

ALBANIAN LITERATURE IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

by
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It has been about two twenty since the opening of Albania, after half a century of Stalinist dictatorship, and almost a decade since the liberation of Kosova. Albanian literature remains, nonetheless, one of the least known national literatures of Europe. Many interested readers will have heard the name Ismail Kadare, but few other literary associations will come to mind.

While much Albanian literature has been translated into French, and some major and minor works are available in Italian, German and Russian, even Spanish, English-language translations, with the exception of some works of Kadare, have been sadly missing in bookstores and on bookshelves. This paper endeavours to provide an overview of existing English-language publications of Albanian literature and of the diffusion of Albanian letters.

The first translation into English of what could very broadly be described as Albanian literature was published in 1596. It is *The Historie of George Castriot, Surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albinie, Containing his Famous Actes, his Noble Deedes of Armes and Memorable Victories again the Turkes for the Faith of Christ* (London 1596), a translation by one Zachary Jones from a French version of a Latin work entitled *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi, Epirotarum Principis* (Rome ca. 1508-1510). This 'History of Scanderbeg' was written by the historian Marinus Barletius Scodrensis (ca. 1450-1512), known in Albanian as Marin Barleti, who after experiencing the Turkish occupation of his native Shkodra at first hand, settled in Padua where he became rector of the parish church of St Stephen's. The work was widely read in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and also exists in Italian, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Polish translations, and now of course in Albanian. Though it is not a translation from the Albanian and is more a work of history than of literature, Barleti's 'History of Scanderbeg' is the first Albanian book, if we may call it that, to have been translated into English.

Albanian oral literature was first made available in English in the 1920s and 1930s, in two now rare volumes. The first was *Tricks of Women and Other Albanian Tales* (New York 1928) by Paul Fenimore Cooper, descendant of the American novelist James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), which was translated from French and German. The second, *Albanian Wonder Tales* (Lovat Dickenson, London 1936) by Post Wheeler (1869-1956), is a beautiful edition of ten fairy tales, published with the assistance of Stavro Frashëri (1900-1965) of Kavaja. More recently, I published an edition of folk tales in the volume *Albanian Folktales and Legends*, Peja 2001, and another collection was recently printed by Mustafa Tukaj and Joanne M. Ayers, entitled *Faith and Fairies: Tales Based on Albanian Legends and Ballads*, Shkodra 2002. In 1931, the Scottish anthropologist Margaret M. Hasluck (1885-1948) published a modest, though badly transcribed collection of folk tales under the title *Këndime Englisht-Shqip or Albanian-English Reader: Sixteen Albanian Folk-Stories, Collected and Translated, with Two Grammars and Vocabularies*, Cambridge UK 1931. Peggy Hasluck, who was the wife of the noted archaeologist and orientalist Frederick William Hasluck (1878-1920), was an astounding figure. She bought a house in Elbasan and spent almost two

decades of her life in Albania after her husband's death. I am delighted to announce that, with the assistance of Bejtullah Destani of London, I have come across the full manuscript of her substantial collection of Albanian folk tales in English translation and hope to publish it.

Another, in my view, important edition to Albanian oral literature is the recent collection entitled: *Songs of the Frontier Warriors: Këngë Kreshnikësh. Albanian Epic Verse in a Bilingual English-Albanian Edition*, Wauconda, Illinois 2004, translated and published by my colleague, Janice Mathie-Heck of Calgary, Alberta, and myself. It contains over 6,000 lines of epic verse, primarily from the Mujo and Halili cycle, and endeavours finally to throw more light on the Albanian epic, which has remained in the shadow of the Serbo-Croatian, or more properly, Bosnian epic, with which it has undeniable affinities.

English translations of written Albanian literature are a relatively recent phenomenon. The first translations began to appear in Tirana in the 1960s, but were generally not of sufficient literary quality to make them readable. Of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Albanian literature in translation, one may mention the little volume *The Last Lay of Bala*, Tirana 1967, by the Italo-Albanian (Arbëresh) poet and man of letters Gabriele Dara junior (1828-1885). This rhymed English version of the lengthy romantic ballad *Kënka e sprasme e Balës*, Catanzaro 1906, translated by Ali Cungu (1898-1978), is unfortunately more of a bouncy exercise in traditional poetics than a readable and faithful version of the original. Similar in style by the same translator is *Scanderbeg's Return and other Poems*, Tirana 1970, by the classic Rilindja poet and ideologist Naim bey Frashëri (1846-1900). An uncensored version of Ali Cungu's translation of Frashëri's *Bagëti e bujqësija* (Herding and Farming), Bucharest 1886, was published by the translator's brother, Mahmoud Tsungu, in New York under the title *Frashëri's Song of Albania*, Smithtown, New York 1981. More acceptable from a stylistic point of view is the melodramatic play *Besa* by Naim Frashëri's talented brother, Sami bey Frashëri (1850-1904), translated into English by Nelo Drizari (1902-1978), former lecturer in Albanian at Columbia University, as the *Pledge of Honor, an Albanian Tragedy*, New York 1945.

