) for fifteen years. Agolli not only served as president of the Writers' Union from 1973 to his retirement on 31 January 1992, but was also a deputy in the People's Assembly.

After two rather conformist novels of partisan heroism, the standard theme encouraged by the party, Agolli produced a far more interesting work, his satirical *Shkëlqimi dhe rënja e shokut Zylo*, Tirana 1973 (The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo), which has proved to be his claim to fame. Comrade Zylo is the epitome of the well-meaning but incompetent *apparatchik*, director of an obscure government cultural affairs department. His pathetic vanity, his quixotic fervour, his grotesque public behaviour, in short his splendour and fall, are all recorded in ironic detail by his hard-working and more astute subordinate and friend Demkë who serves as a neutral observer.

Though Agolli was a leading figure in the communist nomenclature, he remained a highly respected figure of public and literary life after the fall of the dictatorship, and is still one of the most widely read authors in Albania. In the early 1990s, he was active for several years as a member of parliament for the Socialist Party of Albania. He also founded his own *Dritëro* Publishing Company by means of which he has been able to publish many new volumes of prose and poetry, and make an impact on literary and intellectual life in the country. Dritëro Agolli has been a prolific writer throughout the nineties, a rare voice of humanity and sincerity in Albanian letters.

Prose author Fatos Kongoli (b. 1944) has recently become one of the most forceful and convincing representatives of contemporary Albanian literature. He was born and raised in Elbasan and studied mathematics in China during the tense years of the Sino-Albanian alliance. Kongoli chose not to publish any major works during the dictatorship. Rather than this, he devoted his creative energies at the time to an obscure and apolitical career as a mathematician, and waited for the storm to pass. His narrative talent and individual style have only really emerged, at any rate, in the nineties, since the fall of the communist dictatorship.

Among the other prose authors of the period, mention may be made of Sabri Godo (b. 1929) from Delvina, an author of historical novels such as *Ali Pashë Tepelena*, Tirana 1970 (Ali Pasha of Tepelena), and *Skënderbeu*, Tirana 1975 (Scanderbeg), who, after the dictatorship, embarked upon a political career; Kasëm Trebeshina (b. 1926), a committed communist and dissident who for many years was denied the right to publish; Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) from the Vlora region; Naum Prifti (b. 1932), short story writer from the Korça district; Bilal Xhaferi (1935-1986) from Çamëria who in 1969 escaped to Greece and the United States; Vath Koreshi (b. 1936), a prolific writer from Lushnjë; Teodor Laço (b. 1936) of Korça; Kiço Blushi (b. 1943) also of Korça; Neshat Tozaj (b. 1943) of Vlora, author of the novel *Thikat*, Tirana 1989 (The knives), which received wide attention for its candid criticism of a 'theoretical' abuse of power on the part of the Sigurimi; Elena Kadare (b. 1943), the first woman in Albania to publish a full novel; Koço Kosta (b. 1944), remembered for his short story *Ata të dy e të tjerë* (The two of them

and the others) which was banned after publication in 1986; Nasi Lera (b. 1944), author from Korça of numerous volumes of short stories; Zija Çela (b. 1946) of Shkodra; the prolific Diana Çuli (b. 1951) from Tirana; Bashkim Shehu (b. 1955), who, as son of the purged communist leader Mehmet Shehu, spent many years in prison; Preç Zogaj (b. 1957) from the region of Lezha who in June 1991 became the first non-communist minister of culture; Teodor Keko (1958-2002); Besnik Mustafaj (b. 1958) from Bajram Curri who served as Albanian ambassador in Paris; Mira Meksi (b. 1960) from Tirana; Elvira Dones (b. 1960) now living in Switzerland, who is author of the successful and exceptionally frank novel *Yjet nuk vishen kështu*, Elbasan 2000 (Stars don't dress up like that) on the subject of Albanian prostitution abroad; Mimoza Ahmeti (b. 1963) from Kruja; and Ardian-Christian Kyçyku (b. 1969) of Pogradec, now living in Bucharest.

