

## **Albanian Literary History and Albanian Literary Culture: Observations on Recent Developments**

by

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The publication in Tirana in 1983 of the standard reference 'History of Albanian Literature' was both a substantial achievement of Albanian scholarship and a national tragedy. The 629-page volume, entitled *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare: që nga fillimet deri te lufta antifashiste nacionalçlirimtare* (History of Albanian Literature: from the Beginnings to the Anti-Fascist, National-Liberation Struggle), was published - with the blessing of the Albanian Party of Labour - by the Albanian Academy of Sciences under the direction of the late Dhimitër Shuteriqi (1915-2003). As the title suggests, it discusses the history and development of creative writing in Albanian from the earliest texts to the beginning of the Second World War. Its major contributors were all literary scholars from the Institute for Language and Literature of the Academy of Sciences in Tirana, including Ali Xhiku for early Albanian writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Shaban Çollaku (1940-1993) for early literature in the Muslim tradition, Klara Kodra (b. 1944) for Italo-Albanian literature, Razi Brahimi (b. 1931) for nineteenth-century Rilindja literature, Dhimitër Fullani for early twentieth-century literature, and Vehbi Bala (1923-1990) for the politically most sensitive period prior to 1939. Important contributions were also made by Jorgo Bullo (b. 1939) and Mahir Domi (1915-2000). This volume replaced and substantially improved upon an earlier two-volume edition by the Academy published in 1959.

The 1983 literary history narrated the basic course of Albanian literature up to 1939, giving treatment to its culturally diverse branches and movements, and did so comprehensively and with much more accuracy in detail than the shoddy 1959 edition. Its primary importance is that it served as a standard reference guide for a whole generation of Albanians in both Albania and Kosova, and was used for teaching in all schools and universities. It thus told the Albanians what they needed to know and, perhaps more crucially, what they were supposed to think about their national literature. Indeed it created and/or perpetuated many firm views on Albanian literature and culture - some of them quite erroneous - which have survived up to the present day. From the point of view of modern scholarship, it is a primitive and essentially pernicious work. It would, however, be unfair to denigrate all of its authors and contributors, most of whom were doing the best they could under extremely difficult conditions. It must not be forgotten that the Fourth Party Congress of 1973, the Cultural Revolution, and the subsequent purges had terrified Albanian writers, scholars and intellectuals and had forced them all into submission. Not only were the Albanians living in virtual isolation from the outside world, but most of the authors were not old enough to have known anything but the communist regime they were serving. The sole exception was Dhimitër Shuteriqi, the editor-in-chief of the 1983 edition, who had been abroad in the 1930s but who chose to throw his lot in with the communist partisans. Whatever might be said of the political and personal compromises he made during his lifetime, Shuteriqi was a passionate scholar of Albanian literature and culture, and was in some ways a pioneer.

Other major literary studies published in Tirana under the dictatorship, such as the *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare të realizmit socialist* (History of the Albanian Literature of Socialist Realism), published in 1978 under Koço Bihiku, and the *History of Albanian Literature* by the same author, published for foreign consumption in English and French in 1980, in Italian in 1981, and in Russian in 1983, are not to be taken seriously.

What made the 1983 history of Albanian literature a “national tragedy”, as I have asserted above? Essentially, it is permeated from start to finish with two extremist ideologies - or agendas as one would say today - which render it virtually useless as an objective tool of scholarship. Firstly, it is infused with a primitive Stalinist interpretation of socialism, viewing five hundred years of writing from the point of view of class struggle. It forced almost all authors, even those of earlier centuries, into the superficial categories of politically progressive and politically reactionary. Needless to say, the so-called reactionaries are given limited, usually virulent treatment, or are not mentioned at all. The best example of this is the brief and scandalous passage afforded to Gjergj Fishta, who, with the publication in 1937 of the definitive edition of his 15,000-line national epic ‘The Highland Lute’ (*Lahuta e Malcís*), was lauded as the Albanian Homer and was universally regarded before the Second World War as the national poet of Albania. Vehbi Bala had in fact prepared a forty-page treatment of Fishta, coverage equal to that given to Naim Frashëri, but was not allowed to publish it. Instead, the following passage appeared, which I quote here in full:

