

## The Hybrid Soil of the Balkans: A Topography of Albanian literature

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### A Rocky, Much-trodden Land

Albanian literary culture reveals an apparent contradiction from the very start. On the one hand, Albania as a cultural entity, and thus Albanian literature as a product thereof, evolved over the centuries in relative isolation. The inaccessible, mountainous terrain that covers most of the country made Albania a virtual *terra incognita* until the late nineteenth century, and even the southern Adriatic coastline, marshy and malaria-infested as it was, attracted few foreign visitors who might have stimulated a minimum of cultural exchange. With the exception of the ports of Durrës and Vlora, used for a modicum of maritime trade, and of the *Via Egnatia*, which had been employed since ancient times to link the imperial cities of Rome and Constantinople, the routes of international communication tended to skirt Albania, leaving it an economic and cultural backwater in a decaying Ottoman Empire.

Yet, at the same time, hardly any other region of Europe has been so much at the crossroads and been subjected to so much foreign control and influence as Albania. For a thousand years, from the division of the Roman Empire in 395 to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Albanian territory constituted the immediate cultural, political, and military border between West Rome and East Rome (i.e., between the Latin-speaking West and the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire). Even later, from the Ottoman conquest of the southern Balkans in the late fourteenth century virtually to the present, Albania continued to constitute a cultural interface in Europe, linking the Christian West with the Islamic East. In view of the thorough, though highly heterogeneous foreign influence exerted over Albania, it is a miracle that this tiny nation was able to survive at all, to consolidate its national culture and finally, to take its place among the nation-states of Europe.

From the fifteenth century onwards, Albania found itself divided into three distinct cultural and linguistic spheres: that of the Muslim Turks, the Orthodox Greeks, and the Catholic "Latins." Though the native mountain tribes had their own folk culture and a rich oral literature, they had no alphabet and thus no written traditions. Nor did they have access to formal education and intellectual culture that might have stimulated the creation of a written literature. These had to be imported from the three neighboring cultures that had partitioned the country culturally and many times politically.

Among the many literary problems that had to be tackled when Albanian literary culture had finally attained a modest level of consolidation was consensus on a common alphabet for the Albanian language. This problem was not solved satisfactorily until the second half of the twentieth century. In the hundred-year period between 1750 and 1850, Albanian was written in no less than ten different alphabets. Without consensus on an alphabet, no national literature could be created. Secondly, although the Sublime Porte accorded its Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Romanian citizens cultural autonomy, including schooling and books in their languages, it denied these rights to the Albanians who, as Muslims in their majority, were considered Turks. Schools, books, and periodicals in Albanian were forbidden in the country right up to the time of Albanian independence

in 1912; in Kosova, under heavy-handed Serb rule, they were virtually prohibited until the 1950s. As a result of these and other factors, Albanian literature was late to develop.

Early Albanian literature (the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) was an essentially religious literature of Catholic and “Latin” inspiration. It consisted initially of translations of Latin and Italian devotional texts in the service of the Counter-Reformation. Of more substantial literary value was the religious treatise *Cuneus Prophetarum* (The Band of Prophets), by Archbishop Pjetër Bogdani from Kosova, which was published in Padua in 1685 in Albanian and Italian.

These beginnings of Albanian literature were abruptly interrupted by the Ottoman invasion and the Islamization of the southern Balkans.

### The Mountains of Calabria and Sicily — *dheu i huaj* (the Foreign Land)

With the Ottoman conquest and the death of resistance leader Skanderbeg, large numbers of Albanians fled to southern Italy and took, one could surmise, the embryonic impulses of their literary culture with them. Sporadic groups of Albanians had found their way to Italy as early as the thirteenth century, but it was not until the mid-fifteenth century that settlements were established when Albanian troops under the command of Demetrius Reres were summoned to Italy by Alfonso I of Aragon, King of Naples, to put down a revolt in Calabria. For his assistance, Reres was offered land in Calabria, and there his soldiers and their families settled. His sons, George and Basil, are said to have later continued on to Sicily to establish the first Albanian colonies there. Mass settlement first began, however, with the Turkish invasion of the Balkans, which resulted in a great exodus of Albanians to Italy. More Albanians fled Greece in 1532–33, after Turkish encroachments in the Morea, and settled primarily in Sicily. All in all, the Albanians founded or repopulated over one hundred towns and villages in southern Italy, more than half of which are to be found in the mountains of Calabria. Today, there are about fifty towns scattered throughout the *mezzogiorno*, with an estimated Albanian-speaking population of about 90,000 individuals.

In view of the destruction wrought by the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, it is no wonder that the first attempts to create an Albanian literature should come from these Italo-Albanian or Arbëresh communities. Among the first Italo-Albanian poets were Nicolò Brancato of Piana degli Albanesi and Nicola Figlia of Mezzoiuso (Alb. *Munxifsi*). A decisive impetus to the intellectual and cultural advancement of the Sicilian Arbëresh came from the establishment of the Greek college or seminary in Palermo. The seminary soon became the intellectual center of the Albanian community on the island and was to produce many writers and scholars of note. One of the first and more prominent students of the Greek seminary in Palermo was Nicola Chetta of Contessa Entellina (Alb. *Kundisa*), who is credited with composing the first Albanian sonnet (1777).

But it is to the mountains of Calabria that we must turn for the first Arbëresh poet of real talent. Born in San Giorgio Albanese (Alb. *Mbuzati*), Giulio Variboba, known in Albanian as Jul Variboba, is regarded as the first genuine poet in all of Albanian literature. His long lyric poem *Ghiella e Shën Mëriis Virghiër* (The Life of the Virgin Mary; 1762) is the only Arbëresh book printed in the eighteenth century.

Girolamo De Rada, known in Albanian as Jeronim De Rada, is not only the best-known writer of Arbëresh literature, but also the foremost figure of the Albanian nationalist movement in

nineteenth-century Italy. Born in the mountains of Cosenza as the son of a parish priest of Greek rite, De Rada published in Naples, in 1836, the first edition of his Albanian-language poem, the "Songs of Milosao," under the Italian title *Poesie albanesi del secolo XV, Canti di Milosao, figlio del despota di Scutari* (Albanian Poetry from the Fifteenth Century, Songs of Milosao, Son of the Despot of Shkodra). In the revolutionary year 1848, he founded the newspaper *L'Albanese d'Italia* (The Albanian of Italy). This bilingual "political, moral, and literary journal," with a final circulation of 3,200 copies, was the first Albanian-language periodical anywhere. De Rada's fame as a catalyst of Albanian national awareness spread in the mid-nineteenth century. He corresponded with leading figures of the Rilindja (rebirth) movement and received encouragement from the French poet and statesman Alphonse de Lamartine sojourning on Ischia. Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral, whose verse romance *Mirèio* (1859) was not without affinities to De Rada's work, expressed his admiration for the "Songs of Milosao." Before Albania had become a political entity, it was already a poetic reality in the works of De Rada. His vision of an independent Albania grew in the second half of the nineteenth century from a simple desire to a passionate political objective. De Rada was the harbinger and first audible voice of the Romantic movement in Albanian literature, a movement that, inspired by his commitment to the national awakening of Albanians in Italy and in the Balkans, was to evolve into the romantic nationalism characteristic of the Rilindja period. His journalistic, literary, and political activities were instrumental not only in fostering an awareness of the Arbëresh minority in Italy but also in laying the foundations for an Albanian national literature.

