

Albanian Literary History: a Communist Primeur

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Interest in the historical development of Albanian literature was first evident in attempts to collect and study oral literature during the romantic movement of the nineteenth century. The first substantial history of Albanian literature as such was a manual of Albanian literature by the Italo-Albanian scholar Alberto Straticò (1896). His chapter, "First Monuments of Albanian Literature" provided an overview of the early texts, not all of a purely literary nature, to the extent that they were known and understood at the time. Straticò's section on "folk songs" constitutes a solid introduction to the various genres of Albanian oral literature. Finally, the chapter 'Albanian Writers' deals both with some early writers like Frang Bardhi and Pjetër Bogdani (Gjon Buzuku and Pjetër Budi were unknown to him), and the writers of the Italo-Albanian tradition: Giulio Variboba, Francesco Antonio Santori, Girolamo De Rada, Giuseppe Serembe and others. For Straticò, Albanian literature was Arbëresh (Italo-Albanian) literature. He does not mention at all the rising figures of nineteenth-century literature in Albania itself.

No history of Albanian literature was published in Albania before the communist period, though a number of school readers and anthologies appeared in the early decades of the century. The Albanian Literary Commission (*Komisia letrare shqype*) published a reader for middle schools (1920), and five years later the Franciscan scholar Justin Rrota published a somewhat more sophisticated reader for middle schools. These endeavours culminated in 1941 in the masterful two-volume anthology of Albanian writers (Resuli, *Shkrimtarët shqiptarë*), compiled by the Scutarine scholars Ernest Koliqi, Namik Ressuli and Karl Gurakuqi, which provided bio- and bibliographical introduction to each writer. It is still studied with great interest today.

The first reliable and comprehensive history of Albanian literature was published in 1932, in Italian by Gaetano Petrotta, professor of Albanian studies at the University of Palermo. It surveys literature written in Albanian from the earliest texts to 1930, and also includes oral literature and a section on the development of Albanian studies as a field of scholarship. Petrotta published in 1950 a second, much shorter work on the subject, which was up to date, more concise, and better structured. It is particularly useful for the independence period from 1912 to World War II.

The first study of Albanian literature in English was published in 1955 by the British scholar Stuart E. Mann, author of Albanian dictionaries, grammars and linguistic studies. His *Albanian Literature* contains a wealth of information on Albanian writers, but is limited in scope and ends with World War II. Eminently readable and well structured is the Italian history of Albanian literature, by Giuseppe Schirò junior (1959), which covers Albanian letters up to World War II with an extensive treatment of Arbëresh literature to that date.

In Albania itself, scholarly activity took some time to recover from the mass persecution of Albanian intellectuals in the early years of Stalinism. The new institutions in Tirana, among them the University of Tirana, an Institute of Linguistics and Literature, and the Academy of Sciences, bore fruit with time. A major achievement for the period was the history of Albanian literature published in 1959-60 by the Albanian Academy of Sciences under the direction of Dhimitër Shuteriqi. It covers Albanian letters from the sixteenth century up to the 1930s, but suffers, as do virtually all other books published in Tirana during the half century of communist dictatorship,

from a strong political and nationalist bias. The tendency to divide all Albanian writers and works, even those of earlier centuries, into absolute good (progressive, i.e. left-wing, patriotic) and bad (reactionary, i.e. right-wing, non-patriotic), had disastrous consequences. Shuteriqi's *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare* (1983), a revised and expanded version of the former, was substantially more accurate and detailed, but it suffered just as much from extremist ideology. Major authors such as Gjergj Fishta and Ernest Koliqi were mentioned for the first time, though given a dismissive treatment. The literature of Kosova is completely ignored for it was too dangerous a subject.

The 1970s saw the publication of a number of major studies on Albanian literature, although none of them can be considered a literary history as such. Ernest Koliqi, in Italian exile, published in 1972 his *Saggi di letteratura albanese*, a collection of scholarly articles on various chapters of Albanian literature. Arshi Pipa of the University of Minnesota, another leading scholar in exile, published in 1978 his *Albanian Literature: Social Perspectives*, which contains useful information on various periods. Modern literature from Albania, though not from Kosova, is also covered by Pipa's insightful *Contemporary Albanian literature* (1991). For early Albanian literature up to 1700, the *Storia della letteratura albanese* by Giuseppe Ferrari of the University of Bari must be mentioned. For modern letters in Albania up to the mid-seventies, one may also consult the official *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare të realizmit socialist* (History of the Albanian Literature of Socialist Realism; 1978), which was written under the direction of Koço Bihiku with extreme, and at times hilarious, political bias. Bihiku's *History of Albanian literature* (also available in French, Italian, and Russian translations) concentrates on socialist realist literature up to 1977, seen from an exalted Party perspective. It provides extremely varied coverage and consciously excludes both the many great authors of the twenties and thirties who were ostracized from the Albanian Parnassus, and all the literature of Kosova.

Rexhep Qosja's three-volume history of Albanian Romanticism (1984-86) provides a good survey of the nineteenth-century romantic nationalism in Albanian literature. In 1987, a few years before her death, the great Russian Albanologist Agnija Vasil'evna Desnickaja published a study on Albanian literature and language, of which about half is devoted to the development of Albanian letters.

The most wide-ranging and detailed survey of Albanian letters to date is Robert Elsie's *Albanian Literature: a Short History* (2005), which gives extensive coverage to virtually all currents of written Albanian literature from the beginning to 2000 and endeavours to be objective and comprehensive, including not only the literature of Albania, but also that of Kosova and the diaspora. An Albanian translation appeared in 2006.

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