

Sabri Hamiti  
Literary self-knowledge  
[*Vetëdija letrare*].  
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1989. 567 pages

Though it is generally conceded on both sides of the border that the artistic level of Albanian prose is still higher in Albania than it is in the (as yet autonomous) Albanian-speaking province of Kosovo in southern Yugoslavia, it is to the troubled and tormented plains of the blackbird that we must look for the best literary critics. One of them is Sabri Hamiti (b. 1950) who, together with Ali Aliu (b. 1934), eloquent critic from Lake Prespa, Rexhep Qosja (b. 1936), academician and literary historian, Ibrahim Rugova (b. 1945), cast into the limelight of recent political events as spokesman of the democracy and human rights movement, Rexhep Ismajli (b. 1947), released last year from an unpleasant term of 'isolation' and beatings in Serbian prisons, and Agim Vinca (b. 1947), cogent expert in contemporary verse, has introduced more objective and demandingly structuralist methods to Albanian literary criticism, so often given to innocuous platitudes in Tiranë.

Born in Dumnicë near Podujevë (Podujevo) in Kosovë, Sabri Hamiti studied comparative literature both in Zagreb and at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, where the demigods of French structuralism brought their influence to bear, and finished his doctorate at the University of Prishtinë. He is the author of numerous volumes of prose, poetry and drama, but it is primarily as an innovative critic that Hamiti has left his mark.

*Vetëdija letrare*, which could be translated roughly as 'literary self-knowledge', is Hamiti's fifth book of criticism. It was preceded by: *Variante*, Prishtinë 1974 (Variants), *Teksti i dramaturgjisë*, Prishtinë 1978 (The dramatized text) and *Kritika letrare*, Prishtinë 1979 (Literary criticism), written with critic Ibrahim Rugova, and *Arti i leximit*, Prishtinë 1983 (The art of reading). Hamiti introduces new notions and concepts to the study of Albanian literature, insisting on an interpretation independent of extra-literary processes. By focussing on thematic codes, notions of textual status, and narrative and poetic structures valid for all Albanian literature, he sees this little-known literature as an structured organism which must be examined, as far as possible, without the optics, values and ideologies of the age in question. This stance alone is refreshing in view of the at times impervious ideological filter through which every printed word in Albania still must pass.

In addition to theoretical considerations, Hamiti applies his approach to a series of analytic studies on the authors whom he regards as having been turning-points in the history of Albanian literature from its beginnings in the sixteenth century to the present day: Pjetër Budi (1566-1622) and Pjetër Bogdani (ca. 1630-1689) of early Albanian religious literature, Italo-Albanian Girolamo De Rada (1814-1903), Pashko Vasa (1825-1892), Kostandin Kristoforidhi (1830-1895) and Naim Frashëri (1846-1900) of the Rilindja movement of national awakening in the nineteenth century, pre-war poets Andon Zako Çajupi (1866-1933) and the messianic Migjeni (1911-1938), as well as a number of contemporary writers of Kosovo and Albania, from poet Esad Mekuli (b. 1916) and prose writer Hivzi Sulejmani (1910-1975) to Anton Pashku (b. 1938), Nazmi Rrahmani (b. 1941), Vehbi Kikaj, a leading author of children's literature in Kosovo, prose writers Musa Ramadani (b. 1944) and Teodor Laço (b. 1936) and poet Nexhat Halimi (b. 1949).

*Vetëdija letrare* was honoured with the 1989 Rilindja award as best book of the year for its valuable contribution to the study of Albanian literature. In a reference to the increasingly hopeless political situation in Kosovo, Sabri Hamiti acknowledged in his speech of acceptance in

February 1990:

*"In accepting this award, my thoughts go out to all those who are striving at this difficult hour to create something of value in Albanian culture, to all those creative people who are aware that Albanian culture has always been a function not only of the creation of a national identity but also of its defence. Now that this identity is under dire attack and has come under conditions which threaten its very existence, culture and literature take on an even greater significance and function as their life grows more and more difficult."*

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