*“The main representative of this clergy, Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), poet, publicist, teacher and politician, ran the press of the Franciscan order and directed the cultural and educational activities of this order for a long time. For him, the interests of the church and of religion rose above those of the nation and the people, something he openly declared and defended with all his demagoguery and cynicism, [a principle] upon which he based his literary work. His main work, the epic poem, “Lahuta e Malcís” (The Highland Lute), while attacking the chauvinism of our northern neighbours, propagates anti-Slavic feelings and makes the struggle against the Ottoman occupants secondary. He raised a hymn to patriarchy and feudalism, to religious obscurantism and clericalism, and played with patriotic sentiments wherever it was a question of highlighting the events and figures of the national history of our Rilindja period. His other works, such as the satirical poem “Gomari i Babatasit” (Babatasi’s Ass), in which public schooling and democratic ideas were bitterly attacked, were characteristic of the savage struggle undertaken by the Catholic church to maintain and increase its influence on the intellectual life of the country. With his art, he endeavoured to pay service to a form close to folklore. This was often accompanied by prolixity, far-fetched effects, rhetoric, brutality of expression and style to the point of banality, false arguments which he intentionally endeavours to impose, and an exceptionally conservative attitude in the field of language. Fishta ended his days as a member of the academy of fascist Italy<sup>1</sup>.”*

Other major authors such as Faik bey Konitza (1875-1942) and, in particular, the many talented writers of the Catholic culture of Shkodra are scathingly dismissed, if mentioned at all.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Dhimitër Shuteriqi *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare që nga fillimet deri te lufta antifashiste nacionalçlirimtare*, Tirana 1983, p. 470-471.

Secondly, the 1983 literary history is pervaded by an equally pernicious ideology of Albanian nationalism. Creative writing in Albanian is interpreted from start to finish as an act of patriotism. While this may be true in some cases, and there are admittedly strong ties between the rise of Albanian literature and the rise of the nationalist movement, one is left hoping that some Albanian writer might be found, just for a change, who was not a “patriot” struggling against evil foreign oppressors. It was thought that good literature had to be patriotic literature, and everything else was superfluous.

The 1983 history did not dare to venture past 1939, although it could easily have included the first decades of socialist literature up until, for example, 1970. Nor did it say much about the literature of the other half of the Albanian nation - that of Kosova and the other Albanian-inhabited parts of former Yugoslavia.

Despite these major drawbacks, the 1983 “History of Albanian Literature” was reprinted in large editions, most recently in Prishtina in 1990 and is still, to this very day, being used in Albanian schools and universities as the basic reference guide for Albanian literature and written culture.

I have referred to the 1983 edition somewhat polemically as a “national tragedy.” This is not so much to promote my own recent work *Albanian Literature: a Short History* (London 2005), the Albanian-language version of which, entitled *Letërsia shqipe: një histori e shkurtër* (Tirana 2006), has just been published, but to stress the impact that previous works of outdated, Stalinist scholarship are still having on contemporary thought in the Albanian world today. I do not wish to give the impression that contemporary Albanian scholars look back longingly to the communist period. This is clearly not the case. Communism as an ideology evaporated from the minds of most Albanians long before the fall of the dictatorship in 1990-1991. There is no lingering nostalgia for communism, certainly not among anyone under the age of seventy-five. There are, however, lingering remnants of outdated ethnocentric ideology, with exaggerated claims which continue to colour and distort works of scholarship in the field of Albanian literature and culture. The same tendencies occur in the field of historiography, where outdated accounts of Albanian history - portrayed in terms of a struggle between good, i.e. the nationalist cause, and evil, i.e. everything else - are still being relied upon today.

In short, what is needed are new, detailed, authoritative and reliable accounts of the nation’s literature, history and culture, written and compiled by native scholars and specialists, accounts which must be thoroughly depoliticized and cleansed as far as possible of all ideologies and agendas. As long as the current situation remains, schools and universities will continue disseminating and perpetuating erroneous claims and naive views.

Albanian scholarship has not had an easy time of it since the fall of the dictatorship. The collapse of State structures in Albania and in Kosova resulted in a glaring lack of funding for research scholars, teachers and professors. With dismally low salaries and primitive working conditions, scholars were not motivated to advance in their fields. Therefore, much of their time and energy was devoted to finding other sources of income to support their families. What is more worrisome is that there is no generation of new, young scholars in the field of Albanian studies to replace the present, now aging generation. As such, there is little new and original scholarship - most recent publications being reprints of older works or new translations of foreign-language classics in Albanian studies. The future is not bright for this field.

