

OPENING A WINDOW OF ALBANIAN LITERATURE TO ENGLISH READERS

Interview with Dr. Robert Elsie, translator, author and editor of several English language volumes of Albanian poetry and literary heritage

by Sokol Rama

Robert Elsie is undoubtedly one of the most prolific translators of Albanian poetry and literary heritage into English. Born in 1950 in Vancouver, Canada, he studied at the University of British Columbia, graduating in 1972 with a diploma in Classical Studies and Linguistics. In the following years, he continued his post-graduate studies in Germany, France, Ireland, and finished his doctorate (Dr. Phil.) in 1978 at the Linguistics Institute, University of Bonn. From 1978 on, he visited Albania several times with a group of students and professors from the University of Bonn, visits which first awaken in him an interest for Albanian culture. For several years in a row, he also attended the International Seminar on Albanian Language, Literature and Culture, held in Prishtina, Kosova. From 1982 to 1987, he worked for the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bonn. Since that time he has worked as a freelance conference interpreter, primarily for Albanian and German. Most recently, he worked as an Albanian-English-Albanian simultaneous interpreter for The Hague Tribunal in the whole Kosova phase of the Milosevic trial.

Elsie has translated and published a series of books, among which *History of Albanian literature*, two volumes; *Dictionary of Albanian literature*; *A dictionary of Albanian religion, mythology and folk culture*; *Studies in Modern Albanian literature and culture*; *Albanian folktales and legends*; *An Elusive eagle soars: Anthology of modern Albanian poetry*; *Migjeni: Free verse*; *Flora Brovina: Call me by my name*; *Who will slay the wolf, selected poetry by Ali Podrimja*; *Gathering clouds: the roots of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and Macedonia*, etc.

Following is an interview he gave to *Illyria* last week.

Illyria: *There is hardly any reader of Illyria that has not read your translations of Albanian poetry and literary heritage. I have not yet met an Albanian American that doesn't have in his library at least one book translated by you. What was the initial attraction, that decisive moment that appealed so strongly to you so as to make you devote so much time and energy to Albanian literature?*

Dr. Elsie: I have always had a passion for relatively obscure foreign languages and cultures. When I began learning Albanian in the 1970s, in the course of my studies in comparative linguistics, I was struck by the "wall of silence" which surrounded Albanian culture. The Stalinist dictatorship in Albania and extreme isolation from which the Albanians suffered for decades had as a long-term consequence that very few foreigners ever learned Albanian and, to be honest, very few were interested, except for a handful of political extremists. Nor has the image Albania has portrayed over the last chaotic decade been particularly attractive. The paucity of scholars interested in Albania and the lack of literary translators from Albanian into English has meant that the wall of silence has not been broken down yet. And still, there is much to discover in Albanian culture. After years of isolation and oppression, the Albanians have much to tell. My interest has been in helping to make this culture, in all its diversity, known to and understood by the outside world.

Illyria: *The introductions to both the Brovina's and Podrimja's volumes are exceptionally informative but also emotionally warm and sympathizing. Is there any reason beyond the merits of their poetry?*

Dr. Elsie: When you begin translating the poetry of an author, you enter his or her cosmos. Each author is different, and each has his or her own message to convey to the world. In the case of Flora Brovina, who was in a Serb prison at the time I began the translation, I was of course influenced by the political circumstances of her life, too, but in general, it is the poetic message that counts. I translate authors whose work I have personally enjoyed and whom I think will come across well in an English translation. Not every poet, even the ones I enjoy and appreciate, is translatable, at least not by me. Nonetheless, I have translated many authors and, for lack of publishers, have recently put most of the material on my new website: www.albanianliterature.com to make it available to everyone with a computer. Many of my articles and books can be downloaded there, too.

I have, by the way, finished translations of two more Albanian poets, who will be published in the United States very soon. Visar Zhiti of Tirana is, in my opinion, one of the best and most representative poets of modern Albania. He spent many years in concentration camps under the dictatorship, but is much more than a 'prison poet.' He is a writer of tradition, clarity and precision. The bilingual edition of his works is going to be published shortly by Green Integer in Los Angeles. The second poet, Eqrem Basha of Prishtina, is a writer who has created a totally different cosmos: chaotic, absurd and full of meaning below the existentialist surface. His works are going to be published soon, too, by Gjonlekaj Publishing Co. in New York, again in a bilingual edition.

Illyria: *How did you come to learn Albanian so well, especially given the fact that unlike English it is a highly inflectional language?*

Dr. Elsie: As I mentioned, I have always had a passion for foreign languages. I must admit that it took me a long time to master Albanian. It was quite a struggle, in view of the lack, not only of good grammars and dictionaries at the time, but also of people to practise on. Why did I specialize in Albanian, and not Welsh, Lithuanian or Breton, which I had studied earlier, too? I guess it was a coincidence. In 1978, while I was finishing my doctorate in Germany, I had a rare opportunity, through my professor at the University of Bonn, to tour Albania with a group of students. I was quite mystified by all the political propaganda on the walls and billboards, which reminded me of a badly made Hollywood film, but I was equally enticed by the country and its extremely friendly and hospitable people. Such was Albania at the time, a theatre of the absurd, yet it has remained in my heart.

