

Fatos Arapi
We, the grief of lights
[*Ne, pikëllimi i dritave*].
Tiranë. Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve. 1993. 78 pages

Contemporary verse in Albania took its course in the early sixties. It was the creation of three writers in particular: the multi-talented and inscrutable Ismail Kadare (b. 1936) from Gjirokastër, later to become the first Albanian novelist to enjoy an international reputation, poet of the soil and short story writer Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931) of the southeastern Devoll region, and the poet's poet par excellence, Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) from the coast near Vlorë.

It was this generation of writers, educated in the countries of the Eastern bloc, with which Albania was then allied, that first endeavoured to break with the cumbersome propaganda of partisan verse and of 'boy meets tractor' lyrics, and began, ever so discreetly, to circumvent some of the constraints of socialist realism imposed upon it by the Stalinist regime. Fatos Arapi's first collection, *Shtigje poetike*, Tiranë 1961 (Poetic paths), was like a fresh breeze from off the Ionian Sea after years of stale conformity. Arapi transfixed in his verse bedazzling sunlight, the rhythmic breaking of the waves and the salty tang of the air from his native Albanian Riviera.

Now, after a dozen volumes of verse, some of which reflect more than anything the vicissitudes of Albania's political life, we encounter a different poet. Gone is the nervous and impetuous young man searching the sparkling expanses of the Ionian for his inspiration. Vanished is the optimist by political necessity. In *Ne, pikëllimi i dritave* (We, the grief of lights), we encounter a mature, pensive writer, 'an abandoned temple' as he sees himself. Fatos Arapi, now 'hand in hand with tragedy', contemplates matters of the heart and seems to find much solace in the theme of love, ubiquitous in this collection of fifty-six poems.

The volume offers an overview of Arapi's work from the final decade of the dictatorship, poems which, to a large extent, remained unknown and unread in Albania itself, though they were published in Prishtinë by Ali Podrimja in 1991 in an initial version entitled *Dafina nën shi* (Laurel in the rain). Widely admired though Arapi is, it remains to be seen whether the poet's hapless compatriots, on the threshold of social and cultural disintegration in Albania and in the shadow of the apocalypse in Kosovo, will find enough peace of mind and inner strength at the present moment to read and enjoy such nostalgic reflections.

First published in: World Literature Today 67.4 (autumn 1993)