

Evolution and revolution in modern Albanian literature

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*Tehut të shpatës kemi ecur rrufe,
Pastaj shpata ka ecur mbi ne.*

(The blade of the sword we came down in a dash,
The sword then came down upon us in a flash.)

Xhevahir Spahiu

Establishing a literary culture in Albania has never been an easy task, though not for want of artistic endeavour and creative impulses. All too often the tempestuous course of Albanian history has nipped the flowers of Albanian literature in the bud and severed the roots of intellectual culture.

Early Albanian literature of the 16th and 17th century with its primarily biblical focus (religious translations and devotional texts beginning with the 'Missal' of Gjon Buzuku in 1555) might have provided a foundation for literary creativity in the age of the Counter-Reformation under the somewhat ambiguous patronage of the Catholic church, had not the banners of Islam soon been unfurled on the eastern horizons, had not tiny Albania been destined to bear the full brunt of the Turkish invasion. The Ottoman colonization of Albania which had begun as early as 1385 was to split the country into three spheres of culture, all virtually independent of one another: (1) the cosmopolitan traditions of the Islamic Orient using initially Turkish, Persian and Arabic as their media of expression and later Albanian in a stylized *Aljamiado* literature, i.e. the so-called poetry of the *Bejtexhinj*, (2) the lingering Byzantine heritage of Greek Orthodoxy in southern Albania which produced a number of religious and scholarly works in Greek script in the 18th century, and (3) the awakening culture and literature of the Arbëresh (Italo-Albanians) in southern Italy, nourished by a more favourable social, political and economic climate and by the fertile intellectual soil of Italian civilization.

The stable foundations of an Albanian national literature were finally laid in the second half of the nineteenth century with the rise of the nationalist movement striving for Albania's independence from a decaying Ottoman Empire. The literature of this so-called *Rilindja* period of national awakening was one of romantic nationalism and provides an excellent key to an understanding of the Albanian mentality even today. As so often in the history of Albanian literature, writing in Albanian, by its very existence, constituted an act of defiance against the foreign powers ruling the country or dominating it culturally. Indeed, the Sublime Porte rightly regarded most Albanian cultural and educational activity as subversive, and as such saw fit to ban Albanian-language schools and the publication of all books and periodicals in Albanian. With no access to education in their own language, only a small minority of Albanians could hope to break through the barriers to literary creativity and intellectual thought.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catholic education facilities set up by the Franciscans and Jesuits in Shkodër (Scutari) under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian

Kultusprotektorat paved the way for the creation of an intellectual elite in Albania which in turn produced the rudiments of a more sophisticated literature that expressed itself primarily in poetry. The culmination of Albanian literature before the Second World War is seen in the works of the talented Franciscan pater **Gjergj Fishta** (1871-1940), once lauded as the national poet of Albania though from 1945 to 1990, for reasons more political than literary, ostracized from the Albanian Parnassus.

Indeed, virtually the whole literature of pre-war Albania was swept away by the political revolution which took place in the country during and after the Second World War, to be replaced by a radically proletarian and socialist literature in its infancy. The first minister of education and culture of the 'new' Albania, **Sejfullah Malëshova** (1901-ca.1970), a self-styled 'rebel poet' who used the pseudonym *Lame Kodra*, nonetheless followed a relatively liberal course in order to encourage the reintegration of non-communists writers and forces into the new structures of power. His success was limited though as he very soon fell into disgrace as an 'opportunist' and was eliminated by Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) in a power struggle in 1946. Malëshova strangely enough survived his fall. This left-wing idealist who had once been a member of the Soviet Comintern, spent his later life in internal exile as a humble stock clerk in Fier where, for years on end, not a single inhabitant of the town dared speak to him. His only social contact was to play soccer with the children. Whenever anyone approached, he would pinch his lips with his fingers, betraying the vow of eternal silence which ensured his survival. Malëshova died of appendicitis in unimaginable isolation.

