

Bardhyl Londo
Only Ithaca
[*Vetëm Itaka*].
Prishtinë. Rilindja. 1989. 119 pages

The Albanians are most at home in their rugged and inaccessible mountains. Like the Romans, they have always distrusted the sea which has brought them nothing but grief. And yet, Albania's poets have retained a curious fascination for Ithaca, the saga of Ulysses and for the sparkling azure waters of the Ionian. No other island occurs more often in Albanian verse than this isle of Homeric fulfilment and Cavafian futility. Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) and Sulejman Mato (b. 1941), two established poets of the Albanian south coast, have made use of the Ithaca motif to transform the rhythmic waves of the Ionian Sea, which Greece and Albania share, into the pulse of poetic being.

In this tradition follows Bardhyl Londo (b. 1948) from the village of Lipë near Përmet in the southern interior of Albania who has built up a reputation as a leading Albanian poet of the eighties. Londo studied language and literature at the University of Tiranë, taught school for a number of years in his native district of Përmet and now works for the Albanian literary and cultural journal 'Drita', issued fortnightly in Tiranë. His latest volume of verse, *Vetëm Itaka* (Only Ithaca), which is his first book to have appeared in Prishtinë, is a compendium of the best of his work from three recent collections published in Tiranë: *Hapa në rrugë*, 1981 (Steps in the street), *Emrin e ka dashuri*, 1984 (They call it love) and, in particular, his well received *Si ta qetësoj detin*, 1988 (How can I calm the sea) which was awarded last year's Migjeni Prize.

Londo's lyrics depart from the concrete: details and moments of existence he has experienced, lived through intensely and transformed into verse in a controlled, erudite manner. His poetry, which is written in standard meters and mostly rhymed, melodiously echoes the rich traditions of Tosk verse to the extent that Tiranë critic Razi Brahimë has placed him at the crux between the classical Rilindja poet and thinker Naim Frashëri (1846-1900) and the influential poet of the soil, Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931), now head of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists.

Vetëm Itaka is divided into five cycles, as all volumes of contemporary Albanian verse seem to be: *Drejt teje kam vrapuar* (I ran towards you) evincing Londo's fascination with roads and travel, *Vdekja e kish harruar* (Death forgot him) with verse dedicated to his predecessors, Albanian poets of the past such as Andon Zako Çajupi, Ndre Mjeda, Naim Frashëri, Migjeni and Lasgush Poradeci, *Rebelimi i shkronjave* (The rebellion of letters), and *Fund vere* (End of summer), both thematically varied, and *Vetëm Itaka* (Only Ithaca) devoted primarily to the figures and symbols of ancient Greece.

Is Ithaca the prerogative of the poet, the traveller and dreamer? Should Ithaca not be considered foreign to Londo's wilful compatriots so firmly entrenched in their mountain homeland and to their often matter-of-fact literature of socialist realism? The poet insists:

*We are all a little like Ulysses,
Even if we may not have a Penelope
We do have an Ithaca!*

Indeed in the final poem of the collection he concludes:

*Only Ithaca remains.
Ithaca for the child, Ithaca for genius,*

*It, the eternal,
Dreams,
 love,
 life,
 death:
Ithaca - man himself.*

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