The story of modern verse in Albania begins with an exception, a poet who managed to flee from Stalinist Albania in 1949 and thus escaped the all-pervasive influence of socialist realism. Martin Camaj began his literary career with poetry, a genre to which he remained faithful throughout his life, though in later years he devoted himself increasingly to prose, as we have seen. His first volumes of classical verse, *Nji fyell ndër male*, Prishtina 1953 (A flute in the mountains), and *Kânga e vërrinit*, Prishtina 1954 (Song of the lowland pastures), were inspired by his native northern Albanian mountains to which he never lost his attachment, despite long years of exile and the impossibility of return. Camaj's mature verse shows the influence of the hermetic movement of Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti. The metaphoric and symbolic character of his language increased with time as did the range of his poetic themes. Camaj's language is discreet, reserved and trying at times, although the author himself regarded the term hermetic as coincidental. He relies on the traditional and colourful linguistic fountainhead of his native Gheg dialect in order to convey a poetic vision of his pastoral mountain birthplace near the Drin with its sparkling streams and shining forests.

The best known of the contemporary poets of Albania itself to have solved the dilemma of the poet with a pre-established mission is Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) from Zvërnec near the port city of Vlora, author of philosophical verse, love lyrics and poignant elegies on death. Arapi studied economics in Sofia from 1949 to 1954 and worked in Tirana as a journalist and lecturer in modern Albanian literature. Child of the Ionian coast, he 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 numerous publications during the dictatorship, 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.

Dritëro Agolli made his name originally as a poet before turning to prose in later years. He is still widely admired in both genres. His first verse collections *Në rrugë dolla*, Tirana 1958 (I went out on the street), *Hapat e mija në asfalt*, Tirana 1961 (My steps on the pavement), and *Shtigje malesh dhe trotuare*, Tirana 1965 (Mountain paths and sidewalks), introduced him to the reading public as a sincere and gifted lyric poet of the soil and demonstrated masterful verse technique.

Prose writer Ismail Kadare also began his literary career with verse, and although he has been much less active in this genre in recent years, he is still recognized and admired as one of his country's leading poets. 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. With candidness and sincerity, Kadare contributed in particular to the evolution of love lyrics, a genre traditionally neglected in Albanian literature. He soon became widely admired among the youth of Albania.

Visar Zhiti (b. 1952) is the Albanian writer whose life and works perhaps best mirror the

history of his nation. He was one of the many to have suffered appalling persecution for no apparent reason. But he survived - physically, intellectually and emotionally, and is now among the most popular poets of present-day Albania. Born in the Adriatic seaport of Durrës as the son of the stage actor and poet Hekuran Zhiti (1911-1989), Visar Zhiti grew up in Lushnja where he finished school in 1970. In 1973, he was preparing the collection *Rapsodia e jetës së trëndafilave* (Rhapsody of the life of roses) for publication when the Purge of the Liberals broke out in Tirana at the Fourth Plenary Session of the Communist Party. Zhiti, whose father had earlier come into conflict with the authorities, was one of the many scapegoats selected as a means of terrifying the intellectual community. The manuscript of the verse collection which he had submitted to the editors of the Naim Frashëri publishing company was now seen to contain grave ideological errors and was interpreted as having blacken socialist reality. His works were denounced as anti-communist agitation and propaganda, and there was nothing the poet could say to his interrogators to prove his innocence. None of his fellow writers dared or saw fit to help him. Indeed in October 1979, some of them prepared an insidious report condemning the works of the poet, no doubt to save their own necks. Visar Zhiti was arrested on 8 November 1979 in Kukës where he was teaching, and spent the following months in solitary confinement. Sentenced at a mock trial in April 1980 to thirteen years in prison, he was taken to Tirana jail and, from there, transferred up to the isolated northern mountains to do the rounds in the infamous concentration camps similar to the Soviet gulags, among them, the living hell of the copper mines at Spaç and the icy mountain prison of Qafë-Bari. Many of his fellow prisoners died of mistreatment and malnutrition, or went mad. Visar Zhiti was released on 28 January 1987 and was then 'permitted' by the Party to work in a brick factory in his native Lushnja, where he kept a low profile until the end of the dictatorship. Zhiti is the author of four other verse collections, including most recently *Si shkohet në Kosovë*, Tirana 2000 (Where is the road to Kosova), a volume which mirrors, among other things, the poet's horror at the sufferings of Kosova and its people during the ten years of oppression and the two years of war leading to NATO intervention and final liberation in 1999.