The works of the pre-revolutionary poet Migjeni (1911-1938), pseudonym of Millosh Gjergj Nikolla, were first translated into English, again by Ali Cungu, in the volume *Migjeni: Selected Albanian Songs and Sketches*, Tirana 1962. Here, again, excessive attention to rhyme and rhythm substantially diminishes the dramatic force and caustic cynicism of Migjeni's verse of growing social awareness. I have published another, I believe, much more appropriate translation of Migjeni's complete poetic works in the volume *Free Verse*, Peja 2001. In addition, a number of Migjeni's short stories and prose sketches have appeared in my new volume *Tales from Old Shkodra: Early Albanian Short Stories*, Peja 2004. This book also includes short stories by Ernest Koliqi (1902-1975), the éminence grise of pre-Second World War Albanian literature, translated by me and by the late British Albanologist Stuart Mann (1905-1986).

Numerous classics of Albanian socialist realism literature were published in Tirana in English translation during the dictatorship. Most of these early translations were awkward to say the least, though they suffice for the most part to convey a general idea of the questionable Albanian prose of the period. Details can be found in my article in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, London, 70. 2 (April 1992), p. 249-257.

The best example of creativity and originality in contemporary Albanian letters is Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), still the only Albanian writer to enjoy a broad international

reputation. Kadare's talents 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.

Kadare began his literary career 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. His works were extremely influential throughout the 1970s and 1980s and, for many readers, he was the only ray of hope in the chilly, dismal prison that was communist Albania. 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 an impulsive stroke of the tyrant's quill. At the end of October 1990, a mere two months before the final collapse of the dictatorship, 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, as a writer both in Albanian and in French. He returned to Tirana in 2002, but no lived primarily back in Paris.

Though Kadare is admired as a poet in Albania, his reputation and, in particular, his international reputation now rests entirely upon his prose, especially his novels, most of which set in periods of the past. Of his literary works translated into English, mention may be made of the following: *The General of the Dead Army*, London 1971 (*Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur*, Tirana 1963); *Chronicle in Stone*, New York 1987, 2007 (*Kronikë në gur*, Tirana 1971); *Doruntine*, New York 1988 (*Kush e solli Doruntinën?* 1979); *Broken April*, New York 1990 (*Prilli i thyer*, 1978); *The Palace of Dreams*, New York & London 1993 (*Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave*, 1981); *The Concert*, New York & London 1994 (*Koncert në fund të dimrit*, Tirana 1988); *The Pyramid*, London & New York 1996 (*Piramida*, 1993); *The File on H*, London 1997 (*Dosja H*, Tirana 1990); *The Three-Arched Bridge*, New York 1997 (*Ura me tri harqe*, Tirana 1978); *The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice*, Boulder 1997 (*Krushqit janë të ngrirë*, 1986); *Three Elegies for Kosovo*, London 2000 (*Tri këngë zie për Kosovën*, Tirana 1998), also called *Elegy for Kosovo* (New York 2000); *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*, New York 2002 (*Lulet e ftohta të marsit*, Tirana 2000); *The Successor*, New York 2006 (*Pasardhësi*, Tirana 2003); *Agamemnon's Daughter*, New York 2007 (*Vajza e Agamemnonit*, Tirana 2003); and most recently *The Siege*, Edinburgh 2008 (a re-edition of *Kështjella*, Tirana 1970). Some other works have appeared in British and American periodicals, notably the short story *The Albanian Writers' Union as Mirrored by a Woman* (*Përballë pasqyrës së një gruaje*, Tirana 2001), in *The New Yorker* in December 2005. Of the fifteen major works mentioned above, only five were translated directly from the Albanian. The others were translated into English, most recently by David Bellos, from the French-language versions of Jusuf Vrioni (1916-2001) and Tedi Papavrami. I am excluding here the early and very stilted translations of *The Wedding* (Tirana 1968) and *The Castle* (Tirana 1974), which fortunately never circulated much in the West.