The Romantic cultural awakening of the Arbëresh brought forth another writer of talent, Francesco Antonio Santori, author of poetry, plays, short stories, novels, adaptations of 112 Aesop fables, and an Albanian grammar written in verse. Much of his writing, in an original and rather difficult orthography, remained unpublished until recently. Of particular historical significance are Santori's plays. His *Emira* (Emira) is regarded as the first original Albanian drama, but Santori wrote a number of other melodramatic comedies and tragedies, some incomplete, which remained in manuscript form during his lifetime. Santori was also a prose writer: with his two novels and six short stories published in modern times, he may be considered the earliest Albanian writer to have produced a substantial corpus of literary prose, though none of these works are of significant aesthetic value. Santori tried his hand at many genres, and it is this versatility that ensures him a place of honor in Arbëresh literature, right behind that of Girolamo De Rada.

Italo-Albanian writing blossomed in the fertile soil of Italian civilization to form a body of literature that, in its origins and development, was quite independent of Albania itself. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was only in southern Italy that political, social, and economic conditions, dire as they may seem from a modern perspective, were stable enough to allow Albanians to pursue the modest written culture that laid the foundations for modern Albanian literature.

But Albania, too, was finally awakening in the nineteenth century, both politically and culturally. In the collective memory of the Arbëresh, cast upon the shores of the *dheu i huaj* (foreign land) that they always regarded with a degree of suspicion, Albania evolved from a vague recollection to a concrete reality, a struggling motherland which inspired them to preserve their own fragile culture. The indefatigable Girolamo De Rada had cemented the bonds between the Italo-Albanian colonies scattered throughout the isolated mountain ranges of southern Italy and

their original Balkan homeland struggling to find its identity. From then on, political, cultural, and literary ties were forged that proved beneficial to both sides. Arbëresh literature had blossomed of its own accord and was certainly mature enough by this time to go its own way, but the ties of the *gjaku i shprishur* (the scattered blood) enabled it to remain an integral part of Albanian culture. Albanian literature would be inconceivable without its Arbëresh roots.

### A Tulip on the Adriatic — Albanian Literature in the Muslim Tradition

Before the arrival of the Turks on the Balkan Peninsula, Albanian culture was well within the sphere of Christianity: Catholicism in the north and Orthodoxy in the south. The exact border between these two Christian faiths varied over the centuries in accordance with the political and military gains or losses of the heirs to the two halves of the Roman Empire. By the end of the fourteenth century, the third great religion of the Balkans had entered the stage. On June 28, 1389, the Muslim Turks defeated a coalition of Balkan forces under Serb leadership at Kosovo Polje, the Plain of the Blackbirds, and established themselves as masters of the Balkans. By 1431, the Turks had incorporated all of southern Albania into the Ottoman Empire and set up a “sanjak” administration with its capital in Gjirokastra. Mountainous northern Albania remained in the hands of its autonomous tribal leaders, though under the suzerain power of the Sultan. The following four centuries of Ottoman colonization changed the face of the country radically. The new religion, Islam, had wedged itself between the Catholic north and the Orthodox south of Albania and, with time, was to become the dominant faith of the country. At the dawn of Albanian independence in 1912, about two-thirds of the Albanian population were Muslim.

While the Turkish Empire left Albania the cultural and political backwater it had been from the start, Ottoman Turkish culture penetrated the country thoroughly. It reached its zenith during the Tulip Age of the eighteenth century. Central and southern Albanian cities like Elbasan, Berat, and Gjirokastra, with their newly constructed fortifications, mosques, and medresas, became centers of oriental learning and experienced something of a cultural renaissance under Islam, as did Shkodra and Gjakova (Djakovica) in the north. Wandering poets, artists, and scholars began to enjoy the patronage of local governors and pashas as they did throughout Asia Minor. The first writers of Muslim Albania used the Turkish and Persian literary vehicles of the Ottoman Empire, many of them with notable success.

One of the most original early Ottoman poets was Messiah of Prishtina, known in Turkish as Prishtineli Mesihî. We assume that he was an Albanian from Prishtina, though he must have lived in Istanbul from an early age on. Messiah produced some of the best Ottoman verse of the period. Much quoted is his *Murabba’-i bahâr* (Ode to Spring), which, after publication with a Latin translation in 1774 by Orientalist Sir William Jones, was to become for a long time the best known Turkish poem in Europe. Another sixteenth-century writer of Albanian origin was Jahja bej Dukagjini, known in Turkish as Dukagin-zâde Yahyâ bey or Taşlıcalı Yahyâ. Of his five *mesnevî*, the most popular is *Shâh u gedâ* (The King and the Beggar), which he finished allegedly in just one week. This metrical romance idealizes the affection of a pious lover (stylized as a beggar because of his suppliant longing) for an Istanbul youth of unequalled beauty (stylized as the king because he reigns over the heart).

The first early eighteenth-century attempts by Islamic Albanian writers to express themselves in their own native tongue were as momentous as the transition from Latin to Albanian had been for the creation of early Albanian literature. The literature of the *Bejtexhinj*, as the writers of this period are called, consists almost exclusively of verse composed in Arabic script. The Arabic writing system had already been adapted, albeit rather awkwardly, to the needs of Ottoman Turkish and was now being molded to fit the more elaborate phonetic system of the Albanian dialects. It proved to be just as unsatisfactory for Albanian as it had been for Turkish. The poetry of the *Bejtexhinj* was strongly influenced by the Turkish, Persian, and Arabic models in fashion at the time, in both Istanbul and the Middle East. Most of the genres and forms prevalent in Turkish and Persian verse are present in Albanian. We thus find, either as isolated poems, or within the *divans*: the *murabba'*, quatrain; the *ilâhî*, religious hymns; the *qaside*, the longer panegyric odes favored by the Arabs; and the *ghazal*, shorter and often love lyrics, favored by the Turks and Persians. The metric system was basically syllabic, although occasional attempts were made to introduce quantitative meters. The subject matter was often religious, either meditatively intimate, or openly didactic, serving to spread the faith. The speculative character of much of this verse derived its inspiration from the currents of Islam: from authoritative Sunnite spirituality to the intense mystical spheres of Shi'ite Sufism and later, to the more liberal, though equally mystical reflections of Bektashi pantheism. Some secular verse also occurs: love lyrics, nature poetry, and historical and philosophical verse in which we encounter musings on the vacillations of existence from a world that is easily as exotic to the modern Albanians as it is to the foreign reader.