But let us turn away from scholarship and return to literature and book publishing in general. Here, on a more positive note, we see that there are now more publishing companies

and more books being published in Albanian than ever before. The bookstores are overflowing with books, and in view of the tiny Albanian-language market, one is left wondering who reads them all! In the field of creative literature, in particular, new books have flooded the retail outlets, and are doing so more and more every year.

After decades of isolation, the Albanians are understandably more interested in reading foreign literature than they are their own writers' works, and therefore, an increasing proportion of recent literary publications are foreign works translated into Albanian. Literature written in Albanian itself now occupies a reduced position in the book market, although this certainly does not mean that production has been curtailed.

The primary trend to be noted in contemporary Albanian literature is that there has been a substantial increase in prose production. Fifteen years ago, the majority of literary works written and published in Albanian were volumes of poetry, a phenomenon quite unthinkable in the western world where poetry accounts for less than two percent of literary publications. While Albanian verse is not in decline by any means, and volumes of poetry still make up a clear majority of literary publications, there is now a somewhat greater market for novels, short stories and other genres. If we take a look at new publications catalogued by the Albanian National Library in Tirana for the years 1995, 2000 and 2004, we see the following figures:

year	Albanian poetry volumes	Albanian novels	Albanian short story volumes	Albanian drama volumes	Albanian literature in total	foreign literature translated into Alb.
1995	136	26	37	6	205	27
2000	224	62	67	9	362	92
2004	274	95	55	6	430	199

Between 1995 and 2004, the number of poetry volumes originally written in Albanian doubled, but the number of novels written and published in Albanian experienced a 365% increase. It is interesting to note the dramatic rise in the number of Albanian translations of foreign-language literature. In 1995, such translations made up only 11% of the total market for literary publications. In 2000 this proportion rose to 20% and by 2004 it had grown to 31%.

Albanian prose writers have learned and profited by their new contacts with world literature. At the same time, as we have seen from the statistics, they are also having great difficulty keeping up with the foreign competition. After years of bitter experience, many Albanian readers have turned away from Albanian literature and are now oriented exclusively to world literature in Albanian translation, albeit in often very shabby translations. The truth of the matter is that, with the exception of the works of Ismail Kadare, few Albanian novels published in Tirana in the mid-nineties sold more than 100 copies. Nonetheless, despite the stiff competition from translations, Albanian prose and poetry have survived and are flourishing in the modest context of the Albanian market.

There are, at any rate, a good number of readable prose writers and poets in Albania, many of whom are too young to have been influenced by the horrors of Albania's political

past. They have grown up in a new and more open environment and are helping to bring fresh air into the once stale and stifling atmosphere of Albanian written culture.

A few words must also be said about the diffusion of Albanian literature abroad. Many Albanian authors regard themselves as successful only if their works have been translated into foreign languages and published abroad, and forget that their natural links are with their Albanian-language readers. The major impediment to the diffusion of Albanian literature abroad is the lack of literary translators from the Albanian. At a translation workshop held in Shkodra in the autumn of 2004, I noted the following:

*“There is, and always has been an extreme lack of literary translators from the Albanian. For Albanian literature in English, for example, there are only two or three literary translators who are vaguely active at the moment. The situation is somewhat better in French, where there are up to five literary translators, of whom three are currently active. In Italian there are also three to five translators, most of whom are Italo-Albanians. In German and Polish there are two active translators each, in Bulgarian three, and in Spanish one. There are also active translators of Albanian literature into Dutch and Greek. Very few of these translators are, however, full-time professionals. They are simply individuals who translate works of Albanian literature occasionally when they have time and if they manage to find a publisher.”*

The only Albanian writer who has made the breakthrough onto the world stage is Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), recipient of the 2005 Man Booker International prize, who is a respected author in France and who is now widely known in many other countries around the world. Indeed, if a foreigner knows the name of any Albanian writer, it is most likely to be that of Ismail Kadare. Approximately 35 of his books have been translated into French, 24 into Greek, 23 into Spanish, 20 into Dutch, 15 into German, and 12 into English.

