

Robert Elsie pays tribute to the sensitivity and resolve of the Albanian writers
murdered in Kosovo this week

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Just being an Albanian writer in Kosova has been an act of unwitting resistance from the start. The violent death of a poet, a playwright or a journalist is, one might say, the logical consequence of being born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Din Mehmeti, who was among the Albanian intellectual murdered this week, was among the best-known classic representatives of modern verse in Kosova. He was born in 1932, in the western Kosova village of Gjocaj i Junikut, in one of the regions hardest hit by Serb forces in 1998. After studying at the University of Belgrade, he lectured for many years at a teacher training college in the now smouldering oriental town of Gjakova.

Although he published some prose, literary criticism and a play, Mehmeti will be remembered primarily for his figurative poetry, which appeared since 1961 in 15 volumes. His verse is characterized by indigenous sensitivity. He relied on many of the figures, metaphors and symbols of northern Albanian popular verse to imbue and stabilize his restless lyrics with the stoic vision of the mountain tribes. Despite the slight breeze of romanticism which wafts through his verse, this creative assimilation of folklore remains strongly fused with a realist current.

In good part, it takes its roots in the ethics of revolt in the tradition of the Scutarine poet Migjeni (1911-1938) and of his Kosovan counterpart Esad Mekuli (1916-1993). Mehmeti's poetic restlessness was, nonetheless, rarely focused on messianic protest or social criticism but on artistic creativity and individual perfection. The poem *Dialog me liqenin* (Dialogue with the Lake) - from the volume *As në tokë as në qiell*, 1988 (Neither On Earth Nor In Heaven) - has been interpreted as symbolic of the steadfast presence of Albanian letters, indeed of the Albanian people, in what was Yugoslavia. In a quirk of fate, the "barque/barracks" play on words was originally nothing more than a printing mistake:

"The lake has grown dark / The lake has gone mad / May my barque hold / On this side are your cliffs / Of bone / On the other side immortal dreams / May my barque hold / You once searched for an escape / In your heart / The cape of hope is afar / There will arrive / Blood-red flowers / May my barracks hold."

The novelist Teki Dervishi (born 1943), who was also assassinated in Kosova this week, from Gjakova, where Mehmeti taught. He went to secondary school in Peja, studied at the University of Prishtina and worked in Skopje as a journalist for the Albanian-language newspaper *Flaka e vëllazërimit* (The Flame of Fraternity).

Dervishi's first novel *Pirgu i lartë* (The High Tower), 1972, is a meditative work in a transitional style between poetry and prose. *Padrona* in 1973 was followed by *Skedarët* (The Catalogues) in 1974, a biting ironic novel dealing with bureaucracy and mediocrity in social relations.

Herezia e Dervish Mallutës (The Heresy of Dervish Malluta), 1981, was an allegorical study of monasticism and heresy. Malluta, a young intellectual, is in search of his identity and enters a dervish monastery at Suka e Cërmanjit where he discovers mysticism and self-denial, but also paradox, solitude, hypocrisy, antipathy and hatred. It is a complex novel not without inconsistencies of style, but it offers an intriguing view of an exotic world.

Dervishi is also the author of *Palimpsest Dush Kusari* (Palimpsest For Dush Kusari),

1993, numerous short stories, and three volumes of verse: *Nimfa* (The Nymph), 1970, *Shtëpia e sëmurë* (The Sick House), 1978, and *Thashë* (I Said), 1981. Latterly he rose to fame as a playwright.

His tragicomedy *Pranvera e librave* (The Springtime of Books), 1990, his nine-part *Zhvarrimi i Pjetër Bogdanit* (The Exhumation of Pjetër Bogdani), 1990, which recreates the lost world of a seventeenth-century Albanian author, and *Kufiri me atdhe dhe Vojceku* (The Border with the Homeland and Wozzeck), 1996, were all well received in Kosovo and in Albania itself. To his detractors, Teki Dervishi was a curious scatterbrain hiding behind a big oriental moustache. To his admirers, he was the creative genius of a new Kosovo striving for statehood.

[Published in: *The Guardian, Saturday Review*, 3 April 1999, p. 3. It was discovered after the Kosovo war, in June 1999, that the two writers had indeed survived. Their obituaries are thus ready for later usage.]