Most other writers and intellectuals who had not left the country by 1944 suffered a similar or worse fate. The Catholic writers of the north were of course among the first to be eliminated by the new regime: poet **Lazër Shantoja** (1892-1945) was shot in the spring of 1945; poet **Bernardin Palaj** ((1897-1947) died in prison in Shkodër ca. 1947; **Vinçenc Prennushi** (1885-1949), poet, folklorist and Archbishop of Durrës, was tortured to death in Durrës prison in February 1949; **Ndoc Nikaj** (1864-1951), often called the father of twentieth-century Albanian prose, was arrested in 1946 at the age of eighty-two on the absurd charge of planning to 'use violence to overthrow the government' and died in Shkodër prison five years later. But repression was not confined to the Catholics. Dramatist **Kristo Floqi** (1873-1951) died in 1951 after several years in prison. Talented short story writer **Mitrush Kuteli** (1907-1967), pseudonym of *Dhimitër Pasko*, was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and spent at least three years in Tiranë jail and doing forced labour in the notorious swamp of Maliq near Korçë. With him in Tiranë was **Andrea Varfi** (b. 1914), later to be celebrated as a classic author of early Socialist Realism. Novelist and Spanish civil war veteran **Petro Marko** (b. 1913) was invited to Hollywood after the war by Billy Wilder to do filmscripts. He was hindered in his reply to the invitation by a stay in prison in Tiranë from 1947 to 1950, where he was often suspended in chains.

Enver Hoxha was deeply suspicious of Albanian writers and intellectuals and remained so to the end of his days. The intellectual freedom which had existed, ironically enough, under the pre-war Zog dictatorship and during the Italian occupation was snuffed out completely. The Party demanded nothing less than absolute obedience. The simplest means of eliminating questionable writers was to deny them access to publication. As a result, many a talented quill turned nolens volens to translating. Pantheistic poet **Lasgush Poradeci** (1899-1987), a twentieth century classic, is said to have preferred to break his pencil in two rather than write the kind of poetry 'they' wanted. Instead, he rendered Burns, Pushkin, Lermontov, Goethe, Heine and Brecht into fluid Albanian, before dying in absolute poverty. Respected intellectual **Petro Zheji** (b. 1929), spiritual father to a whole generation of Albanian intellectuals, is an admired translator of Aragon, Cervantes, Asturias, Goncharov and Sciascia, but never had access to publishing facilities for his own works imbued with symbolism; **Jusuf Vroni**, Kadare's talented translator into French, spent over a decade in prison because of his

aristocratic origins before being allowed to work. A handful of pre-war authors did manage to adapt. **Sterjo Spasse** (1914-1989) from Lake Prespa, for instance, whose early novels *Pse?!*, 1935 (Why?!) with its strongly nihilistic overtones and *Afërdita*, 1944 (Afërdita) portrayed the dilemma of the young intellectual in a backward rural society, wrote prose in the vein of socialist realism but never published anything convincing in his later years. The same is true of satirist **Nonda Bulka** (1906-1972).

The persecution of intellectuals, in particular of 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 gifted writers and artists were dispatched to do menial chores in dangerous branches of industry, or banished to the provinces forever, to internment in some isolated mountain village with no hope of return.

With Albania's integration into the Soviet bloc during the fifties, Soviet literary models were introduced and slavishly imitated. The verse, short stories and novels produced by the first generation of post-war Albanian writers were nonetheless for the most part not literary publications at all. They were politically motivated and educative in nature, often to the point of being cumbersomely didactic. Patriotism and the 'right' political convictions counted for much more than literary sophistication. *Lumi i vdekur*, Tiranë 1965 (The dead river), by **Jakov Xoxa** (1923-1979) from Fier, one of the rare works of the period with any literary merit, was modelled on the Russian *Tikhij Don* (And quiet flows the Don) 1928-1940 by Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov (1905-1984) and his *Juga e bardhë*, Tiranë 1971 (The white south wind), on the latter's *Podnyataya tselina* (Virgin soil upturned) 1932-1960. *Një vjeshhtë me stuhi*, Tiranë 1959 (Stormy autumn), by **Ali Abdihojha** (b. 1923) was a complete imitation of *Molodaya Gvardija* 1945 by Aleksander Aleksandrovich Fadeyev (1901-1956). Among other representative authors of this period of Albanian literature were **Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi** (b. 1915) from Elbasan, now a pre-eminent literary historian, **Shevqet Musaraj** (1914-1986) from the Vlorë region, **Fatmir Gjata** (1922-1989) from Korçë, and poets **Aleks Çaçi** (1916-1989), **Mark Gurakuqi** (1922-1977), **Luan Qafëzezi** (b. 1922) and **Llazar Siliqi** (b. 1924), none of whom were able to express much particular talent.