Kadare has recently published his collected works in sixteen thick volumes, each in an Albanian-language and a French-language edition, and has been given membership in the prestigious Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques (28 October 1996) and in the French Legion of Honour. He has also been nominated on several occasions for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

There can be no doubt that Ismail Kadare was a profoundly dissident writer who, at the same time, led an extremely conformist, if you will, collaborationist life. Dissent in Kadare's prose up to the fall of the dictatorship was very discreet but ubiquitous. Notwithstanding its subtle nature, it was sufficiently evident at all times to the educated Albanian reader, and this is one of the major factors which contributed to his popularity at home. Ismail Kadare left no opportunity untouched to attack the follies, weaknesses and excesses of the Albanian communist system, yet many of his subtle barbs are difficult to grasp for those who did not grow up in or live through that system. The very treatment in a conformist manner of a taboo subject, i.e., of virtually anything beyond the very narrow scope of socialist realism and communist partisan heroism, constituted in itself an act of extreme dissent, amounting to treason in Albania. 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 death blow to the literature of socialist realism. There can be no doubt that he made use of his relative freedom and his talent under the dictatorship to launch many a subtle but effective fusillade 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 (1908-1985) and, at the same time, the regime's most talented adversary.

Ismail Kadare is and remains the flagship of Albanian literature, yet there are many other prose authors who deserve attention. Unfortunately, little has been done to offer more choice to the English-speaking public. Two novels have, however, appeared recently. The first is by Fatos Kongoli (b. 1944) - *The Loser*, Bridgend, Wales 2007 (*I humburi*, Tirana 1992), translated by myself and Janice Mathie-Heck. The second is by Bashkim Shehu (1955) - *The Last Journey of Ago Ymeri*, Evanston, Illinois 2007 (*Rrugëtimi i mbramë i Ago Ymerit*, Prishtina 1995), translated by Diana Alqi Kristo.

As far as I am aware, as published books, there have been no other substantial English translations of Albanian prose authors since the Communist period, although there are certainly a number of writers now whose works could and should be made available. Albanian prose is even rare in readers and anthologies. One initial anthology devoted to modern Albanian prose, entitled *The Angry Cloud: an Anthology of Albanian Stories from Yugoslavia*, Prishtina 1991, presented a selection of nine Kosova authors in the translation of John Hodgson.

I was able recently to publish what I regard as a significant anthology of modern Albanian short stories, entitled *Balkan Beauty, Balkan Blood*, Evanston, Illinois 2006, comprised of twelve short stories by nine contemporary authors. The authors included in this collection are: Elvira Dones now in Washington D.C.; Kim Mehmeti of Skopje; Ylljet Aliçka, now Albanian Ambassador to France; Lindita Arapi, now in Bonn, Germany; Eqrem Basha of Prishtina; Fatos Lubonja of Tirana; Stefan Çapaliku of Shkodra; Mimoza Ahmeti of Tirana; Teodor Laço of Tirana; and Dritëro Agolli of Tirana. The anthology was published in the "Writers from an Unbound Europe" series by Northwestern University Press.

The strength of Albanian literature has always been poetry. It is understandable, therefore, despite the difficulties of translating and marketing verse, that there is a comparatively large amount of Albanian verse in English translation, large, of course, by modest Albanian standards. Of earlier authors, mention has been made of the translations of

the messianic Migjeni from Shkodra. With my colleague Janice Mathie-Heck, I completed a major translation of another author from Shkodra, Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940). Fishta, a Franciscan priest and imposing figure of pre-Second World War literature, was the author of thirty-seven literary publications, but his name is indelibly linked to one great work, indeed to what is perhaps the most astounding creation in all of Albanian literature, the national literary epic "The Highland Lute."

The Highland Lute (*Lahuta e Malcís*) is a 15,613-line historical verse epic, a panorama of northern Albanian history from 1862 to 1913 which mirrors the long Albanian struggle for freedom and independence. This literary masterpiece was composed for the most part between 1902 and 1909, though it was refined and amended by its author over the following quarter of a century. The Highland Lute is a work of great significance to the Albanian people and, at the same time, constitutes the first Albanian-language contribution to world literature, yet it is still largely unknown to the outside world.