The first major poet among the *Bejtexhinj* was Nezim Frakulla, alternatively known as Nezim Berati or Ibrahim Nezimi. Between 1731 and 1735, he composed a *divan* and various other poetry in Albanian, including an Albanian-Turkish dictionary in verse form. His *divan* includes verse ranging from panegyrics on local pashas and military campaigns, to odes on friends and patrons, poems on separation from, and longing for, his friends and (male) lovers, descriptions of nature in springtime, religious verse, and, in particular, love lyrics. The imagery of the latter *ghazal*, some of which are devoted to his nephew, is that of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish poetry, with many of their classical themes and metaphors: love as an illness causing the poet to waste away, the cruel lover whose glance could inflict mortal wounds, or the cup-bearer whose beauty can reduce his master to submission. Frakulla not only considered himself the first poet to write in Albanian, but also commended himself as the Sa'dî and Hâfiz of his times. Most experts consider this comparison somewhat exaggerated. While Nezim Frakulla had initiative and talent, his verse did not by any means reach the level of literary perfection of the Persian classics, nor was the clumsy mixture of Albanian, Turkish, and Persian he employed refined enough to enable him to do so. What he did accomplish was to lay the foundations for a new literary tradition in Albania that lasted for two centuries. Other Muslim writers of the period include Sulejman Naibi of Berat, who died in 1772, and Hasan Zyko Kamberi, a poet of the second half of the eighteenth century from the Kolonja region of southern Albania.

Albanian literature was written in Arabic script for over two centuries. It flourished throughout the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century until it was gradually replaced by the romantic nationalist literature of the Rilindja period, written primarily in a number of newly devised versions of the Latin alphabet. The waning of the Muslim tradition in Albanian literature was concomitant with the decay of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Albanian nationalist movement, during which Albanians began to turn their backs on all things Ottoman and oriental.

### Voskopoja and the Schism of Cultural Identity: Greek Orthodox Traditions in Albanian Literature

Even after the Ottoman invasion of Europe and the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, the Greek population in the southern Balkans was not completely divested of the imperial heritage of two millennia. Despite forced submission to Turkish rule, a certain continuity of ideas and customs reigned among the Greeks, fostered in particular by the Orthodox Church, that quintessence of languishing Byzantine grandeur. In southern Albania and Epirus, which throughout the centuries have had a mixed population of Albanian, Greek, and Aromanian speakers, the Orthodox Church remained an expression of Greek civilization and was exclusively devoted to the Greek language as a cultural bulwark against the invading Turks. To be of Orthodox faith was to be Greek, just as to be of Islamic faith was to be Turkish. There was little room in either culture for the gradually awakening aspirations of Albanian nationalism. Albanians educated in the Orthodox tradition were thus of necessity oriented to Greek language and culture. Using the Greek script to write in the vernacular language of the Albanians was regarded by the Orthodox Church as eminently superfluous and, in later years, even heretical.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, we nonetheless find a number of Albanian-language documents written in Greek script, which show that interest in writing Albanian was not extinct in this mixed culture. These works, few of which were ever published, comprise translations of Orthodox religious literature, dictionaries, and grammar notes on the Albanian language. Though not a creative literature per se, they might, under other circumstances, have laid the foundations for a new literary tradition in Albania.

Orthodox culture in eighteenth-century Albania is intimately linked to the rise of the city of Voskopoja, now an isolated mountain village of some five hundred inhabitants, twenty-five kilometers west of Korça. In the sixteenth century, Voskopoja, known in Greek as *Moschopolis* and in Aromanian as *Moscopole*, increased tremendously to become one of the largest cities in the Balkans. At its peak, before the city was pillaged for the first time in 1769, it is said to have had a population of about 20,000, greater than Athens, Sofia, or Belgrade at the time, and to include 24 churches, a hospital, an orphanage, a library, the only Greek printing press in the Balkans, and the so-called "New Academy" (*Hellênikon Frontistêrion*). The latter was a center of learning founded in 1744; similar academies existed in Bucharest, Iași, Constantinople, Metsovon, Janina (Iôanina), Mt. Athos, and Patmos. Many Greek scholars of note came to teach at Voskopoja among the Aromanian majority, the Albanians, and the Greeks. The New Academy was not an exclusively theological institution. It enjoyed a good reputation for its teaching in ancient Greek, philosophy, mathematics, and physics, and produced many writers and scholars of repute. Between 1769 and 1789, Voskopoja was pillaged several times and came to lose its vitality as a commercial center on the trading route between Constantinople and Venice. It was finally destroyed in 1916, during the First World War, and, with the exception of five beautiful Orthodox churches, the historical buildings that did survive were tragically razed in partisan warfare during World War II.

Among the major figures of literary culture within the Orthodox sphere was Gregory of Voskopoja, also known Gregory of Durrës, an Orthodox cleric and teacher in Voskopoja who is remembered as the author of several hagiographies published there in Greek. He was elected Archbishop of Durrës in 1768 and died in 1772, probably at the monastery of St. John Vladimir in

Elbasan. He is assumed to be the author of the “Elbasan Gospel Manuscript,” also called *Anonimi i Elbasanit* (Anonymous Manuscript of Elbasan), a work containing Albanian translations of part of the four gospels. It was written not in Greek script but in a special alphabet of forty letters, seemingly the oldest known example of an original Albanian alphabet. Other figures active at the New Academy in Voskopojë were Todhri Haxhifilipi, also known as Dhaskal Todhri from Elbasan, inventor of the so-called Todhri alphabet of fifty-three letters based on a Greek cursive script; and Constantine of Berat, author of — among other religious works — a forty-four-line Albanian poem known as *Zonja Shën Mëri përpara kryqësë* (The Virgin Mary before the Cross).

Theodor Kavalioti, known in Greek as Theodoros Anastasios Kaballiotês, was an Aromanian scholar from Voskopojë who made an important contribution to Albanian lexicography. He is the author of a scholarly work entitled *Prôtipeiria* (Primer; 1770), which contains a three-language lexicon in Greek, Aromanian, and Albanian of about 1,170 words. Another work in this vein is the *Eisagôgikê didaskalia* (Introductory Study; 1802), a four-language lexicon in Greek, Aromanian, Bulgarian, and Albanian. It comprises about 1,000 entries, and 235 freely translated everyday phrases that are of interest for the study of Albanian historical morphology and syntax. The author of this second multilingual lexicon in Greek script was Daniel of Voskopojë, also known as Master Daniel, in Albanian as Dhanil Haxhiu, and in Greek as Daniël Moschopolitês or Daniël Adam Chatzis, no doubt an Aromanian scholar from Voskopojë and student of Kavalioti, who hoped to persuade with this work Albanians, Aromanians, and Bulgarians to abandon their “barbaric” tongues and learn Greek, the “mother of knowledge.”

The predominance of Greek as the language of Christian education and culture in southern Albania and the often-hostile attitude of the Orthodox Church to the spread of writing in Albanian prevented the evolution of an Albanian literature in Greek script. While intent on spreading Christian education and values, the Orthodox Church in southern Albania was never convinced of the utility of writing in the vernacular as a means of converting the masses, as the Catholic Church in northern Albania had been, to a certain extent, during the Counter-Reformation. With the exception of an ephemeral printing press in Voskopojë, southern Albanians never had publishing facilities like those available to the clerics and scholars of Catholic Albania in Venice and Dalmatia.