Emotion and ideas were always an integral part of Albanian poetry, but there has been a conspicuous lack of sensuality and lust for life in literature, both in Albania and in Kosova. The watchful eye of the Albanian Party of Labour curtailed any would-be expressions of intimacy and certainly succeeded in eliminating sincerity in creative writing. Mimoza Ahmeti (b. 1963) from Kruja is one of the 'enfants terribles' of the nineties, who set about to expand the horizons and explore the possibilities offered to her by her own senses. Dragging the nation, in her idiosyncratic manner, along the bumpy road to Europe, she has managed in recent years to provoke Albania's impoverished and weary society into much needed reflection which, with time, may lead to new and more sincerely human values. After two volumes of verse in the late eighties, it was the fifty-three poems in the collection *Delirium*, Tirana 1994 (Delirium), that took their departure, for the first time, essentially from the senses. Mimoza Ahmeti's poetry has been well received by the new generation of readers in tune, for the first time, with Western culture. Her candid expressions of wide-eyed feminine desire and indulgence in sensual pleasures, and the crystalline fluidity of her language have already made of her a modern classic.

Among other noted poets in Albania during the last two decades of the twentieth century, of whom we note a dramatic rise in the number of talented female poets, are: Jorgo Bllaci (b. 1938), who spent ten years in prison; Koçi Petriti (b. 1941) from Korça; Frederik Rreshpja (b. 1941) of Shkodra; Ndoc Papeleka (b. 1945) from Tropoja; Xhevahir Spahiu (b. 1945) of Skrapar; Natasha Lako (b. 1948) from Korça; Bardhyl Londo (b. 1948) from the Përmet region; Rudolf Marku (b. 1950) from Lezha, now living in London; Preç Zogaj (b. 1957) from Lezha; Flutura Ačka (b. 1966) of Elbasan; Luljeta Lleshanaku (b. 1968) of Elbasan; Lindita Arapi (b. 1972) of Lushnja; Gert Pashaj (b. 1972) of Tirana; Ervin Hatibi (b. 1974) of Tirana; and

Ledia Dushi (b. 1978).

7. Modern Albanian literature in Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro

Written literature in Kosova was late to develop because of widespread illiteracy and Serb cultural hegemony. It was only with the improvement of Yugoslav-Albanian relations in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the establishment of full diplomatic ties between the two countries in February 1971 that a political thaw gave the Albanians of Kosova a semblance of cultural freedom. In 1968, they won the right to fly their national flag and in November 1969 the University of Prishtina was opened, facilitating higher education in Albanian for the first time.

With access to Albanian-language education and cultural facilities having been granted, Albanian literature and culture in Kosova flourished in the mid-seventies. It was a brief blossoming in which tremendous progress was made within a short period of time, in education, culture and literature. This semblance of autonomy and freedom which the Albanians enjoyed was, however, brought to an abrupt end in 1981 when the popular demand for republic status and equality with the other peoples of the Yugoslav federation was met by Belgrade with tanks and automatic rifles. From there, it was a downhill slide until liberation in the spring of 1999 with the help of NATO troops.

Literature in Kosova evolved without the severe ideological constraints imposed upon writers in Albania itself. Emigration also brought about contacts with the outside world, which enabled the written word to develop in a more cosmopolitan manner from the start. Literature here, as such, is more experimental and offers the reader a much wider range of styles, subject matter and ideas. Though the level of formal training for prose writers in Kosova was not to reach Tirana standards, young Kosova writers were eager to assimilate foreign influence and the currents of contemporary European thought that were rejected out of hand in Tirana. 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 Kosova Albanians to defend their cultural values in a region plagued by political turmoil and ethnic conflict.

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 which served as an initial forum for literary publications. While some monographs were published in the fifties, it was not until the mid-sixties that Albanian and Kosova Albanian literature began to appear in print in Yugoslavia on a significant scale. The beginnings of serious prose in Kosova date from the period 1956 to 1960. Conditions at this time were not much easier in Kosova for the handful of Albanian intellectuals than they were in Albania. The Serb authorities fiercely opposed all progress in education and culture for the Albanian population, and, as in Albania, intellectuals constituted the greatest threat to those in power. Tragically, this first generation of writers, who might have laid the foundations for Kosova prose, was annihilated politically before it could give birth to a new written culture. Kosova prose did not reach a satisfactory level for many years to come, and the loss to Albanian literature can be felt even today.

A start to serious prose in the 1950s was made by Hivzi Sulejmani (1912-1975) of Mitrovica who helped bring early Kosova literature out of its regional focus and provinciality. His short story collections, such as *Era dhe kolona*, Prishtina 1959 (The wind and the column), and his novels, among which *Fëmijët e lumit tim*, Prishtina 1969 (The children of my river), were widely read in the early years.

