

Mensur Raifi (ed.)

*Roads lead only one way. A survey of modern poetry from Kosova.*

John Hodgson & Fiona Cullen, transl.

Prishtinë. Kosova Association of Literary Translators. 1988. 235 pages

Acutely aware of the necessity of overcoming the isolation, both within Yugoslavia and in Europe, in which the budding literature of Kosovo (Alb. Kosova) is languishing, the Kosova Association of Literary Translators has published an English-language version of a selection of modern verse from the predominantly Albanian-speaking autonomous region.

*Roads lead only one way* comprises 139 poems written originally in one of the three languages of Kosovo: Albanian, Serbo-Croatian and Turkish. Represented in the anthology are the contemporary Albanian poets Esad Mekuli, Enver Gjerqeku, Azem Shkreli, Rrahman Dedaj, Fahredin Gunga, Ali Podrimja and Eqrem Basha, the Serbian poets Lazar Vučković, Radoslav Zlatanović and Darinka Jevrić, and the Turkish poet Hasan Mercan.

In contrast to the last anthology of Kosovo verse to have appeared in translation, *Dega e pikëlluar / The withered branch* Prishtinë 1979, which included only two poems by each poet, the present work offers selections of five to twenty-three poems per author which enable the perspicacious reader this time to grasp at least something of the particular style and flavour of each writer. Also included in the book are an introduction by writer and critic Mensur Raifi and bio-bibliographical notes about each of the poets.

The longest selection in the anthology is devoted to Azem Shkreli, an admired Albanian-language poet and writer of short stories and novels who was born in the Rugova mountains near Pejë (Peć) in 1938 (not to be confused with the dramatist and poet Adem Shkreli, two years his senior). Azem Shkreli, now head of 'Kosovo Film Studios' in Prishtinë, is an intellectual poet who, like his contemporary, Ali Podrimja, though highly expressive, is by no means verbose. His urban perception of things has given new significance to the reexamination of his experience with rural life among the rugged hill tribes of the Rugova district at the foot of the 'Mountains of the Damned', their traditional wisdom and way of life. Critic Agim Vinca has described him as a poet of ideas and profound judgments. Shkreli's perception can be succinctly summarized in the existentialist conclusion of his poetic 'New Testament':

*"Our age cannot dare to age without us."*

The translations by John Hodgson (from the Albanian) and Fiona Cullen (from the Serbo-Croatian) are functional and sufficiently faithful. To rhyme or not to rhyme, however, is one of the eternal questions which arise and which sooner or later all translators of verse must confront. Is it acceptable to translate rhymed lyric poetry without a rhyme in order to convey the message as clearly as possible and thereby produce only a sort of interlinear prose, or is one to recreate verse with a rhyme in order to preserve the poetic dimension, though at the risk of distorting the meaning of the original?

The first school of thought seems to predominate nowadays, no doubt among other reasons, because our impoverished age is no longer producing the sublime poet-translators of the past who, with the flick of a quill, were able to generate pages of verse similar or even identical in rhyme and metrics to the original. The rhymed English versions of Mekuli, Gjerqeku, Shkreli, Dedaj and Basha which Hodgson has produced, while by no means excessively stilted and unpleasant, simply make one inquisitive about the missing imagery of the original rather than satisfy our craving for 'real poetry'.

It is generally accepted at any rate that, with a very few exceptions, 'real poetry' is only to be had in the original and that translations can provide but a pale reflection, a reality we must come to terms with. As the Hebrew poet Chayyim Nachmann Bialik once put it: 'reading poetry in translation is like kissing the bride through the veil'. This said, translation still remains an obvious necessity and *Roads lead only one way* constitutes a welcome and significant addition to the few English translations which exist of Kosovo poetry and Albanian poetry in general.

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