Though the influence of the Orthodox Church waned among Albanian believers due to its intransigence in matters of Albanian cultural autonomy, the influence of Greek culture remained strong among the southern Albanians. Albanians and Greeks had lived for centuries together in the border region between southern Albania and Epirus. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the mixed settlement patterns and the lack of a definitive borderline between the newly independent Greek state and Albania, which was still part of the Ottoman Empire, had transformed the region into a political powder keg that finally burst in the Balkan wars of the early twentieth century. The Greeks distrusted their wild and unruly Albanian neighbors, and the Albanians, for their part, were always somewhat ambivalent towards the Greeks. Nevertheless, many Albanians enjoyed the benefits of Greek schooling and culture, and had an unbounded admiration for Hellenic civilization. The Zosimaia secondary school in Janina provided young Albanians from the rugged mountain homeland with the rudiments of education and culture, and it facilitated intellectual contacts with the outside world. But the Albanians resisted complete assimilation into this more Mediterranean culture. Moreover, most Albanians, including many in the south, were Muslims and were thus looked upon as Turks by the Epirotic Greeks, who even today are not known

for a surfeit of Turkophile sentiment. The Greek authorities, too, were unwilling to allow that not all Muslims were Turks, and were even more unwilling to comprehend that not all Orthodox were Greeks, an attitude that has lingered in many spheres of Greek life up to the present day. In the nineteenth century, the Greek Orthodox Church went to unbelievable lengths to suppress all signs of Albanian cultural activity. An act as harmless as supporting the opening of an Albanian-language school could lead to excommunication. The Albanian national awakening and the concomitant rise of national awareness were bound to come into conflict with Greek interests. If southern Albanians enjoyed many of the benefits of Greek culture, they also suffered from Greek cultural imperialism at the time.

The large Albanian minority in Greece itself and the Albanians of Epirus made an important contribution both to the liberation of Greece in the first half of the nineteenth century, and to the Albanian national awakening in the second half of that century.

Of all the southern Albanian figures, none was more active in the Albanian nationalist movement than Jani Vreto, born in Postenan near Leskovik, a town situated not far from the present Greek border. In 1879, he took part in the founding of the historic *Shoqëri e të shtypuri shkronja shqip* (Society for the Publication of Albanian Writing), which was to devote its energies to the publication of Albanian books, in particular school texts, and to the establishment of Albanian schools. About the same time he was excommunicated by the Orthodox metropolitan of Gjirokastra for having committed the heresy of “creating an Albanian question.” Aside from one youthful poem of limited artistic interest, “Istori e Skënderbeut” (History of Scanderbeg), Jani Vreto did not publish any works that could fall under the category of Albanian literature per se. Although he was a significant essayist, Jani Vreto’s major place in Albanian literary history does not rest on his writings. As an active member of the “Society for the Publication of Albanian Writing” in Constantinople and later in Bucharest, where the society moved after its activities were banned in Constantinople, Vreto played a key role in the realization of a major goal of the period. The Albanian printing press of Bucharest, which he set up and operated during his sojourn there, was as fundamental to the advancement of Albanian literature in the late nineteenth century as Johann Gutenberg’s invention of printing by movable type had been to European culture four and a half centuries earlier. For the first time, it provided Albanian writers with what they had always been looking for: readers.

The one who had a greater impact on Albanian literature itself was the nationalist publisher and writer Anastas Kullurioti of Athens. Kullurioti was born in the Plaka district of the Greek capital. This former old town and present tourist center of Athens at the foot of the Acropolis, inhabited by Albanians at the time, still bears its Albanian name. Kullurioti is remembered not only as a publisher of the weekly newspaper *Hê fônê tês Albanias* (The Voice of Albania), but also for his *Albanikon alfabêtarian* or *Avabatar arbëror* (Albanian Primer; 1882), a bilingual primer or speller of his native dialect. It included an introduction to Albanian grammar and a selection of folk tales, poetry, and proverbs of the Albanians of Greece. That same year, Kullurioti also produced a 116-page Albanian reader entitled *Klumësht për foshnja* (Milk for Babies; 1882), with a bilingual text, certainly one of the earliest works of children’s literature in Albanian. Kullurioti was concerned more with the preservation of Albanian cultural heritage in Greece than with the creation of literature. He was very interested, for instance, in Albanian and *Arvanitika* oral literature and was the author of a 196-page notebook of Albanian folk songs, as yet unpublished, which is now preserved



in the National Library in Tirana. This notebook contains folk songs Kullurioti collected himself — ten of them, interestingly enough, with an interlinear English translation. Both as a publisher and as a nationalist figure, Kullurioti contributed substantially to an awakening of national identity among the Albanians of Greece and southern Albania.

The native culture of southern Albania was to survive and flourish as a result of the activities of the Rilindja intellectuals. In central and southern Greece itself, however, the Albanians — despite their large numbers — were assimilated with such rapidity over the following decades that very little written literature in Albanian was ever produced there. The Greco-Albanian current of written Albanian literature thus ran dry. Though the version of Albanian language (*Arvanitika*) is still spoken by older people in some three-hundred and twenty Greek villages today, it has not withstood the onslaught of cultural assimilation and has long been reduced to the level of a village patois. It is now up to the folklorists to record the remaining oral literature from the collective memory of the Greco-Albanians before it, too, fades away.

### **Constantinople: an Albanian National Identity Created on the Banks of the Bosphorus**

By the mid-nineteenth century, the cultural links between Albania and the Ottoman capital Constantinople (Istanbul) had been firmly cemented. As a long-standing and integral part of the Ottoman Empire, Albania now had a 70% Muslim population that, despite much frustration with Ottoman incompetence in matters of government and economic management, looked to the Bosphorus for direction. Quite a few Albanians, after all, had over the centuries risen to fame and fortune in the Ottoman administration. By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the many Albanian intellectuals who had taken up residence in the Ottoman capital were devoting their energies primarily to the goals of the Albanian national awakening. This movement eventually led to an open struggle for freedom and self-determination against a decaying Ottoman Empire. Leading this movement were three brothers, Abdyl, Naim, and Sami Frashëri, from the mountainous village of Frashër in the southern Albanian district of Përmet.

Naim Frashëri is now widely regarded as the national poet of Albania. He spent his childhood in the village of Frashër, where he began learning Turkish, Persian, and Arabic, and where, at the local Bektashi monastery, he absorbed the spiritual traditions of the Orient. In Janina, Naim Frashëri attended the Zosimaia secondary school that provided him with the basics of a classical education along Western lines. Here he studied ancient and modern Greek, French, and Italian and was tutored privately in oriental languages. As he grew, so did his affinity for the pantheistic Bektashi religion, for the poets of classical Persia, and for the French Enlightenment. His education in Janina made of him a prime example of a late nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectual equally at home in the Western and Oriental cultures. Around 1881–82, he took up permanent residence in Constantinople and, following the arrest of his politically active brother Abdyl, began to play a serious role in the activities of Albanian nationalists.

Naim Frashëri is the author of twenty-two works: four in Turkish, one in Persian, two in Greek, and fifteen in Albanian. Most of these works were published not in the heart of the Ottoman Empire, but in Bucharest, where a substantial Albanian colony had settled and where an Albanian printing press had been set up by the Society for the Publication of Albanian Writing in 1886.