The writers of the fifties and early sixties started from scratch. They were inspired, if at all, by revolutionary pathos and an awareness of being the very first generation of a new literature and of a new Albania. The link between this literature and Marxist politics had been firmly cemented and the political message was the essential for those who wished to survive. Writers were encouraged to concentrate their creative energies on specific themes such as the partisan struggle of the 'national liberation war' and on the building of socialism. Subjects devoid of any redeeming educational value in Marxist terms were considered alien and taboo, and indeed still have been up to the present. 'L'art pour l'art' is quite unthinkable in modern Albania. Socialist realism gave writers the tools with which to create but, as an absolute value, it allowed them no alternatives. As a result, the vast body of writing churned out in the fifties and sixties proved in general to be sterile and exceptionally conformist. The subject matter of the period was repetitious and unelaborate texts were spoon-fed to the reader time and again without much attention to basic elements of style. Political education and fueling the patriotic sentiments of the masses were considered more important than aesthetic values. Even the formal criteria of criticism such as variety and richness in lexicon and textual structure were demoted to give priority to patriotism and the political message.

A turning point came in the stormy year 1961 which on the one hand, marked the 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, *Hapat e mija në asfalt* (My steps on the pavement) by Dritëro Agolli, and in the

following year *Shtigje poetike* (Poetic paths) by Fatos Arapi. It is ironic to note that while Albania had broken with the Soviet Union to save socialism, leading Albanian writers, educated in the Eastern bloc, took advantage of the rupture to part not only with Soviet models but also with socialist realism itself. The attempt made to broaden the literary horizon in search of something new inevitably led to a hefty literary, and of course political controversy on 11 July 1961 at a meeting of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists. The debate conducted not only by writers but also by leading party and government figures was published in the literary journal *Drita* (The light) and received wide public attention in the wake of the Fourth Party Congress of that year. It pitted writers of the older generation such as Andrea Varfi, Luan Qafëzezi and Mark Gurakuqi, who voiced their support for fixed poetic standards and the solid traditions of socialist Albanian literature and who opposed new elements such as free verse as un-Albanian, against a new generation led by Ismail Kadare, Dritëro Agolli, and Fatos Arapi who were in favour of a literary renewal and a broadening of the stylistic and thematic horizon. The road to renewal was given the green light by Enver Hoxha himself who saw that the situation was untenable.

Though it constituted no radical change of course, no political 'thaw' in the Soviet sense, 1961 set the stage for a quarter of a century of trial and error which has now led to much greater sophistication in Albanian literature. Themes and styles diversified and more attention was paid to formal literary criteria and to the question of individuality.

This first attempt to liberalize Albania's rigid literature and culture somewhat reached its peak in the early seventies in the wake of the Chinese cultural revolution, an echo of which had been felt in Albanian letters. Heading the so-called liberal movement were dramatist **Fadil Paçrami** (b. 1922), party secretary for ideological affairs in Tiranë, and **Todi Lubonja**, director of radio and television broadcasting. They encouraged liberal trends and permitted some Western ideas and influence to penetrate Albanian culture (more interesting plays and the broadcasting of Italian pop music and the Beatles on radio). The 11th song festival on 25 December 1972 served as a pretext in this in actual fact rather harmless movement to keep writers and artists, and consequently the whole country in tow. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the Central Committee on 26-28 June 1973, Enver Hoxha took the offensive and presented a report which must now be regarded as a hallmark in the annals of European obscurantism: *Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike kundër shfaqjeve të huaja e qëndrimeve liberale ndaj tyre* (Let us strengthen the ideological struggle against foreign manifestations and liberal attitudes towards them). The liberal movement was swiftly crushed and its two figureheads mercilessly condemned for their sins as deviationists and enemies of the people. Todi Lubonja was released from prison in June 1987 and Fadil Paçrami was finally freed from Kosovë e Madhe prison near Elbasan on 17 March 1991, two weeks before Albania's first multiparty elections.

What followed from 1973 to at least 1975 was a virtual reign of terror against Albanian writers and intellectuals, comparable in spirit at least to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. These years constituted the major setback in the development of Albanian literature and culture. Poets and prose writers began vying with one another in the proclamation of their revolutionary fervour and in their rejection of foreign and liberal influences. Those who were less convincing or whose publications were found to be tainted with liberality were banned to the provinces or landed in prison. The more fortunate simply lost their right to publish. Almost all major authors had a work withdrawn from circulation and 'turned into cardboard'. Learning foreign languages was effectively banned and those who already had the misfortune of knowing French or Italian found themselves in dangerously embarrassing positions. Artists and painters such as Maks Velo (b. 1935), Edison Gjergo (b. 1938), Ali Oseku (b. 1944), Edi Hila (b. 1946) and Abdullah Cangoni (ca. 1920-1988) were denounced at the Fourth Plenary Session and sent to prisons and concentration camps like the notorious copper

mines at Spaç for agitation and propaganda, i.e. for having expressed a vague interest in Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali or Max Ernst.