Writer and longtime political prisoner Adem Demaçi (b. 1936) was born in Prishtina. His early short stories, many of them with socially critical overtones, were published in *Jeta e re*

(New life) in the fifties. It was, however, his controversial novel *Gjarpijt e gjakut*, Prishtina 1958 (The snakes of blood), that established his literary reputation. This novel, of more ethnographic than literary interest, focusses on the bloody institution of vendetta which plagued and continues to plague northern Albania and Kosova. Demaçi spent twenty-eight years of his life in Serb jails as a political prisoner. He was released in 1990 and has been an active figure of public life ever since.

Anton Pashku (1938-1995) is a writer who does not appeal to the broad masses of the public, but rather to the educated reader who relishes the hermetic observations and details of character analysis of the psychological novel. It was the harsh political suppression of the first generation of prose writers in the late fifties which caused him to withdraw from the mainstream of literary production and create a reclusive world of his own. Pashku was born in Grazhdanik near Prizren of a peasant family from the Has mountains. He worked as a journalist in Prishtina for some time and thereafter edited prose and drama for the Rilindja publishing company there. His experimental short stories, novels and plays, showing affinities with the works of George Orwell, Franz Kafka and Robert Musil, are in themselves subtle and masterful studies of the psyche, though they can be taxing to the innocent and down-to-earth reader. Anton Pashku ranks among the best stylists in Albanian literature, though he will certainly never be widely read.

Rexhep Qosja (b. 1936) is one of the most eminent and prolific literary critics in the Balkans, academician, former director of the Albanological Institute in Prishtina and author of anthologies and numerous scholarly monographs, including a three-volume history of Albanian literature in the romantic period. He is also the author of the widely translated novel, *Vdekja më vjen prej syve të tillë*, Prishtina 1974 (Death comes from such eyes). It is a work of original narrative technique and composition, 'thirteen tales which might constitute a novel.' The protagonist of the novel, Xhezairi i Gjikës, is a professional writer caught up in a frightening web of political intrigue, secret police, interrogation and torture, a world full of very definite political allusions to the difficult situation faced by Albanian intellectuals in Kosova. Qosja has remained active as a writer in the struggle for freedom in Kosova.

Among other prose writers of the last three decades of the twentieth century are Murat Isaku (b. 1928) of Tetova/Tetovo; Ramiz Kelmendi (b. 1930) of Peja/Peć, whose works, such as *Ahmet Koshutani*, Prishtina 1973 (Ahmet Koshutani), were widely published and enjoyed in the seventies; Azem Shkreli (1938-1997) of Rugova; Nazmi Rrahmani (b. 1941) from the Podujeva/Podujevo region, a prolific and popular novelist of Kosova village life; Luan Starova (b. 1941) of Skopje, whose novels have been translated into French and German; Teki Dërvishi (b. 1943) of Gjakova whose novels and short stories have penetrated the psyche of modern man; Musa Ramadani (b. 1944) from Gjilan/Gnjilane; Beqir Musliu (1945-1996) from Gjilan; Jusuf Buxhovi (b. 1946) of Peja, noted for his three-part novel *Prapë vdekja*, Prishtina 1991-1995 (Death again); Eqrem Basha (b. 1948) from Dibra/Debar whose short story collection *Marshi i kërmillit*, Peja 1994 (The snail's march), and recent novel *Dyert e heshtjes*, Peja 2001 (The gates of silence), have been well received; Sabri Hamiti (b. 1950) of Podujeva, a leading and innovative literary critic, poet and playwright; Mehmet Kraja (b. 1952) from Ulqin/Ulcinj; Zejnullah Rrahmani (b. 1952) of Podujeva, an elegant stylist of modern Kosova literature; Kim Mehmeti (b. 1955) of Skopje who has added new dimensions to short story writing in the nineties; and Migjen Kelmendi (b. 1959) of Prishtina.

Poetry has always been the vanguard of literature in Kosova and has enjoyed more popularity among writers and the reading public there than prose. This poetic imagination has solid roots in the soil, in the land and in its people with their aspirations, sufferings and dreams.

The writer widely considered to be the father of modern Albanian poetry in Yugoslavia, Esad Mekuli (1916-1993), was not born in Kosova itself but in the mountain village of Plava/Plav on the Montenegrin-Albanian border where national traditions are still revered.

