

Dritëro Agolli  
The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo  
[*Splendeur de décadence du camarade Zulo*].  
Christian Gut, transl.  
Paris. Gallimard. 1990. 286 pages

For the last two decades, contemporary Albanian writers have been condemned nolens volens to live in the shadow of Ismail Kadare whose last-minute emigration to Parisian exile in October 1990 and whose political ambitions will no doubt only increase his international literary reputation. One such writer is Dritëro Agolli, whose satirical *Shkëlqimi dhe rënia e shokut Zylo* (The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo) has now appeared in a well-received French translation by Christian Gut.

Comrade Zylo is the epitome of the well-meaning but incompetent *apparatchik*, director of an obscure government cultural affairs department to which his ego is intrinsically attached. His pathetic vanity, his quixotic fervour, his grotesque public behaviour, in short his splendour and his fall, are all recorded in ironic detail by his labouring and more astute subordinate and friend Demkë, who serves as a neutral observer. The turning-point in comrade Zylo's career finally comes when he expresses his views on a play:

*"The drama is ideologically faulty. First of all, the negative hero inspires force. Did you notice him climbing a hill? What does this mean, my friends? It means he has mounted a pedestal, i.e. the hill. He should get off the hill and be tossed into a well. It is for the positive hero to climb the hill."*

These words which, according to Agolli, were actually uttered by some subtle proponent of socialist realism in Tiranë at the time, precipitate Zylo's fall when the play is later deemed a success by others higher on the ladder.

Comrade Zylo is a universal figure, a character to be found in any society or age, and critics have been quick to draw parallels ranging from Daniel Defoe and Nikolay Gogol's *Revizor* to Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera's *Žert*. But it is doubtless the Eastern European reader who will best appreciate all the subtleties of the novel. A Bulgarian translation exists and Russian and German versions are now in preparation.

Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931) from the Devoll region of southeastern Albania has exercised a strong influence on the course of contemporary Albanian literature both as a prose writer and a poet of the soil. His other prose works include the partisan novels *Komisari Memo*, Tiranë 1970 (Engl. transl. *The bronze bust*, Tiranë 1975) and *Njeriu me top*, Tiranë 1975 (Engl. transl. *The man with the gun*, Tiranë 1983). Sixteen of his short stories have also been published in English in the volume *Short stories*, Tiranë 1985. Agolli is a member of the Central Committee of the Party and has served as president of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists since 1973 following the purge and condemnation that year of the liberals led by dramatist Fadil Paçrami and Todi Lubonja. 'The splendour and fall of comrade Zylo', his best novel by far, first appeared in 1972 in the Tiranë satirical journal *Hosteni* (The goad) and was published the following year. That it was published in Stalinist Albania, a country not exactly renowned at the time for its tolerance of anything even vaguely resembling criticism of the system, is no doubt linked to the fact that the character of Zylo was modelled in a negative manner on liberal journalist Jusuf Alibali, a friend of Fadil Paçrami and Mehmet Shehu. The novel thus served among other things

to discredit Alibali, subsequently sent into exile, and the liberal movement which Agolli himself, almost twenty years later and in a different age, has now nolens volens come to accept.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 65.3 (summer 1991)