

ALBANIA, POETRY OF. Albanian is an IE lang. spoken in Albania, Kosovo and surrounding areas in the southwestern part of the Balkan Peninsula. Albania attained its independence in 1912 after five centuries as part of the Ottoman Empire.

The beginnings of written verse in Albania are strongly linked to the Catholic Church. Pjetër Budi (1566-1622) from the Mati area trained for the priesthood at the so-called Illyrian College of Loretto, south of Ancona in Italy, and was later bishop of Sapa and Sarda in the Zadrime region. His major publication, a catechism titled *Dottrina Christiana* (Christian Doctrine, 1618), is appended with 53 pages of religious poetry in Albanian, some 3,000 lines. This verse, incl. both trans. from Lat. and original Albanian poems in quatrain form, is octosyllabic, which is the standard in Albanian folk verse. Budi prefers biblical themes, eulogies and universal motifs such as the inevitability of death. Though his rhymes are not always elegant, his verse evinces an authenticity of feeling and genuine human concern for the sufferings of a misguided world.

The Ottoman invasion and occupation of Albania, starting in the late 14th c., brought about the gradual demise of this early Catholic poetry. It was replaced by *aljamiado* verse, written in Ar. script and strongly influenced by Islamic culture. Muslim poets wrote initially in Ottoman Turkish, but by the mid-18th c., they were experimenting in Albanian, as well. Among the leading literary figures of this period was Nezim Frakulla (ca. 1680-1760) from the Fier region. Nezim writes proudly that he was the first person to compose a *divan* in Albanian: "Who bade the *divan* speak Albanian? / Nezim has made it known, / Who bade clarity speak in Albanian? / Nezim has made it human." About 110 poems of his poems are preserved, all replete with Turkish and Persian vocabulary.

Leaving aside the Italo-Albanian poets of southern Italy, such as Giulio Varoboba (1724-88), Nicola Chetta (1740-1803), Girolamo De Rada (1814-1903), and Giuseppe Serembe (1844-1901), who all made substantial contributions to the evolution of Albanian verse, we first note a revival of verse in Albania itself in the late 19th c., during the *Rilindja* period of national renaissance. Among the leading figures of this movement for national identity and political autonomy were Pashko Vasa (1825-92) from Shkodra, whose poem *O moj Shqypni, e mjera Shqypni* (Oh Albania, Poor Albania), a stirring appeal for national awakening, was written in the dramatic years of the League of Prizren, 1878-1880; and Naim Frashëri (1846-1900), now widely regarded as Albania's national poet. Frashëri's verse, publ. for the most part while he was living in Constantinople and very popular among Albanians at the time, included pastoral lyrics in the trad. of Virgil heavily laden with the imagery of his mountain homeland, and historical epics and Bektashi religious verse.

A qualitative step forward occurred in the early decades of the 20th c., when the Albanian lang. first became widespread in education and publishing. Though the romantic nationalism of the *Rilindja* period was still popular, other themes were introduced incl. love poetry, which initially caused quite a scandal. Among the leading poets of the early decades were: Anton Zako Çajupi (1866-1930) who was active in Egypt; Ndre Mjeda (1866-1937) of Shkodra, whose collection *Juvenilia* (1917), influenced by the 19th-c. It. classics, included sonnets and other verse in refined meters; and Asdreni (1872-1947) from the southeastern Korça region, whose first three verse collections were well received.

The greatest figure of Albanian verse before World War II was Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), whose 15,000-line verse epic of Albanian history, *Lahuta e Malcís* (*The Highland Lute*, 1937), caused him to be revered as the Albanian Homer. When the Communists took power in 1944, his fame was swiftly veiled by oblivion, and the very mention of his name was taboo for 46 years.

Two poets, entirely different from one another, may be regarded as the vanguards of modernity in Albanian lit. The messianic Migjeni (1911-38) of Shkodra turned away from the

beauties of the Albanian mountains and the sacred trads. of the nation to devote his verse to the social realities of despair and ubiquitous squalor, against which he rose in defiance. His slender collection *Vargjet e Lira* (*Free Verse*, 1944), pub. posthumously, was a literary revolution, and a breath of fresh air that did away with the traditions of romantic nationalism for good. Lasgush Poradeci (1899-1987), a pantheistic poet from Pogradec on Lake Ohrid, studied the ever-changing moods of the lake to offer crystalline verse in southern Albanian folk style.

Albanian written culture and verse reached a zenith in the 1930s and early 1940s. A mod. lit. had been created and the nation had come of age. However, it was a brief blossoming in the shadow of an apocalypse. The Stalinist takeover and purges under dictator Enver Hoxha (1908-85) caused terror in intellectual circles and snuffed out creative writing in the country for almost 20 years. Only Martin Camaj (1925-92) in Bavarian exile and the unfettered poets of Kosovo were left to build on established trads.

By the early 1960s, a new generation of poets in Albania, led by Fatos Arapi (b. 1930), Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931), and Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), managed to slip elements of aesthetic finesse into their volumes of obligatory and otherwise stale partisan poetry. There was no thaw in Albanian verse during the Communist period (1944-89), but cautious openings, ever so slight, enabled some verse of quality to be published, and it immediately caught the imagination of the beleaguered public.

Ideological restrictions vanished when the Stalinist regime imploded in 1989-90, and chaos reigned in the little Balkan country for a decade. Yet, despite the harsh conditions of a free-market economy, contemp. poetry lost none of its fundamental importance in Albanian national culture. Well into the 21st c., verse collections still account for over 50% of literary output. Albania is and remains a land of poets.

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