Among his major works in Albanian is *Bagëti e bujqësija* (Bucolics and Georgics; 1886), a pastoral poem reminiscent of Vergil and laden with the imagery of his mountain homeland. It proved extremely popular among Frashëri's compatriots and was smuggled into Albania on caravans. In it, the poet expresses his dissatisfaction with city life, no doubt from actual experience on the bustling banks of the Bosphorus, and idealizes the distant and longed-for Albanian countryside. This poem is a hymn to nature in the traditions of European Romanticism but also an earthy song of herds and flocks, and of the joys and toil of rural life:

*O malet' e Shqipërisë e ju o lisat' e gjatë!  
 Fushat e gjera me lule, q' u kam ndër mënt dit' e natë!  
 Ju bregore bukuroshe e ju lumënjt' e kulluar!  
 Çuka, kodra, brinja, gërxhe dhe pylle të gjelbëruar!  
 Do të këndonj bagëtinë, që mbani ju e ushqeni,  
 O vëndethit' e bekuar! ju mëndjenë ma dëfreni.  
 Ti Shqipëri më ep nderrë, më ep emërin shqipëtar  
 Zëmërnë ti ma gatove plot me dëshirë dhe me zjar:  
 (Elsie, *History of Albanian Literature* 1: 232–33)*

Oh mountains of Albania and you, oh lofty trees!  
 Broad blossoming plains, you are in my thoughts day and night!  
 You fair highlands and you sparkling streams!  
 Peaks, hills, slopes, cliffs and verdant forests!  
 I shall sing of the herds you hold and feed,  
 Oh blessed places! How you nourish and delight me!  
 You, Albania, bestow upon me honor and the name Albanian,  
 You have filled my heart with flame and desire.

The significance of Naim Frashëri as a Rilindja and, indeed, as a “national” poet rests not so much upon the artistic quality of his verse, but rather upon the social, philosophical, and religious messages it conveyed. These were aimed above all at national awareness and, in the Bektashi tradition, at overcoming religious barriers within the country. His influence upon Albanian writers at the beginning of the twentieth century was enormous. Upon comparing the state of Albanian literature before and after the arrival of Naim Frashëri, one becomes aware of the major role he played in transforming Albanian into a literary language of substantial refinement.

The Frashëri brother with the most diverse talent, who fulfilled the roles of writer, publisher, and ideologist of the nationalist movement, was, however, Sami Frashëri, known in Turkish as Şemseddin Sami. Like his brother Naim, he was first confronted with the currents of Western thought in Janina, where he studied Greek, French, and Italian, and where he was privately tutored in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. Sami Frashëri moved to Constantinople in 1872 to work in the government press office. In Constantinople, he made friends with the Turkish writers Namik Kemal and Ebüzziya Tevfik, as well as with the influential Albanian hodja Hasan Tahsini. Sami Frashëri is the author of about fifty works as well as of numerous newspaper articles. His interests were, on the whole, more scholarly than literary. Between 1882 and 1902, he published six teaching manuals in Turkish and Arabic. His publications in Turkish are of greater significance than

his Albanian-language works. In 1872, Sami Frashëri published what is widely recognized as the first Turkish novel and the first novel written and published by an Albanian — *Taaşşuk-u Tal'at ve Fitnat* (The Love of Tal'at and Fitnat). Though a period piece, it did give some direction to the prose of the time.

As a Turkish lexicographer, Sami Frashëri published a French-Turkish Dictionary (*Kamûs-u fransevî, fransızcadan türkçeye lugat*; 1882); a Turkish-French Dictionary (*Kamûs-u fransevî, türkçeden fransızcaya lugat*; 1883), and a two-volume *Kamûs-u türkî* (Turkish Dictionary; 1900–01), which is still regarded as useful and was consulted by the Turkish Philological Society in 1932, as a guideline for the creation of the modern Turkish literary language. After twelve years of work, Sami also published a monumental six-volume Turkish encyclopedia of history and geography entitled *Kamûs al-a'lâm* (Dictionary of the World; 1889–96). The *Kamûs al-a'lâm* was an exceptional work of reference for the period and contained extensive information on the history and geography of Albania.

Of major importance for the Albanian national movement was Sami Frashëri's much-read political manifesto *Shqipëria — Ç'ka qënë, ç'është e ç'do të bëhetëfi Mendime për shpëtimt të mëmëdheut nga reziket që e kanë rethuarë* (Albania — What Was It, What Is It and What Will Become of It) Reflections on Saving the Motherland from the Perils that Beset It; 1899), which was translated into Turkish, Greek, French, Italian, and German.

Sami Frashëri and his brothers Abdyl and Naim represented a new generation of Albanian intellectuals who, though educated in Greek schools, steeped in the great traditions of the Orient and residing in its cultural and political capital Constantinople, devoted their talents to the advancement of their Albanian homeland and its culture. As a result of their activities, the national awakening began to make its impact throughout Albania.

### Shkodra — the Cradle of Northern Albanian Literature

The *Rilindja* movement was to take root more slowly in northern Albania than in the south of the country. The harsh terrain and the feudal structure of the population inhabiting the barren and isolated valleys of the Albanian Alps had made the northern Albanian “Gegs” a special breed — unbridled mountain tribesmen who were fiercely independent and lived by their own traditional customs and laws. As there were no easy means of communication in the rugged northern mountains, most of these tribes had little contact with the outside world. The ubiquitous blood feuding among them and their experience with Ottoman troops and tax collectors had taught them to be on guard against everything from the outside. Traditional laws, such as the fifteenth-century Code of Lekë Dukagjini (Alb. *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*), governed almost every facet of life in the isolated and otherwise lawless terrain of the northern highlands. With the help of this ancient code, the highland tribes preserved their identity though they were ostensibly part of the Ottoman Empire for five centuries. As their trading post, the highland tribes relied on the town of Shkodra.

The ancient fortress of Shkodra was strategically positioned, overlooking Lake Shkodra and the Buna River that flows into the nearby Adriatic. The hybrid town that grew at the foot of the fortress became known in Italian as Scutari, in Turkish as Işkodra or Iskenderiye, and in Serbo-Croatian as Skadar. It soon developed into a major commercial center for most of the northern

Albanian highlands and became Albania's main point of contact with the Western world. In the mid-nineteenth century, this capital of northern Albania was not only the largest city in the country but also the literary and cultural center of the entire Albanian nation. It was only with the Communist takeover in 1944 that the new and more centrally located capital Tirana managed to overtake Catholic Shkodra as the focal point of Albanian writing and culture in general.

The initial catalyst of Albanian literature in mid-nineteenth-century Shkodra was, as it had been in previous centuries, the Catholic Church. Although traditionally oriented towards Italy, northern Albanian Catholics were coming under the increasing influence of Austro-Hungary within the framework of the *Kultusprotektorat* (religious protectorate), a right Vienna had wrestled from the Porte in a series of peace treaties with the Sultans beginning in 1616. With Austro-Hungarian assistance, schools and churches were built throughout the north of the country, and the Catholic Church began to play a more active role in education and culture. Though various orders of the Church, in particular the Benedictines and Dominicans, had been active in Albania from the high Middle Ages on, it was the Franciscans and subsequently the Jesuits who had the decisive influence on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Albanian culture. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that Catholic-educated Albanians, and to an extent the Italian clerics who had taken up residence in Shkodra, were the first to produce the rudiments of a new Albanian literature. This literature of religious inspiration consisted primarily of poetry (initially imitations and translations of Italian and Latin verse), but later also of prose and dramas. It set the pace for much of twentieth-century Albanian literature up to World War II.

