

The National Role of the Albanian Literary Journals

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Journalism played a key role in stimulating the Albanian national awakening, not only with information and ideas, but also with works of creative literature written in Albanian. In the 1880s and 90s, Albanian-language periodicals sprang up in all the major cities of the Balkans, including Constantinople, Bucharest, Sofia, Thessalonika and Athens, carrying the ideals of the nationalist movement to the remotest corners of Albanian-speaking territories. Most of these periodicals were short-lived newspapers that devoted a modest section of their issues to creative writing in Albanian.

The most influential of all Albanian writers and publishers at the turn of the century was most certainly Faik bey Konitza. At the age of twenty-two, in 1897, Konitza founded in Brussels the Albanian/French periodical *Albania*, which soon became 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 1910. It was also in London that he made friends with the French poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire, who stayed with him in 1903 and 1904. *Albania* not only helped make Albanian culture and the Albanian cause known in Europe, it 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 World War II. Writers like Thimi Mitko, Kostandin Kristoforidhi, Andon Zako Çajupi, and Gjergj Fishta first became known to a broader public through the pages of *Albania*, which Konitza published faithfully over a twelve year period. The periodical contained articles and information on a wide range of topics: history, language, literature, folklore, archaeology, politics, economics, religion and art. As such, it constituted a mini-encyclopedia of Albanian culture of the period.

Other outstanding literary journals of the period were supported by the Catholic Church in Shkodra. Father Gjergj Fishta founded and edited the Franciscan monthly *Hylli i dritës* (The Day-Star) which was devoted to literature, politics, folklore and history. With the exception of the turbulent years of World War I and its aftermath, (1915-1920), and the early years of the dictatorship of Ahmet Zogu (1925-1929), this influential journal of high literary standing was published regularly until July 1944 and became as instrumental for the development of northern Albanian Geg culture as Faik bey Konitza's *Albania* had been for the Tosk culture of the south. Also of literary and cultural interest was *Zâni i Shna Ndout* (The Voice of St Anthony; 1913-1944). Like the Franciscans, the Jesuits also produced periodicals of note such as *Elçija i zemers t'Jezu Krisctit* (The Messenger of the Sacred Heart; 1891-1944), known from 1914 on as *Lajmtari i zemers t'Jezu Krishtit*, a magazine of religious culture, *Përparimi* (Progress; 1914-16), a short-lived historical and scholarly journal, and *Leka* (1929-1944), a monthly cultural review. For the majority Muslim community in Albania, there was the monthly *Zâni i naltë* (The Sublime Voice), published in Tirana from October 1923 to 1938, and *Kultura islame* (Islamic Culture) published from 1939 to 1945, which kept their readers abreast of the past and present of Islamic culture in Albania and the Middle East.

Essential to the strengthening of written culture in the mid-thirties were three periodicals in particular. The illustrated monthly *Minerva*, which called itself the "great

literary magazine of modern life," was a liberal journal published in Tirana from August 1932 to 1936. Many leading journalists were also active in the publication from March 1934 to 1936 of the Tirana cultural weekly *Illyria*. Migjeni, for instance, published there his first prose and poetry. *Përpyjekja shqiptare* (The Albanian Endeavor), published from October 1936 to 1939 by Branko Merxhani and administered for a time by Petro Marko, also reflected the qualitative step forward in Albanian literature. Ephemeral though not insignificant for the diffusion of the new progressive ideas of the left were *ABC*, a fortnightly magazine published in Tirana by Petro Marko in March 1936 and soon thereafter shut down by the Zogist authorities, and *Bota e re* (New World) of Korça, the fortnightly organ of the Korça communist organization, published from April 1936 to February 1937.