The frenzy had largely subsided by 1978, but no deviation from the ideological course set by the Party was dared up to the death of Enver Hoxha on 11 April 1985. With the notable exception of Ismail Kadare, no Albanian writers were allowed to express any negative views or even to leave the country. In April 1986, prose writer **Koço Kosta** (b. 1944) raised an eyebrow or two when he published the first part of a realistic short story *Ata të dy e të tjerë* (The two of them and the others) in the Tiranë literary periodical *Nëntori* (November) which contained some indirect criticism of the system. The author disappeared, banned to the tiny village of Greshicë near Fier and was denied rights to publish for three years, 'pour encourager les autres'. The second part of his short story, scheduled for publication in the May 1986 edition, was torn out of *Nëntori* at the last minute and replaced with something more acceptable. The watchful eye of the Party continued to channel all literary creativity in the 'right direction' up to December 1990 which finally saw the first tentative steps towards pluralism and democratization in Albania.

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 **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 three decades and his courage in attacking literary mediocrity within the system brought about a degree of flexibility in socialist realism which enabled it to survive.

Born and raised in the museum-city of Gjirokastër, Kadare studied at the Faculty of History and Philology of the University of Tiranë and subsequently at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow until 1960 when relations between Albania and the Soviet Union became tense. From the start, Kadare enjoyed a privileged relationship with Enver Hoxha, also from Gjirokastër, which enabled him to pursue literary and personal objectives for which other writers would certainly have been sent into internal exile or to prison.

He had begun his literary career in the 1950s as a poet with verse collections such as *Endërrimet*, Tiranë 1957 (Dreams), and *Shekulli im*, Tiranë 1961 (My century), which gave proof not only of his youthful inspiration but also of talent and poetic originality in the vein of Russian poets Yevgeny Yevtushenko (b. 1933) and Andrey Voznesensky (b. 1933). 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.

Kadare's international reputation up to the present rests entirely upon his prose, in particular his historical novels and short stories. His first prose work, and perhaps still his best known, *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* Tiranë 1963 (The general of the dead army), dealt with the immediate post-war years as seen through the eyes of an Italian general in the company of a priest on a mission to Albania to exhume and repatriate the remains of his fallen soldiers. The novel was published initially in 1963 and in a revised edition in 1967. After the success of the French-language edition (Paris 1970), it was widely translated (English, German, Italian, Romanian, Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, Swedish, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Greek etc.) and laid the foundations for Kadare's deserved renown abroad.

Kadare's works are a strict reflection of the vicissitudes of Albanian political life. In the seventies, he turned increasingly to historical prose, a safer haven, and became an unrivalled master of the genre. *Kështjella*, Tiranë 1970 (The castle), a work reminiscent of Dino Buzzati's *Il deserto dei Tatars* 1940 (The Tatar steppe), takes us back to the 15th century, the age of the Albanian national

hero Scanderbeg (1405-1468), and in minute, carefully composed detail, depicts the siege of a mediaeval Albanian fortress, symbolic of Albania itself, by the Turks during one of their numerous punitive expeditions to subdue the country. The allusion to political events of the sixties seen by many critics was not unintentional. In 1961, Albania had stubbornly broken ties with the mighty Soviet Union, and after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, it felt the very real possibility of a Soviet incursion to bring the country back into the fold. No Albanian reader at any rate could be unaware of the analogy construed between the Sublime Porte and the Kremlin.

Next came *Kronikë në gur*, Tiranë 1971 (Chronicle in stone) [see WLT 61:4, p. 669], a forceful novel set in his native Gjirokastrë. *Nëntori i një kryeqyteti*, Tiranë 1973 (November of a capital city), set in Tiranë under Italian occupation in 1940, was, like *Dasma*, Tiranë 1968 (The wedding), less successful, a reflection of the 1973-1975 purge. *Dimri i madh*, Tiranë 1977 (The great winter), [see WLT 62:3, p. 493], constitutes a literary digestion of the traumatic rupture of relations with the Soviet Union. In *Ura me tri harqe*, Tiranë 1978 (The bridge with three arches), Kadare returned to the mythical origins of Albania's haunted history to bring to life one of the most awesome motifs of Balkan legendry, that of immurement. It has been interpreted as an Albanian response to Serbian Nobel prize winner Ivo Andrić's *Na Drini cuprija* 1959 (Bridge on the Drina). Kadare is at his best with Balkan themes.