Among the early authors of nineteenth-century Catholic literature in Shkodra were Pjetër Zarishi from the village of Blinisht in the Zadrima area, Ēngjell Radoja of Shkodra, known in Italian as Angelo Radoja, and in particular Leonardo De Martino from the village of Greci (Greçi), in the southern Italian province of Avellino. Leonardo De Martino was a born poet whose talent surprised many of his contemporaries, particularly since he wrote not in his mother tongue but in the Geg dialect of northern Albania that he learned during his forty years as a missionary there. He is the author of Albanian translations of Italian religious literature, and of poetry of primarily religious inspiration written in both Albanian and Italian. His *L'Arpa di un italo-albanese* (The Harp of an Italo-Albanian; 1881) is an impressive compilation of mature and polished verse in Italian and Albanian. De Martino's importance as a poet lies primarily in his prosodic finesse. He introduced new meters such as the iambic into Albanian and popularized Sapphic verse. However, the Catholic verse of the period gradually gave way to the ubiquitous poetry inspired by the romantic nationalism of the *Rilindja* period.

One northern Albanian figure who played a key role in the *Rilindja* culture of the nineteenth century was Shkodra-born Pashko Vasa, also known as Wassa Effendi or Vaso Pasha Shkodrani. After his early years of hardship in Shkodra and Italy, Pashko Vasa became a career diplomat and functionary of the Sublime Porte, for which he held various positions of authority culminating with his appointment as Governor General of Lebanon. He authored a number of literary works of note. The first of these was a volume of Italian verse entitled *Rose e spine* (Roses and Thorns; 1873), composed of forty-one emotionally-charged poems devoted to the themes of love, suffering, solitude, and death, in the romantic tradition of Giacomo Leopardi, Alphonse de Lamartine, and Alfred de Musset. *Bardha de Tëmal, scènes de la vie albanaise* (Bardha of Temal, Scenes from Albanian Life; 1890) is a French-language novel which Pashko Vasa published under the

pseudonym Albanus Albano. Though not written in Albanian, *Bardha of Temal* is, after Sami Frashëri's much shorter prose work, *The Love of Tal'at and Fitnat*, the oldest novel written and published by an Albanian and the oldest such novel with an Albanian theme. Though most of Vasa's publications were in French and Italian, one poem, perhaps the most popular ever written in Albanian, ensured him his place in Albanian literary history. Written some time between 1878 and 1880, "O moj Shqypni" (Oh Albania, poor Albania) is a stirring call to national awakening, in which Vasa urges all Albanians to overcome their religious and cultural differences and defend their homeland:

<i>Çonju, shqyptar prej gjumit çonju,</i>	Awaken, Albania, wake from your slumber,
<i>Të gjith si vllazën n'nji bes shtrëngonju, E mos shikjoni kish e xhamija, Feja e shqyptarit asht shqyptarija!</i>	Let us all, as brothers, swear a common oath and not look to church or mosque, The faith of the Albanian is Albanianism!
<i>Qysh prej Tivarit deri n'Prevezë, Gjithkund lshon dielli vap edhe rrezë, Asht tok e jona, t'part na e kan lan, Kush mos na e preki, se desim tlan! Desim si burrat qi diqne motit E mos turpnohna përpara Zotit!</i>	From Bar down to Preveza everywhere let the sun spend its warmth and rays, This is our land, left to us by our forefathers, Let no one touch us for we are all to die! let us die like men as our forefathers once did And not bring shame upon ourselves before God!
(Elsie, <i>History of Albanian Literature</i> 1: 263–64)	

Ndoc Nikaj, prose writer and publisher from northern Albania, has been called the father of the Albanian novel. He is the author of numerous, though now rare, volumes of prose and some plays. The best known of these are the novelettes *Marzia e ksctenimi n'filles t'vet* (Foolishness and the Origins of Christianity; 1892) and *Shkodra e rrethue* (Shkodra under Siege; 1913). The latter is a history, in the form of a short novel, of the siege of Shkodra during the 1912 Balkan war. Nikaj was arrested by the communists in 1946, during the initial persecution of the Catholic clergy in northern Albania. He was accused rather absurdly, at the age of eighty-two, of "planning to overthrow the government with violence," and died in a Shkodra prison five years later, in January 1951, a tragic end to a great figure of Albanian culture.

Also from Shkodra was Luigi Gurakuqi, a major political figure of the late *Rilindja* movement in northern Albania, and the author of poetry and both didactic and educational works. His verse, imbued with strong patriotism and the sentimentality of romantic nationalism, was published posthumously in the collection *Vjersha* (Verse; 1940). Though it contains much lively imagery, including moving descriptions of the changing seasons in his mountainous homeland, it often lacks melody and rhythm. Gurakuqi did have the gift of language, but he was not a sophisticated poet.

The classical poet Ndre Mjeda bridges the gap between the late nineteenth-century *Rilindja* culture and the dynamic literary creativity of the independence period. His poetry, particularly his collection *Juvenilia* (1917), is noteworthy for its classical style and purity of language. It is probably no coincidence that the title of this work, for which Mjeda is best remembered, is the same as Giosuè Carducci's lyrical volume *Juvenilia*, published almost half a century earlier. Though

not covering an especially wide range of themes, Mjeda's poetry demonstrates a refined language under the influence of the nineteenth-century Italian classics and a high level of metric subtlety.

By far the most significant figure of Albanian literature in the first half of the twentieth century was the Franciscan father Gjergj Fishta who, more than any other writer, gave artistic expression to the searching soul of the now sovereign Albanian nation. Although he is the author of thirty-seven literary publications, his name is indelibly linked to one of the most astounding creations in the history of Albanian literature, *Lahuta e malcís* (The Highland Lute; 1937). "The Highland Lute" is a historical verse epic focused on the Albanian struggle for autonomy and independence, in particular the events in northern Albania from 1858 to 1913. This literary masterpiece was composed between 1902 and 1909, but refined and amended by its author over a thirty-year period. It constitutes the first Albanian-language contribution to world literature.

The Fishta-dominated Scutarine Catholic school of letters entered a golden age in the early decades of the twentieth century and much credit for this blossoming of Geg culture goes to him. Franciscan poets and scholars like Pashko Bardhi, Marin Sirdani, Anton Harapi, Justin Rrota, Donat Kurti, Gjon Shllaku, and indeed virtually all other Albanian intellectuals who spent their productive years in Shkodra during the first four decades of the century, were influenced in one way or another by the imposing figure of Father Gjergj Fishta.

Fishta and the Scutarine school represented the mainstream of Albanian literature up until World War II — creative, innovative, and yet traditionalist. Fishta raised the little Balkan country to the level of literary sophistication that the more advanced nations of Europe had known in the second half of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century. This in itself was quite a significant step forward in view of Albania's tardy consolidation as a nation and its sluggish political and cultural development.