One of the many characteristics which the northern Albanian tribes have in common with their southern Slavic and, in particular, Montenegrin neighbours in the mountains of the western Balkans, is the cult of the heroic. The two peoples, divided as they are by language and by the bitter course of history, have indeed a largely common culture. Although the Montenegrins serve as the 'bad guys' in the glorification of the author's native land, Fishta was not anti-Slav, as communist propaganda portrayed him. Even today, it is rare to hear a northern Albanian highlander speak ill of the Montenegrins. It is known, at any rate, that Fishta was influenced and moved by the literary achievements of the southern Slavs in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular by the epic verse of Slavic resistance to the Turks. The works of the Franciscan pater Grga Martić (1822-1905) served the young Fishta as a model while the latter was studying in Bosnia. Fishta was also influenced by the writings of an earlier Franciscan writer, Andrija Kačić-Miošić (1704-1760), the Dalmatian poet and publicist of the Enlightenment who is remembered especially for his *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* (Pleasant Talk of Slavic Folk), 1756, a collection of prose and poetry on Serbo-Croatian history, and by the works of Croatian poet Ivan Mažuranić (1814-1890), author of the noted romantic epic *Smrt Smail-age Ćengića* (The Death of Smail Aga), 1846. A further source of literary inspiration for Fishta may have been the Montenegrin poet-prince Petar Petrović Njegoš (1813-1851). It is no coincidence that Fishta's title 'The Highland (or Mountain) Lute' is very similar to Njegoš's *Gorski vijenac* (The Mountain Wreath), 1847. This latter verse rendition of Montenegro's heroic resistance to the Turkish occupants is now generally regarded as the national epic of the Montenegrins and Serbs. Fishta proved that the Albanian language was also capable of a refined literary epic of equally heroic proportions.

Despite the success of The Highland Lute and the pre-eminence of its author, this and all other works by Gjergj Fishta were banned after the Second World War when the Communists came to power in Albania. The epic was, however, republished in Rome 1958 and Ljubljana 1990, and exists in German and Italian translations. The English translation, which took us over three years of hard work, was published in 2005 by I.B. Tauris in London, in collaboration with the Centre for Albanian Studies there.

Of contemporary poets in English translation, mention may be made firstly of Martin Camaj (1925-1992), poet, novelist and scholar who worked for many years as Professor of Albanian Studies at the University of Munich. Camaj's verse has appeared in two fine volumes: *Selected Poetry*, New York 1990, and *Palimpsest*, Munich & New York 1991, both in the translation of Leonard Fox.

The poets of Kosova are perhaps slightly better known in the English-speaking world than the poets of modern Albania. Among recent publications are my *Who Will Slay the Wolf: Selected Poetry by Ali Podrimja*, New York 2000, and *Neither a Wound nor a Song: Poetry from Kosova*, by Eqrem Basha, New York 2003. Ali Podrimja (b. 1942) and Eqrem Basha (b. 1948) are among the most noted writers of contemporary Kosova. Another volume of verse I published was *Call Me by My Name: Poetry from Kosova*, New York 2001, by Flora Brovina (b. 1949). Brovina is known not only as a poet and pediatrician, but was also widely known as a human rights and women's rights activist. She was taken hostage by Serb paramilitaries during the Kosova War of 1999 and, despite protests from international and, indeed, from Serb human rights organization, was sentenced to twelve years in prison for so-called "hostile activities in connection with terrorism." During her trial, she stated that the truth had been so distorted, it reminded her of the metaphor of an 'elephant' who admitted to being a 'giraffe.' Fortunately, Flora Brovina was released in November 2000 and is currently a member of parliament in Kosova.

Recently published is another noted poet from Kosova, Azem Shkreli (1938-1997). *The Blood of the Quill*, translated by myself and Janice Mathie-Heck, reflects the values of the culture of the Albanian Highlands. It was published by Green Integer in Los Angeles in a bilingual edition. It is indeed the second volume of Shkreli's verse in English. The first one, *The Call of the Owl*, Prishtina 1989, was translated by John Hodgson.

Of the poets of Albania itself, mention may be made of the volume *Fresco: Selected Poetry by Luljeta Lleshanaku*, New York 2002, edited by Henry Israeli of Montreal and translated by no less than nine authors. Another well-known poet from Tirana is Visar Zhiti (b. 1952), who was long a political prisoner of the Communist regime. His poetic works have appeared under the title *The Condemned Apple: Selected Verse in a Bilingual Albanian-English Edition*, Los Angeles 2005, once again in my translation. Another recent volume of verse is *I Don't Believe in Ghosts: Poems by Moikom Zeqo*, Rochester NY 2007, in the translation of Wayne Miller.