Mekuli went to school in Peja on the Kosova side of the wild Rugova canyon and studied veterinary medicine at the University of Belgrade. In 1949, he founded the literary periodical *Jeta e re* (New life), whose editor-in-chief he remained until 1971. Mekuli was a committed poet of social awareness whose outrage at injustice, violence, genocide and suffering mirrors that of the pre-revolutionary verse of the messianic Migjeni of Shkodra.

Din Mehmeti (b. 1932) is among the best-known and consistent representatives of modern verse in Kosova. He was born in the village of Gjocaj i Junikut near Gjakova and studied Albanian language and literature at the University of Belgrade. Mehmeti also lectured at the teacher training college in Gjakova. Although he has published some prose, literary criticism and a play, he is known primarily for his figurative poetry which appeared from 1961 to 1999 in fifteen volumes. Mehmeti's verse is characterized by indigenous sensitivity. He relies 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.

Kosova's leading poetry critic Agim Vinca (b. 1947), himself a poet of note, has described Azem Shkreli (1938-1997) as a poet of profound ideas and critical judgments. Azem Shkreli was born in the Rugova mountains near Peja and became head of Kosova Film Studios in Prishtina. He is an intellectual poet who, though highly expressive, is by no means verbose. His urban perception of things has given new significance to his experience of rural customs among the rugged tribes of the Rugova highlands with their traditional wisdom and way of life. His early volumes of verse offered masterful portraits of these legendary mountain inhabitants. The idyllic though specifically organized landscape which Azem Shkreli paints does not blind him to problems of ethics. Much of his verse, a moral catharsis in words, is devoted to the oppressed peoples of the Third World, expressing a poetic solidarity with them against exploitation and suffering. Shkreli is also the author of the short story collection *Sytë e Evës*, Prishtina 1965 (Eve's eyes), and the novel *Karvani i bardhë*, Prishtina 1960 (The white caravan).

Ali Podrimja (b. 1942) was born in Gjakova at the foot of the so-called 'Mountains of the Damned.' After a difficult childhood, he studied Albanian language and literature in Prishtina. Author of over a dozen volumes of cogent and assertive verse since 1961, he is recognized both in Kosova and in Albania itself as a leading and innovative poet. Indeed, he is considered by many to be the most typical representative of modern Albanian verse in Kosova and is certainly the Kosova poet with the widest international reputation. Podrimja's first collection of elegiac verse, *Thirrje*, Prishtina 1961 (The calls), was published while he was still at secondary school in Gjakova. Subsequent volumes introduced new elements of the poet's repertoire, a proclivity for symbols and allegory, revealing him as a mature symbolist at ease in a wide variety of rhymes and meters. In the early eighties, he published the masterful collection *Lum Lumi*, Prishtina 1982 (Lum Lumi), which marked a turning point not only in his own work but also in contemporary Kosova verse as a whole. This immortal tribute to the poet's young son Lumi, who died of cancer, introduced an existentialist preoccupation with the dilemma of being, with elements of solitude, fear, death and fate. Ali Podrimja is nonetheless 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.

Among the most respected contemporary writers in Kosova in recent years is Eqrem Basha (b. 1948). He was born in 1948 in Dibra in the western Albanian-speaking region of what is now the Republic of Macedonia, but his life and literary production are intimately linked to Kosova and its capital Prishtina, where he has lived and worked for the past three decades. It was in the early 1970s, during the only real years of freedom in Kosova, that Eqrem Basha moved to Prishtina to study language and literature at the newly created Albanian-language university

there. He later worked for Prishtina television as editor of the drama section, but was fired for political reasons during the Serb takeover of the media in 1989-1990. Basha is the author of eight volumes of innovative verse spanning the years from 1971 to 1995, three volumes of short stories and numerous translations (in particular French literature and drama). He is currently in the publishing industry in Prishtina. Eqrem Basha is an enigmatic poet. Perplexing, fascinating, and difficult to classify in a literary sense, he succeeds in transmitting a certain mystique to the inquisitive reader. At one moment he seems coolly logical and shows an admirable ability to reason deductively, and the next moment he is overcome by absurd flights of fancy into a surrealistic world where apparently nothing makes any sense. Basha has an urbane view of things and delights in the daily absurdities of life. Nothing could be more foreign to him than the inspiration many of his fellow poets derive from the rich folklore traditions of the northern mountain tribes and verse of social commitment. His verse is light, colloquial and much less declamatory than that of many of his predecessors.