The major literary periodical of the war years was the monthly *Shkëndija* (The Spark; 1940-1943), founded and run by Albanian Minister of Education, Ernest Koliqi. Even in 1944, several short-lived but serious literary periodicals managed to appear amidst the chaos of the civil war: the monthly *Fryma* (The Spirit), established in January 1944 by Myzafer Pipa; the fortnightly *Revista letrare* (The Literary Review), founded in February 1944 by Mitrush Kuteli, Vedat Kokona, Nexhat Hakiu, and Sterjo Spasse; and the monthly *Kritika* (Criticism), founded in March 1944 by Arshi Pipa.

The communist takeover of Albania in November 1944 put a sudden end to literary journals and publishing, and soon turned into an apocalypse for publishers and writers. Most men of letters were executed or died in prison. The Stalinist regime set up and run by Enver Hoxha transformed Albania into a cultural wasteland for at least a decade. Only in the mid-fifties was a modicum of literary culture visible again. From 1954 to the end of the dictatorship, the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists issued a monthly periodical entitled *Nëntori* (November) which served as a tribune for all official literary activity in the country. In 1961 it also began publishing the weekly literary newspaper *Drita* (The Light), which is still being printed in Tirana on a fortnightly basis. In order to help contemporary Albanian literature out of the depressing isolation in which it found itself, the Albanian Writers Union also published from 1978 to 1990 a French-language quarterly entitled *Les lettres albanaises* (Albanian Literature). The fifty issues published in that twelve year period were of course a reflection of official tastes in literature, but did provide the outside world at least with a glimpse into the curious cosmos of Albanian literature under communist dictatorship.

In Kosova, it was the founding of the literary periodical *Jeta e re* (New Life) in 1949 by the poet Esad Mekuli, which gave voice to the young generation of Albanian writers there and served as an initial forum for literary publications. The Writers Union of Kosova also issued a weekly literary newspaper entitled *Fjala* (The Word), Prishtina's much more liberal and open pendant to Tirana's bland *Drita* newspaper.

There was hope for a renaissance of literary journals after the fall of communism in Albania and Kosova, but in fact little progress has been made. The Albanian-speaking world is simply too impoverished and chaotic to devote much of its energy to such periodicals. Nonetheless, a few have arisen recently and are carrying the torch, so to speak. In 1993, the Catholic community attempted to revive Fishta's aforementioned *Hylli i dritës* (The Day-star) but managed to publish only fifteen issues until it fell silent in 1997. The new, retrospective *Hylli i dritës* concentrated on publishing excerpts from texts by formerly forbidden authors. A much more contemporary and intellectual approach has been taken by Tirana's dissident publisher Fatos Lubonja in *Përpyjekja* (Endeavour; 1994-). He

courageously attacked many "sacred cows" of Albanian culture, and was accordingly soon decried by the new establishment as a traitor. In 1997, Lubonja also printed one issue of the journal in English entitled *Përpyekja / Endeavour, writing from Albania's critical quarterly*. In October 1996, the Velija Cultural Foundation of Tirana began publishing a thought-provoking literary and cultural quarterly entitled *Mehr Licht* (More Light). Its director, the talented prose writer Mira Meksi, has made much high-quality contemporary Albanian writing available, but she has concentrated even more - and perhaps rightly so - on contemporary literature from abroad. *Mehr Licht* can now be considered as the main forum of international literary exchange in Tirana. Perhaps the broadest and most interesting literary periodical to have appeared in the 1990s is *MM, revistë mikste teorike dhe letrare* (MM, Mixed Theoretical and Literary Review), published in Kosova by a team of leading writers and intellectuals. Among other periodicals to have provoked and modernized Albanian thinking and literary culture are the respected journal *Përpyekja* in Tirana, the now defunct literary review *Aleph* of Tirana, the poetry periodical *Poeteka* published in Tirana by Arian Leka, and the literary review issued in Bucharest entitled *Haemus, revistë evropiane dygjuhëshe kulture dhe traditash* (Haemus, Bilingual European Review of Culture and Tradition; 1998-) by the prose writer Ardian-Christian Kyçyku. Literary discourse is now increasingly moving into internet forums.

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