His following short stories and shorter novels were published in three collections: *Emblema e dikurshme*, Tiranë 1977 (Signs of the past), *Gjakftohtësia*, Tiranë 1980 (Cold-bloodedness) and *Koha e shkrimeve*, Tiranë 1986 (Epoch of writings) [see WLT 61:4, p. 666], the latter two volumes being decidedly non-conformist by Albanian standards. The shorter novels appeared here in the form of short stories for editorial reasons. Among the best prose works contained in these books were: *Kush e solli Doruntinën?* (Who brought Doruntine back?) [see WLT 61:2, p. 331] in which he once again revived his country's legendary past; *Sjellësi i fatkeqësisë* (The bearer of evil tidings), also known as the 'Caravan of veils' [cf. WLT 61:4, p. 666]; *Viti i mbrapshtë* (The dark year) set in the turbulent and ominous year of 1914, a cautious allusion to modern Albania; *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (The wedding procession turned to ice) [cf. WLT 61:4, p. 666], a moving description of the Kosovo tragedy as experienced by a Prishtinë surgeon; the excellent *Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave* (The official of the palace of dreams); and *Prill i thyer* (Broken April). In contrast to these shorter novels and short stories was the 700-page novel *Koncert në fund të dimrit*, Tiranë 1988 (Concert at the end of winter) [see WLT 63:2, p. 347], a monumental review of Albania's dramatic break with post-Maoist China in 1978, with overt criticism of the depersonalization of the individual under socialism. It returned to the epic proportions of 'The Great Winter' with which it has many parallels.

Ismail Kadare did his utmost to emancipate Albanian literature over which, in view of his talent and his close personal relationship with Enver Hoxha, he reigned as an absolute monarch in the seventies and eighties. His unexpected departure from Albania and application for political asylum in France in October 1990 caused a good deal of consternation but he will no doubt return to his homeland when the time is right.

Kadare's overriding position in contemporary Albanian literature, compounded by his international reputation, has cast a shadow over all other contemporary Albanian writers. One of these who has had a far from negligible influence on the course of contemporary literature is **Dritëro Agolli** (b. 1931), head of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists since the purge of Paçrami and Lubonja in 1973. Like Kadare, he made his name originally as a poet before turning to prose, and is widely admired in both genres. His first verse collections, *Në udhë dola*, Tiranë 1958 (I went out on the street), *Hapat e mija në asfalt*, Tiranë 1961 (My steps on the pavement), and *Shtigje malesh dhe trotuare*, Tiranë 1965 (Mountain paths and sidewalks), introduced him to the reading public as a

sincere lyric poet of the soil and evinced masterful verse technique. One senses the influence of his training in the Soviet Union in this early verse, the spirit of Eduard Bagritsky (1895-1934) and Dmitri Kedrin (1907-1945) in particular. An attachment to his roots came to form the basis of Agolli's poetic credo, in particular in *Devoll, Devoll*, Tiranë 1964 (Devoll, Devoll) which begins as follows:

*Po, Devoll,
i tillë qenkam unë,
Paskam marrë baltën tënde arave,
Në një trastë leshi
ndënë gunë,
Për t'ia sjellë
Lidhjës së Shkrimtarëve.*

(Yes, Devoll, I'm one of them, I gathered your mud from the fields/in a woollen sack/under my coat, to carry it/to the Writers' Union.)

With the volume *Baballarët*, Tiranë 1969 (The fathers), his verse, however, lost much of its spontaneity and tilted towards 'official' poetry in the service of ideology. A prime example of such Party panegyrics enjoying wide publicity and official acclamation was *Nënë Shqipëri*, Tiranë 1974 (Mother Albania). By the time he became a member of the Central Committee and head of the Writers' Union, Agolli's talent as a poet was well on the decline.

Like Kadare, Dritëro Agolli turned increasingly to prose in the seventies. His strength lies in the short story rather than in the novel, although an exception can be made for his satirical novel *Shkëlqimi dhe rënia e shokut Zylo*, Tiranë 1973 (The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo), now available in a French translation (Paris 1990). Zylo is the epitome of the bureaucrat in a socialist society who uses his position to wield influence and to save his own skin. With subtle wit and often folksy humour, Agolli traces the day to day activities of comrade Zylo and his companion Demka in all their absurdity. An earlier collection of his short stories, *Zhurma e ererave të dikurshme*, Tiranë 1964 (The noise of winds of the past), had the distinction of being banned and... 'turned into cardboard'.