At this point, a young poet from Shkodra entered the scene, ignoring the now solid traditions of his written culture and taking Albanian literature along the solitary road to modernity. It is with Migjeni, acronym of Millosh Gjergj Nikolla, that contemporary Albanian poetry began its course. Migjeni's one slender and yet revolutionary volume of verse, *Vargjet e lira* (Free Verse; 1944), composed over a three-year period from 1933 to 1935, radically altered the Albanian perception of poetry. We are for the first time confronted with verse of acute social awareness and despair. Whereas previous generations of poets had sung the beauties of the Albanian mountains and the lofty traditions of the nation, Migjeni was the first to open his eyes to the harsh realities of life, to the appalling level of misery, disease, and poverty he encountered in Shkodra and in the northern Albanian highlands. He painted a grim portrait of our earthly existence. Rarely did a breath of fresh air or a sublime vision of nature seep through the gloom. Though he did not publish a single book during his lifetime, his works, which circulated privately, were an immediate success. Migjeni paved the way for modern literature in his country, but, alas, his achievement was soon to be nipped in the bud. The year "Free Verse" was published also saw the victory of Stalinism in Albania and the proclamation of the People's Republic.

### **Tirana — a Lonely Isle of Revolution**

On November 28, 1944, the communist forces under the command of Enver Hoxha took control of

Tirana, and on January 11, 1946, the People's Republic of Albania was formally established with a Soviet-style constitution — an event that changed the course of Albanian history. From the start, the new leaders were suspicious of Albanian writers and intellectuals, regarding the vast majority of them as representatives of the “ancien régime.” It was, therefore, not indoctrination and education that became the primary means of persuading the established intellectuals to conform, but naked terror. The immediate post-war period became an apocalypse for Albanian writers. Large numbers of intellectuals were executed while others were imprisoned for long periods. As to budding young writers, no one will ever know how many of them were dispatched over the ensuing years to internment camps, to dangerous branches of industry, or to some isolated mountain village with no hope of return.

The postwar persecution of writers, particularly severe for all those who had ever been abroad, and the break with virtually all cultural traditions in Albania, created a cultural vacuum in the country that lasted until the sixties, at least. The effects of this period of literary and cultural stagnation can still be felt today. The vast body of writing churned out in revolutionary Tirana in the fifties and early sixties proved to be sterile and highly conformist. The subject matter of the period was repetitive, and simplistic texts were spoon-fed to readers time and again without much attention to basic elements of style. Political indoctrination and the fueling of patriotic sentiments in the masses were considered more important than aesthetic values. Like everything else, literature was expected to reinforce revolutionary fervor and consolidate the socialist convictions of the “new man.” Whether this policy attained its objective at all is very doubtful. It could not, at any rate, stimulate talent and ensure literary quality, satisfying the aesthetic needs of the Albanian reader.

Despite the extremely unfavorable conditions under which it evolved, Albanian literature managed to recover somewhat by the mid-sixties and continued to make some sluggish progress. The first turning point in the evolution of poetry and prose, after a quarter century of standstill, came in the stormy year 1961, which marked the definitive political break with the Soviet Union and thus with Soviet literary models; this year witnessed the publication of a number of trend-setting volumes, in particular of poetry. A cautious attempt was made by the new generation of writers, including Ismail Kadare, Dritëro Agolli, and Fatos Arapi, to broaden the literary horizon “in search of something new.” Though it constituted no radical change of course, no liberalization or political “thaw” in the Soviet sense, 1961 set the stage for a quarter century of trial and error, which, in the end, led to greater sophistication in Albanian literature.

By far the best example of creativity in contemporary Albanian letters is Ismail Kadare, still the only Albanian writer to enjoy a broad international reputation. Kadare's talent, both as a poet and prose writer, has lost none of its innovative force over the years. His courage in attacking literary mediocrity from within the system brought a breath of fresh air to Albanian culture. Though in Albania he is highly regarded also as a poet, his international reputation has rested entirely upon his prose, in particular upon his historical novels and short stories. Kadare made his literary breakthrough with the novel *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (The General of the Dead Army; 1963). In the period of relative calm between the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1969 and the so-called “purge of the liberals” in 1973, Kadare published one of his most impressive novels, *Kronikë në gur* (Chronicle in Stone; 1971). This work chronicles the fate of Kadare's beautiful native town of Gjirokastra in southern Albania under occupation during World War II. Known to the Greeks as

Argyrokastron (“silver fortress”), this city with lofty stone houses, hanging from the mountainside over narrow cobblestone alleys, was successively occupied, like much of Albania at the time, by the Greeks, the Italians, and the Germans. In *Ura me tri harqe* (The Three-Arched Bridge; 1978) the author returns to the mythical origins of Albania’s haunted history to bring to life one of the most gruesome motifs in oral poetry, that of human immurement. Among Kadare’s more recent novels translated into English are *Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave* (The Palace of Dreams; 1981), *Koncert në fund të dimrit* (The Concert; 1988), *Dosja H* (The File on H; 1990), and *Piramida* (The Pyramid; 1992). Kadare has done his utmost to emancipate Albanian literature, over which — thanks to his talent and, it must be said, to substantial support from the communist authorities — he reigned as an absolute monarch in the seventies and eighties. Throughout the long decades of dictatorship, he used his freedom, limited as it was, and his innate talent to launch many attacks against the regime in the form of subtle political allegories throughout his works. When the dictatorship finally collapsed and an initial flurry of freedom arrived in 1990, Kadare chose to fulfill his dream and moved to France with his family. From his Parisian exile, he has continued to make notable contributions to both Albanian and French literary culture.

Ismail Kadare’s overriding position in contemporary Albanian literature, reinforced by his international reputation, has tended to overshadow the other contemporary Albanian poets and novelists who contributed in one way or another to the advancement of Albanian letters during the last terrible decade of Stalinist dictatorship and during the first, almost equally terrible, decade of freedom before the turn of the millennium.

Dritëro Agolli of Menkulas, in southeastern Albania, is a poet of the soil whose verse is widely read and appreciated in his country. Agolli not only served as president of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists from 1973 to his retirement in 1992, but was also a deputy in the People’s Assembly. Since retirement, he has devoted himself to publishing and has been extremely productive over the last decade. Agolli is also the author of a number of prose works, the best known being his satirical novel *Shkëlqimi dhe rënja e shokut Zylo* (The Splendor and the Fall of Comrade Zylo; 1973).

An important contributor to modern Albanian poetry is Fatos Arapi from Zvërnec, near the port city of Vlora. He is the author of many volumes of philosophical verse, love lyrics, and poignant elegies on death. Of the other Tirana writers, we can mention poets Xhevahir Spahiu from the Skrapar region, Bardhyl Londo from Lipa near Përmet, Visar Zhiti, who served in the nineties as Albanian cultural attaché in Rome, prose writer Besnik Mustafaj from Bajram Curri, who served as Albanian ambassador to France and who has published a number of works in French translation, and short story writer and poet Preç Zogaj. Also noteworthy is the emergence of a generation of female authors, among whom are the prose writers from Tirana, Elvira Dones, now in Switzerland, and Mira Meksi, and poets Mimoza Ahmeti from Kruja, and Lindita Arapi from Lushnja.

