

Alexandre Zotos (ed.)
Anthology of Albanian poetry
[*Anthologie de la poésie albanaise*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. 8 Nëntori. 1983. 417 pages.

Poetry has always been the élan vital of Albanian literature; original prose is a much more recent genre, and drama, with very few exceptions of dubious quality, was virtually unknown before the twentieth century.

The present anthology of Albanian verse, complemented by parallel anthologies of prose and short stories (*Anthologie de la prose albanaise*, 1983; *Anthologie du récit albanais*, 1982), was compiled and translated in Albania for the Western reader. It comprises 230 poems by forty poets from the seventeenth century to the present day and includes brief biographical notes on all the writers, though with many of the inaccuracies of detail endemic to the Albanian literary review *Les Lettres Albanaises*, in which much of the verse first appeared in French translation. Readers of French with an interest in Albanian literature have indeed always been able to consider themselves more fortunate than readers of English, Spanish or German. Not only have French translations of many works of prose and poetry appeared in the above-mentioned journal and in separate Albanian editions, but at least eight of the major prose works of Ismail Kadare have been published in France.

Included in the *Anthologie de la poésie albanaise* are folk poetry, passages of verse from the religious writers of the seventeenth century, a sampling of the classic nineteenth-century poets in the long-standing tradition of romantic nationalism, and a good representative selection of modern poets from socialist Albania. Among the latter are Llazari Siliqi, Fatos Arapi, Dritëro Agolli (president of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists), and Kadare, the only Albanian author to have gained wide international reputation. Also of note are two poets of the Greek minority, Pano Çuka and Niko Kacalidha, as well as two of Albania's very first generation of women poets, Natasha Lako and Zhuljana Jorganxhi. Lacking for a full view of contemporary Albanian verse, which makes up two-thirds of the anthology, are the imaginative and more experimental poets of Kosovo, the Albanian-speaking region of southern Yugoslavia, whose production might be said to offer a wider range than that of poets from Albania itself, and the Arbëresh writers of the Albanian-language minority in southern Italy.

Poetry is a very individualistic matter and often difficult to reconcile with a staunchly communist society. The position of the poet must, as a matter of course, conform to the function assigned to him or her by the powers that be. The critic Dalan Shaplllo in his preface defines the mission of poetry here as serving the masses, giving them spiritual sustenance and emotional satisfaction. The goal is of course ubiquitous in post-war Albanian literature, though fortunately combined with enough individuality on the part of the poets to save modern Albanian verse from the sterile panegyrics which party dogmatists often long for. The dilemma of a poet with an assigned mission has been solved with a good deal of diplomatic creativity. Most contemporary poets have managed to portray themselves as communist, nationalist and yet as individuals. The present volume offers the Western reader direct access to the hearts and minds of the best-known Albanian literati.

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