Of other contemporary prose writers, mention should be made of French translations of Fatos Kongoli (b. 1944), Ylljet Aliçka (b. 1951), Besnik Mustafaj (b. 1958), Eqrem Basha (b. 1948), Elvira Dones (b. 1960), Zija Çela (b. 1946), Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931), Bashkim Shehu (b. 1955), Rexhep Qosja (b. 1936), Elena Kadare (b. 1943), Luan Starova (b. 1941), Neshat Tozaj (b. 1943), Maks Velo (b. 1935), Stefan Çapaliku (b. 1965), and Virion Graçi (b. 1968); of recent German translations of Fatos Kongoli, Beqë Cufaj (b. 1970), Rexhep Qosja, Luan Starova, Besnik Mustafaj, Kasëm Trebeshina (b. 1926) and Kim Mehmeti (b. 1955); of recent Italian translations of Diana Çuli (b. 1951), Elvira Dones, Fatos Kongoli, Mitrush Kuteli (1907-1967), Besnik Mustafaj, Bashkim Shehu and Visar Zhiti (b. 1952); and recent Spanish translations of Mitrush Kuteli and Bashkim Shehu.

The English-language market, much vaster but much more difficult to penetrate, will soon see new translations of Fatos Kongoli and Bashkim Shehu, the first other authors to complement the works of Kadare. In addition, an initial anthology of Albanian prose, *Balkan Beauty, Balkan Blood*, was published recently in Chicago.

As to poetry published as individual collections, there have been French translations of Ali Podrimja (b. 1942), Ismail Kadare, Din Mehmeti (b. 1929), Luan Rama (b. 1952) and Preç Zogaj (b. 1957). Volumes of Dritëro Agolli, Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) and Xhevahir Spahiu (b. 1945) are forthcoming. In German, there are published translations of Sali Bashota (b. 1951), Martin Camaj (1925-1992), Ali Podrimja, Azem Shkreli (1938-1997) and Vaxhid Xhelili (b. 1960); in Italian, there are volumes of Diamant Abrashi (b. 1963), Mimoza Ahmeti (b. 1963), Martin Camaj, Gëzim Hajdari (b. 1957), and Visar Zhiti; and in Spanish of

Mimoza Ahmeti and Xhevdet Bajraj (b. 1960).

In English, there are my own recently published translations of Ali Podrimja, Eqrem Basha, Flora Brovina (b. 1949), Visar Zhiti, and forthcoming, Azem Shkreli. Luljeta Lleshanaku (b. 1968) and Martin Camaj have also appeared in English. Of course many more Albanian poets have appeared in translation in anthologies and periodicals, and on the internet. My large historical anthology of Albanian poetry, entitled *Lightning from the Depths*, is to appear in English next year.

Drama, which has always been a neglected genre in Albanian literature, has recently seen French translations of the works of Iliran Bezhani (b. 1949), Minush Jero (1932-2006), Anton Pashku (1937-1995) and Teki Dervishi (b. 1943).

The existence of translations into foreign languages is not always indicative of the domestic prestige or rank, if you will, of Albanian authors. Many translations arise from chance meetings between authors and translators, and not necessarily because the translator has studied the book market and chosen the most appropriate or representative authors.

There is unfortunately no tradition of literary criticism in Albania. New publications are, of course, mentioned and presented in newspapers and magazines, but panegyrics abound and are often little more than that, written by journalists, or, in many cases by a friend of the author in question. There is still not one professional and respected literary critic in Tirana, and it is doubtful that one will emerge in the coming years. Also lacking in Tirana are well-founded and reliable studies of contemporary Albanian literature. As a result, the Albanian reader is mistrustful and disoriented, and there has been a growing suspicion among the public that Albanian writers can produce nothing of sustainable value. Anyone who has seen the catastrophic state of virtually everything in Albania - the country's infrastructure, e.g. the roads, the education system, the hospitals, the electricity and water supplies, etc. - would be forgiven for suspecting that Albanian literature was in a similar state of underdevelopment. Fortunately, there are diamonds in the rough.

Compounding the general disorientation and doubt as to the value of new books coming onto the market is the fact that many publishers have been understandably interested in a quick profit, and they tend to demand cash in advance for the publication of a book, any book. In the nineties, after decades of total regulation in the publishing industry, there were no more controls on books at all, no real editors and no revision of texts before publication. Anyone who had money or a sponsor could publish and market whatever he or she wished.

Another phenomenon which has had a negative impact on Albanian literature and culture in recent years and, one could say, on Albanian society as a whole, has been mass emigration. After the collapse of the Albanian State in March 1997, following the implosion of the pyramid investment schemes and the plundering of military installations and arms depots throughout the country, many young people came to believe that they had no future in their homeland. Hardship and deprivation have always been part of life in Albania, but patience by then had come to an end. By the close of the twentieth century, the vast majority of writers and intellectuals, young and old, had indeed left Albania in search of a better life abroad. Few will ever return.