Among other major contemporary prose writers are: the above mentioned **Petro Marko** from Dhërmi on the Himaran coast, who paved the road to modernity before Kadare and is now being rediscovered; historical novelist **Sabri Godo** (b. 1924) from Delvinë; short story writer **Naum Prifti** (b. 1932) from Kolonjë; novelist **Dhimitër Xhuvani** (b. 1934) born in Pogradec on Lake Ohrid; **Skënder Drini** (b. 1935) from Korçë, much influenced in style by Kadare; **Teodor Laço** (b. 1936) [see WLT 63:1, p. 147]; **Kiço Blushi** (b. 1943); the above-mentioned **Koço Kosta** (b. 1944) from the Lunxhëria region; **Nasi Lera** (b. 1944) from the Korçë region, noted as an excellent stylist; **Zija Çela** (b. 1946); **Valter File** (b. 1954) from Ersekë; short story writer and poet **Preç Zogaj** (b. 1957); **Teodor Keko**; short story writer **Elena Kadare** (b. 1943) and novelist **Diana Çuli** (b. 1951), no doubt the best among women prose writers.

The gradual refinement of style and the diversification of themes in Albanian prose of the seventies and eighties have been paralleled in modern poetry, too. The aesthetic appeal of poetic language, the relative freedom of expression offered by verse and the opportunity to pursue one's fantasies in a society which has been seemingly obsessed with industrial output, manufacturing statistics and the construction of dams continue to attract a good many Albanian writers to poetry rather than to prose.

The best known of the contemporary poets of Albania to have solved the dilemma of the poet with a fixed mission is **Fatos Arapi** (b. 1930) from the port city of Vlorë, author of philosophical verse, love lyrics and poignant elegies on death. His first two collections, *Shtigje poetike*, Tiranë 1962 (Poetic paths) and *Poema dhe vjersha*, Tiranë 1966 (Poems and verse) evinced a more modern verse form than that of his contemporaries. Child of the Ionian coast, Arapi has 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 later volumes, 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. Criticized in the 1973 purge for the volume *Më jepni një emër*, Tiranë 1973 (Give me a name), which was 'turned into cardboard' too, he withdrew and fell silent as the poet he is until 1989.

Other leading poets are: **Koçi Petrëti** (b. 1941) from Korçë; Kosovo-born **Adem Istrefi** (b. 1942) whose more traditional poetry is imbued with the epic traditions of Kosovo oral verse; **Ndoc Gjetja** (b. 1944), a transparent lyric poet from Lezhë; **Ndoc Papeka** (b. 1945) from Tropojë in the north; the passionate **Xhevahir Spahiu** (b. 1945) from Skrapar, 'enfant terrible' of Albanian letters; **Natasha Lako** (b. 1948) of Korçë, **Bardhyl Londo** (b. 1948) [see WLT 64:1, p. 174-175] from Lipë near Përmet; archeologist **Moikom Zeqo** (b. 1949) of Durrës whose highly intellectual and metaphoric verse has been inspired in good part by the lost grandeur of his ancient Dyrrachium; **Preç Zogaj** (b. 1956); and the gifted **Rudolf Marku** (b. 1950) from Lezhë, whose recent collection *Udhëtim për në vendin e gjërave që njohim*, Tiranë 1989 (Voyage to the place of things we know), was well received. Of the poets of the younger generation who have made a promising start, mention may be made of **Mimoza Ahmeti** (b. 1963) [see WLT 64:1, p.174] from Krujë; **Erind Pajo** (b. 1972) and **Ervin Hatibi** (b. 1974), both of Tiranë.

But the literature of Albania itself is only half the story of Albanian literature. In Yugoslavia, Albanian is spoken by at least two million people (as opposed to three million in Albania), the language now being second there only to Serbo-Croatian. The centre of the Albanian population is the tormented Autonomous Socialist Region of Kosovo (Alb. Kosova) where the Albanians with their extremely high birth rate now make up over 90% of the population. Prishtinë, the capital of Kosovo, has up to the present been able to vie with Tiranë in almost every way as a focal point for Albanian literary and cultural activity and as a publishing centre for Albanian literature. The future of Albanian culture in Yugoslavia is however uncertain.

