

Migjeni

Chronicles of a Northern city and other prose

[*Chroniques d'une ville du Nord et autres proses*].

Jusuf Vrioni, transl.

Paris. Fayard. 1990. 298 pages

There has been a stifling level of polarization in Albanian literature over the last forty-five years: self-confident and vociferous proponents of socialist realism, the literary doctrine which so marked the course of Albanian culture from 1945 to 1991, and quiet though equally determined proponents of pre-war literary currents and of the handful of writers now being rediscovered, who for one reason or another did not conform. One author all can agree on though is Scutarine poet and prose writer Migjeni (1911-1938).

Migjeni, acronym of Millosh Gjergj Nikolla, was born in the northern Albanian town of Shkodër (Scutari) where he attended a Serbian school. He studied at an Orthodox seminary in Bitola (Monastir) in Macedonia where he acquired a taste for Serbian, Russian and French writers and, being of partly Serbian origin, became perhaps the only author to bridge the cultural chasm separating the Albanians and Serbs. On his return to Albania, Migjeni abandoned his plan of joining the priesthood and took up teaching in the rugged northern Albanian Alps. He also began writing verse and prose sketches which reflect the life and anguish of a discerning intellectual in what certainly was and has remained the most backward region of Europe. The consumptive poet was, however, soon obliged to put an end to his career as a writer and teacher and seek medical assistance in Turin where his sister Olga was studying. After a short stay at a sanatorium, he died at the Waldensian hospital in Torre Pellice at the age of twenty-six, a tragic loss for Albanian letters.

Migjeni was the first author to break with the lingering traditions of romantic nationalism in Albanian literature. His slender though powerful volume of 'Free Verse', which has been recently translated into English (Tiranë 1991), evinces a strong social ethic, not of sympathy with the poor and starving, but of sarcasm and outrage. Like the forty-three poems, which have alas been excluded from the present volume, the twenty-two short tales and sketches of this poetic Zola, raising his voice in accusation, focus on suffering, hunger, squalor and injustice. As such, some like to regard him as a precursor of socialist realism whereas others see his reputation sullied by such an epithet. While Stalinist critics have delighted in viewing Migjeni as a product of 'pre-liberation' Zogist Albania, it has become painfully evident that the poet's message, after forty-six years of dictatorship of the proletariat, is now more topical than ever.

The present French translation is accompanied by a long introductory essay by Ismail Kadare, entitled 'The irruption of Migjeni into Albanian literature'. This subjective and somewhat superficial account of Albanian letters in the thirties strongly reflects the attitudes and prejudices of the Party of Labour, and his attempt at determining Migjeni's function entirely satisfactory. Written a year before Kadare's emigration to France, the introduction is more than anything revealing of the autobiographical irruptions of its inscrutable author. Kadare describes, for instance, the processes by which "under certain terrible and diabolically perfected dictatorships, the writer's profession becomes a veritable curse." This was one problem the young and messianic Migjeni, who gave free rein to his outrage and his passions, did not have to confront.

The tragic spirit of Migjeni, harbinger of modernity in Albanian letters, now hovers over a tragically divided land.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 65.4 (autumn 1991)