The early nineties also marked a turning point for the Albanians of Kosova and Macedonia. The communist regime in Yugoslavia had collapsed, and so had Yugoslavia. The Albanians in Kosova, under harsh Serb rule, were faced with an appalling form of discrimination, that of systematic ethnic persecution, which led ultimately to ethnic cleansing. Politically, the country found itself in a downward spiral which resulted inevitably in the 1999 war, but also in final liberation after so many years of torment.

Writers in Kosova, as opposed to their counterparts in Albania itself, had no desire or intention to leave their country. They were solidly committed to building a new nation. By the second half of the nineties, the political and economic situation in Kosova had, however, become so untenable that many writers had no choice but to flee the country or suffer imprisonment... or indeed be murdered by the State in which they lived.

Literature, nonetheless, continued to be published in Prishtina, even in the darkest hours of Serb rule. For the Kosova Albanians, books were an act of resistance to Serbian cultural hegemony. The Serbs themselves, who had been taught to despise the Albanians as an 'inferior race,' regarded the very thought of creative literature in Albanian as ridiculous. As such, once Belgrade had lost its political authority over the Kosova Albanians, it had no more opportunity, and probably no particular interest, in banning or censoring Albanian books. With Belgrade's illegal takeover and liquidation of the state-owned Rilindja Publishing Company, quality controls in publishing, however, disappeared, as they had in Albania. But books in fact did continue to circulate. Draped over the hoods of cars on street corners, they were hawked throughout Kosova in an impromptu manner. All traces of them could be removed instantly if the Serb police did decide to intervene. The Kosova Albanians were proud of every one of these books, although few of the latter were actually read.

Since liberation in June 1999, the book market has developed freely though perhaps modestly. In the field of creative literature, Kosova - with about forty percent of the total Albanian population in the Balkans - represents only ten to fifteen percent of the market in terms of book sales. It is thus proportionately far behind Albania itself.

If one were to ask what the main achievement of Albanian written culture has been over the last few decades, the reply would certainly be, "Poetry, here, there and everywhere!" As opposed to Western literatures, verse collections still account for the largest percentage of literary output in all the major centres of Albanian-language publishing: Tirana, Prishtina, Skopje, Shkodra and Tetova. Even under the harsh conditions of a free market economy in an underdeveloped region, Albanian poetry has managed to survive and maintain its momentum.

When impoverished and ill-educated Albanian emigrants and refugees gather in Western Europe or in North America in their often dingy and always smoke-filled clubs, it is more often than not that they come together for a poetry reading. It is here that the soul of the Albanian nation finds its expression.

Modern Albanian literature, both in Albania and in Kosova, is now, for the first time, at liberty to evolve and go its own way. Throughout the decades of the Hoxha dictatorship, and indeed up to the final months of Serb rule in Kosova, the border between the two halves of the Albanian nation was kept sealed by their respective rulers. Rare were those who crossed it without suffering political repercussions. The Berlin Wall between the two halves of Germany was, in comparison, a sieve. The result of this imposed separation was the rise of two quite different Albanian cultures and two different Albanian literatures. Since 1999, the two countries have been getting to know one another, and getting used to one another. Their citizens are now able to meet and mingle. It has not been easy for the population at large, and many misunderstandings have arisen, but the exchange of experience has proven particularly broadening and fruitful for Albanian writers on both sides of the border. For the first time, they have become members of one common literary culture, a culture which is now twice as large as and much more diverse than the smaller ones they had known. Albanian literature has been enriched. Its tender plant, whose stalks and roots have been torn out of the sparse soil so often over the course of history, is blossoming anew.

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[Paper given at the conference *Die Albaner auf dem westlichen Balkan: Stand und*

*Perspektiven der historischen Forschung, Tagung zu Ehren von Peter Bartl.* Institut für osteuropäische Geschichte, University of Vienna, 19 December 2006. Published in: Oliver Jens Schmitt & Eva Anne Frantz (ed.): *Albanische Geschichte: Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung.* Südosteuropäische Arbeiten, 140. ISBN 978-3-486-58980-1 (R. Oldenbourg, Munich 2009), p. 215-224.]