Illyria: *Albanians view the literary pieces you have translated so far as being the most representative of the Albanian poetry. While you have published a volume of poetry from Migjeni, Flora Brovina and Ali Podrimja, many of my acquaintances have come to expect from you a translation of Fishta. Given the fact that he is considered to be one of the patriarchs of Albanian poetry, are you working on publishing a separate volume of his poetry?*

Dr. Elsie: I have long been daunted by the thought of translating Fishta, and have long put it off because of the strong Gheg dialect, the complexities of his language and the, for me, very exotic culture of the Albanian Highlands. Fishta is the ultimate challenge for a literary translator. But I am a glutton for punishment and in 2000 I finally began to translate **The Highland Lute**, Alb. *Lahuta e Malcís*, which I regard as the Albanian National Literary Epic. The translation work was very difficult at first and, in fact, I gave up several times, but now I

am used to Fishta's language and mode of expression, and am making good progress. The first five cantos of the English translation of **The Highland Lute** are going to be published very soon (by Christmas I am told) in Peja in the series Dukagjini Balkan Books, where I have already published a number of other works in English. In retrospect, I think the translation has worked out extremely well. I am satisfied at least, but I will leave it to the reader to decide for himself. I am continuing slowly with the rest of **The Highland Lute**, but it is very long - as long as Homer's Iliad - so it will take me several years to complete. If I do, it will be an historic achievement.

Illyria: *Your contribution extends beyond poetry to publishing reviews and studies on Albanian literature, religion, mythology, and folk culture. What are your current projects?*

Dr. Elsie: Aside from **The Highland Lute**, I have completed an English translation of Albanian oral epic poetry which is going to be called, **The Songs of the Frontier Warriors**, Alb. *Këngët e Kreshnikëve*, which I regard as very important. It is going to be published soon (I hope before the end of the year) in a bilingual edition by Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers in Wauconda, Illinois. This will, at long last, make the Albanian epic known to the scholarly world and to the reading public. Up to now, it has been in the shadow of the better-known Serbo-Croatian epic, with which it is closely related. I have also finished a new book called **Introduction to Albanian Literature**. This is a shorter, more concise and updated version of my two-volume **History of Albanian Literature**, published in New York in 1995, and concentrates on the major authors of Albanian literature from the start up to the year 2000. I have not found a publisher for it yet, but haven't given up hope. I have also completed an English translation of a collection of **Modern Albanian Short Stories**, which I have submitted to a publisher in Chicago. Another work of interest to historians is **Early Albania: a reader of historical texts (11th - 17th centuries)**, which is going to be published next year in Germany, I hope. Finally, I have begun working on a new edition of the **Historical Dictionary of Albania** for Scarecrow Press, which I am planning as a mini-encyclopaedia of Albania and the Albanian. There is quite a bit of research and work involved in this project, so I have put Fishta and other translations aside for the moment.

Illyria: *Most recently, you have published "Gathering clouds: the roots of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and Macedonia", a collection of early twentieth-century documents. Any specific reason?*

Dr. Elsie: I am not usually involved in works which could be considered political, but in this case, I wanted to help make something clear to the international public. There has been a tendency in international circles since the war in Kosova to put all the blame on Milosevic. In simplified terms, it is alleged that "if Milosevic had not been in power, there would have been no nationalist conflicts in Yugoslavia and the country would still be together. Now that Milosevic is gone, we can put things back together." What most people abroad do not realize is that oppression and ethnic cleansing in Kosova existed long before Milosevic came to power. In fact, there has been a deplorable tradition of ethnic cleansing there throughout the 20th century, from the very beginning to the very end of Serb rule. Every Belgrade government: from the monarchy to the communist and post-communist periods took part in it. If this is made clear, and I hope it will be by this book, the international community will finally understand the obvious: that a definitive solution can only be brought about by respecting the democratic will of the people of Kosova.

Illyria: *I was told that during the first phase of Milosevic's trial at The Hague you served as an Albanian-English interpreter for the Tribunal. Do you have any special recollection that you might like to share with our readers?*

Dr. Elsie: The Milosevic trial has been considered the greatest trial in European history since Nürnberg and I regard it as a privilege to have been able to take part in it. I worked as an Albanian-English-Albanian simultaneous interpreter for the Tribunal daily from mid February through to the end of August 2002, and believe I was the only freelance interpreter to have been involved in the Kosova phase of the trial from beginning to end. I must admit that my main recollection from the trial is stress. The interpretation was unusually difficult. When interpreting from Albanian into English, I was aware that not only the courtroom, but also the international media, and thus at times the whole world, were listening to my voice, and that any mistake could alter the course of the trial. When I was interpreting from English into Albanian, I was equally aware that all of Kosova was listening to my Albanian - and to all of my grammatical and pronunciation mistakes - on television. Although I have done a lot of high-level conference interpreting for Albanian, I think my six months at the Tribunal were the most difficult period of my career, and certainly the one involving the most stress. As one colleague of mine in The Hague noted, it was like bungy-jumping every day.

The linguistic codes of English and Albanian at the trial were vastly different. The English "legalese" of the courtroom is an extremely sophisticated and complex language which I had to translate into Albanian, but also make intelligible for the Albanian witnesses, who were often simply villagers and knew little about legal technicalities. I am still not sure to what extent they, and listeners on TV in Kosova, always understood what I was saying. The other direction, from Albanian, or rather *kosovarçe*, into English, was even more nerve-racking because it was often difficult to understand the local dialects which the witnesses spoke, and to transpose their testimony in an unelaborated code into intelligible English. There were many cultural problems involved in the translations, too. The constant stress of the work there did have one advantage, though. It kept me from absorbing all the horror of the testimonies and from being lamed by the blood and gore we were forced to hear daily. My admiration goes to all those brave people who survived the unspeakable horrors and came from Kosova to testify.

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