Such are the major English translations to date. There are in addition a small number of English-language anthologies which provide a broader view of contemporary Albanian verse in Albania and Kosova with excerpts from the works of a larger number of writers. Verse by Migjeni, Lasgush Poradeci, Arshi Pipa, Martin Camaj and Ismail Kadare appeared in the now rare anthology *Contemporary Albanian Poetry*, Naples ca. 1985, translated by the late Bardhyl Pogoni (1926-1985) of Western Kentucky University.

In Kosova, two presentable anthologies of verse appeared: *The Sad Branch / Dega e pikëlluar*, Prishtina 1979, published by the Kosova Association of Literary Translators and including two poems each by twenty leading Kosova poets, and *Roads Lead Only One Way, a Survey of Modern Poetry from Kosova*, Prishtina 1988, translated by John Hodgson, with 139 poems taken from the three official languages of Kosova: Albanian, BCS and Turkish. Represented in this anthology are the Albanian poets Esad Mekuli, Enver Gjerqeku, Azem Shkreli, Rahman Dedaj, Fahredin Gunga, Ali Podrimja and Eqrem Basha. In contrast to *The Sad Branch*, the latter collection enables the reader to grasp at least something of the particular style and flavour of each writer. A third anthology published in Kosova, *The Glow of the Passion: a Panorama of Albanian Literature in Yugoslavia*, Prishtina 1991, was a translation disaster and should best be ignored.

The first anthology of modern Albanian verse in general appeared in my volume *An Elusive Eagle Soars: Anthology of Modern Albanian Poetry*, London & Boston 1993, which was published as part of the Unesco Collection of Representative Works. It covered 24 poets

from Albania, Kosova and the diaspora.

A selection of Albanian verse appeared recently as part of a verse anthology entitled *New European Poets*, St. Paul Minnesota 2008, edited by Wayne Miller and Kevin Prufer. It includes poetry by Visar Zhiti, Mimoza Ahmeti, Gazmend Krasniqi, Luljeta Lleshanaku, Lindita Arapi, Eqrem Basha, Flora Brovina and Abdullah Konushevci.

A more substantial selection of verse from Albania, 22 authors translated by myself and Janice Mathie-Heck, is now to be found in the internet anthology *Contemporary Verse from Albania*, in: *Transcript, European Internet Review of Books and Writing*, volume 24, under www.transcript-review.org.

In connection with the internet, I should note that I have what is probably the largest selection of Albanian literature available in English translation anywhere, on my website www.AlbanianLiterature.net, with about 100 authors.

At this juncture, I am delighted to announce that a major representative anthology of Albanian verse has finally been published in the West. It is entitled *Lightning from the Depths: Anthology of Albanian Poetry*, edited and translated from the Albanian by Robert Elsie and Janice Mathie-Heck, Evanston, Illinois 2008. This anthology covers Albanian verse from its beginnings to the present day, and includes 277 poems by 48 authors.

From the above survey of publications it is obvious that, although efforts have been made by many writers, translators and publishers in Albania, Kosova and abroad, Albanian literature is still not very well known in the English-speaking world. Many chapters of Albanian literature still remain to be discovered. The basic problem for the transmission of Albanian literature is and remains the lack of literary translators. As I noted with some embarrassment at a conference for translators of Albanian literature, held in Shkodra in November 2003 under the auspices of the Albanian Ministry of Culture, I personally constituted about 80% of the capacity for literary translations from Albanian into English, if not more. Much remains to be done to overcome this bottleneck, and I would be more than delighted if this short presentation should inspire anyone to take up the torch. The need is urgent. There is nothing Albanian authors would like more than to see their works translated into English and to have direct contact with the world. Indeed some impatient authors are already beginning to publish their works privately in unimaginably dreadful English translations of their own, or those made by their children studying English at school.

Albania is certainly the most underdeveloped country in Europe, yet the Albanians are a fascinating and dynamically creative people. After years of isolation, oppression and incredible poverty, they now have much to tell us. Contemporary Albanian literature, not only in Tirana and Prishtina but also, increasingly, in the centres of Albanian emigration abroad: Italy, the United States, Greece, Germany, Switzerland, and Canada, has many a tiny glittering stone to add to the mosaic of modern culture.

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