

Dhimitër Shuteriqi (ed.)
History of Albanian literature
[*Historia e letërsisë shqiptare*].
Tiranë. Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë. 1983. 629 pages.

The pressing need for a comprehensive and reliable history of Albanian literature has come one decisive step closer to being fulfilled by *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare* (History of Albanian literature), assembled by a team of scholars from the Institute of Linguistics and Literature of the Albanian Academy of Sciences, under the direction of Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi. The new literary history, which carries the blessing of the ruling state and party authorities, is an improved and much-expanded version of the two-volume *Historia e letërsisë shqipe* (History of Albanian literature, 1959, 1965), which was not only outdated but frankly unreliable, as are virtually all secondary sources of Albanian literature to date. It is divided into three sections: 1) old Albanian literature, 2) Albanian literature of the Rilindja or national renaissance, and 3) Albanian literature of the 1912-1939 period. Each is introduced by a chapter setting the material in its cultural and historical perspective.

The section on old Albanian literature provides treatment not only of the earliest Christian writers of northern Albania, such as Gjon Buzuku, Pjetër Budi, Frang Bardhi and Pjetër Bogdani, and of the eighteenth-century poets of the Moslem tradition, but also a survey of Latin humanists of Albanian origin and of the far from negligible production of the Arbëresh writers of southern Italy. The most extensive coverage, however, is given in the second section to the literature of the so-called Rilindja period, with stress as always on the patriotic virtues of the writers of the period rather than on their literary merits. This approach is taken consciously and conforms to the party's stance that literature must serve the masses - i.e. in Albania's case, that any valid literary production must serve the cause of national independence and consolidation. Although it might be argued that scholars from socialist Albania have a tendency to idealize the ardent patriotism of nineteenth-century writers and to ignore an objective evaluation of their literary production, it cannot be denied that the nationalist element was predominant in the writing of a people struggling for independence from the decaying Ottoman Empire. Indeed, the very fact that a poet chose to write in Albanian at the time constituted in itself an act of political defiance against the Sublime Porte's edict banning Albanian-language books and schooling. It is not surprising, therefore, that Albanian critics still emphasize patriotism as a criterion of literary merit, a notion quite foreign to Western literature.

New is the third section on literature of the independence period up to World War II, including coverage for the first time of the long-neglected poet Lasgush Poradeci, one of the greats of the Albanian Parnassus, whose pantheistic verse, reminiscent of Eminescu, marks one of the high points of twentieth-century Albanian literature. His aesthetic objective of *l'art pour l'art* is in distinct contrast to the nationalist fervour of Fan Noli or the prerevolutionary outrage of Migjeni, not to mention the often drab uniformity of literary production in the fifties and sixties. In contrast to the earlier edition, more than passing reference is also made - though not devoid of polemics - to several of the Catholic writers of the pre-war period, in particular to Gjergj Fishta, who was once acclaimed as the national poet of Albania and whose clericalism and alleged pro-fascist leanings precipitated his fall to oblivion.

The index of authors and works as well as the selective bibliography contribute to making the new and, from the Marxist-Leninist view at least, definitive history of Albanian literature indispensable as a basic reference for all Albanologists.

First published in: World Literature Today 59.3 (summer 1985)