The Albanian literature of Kosovo was late to develop. 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 served as an initial forum for literary publication. While some monographs were published in the fifties, it was not until the mid-sixties that Albanian and Kosovo Albanian literature began to appear in print in Yugoslavia on a significant scale. The extreme political divergence between Yugoslavia and Albania which erupted in 1948 made it evident to Kosovo Albanians from the start that they could not look to Tiranë for more than moral support in culture and education. The preservation and fostering of Albanian culture in Yugoslavia under often hostile conditions was of necessity to be the concern of Yugoslav Albanians themselves. The formidable problems posed by widespread illiteracy and dire poverty among the Albanians in Kosovo, as in Albania, were compounded substantially by an unwillingness on the part of the Serbian authorities in Belgrade for many years to give the Albanians access to education and cultural facilities in their own language. Full cultural autonomy was first achieved after much delay under the constitution of 1974, though only in Kosovo itself. In 1989/1990, however, Kosovo de facto lost its limited autonomy and freedom and was placed under direct Serbian military occupation. Immediately after the dissolution of the Kosovo

parliament in the summer of 1990, the only Albanian-language daily newspaper was banned as was all Albanian radio and television broadcasting in Kosovo. The situation has been particularly dire for Albanian writers and intellectuals there. They constitute the greatest threat to Serbian rule over the region under the populist leader Slobodan Milosevic who has shown nothing but contempt for the demands of equality and human rights for the Albanian minority. Desiring to overcome the cultural isolation from which it suffers and which has increased dramatically since the repression of the 1981 and 1989 uprisings, the present generation of young Kosovo writers is eager to lap up foreign influence and currents of contemporary European thought which have been rejected off hand in Tiranë. 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 Kosovo Albanians to defend their cultural values in a region plagued by ethnic conflict, political turmoil and economic collapse. Despite such overwhelming problems, Kosovo Albanians have always enjoyed and taken full advantage of intellectual freedom and liberty of expression at the cultural level which has enabled Albanian culture in Kosovo to develop much more rapidly and freely over the last two decades than in Albania itself.

Among the classic prose writers of the first generation were humourist **Sitki Imami** (1912-1983) from Gjakovë (Djakovica), **Hivzi Sulejmani** (1912-1975), born in Mitrovicë, who helped bring early Kosovo literature out of its regional focus and provinciality, **Ramiz Kelmendi** (b. 1930) from Pejë (Pec), and writer and dissident **Adem Demaçi** (b. 1936) of Prishtinë, finally released in April 1990 after twenty-eight years in Serbian prison camps.

One of the leading contemporary prose writers of Kosovo is **Rexhep Qosja** (b. 1936), who is not only one of the most eminent and prolific literary critics in the Balkans, academician, and former director of the Albanological Institute in Prishtinë, but also author of anthologies and numerous scholarly monographs including a three-volume history of Albanian literature of the Romantic period. Qosja has published one of the most widely admired and translated novels of recent years, *Vdekja më vjen prej syve të tillë*, Prishtinë 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, Xhezairi i Gjikës, is a professional writer caught up in a frightening web of political intrigue, secret police, interrogation and torture, a world evincing definite yet subtly couched political allusions to the very real desperation felt by present-day Albanian intellectuals in Kosovo.

Among other prose writers of talent are the hermetic **Anton Pashku** (b. 1938); **Nazmi Rrahmani** (b. 1941), a prolific and popular novelist of Kosovo village life; **Teki Dërvishi** (b. 1943) of Gjakovë who, like Pashku, has penetrated the psyche of modern man with his novels and short stories; **Mehmet Kraja** (b. 1952) of Kështenjë in the coastal Kraja region of Montenegro; **Musa Ramadani** (b. 1944) from Gjilan; humourist **Arif Demolli** (b. 1949) who since his imprisonment for a couple of years after the 1981 uprising has been able to publish little of his prose on the realities of Kosovan life; **Zejnullah Rrahmani** (b. 1952) from Ballovc near Podujevë, whose novel *Sheshi i Unazës*, Prishtinë 1978 (Ring Square) centred on the Kosovan obsession with liberty, on the death and resurrection of a city-state; and **Jusuf Buxhovi** (b. 1946) of Pejë whose novel *Shënimet e Gjon Nikollë Kazazit*, Prishtinë 1982 (The notes of Gjon Nikollë Kazazi) evoked the figure of the eighteenth-century Gjakovan scholar who discovered the only surviving copy of the first Albanian book, Buzuku's *Meshari* (1555). The principle motif of the work is however not the life of Kazazi but the dramatic spread of the plague in eighteenth-century Gjakovë, an account not unsimilar to Albert Camus' *La Peste* 1947 (The plague).