The post-liberation nineties have found Albania in a seemingly perpetual state of political, economic, and social chaos quite unmatched in any other European country. But what of literature? Publishing has been liberalized and privatized, which has resulted in a steadily growing number of literary publications each year but also in a total lack of quality control. Anyone who has the money can publish whatever he or she wishes. At the same time, after half a century of isolation, Albanian readers have been showing a definite preference for translations of the foreign



literatures they were once denied, leaving most volumes of contemporary Albanian prose and poetry to gather dust in the bookstores.

More worrisome for the preservation of Albania's cultural heritage is another problem. In view of Albania's low standard of living and the nation's erratic political, economic, and social development, in particular after the destruction caused by the 1997 uprising, an extremely large number of intellectuals and young people have recently emigrated, legally or illegally. This ongoing brain drain, compounded by the climate of general despair in the country, has contributed to a perceptible decline in the cultural impetus and literary creativity in Tirana. The phenomenon is temporary and should reverse once a modicum of stability is restored.

### **Prishtina — the Freedom to Be Albanian**

The fact that creative literature in Albanian was late to arise in Kosovo (Kosova) is a direct result of decades of political oppression that the Kosovo Albanians endured in silence. Albania itself attained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, whereas Kosovo, the "other half" of the Albanian nation, was conquered by the Serbian army and incorporated into Yugoslavia against the will of its Albanian inhabitants. From the start, Albanians were made to feel that they were unwanted guests in the new kingdom of the southern Slavs. Serbian became the only official language of the country, and books and newspapers in Albanian were as illegal in Yugoslavia as they had once been under the Turks.

It was the founding in 1949 of the literary periodical *Jeta e re* (New Life) by poet Esad Mekuli that gave voice to the young generation of Albanian writers in Kosovo and served as an initial forum for literary productions. These as yet inexperienced Albanian authors began publishing in Kosovo during the years 1956 to 1960, at a time when creative writing in Albania itself had all but vanished under the heavy hand of Stalinism. However, it was not until the mid-sixties that Albanian and Kosovo Albanian literature began to be printed in Yugoslavia on a significant scale. Among the leading prose writers of this first generation were Kapllan Resuli, Adem Demaçi, Anton Pashku, Azem Shkreli, and Ramadan Rexhepi. Tragically, this literary generation, which might have laid the foundations for Kosovo prose, was politically annihilated by the ruling Serb authorities before it could give birth to a solid written culture. Of the five mentioned figures, only two — Pashku and Shkreli — survived unscathed. Demaçi languished in prison from 1958 to 1990, Rexhepi managed to escape to Sweden, and Resuli made the dire mistake of fleeing to Albania, where he soon found himself in prison, too. Due to the willful destruction of a whole generation of writers, Kosovo prose did not reach a quality level for many years to come, and the loss can be felt even today.

With time, the Albanian language was finally proclaimed "one of the official languages of Kosovo," but the linguistic and educational rights accorded to the Albanian population remained for a long time rather abstract. Tito's would-be successor, vice-president Aleksandar Ranković, made active use of the secret police to repress the Albanian population until his fall at the Brioni Plenum of July 1966. Full cultural autonomy was first achieved after much delay under the Yugoslav constitution of 1974. With this change of policy, Albanian culture flourished in Kosovo as never before. It was a brief blossoming, in which education, culture, and literature achieved

tremendous progress within a short period of time. Countless volumes of Albanian verse and much young prose appeared on the book market. Many works of foreign and Yugoslav literature were translated into Albanian, and a number of works of Albanian literature appeared in Serbo-Croatian translations, providing an initial platform for a better understanding between Albanians and their Slav neighbors. At this time, the Writers' Union of Kosovo was still a joint institution serving all the Albanian, Serb, and Turkish authors in the province. Nevertheless, the age-old antagonism between Albanians and Serbs prevented any real cultural exchange. Writers remained firmly entrenched within their own language communities. Indeed, Kosovo Albanian writers were more influenced by Serbian translations of contemporary literary currents in France, England, Italy, or North America, than they were by the Serb and Kosovo Serb literature on their doorstep. Ethnic rivalry was simply too strong.

The semblance of autonomy and freedom that the Albanians enjoyed throughout the seventies was brought to an abrupt end in 1981, when the demand for republic status and equality with the other peoples of the Yugoslav federation — a demand supported by over ninety percent of the population of Kosovo — was met by Belgrade with tanks and automatic rifles. The 1981 uprising signaled the end of any hope for peaceful coexistence in Kosovo and the beginning of the demise of Yugoslavia. Throughout the eighties, the political and economic situation of the province deteriorated and, as a result, relations between the Albanians and Serbs took a drastic turn for the worse, a harbinger of what was to come for all of Yugoslavia in the early nineties. The Serb military invasion of Kosovo in the summer of 1990 brought the province to the verge of war. It was only a matter of time before the devastation of war would befall Kosovo, too.

From 1981 onwards, the Kosovo Albanian intellectuals, while never silent in their struggle for freedom, saw salvation increasingly in terms of inner emigration. Having no other option, the people of Kosovo simply began to ignore the Belgrade government and created a state within a state. They set up their own parallel institutions — schools, universities, health services, a tax system, a government-in-exile, and publishing facilities for books and newspapers — and turned their backs on everything linked to the Yugoslav state. It was in this difficult context that Albanian literature and culture in Kosovo tried to survive.

Prose has been the weaker genre to the present, though some interesting works were published from time to time. Among the leading authors of the last two decades are Ramiz Kelmendi of Peja (Peć) and Rexhep Qosja, whose highly political novel *Vdekja më vjen prej syve të tillë* (Death Comes from Such Eyes; 1974), has appeared in Serbo-Croatian (1976), Slovene (1979), Bulgarian (1982), French (1994), German (1995) and Dutch (1998); also Eqrem Basha from Macedonia and humorist Arif Demolli from Gillogovica. It is, however, poetry that has remained the vanguard of Kosovo literature. The period of relative political peace from the seventies to the early eighties produced a solid generation of talented poets who experimented in a wide variety of styles. Among them are the already-mentioned Azem Shkreli and Eqrem Basha, Enver Gjerqeku from Gjakova, Ali Podrimja from Gjakova, a selection of whose works has been published in English (1997), and Kim Mehmeti from Skopje.

In 1998, the long-expected war between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo finally broke out, resulting, in the spring of 1999, in the dramatic deportation of large sections of the Albanian population and in the destruction of much of the country. The city of Gjakova and much of Peja were razed to the ground. The twenty years of apartheid and oppression left their toll on the people

of Kosovo and thus on their literature. For years, all literary creativity was channeled through a prism of ethnicity; all writing was subordinated to the struggle for national and ethnic survival. The cataclysm has now subsided, and the Albanians of Kosovo are free for the first time. Though it may take time for writers and intellectuals to put the traumatic events behind them and return to normality, the creative spirit in Kosovo/Kosova is strong, and significant literary works may be expected to emerge here.