One critic recently described modern Albanian writing in Kosovo and western Macedonia as a literature with more poets than readers. There is, at any rate, no lack of poetry collections on the book market, and they range, as one might expect, from the abominable to the sublime. Of the many poets who have made a notable contribution to contemporary verse in this region of the world, mention may be made of: Enver Gjerqeku (b. 1928) of Gjakova, a pensive elegiac poet of classical forms; Murat Isaku (b. 1928) of Tetova; Abdylaziz Islami (b. 1930) of Tetova; Besim Bokshi (b. 1932) of Gjakova, author of two slender but exquisite volumes; Adem Gajtani (1935-1982) of Podujeva; Fahredin Gunga (1936-1997) of Mitrovica; Rrahman Dedaj (b. 1939) of Podujeva, now living in London, a neo-symbolist of rich, emotive expression; Mirko Gashi (1939-1995); Resul Shabani (b. 1944) of Struga, author of a dozen volumes of verse; Ymer Shkreli (b. 1945) from the Rugova highlands, now living in Switzerland; Agim Vinca (b. 1947) of Struga, noted also as a leading poetry critic; Flora Brovina (b. 1949) of Skënderaj, poet, pediatrician, women's rights activist; Sabri Hamiti (b. 1950) of Podujeva, author of well-structured, intellectual texts; Edi Shukriu (b. 1950) of Prizren; Miradije Ramiqi (b. 1953) of Pozharan; Shaip Beqiri (b. 1954) of the Podujeva region, now living in Switzerland; Nehas Sopi (b. 1954) of Sllupçan in Macedonia who teaches literature in Skopje; Mustafë Xhemali (b. 1954) of Ferizaj/Uroševac, now living in Switzerland; Milazim Krasniqi (b. 1955) of Prishtina; Kim Mehmeti (b. 1955) of Skopje; Valdet Berisha (b. 1959) from Peja, now living in Switzerland; Naim Kelmendi (b. 1959) from Peja, now living in Switzerland; Basri Çapriqi (b. 1960) of Ulqin; Vaxhid Xhelili (b. 1960) from the Bujanovc/Bujanovac region in southern Serbia, now living in Switzerland; journalist Beqë Cufaj (b. 1970) of Gramaqel; and Lindita Ahmeti (b. 1973) of Skopje.

8. In lieu of a conclusion

If one were to ask what the main achievement of Albanian written culture has been over the last few decades, the reply would certainly be, "Poetry, here, there and everywhere!" Verse collections still account for over fifty per cent of literary output in all the major centres of Albanian-language publishing: Tirana, Prishtina, Skopje, Shkodra and Tetova. Even under the harsh conditions of a free market economy in an underdeveloped region, Albanian poetry has managed to survive and maintain its dynamism.

When impoverished and ill-educated Albanian emigrants and refugees gather in Western Europe in their often dingy and always smoke-filled clubs, it is more often than not that they come together for a poetry reading. It is here that the soul of the Albanian nation finds its expression. Readable Albanian prose is admittedly a recent phenomenon and drama is still a very

much neglected genre, but the Albanians have always opened their hearts spontaneously to lyrics.

Modern Albanian literature, both in Albania and in Kosova, is now, for the first time, free to evolve and go its own way. Closer contacts with the works of other literatures, albeit in often shabby translations, have given rise to some initial copying of styles and themes, but in the long run, such influence can only serve to enrich creative writing in Albanian itself.

Secondly, the two halves of the Albanian nation, Kosova and Albania, are now free to meet and mingle. Throughout the decades of the Hoxha dictatorship, and indeed up to the final months of Serb rule in Kosova, the border between the two countries was kept sealed by their respective rulers. Rare were those who crossed it without suffering terrible political repercussions. The Berlin Wall between the two halves of Germany was, in comparison, a sieve. The result of this imposed separation was the rise of two very different Albanian cultures and two different Albanian literatures.

Since 1997, the two halves of the nation have been getting to know one another, and getting used to one another. It has not been easy for the population at large and many misunderstandings have arisen, but the exchange of experience has proved particularly broadening and fruitful for Albanian writers on both sides of the border. For the first time, they have become members of one common literary culture, a culture which is now twice as large as and much more diverse than the tiny one they knew.

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