Poetry has always been the vanguard of literature in Kosovo and has enjoyed more popularity among writers and the reading public there than prose. The writer widely considered to be the father

of modern Albanian poetry in Yugoslavia, **Esad Mekuli** (b. 1916), was born not in Kosovo itself but in the legendary Montenegrin village of Plava on the Albanian border where national traditions are still held high. Mekuli, founder of the above-mentioned literary periodical *Jeta e re* (New life), whose editor-in-chief he remained until 1971, is a committed poet of social awareness whose outrage at social injustice, violence, genocide and suffering mirrors that of the pre-revolutionary verse of **Migjeni** (1911-1938) of Shkodër. Among the other 'classics' of modern verse in Kosovo are: the pensive **Enver Gjerqeku** (b. 1928) of Gjakovë; **Din Mehmeti** (b. 1932) [see WLT 63:2, p. 348]; tender lyric poet **Adem Gajtani** (1935-1982); **Fahredin Gunga** (b. 1936) of Mitrovicë; **Azem Shkreli** (b. 1938), [see WLT 63:1, p. 148] from the Rugova mountains near Pejë who is head of Kosovo Film Studios in Prishtinë; **Rrahman Dedaj** (b. 1939) of Podujevë [see WLT 64:2, p. 342]; the versatile **Ali Podrimja** (b. 1942) of Gjakovë [see WLT 62:4, p. 708-709], probably the best Albanian poet of all, if one were to venture a qualitative classification; **Eqrem Basha** (b. 1948) from Dibër; and critics **Sabri Hamiti** (b. 1950) [see WLT 64.3, p. 508-509] and **Agim Vinca** (b. 1947), the latter from Veleshtë near Struga in Macedonia whose popular lyrical verse is firmly anchored in the soil of his place of birth.

In Yugoslavia, where the situation is now eminently precarious for the very survival of Albanian culture, writers and intellectuals have taken the lead, as elsewhere in eastern Europe. Literary critic **Ibrahim Rugova** (b. 1945) now heads the Kosovan League for Democracy and Human Rights, the fledgling Kosovan alternative to the Serbian police state, and Rexhep Qosja has nolens volens become father figure and spokesperson of the psyche of the nation. Over the past ten years since the 1981 uprising, Albanian writers and intellectuals in Yugoslavia have been intimidated, humiliated, physically mishandled and imprisoned with or without trial on an almost systematic basis. Should multi-party elections and a democratic government ever come to Kosovo, which at present seems doubtful, these two writers could once again evince the predominance of literary and cultural activity in the process of democratization and renewal in eastern Europe.

In Albania itself, which has often been referred to by the press as the 'last bastion of Stalinism', political change in 1990 was as dramatic as it had been in the other countries of eastern Europe the year before. December 1990 saw the introduction of political pluralism and the first tentative steps towards democracy after decades of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and isolation.

Has there ever been dissent in modern Albanian literature? Yes and no. In a 'pro memoria' addressed to Enver Hoxha, writer **Kasëm Trebeshina** (b. 1926) warned the Albanian leader as early as 5 October 1953 that his cultural policies were leading the nation down the road to disaster. After seventeen years in prison, a comparatively light sentence as he notes, and twenty years of silence, Trebeshina has now resurfaced with a handful of other writers and artists [among whom **Lazër Radi** (b. 1916), **Kapllan Resuli** (b. 1935), **Frederik Reshpja** (b. 1941), **Fatos Lubonja** (b. 1951), **Visar Zhiti** (b. 1952) and **Bashkim Shehu** (b. 1955)] to see his prediction come true. Dissent there was - rare such acts of self-destruction and unspoken thoughts in the hidden recesses of the minds of every intellectual. But opposition? No. In an interview with the Voice of America in February 1991, Dritëro Agolli stated that all Albanian writers were conformists. In a sense he is right, and understandably so in view of the level of political control over the actions and very thoughts of all intellectuals, a control unparalleled in Europe and perhaps anywhere on earth. Every volume of poetry went through the hands of ten to fifteen politically vigilant reviewers before publication, every drama at least thirty (which helps explain the absence of good Albanian theatre). Never has there been an Albanian *samizdat* or even a publishing house in exile. Ties with the outside world were reduced by the Party to an absolute minimum and no Albanian writers, with the exception of Ismail Kadare, were ever permitted to go abroad. For forty-five years, Albania was a different planet, cut off from the world we

know. Splendid isolation? No! There is now so much to catch up on and many uncertainties about what the future holds. But one thing can be said for sure. The most interesting period in the history of Albanian literature has just begun.

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