

Rexhep Ismajli (ed.)
Modern Arbëresh poetry
[*Poezia e sotme arbëreshe*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1990. 321 pages

The beginning of the nineties has seen the Albanian nation in a political and economic catastrophe which is having dramatic repercussions on contemporary literature and culture. Albania itself has nothing to show from forty-six years of 'splendid isolation' under the Stalinist dictatorship but starvation and ruin such as Europe has not seen for half a century. Kosovo, for its part, is faced with a level of oppression and persecution unparalleled on the continent since the Second World War. Virtually all Albanian-language publishing companies have either gone bankrupt or been shut down within the space of one year. No money, no paper, no ink, no hope. Is there no blissful isle where the little flame of Albanian culture can be nourished and fostered under normal human conditions and can continue to be reflected in the radiant mosaic of European civilization?

One 'solid root' has survived the new Balkan apocalypse. The 100,000-strong Albanian minority in southern Italy are scions of refugees who fled Albania during the Turkish invasion after the death of national hero Scanderbeg in 1468. These 'Arbëresh' took refuge in the isolated mountains of Calabria and Sicily where they have remained to this day, cherishing, indeed fiercely guarding, a minute and quite unique language and culture. It was a Sicilian Arbëresh writer, Luca Matranga, in 1592 who was first to record a poem in Albanian. Over the centuries, the Arbëresh have contributed to Albanian literature more than their numbers would warrant, in particular with the figure of Girolamo De Rada (1814-1903), a giant of the Albanian national revival.

And how is Italo-Albanian literature faring today? Not badly at all when one peruses the present anthology, *Poezia e sotme arbëreshe* (Modern Arbëresh poetry), compiled by Kosovo scholar Rexhep Ismajli (b. 1947). The 210 poems by 22 poets from Molise to the mountain villages of Sicily, an unprecedented collection, reflect more than simply the preoccupations of a minority culture. Arbëresh verse is intellectual verse, the pursuit of an educated handful of scholars, teachers and clerics giving direction to the aspirations of their people. One of the most popular and respected of these poets is Vorea Ujko (1918-1989), pseudonym of Domenico Bellizzi. He was a modest priest from Frascineto who taught modern literature in Firmo (Calabria) where his memory has been much cherished since his death in January 1989. Ujko's verse is bathed in the *gjaku i shprishur* (the scattered blood) of his ancestors. At the same time it far surpasses the lingering sentiments of romantic nationalism in earlier Arbëresh verse and the standard motifs of exile lyrics.

Though the long-range forecast for the survival of Arbëresh culture may be gloomy, as it is for all other minority language groups in Europe, a new generation of contemporary poets, among whom are Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio (b. 1944), Agostino Giordano (b. 1950), Kate Zuccaro (b. 1955), Mario Bellizzi (b. 1957) and Anna Ventre (b. 1957), has not hesitated to take up Ujko's heritage and to continue to give refined lyric expression to the Arbëresh experience as the century draws to a close.

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