

Ali Podrimja

The smile in a cage

[*Buzëqeshja në kafaz. Das Lächeln im Käfig*].

Hans-Joachim Lanksch, transl.

Klagenfurt. Wieser. 1993. 129 pages

Kosovo (Alb. *Kosova*), the restless Plain of the Blackbirds, in the southern part of what was once Yugoslavia, still remains to a large extent a *terra incognita* of European literature, despite the excellent poets it produced during the ever so brief flourishing of Albanian culture there. From the fall of the dreaded Serbian minister Aleksandar Rankovic in July 1966 to the bloody quelling of the 1981 movement for equality and republic status, Kosovo enjoyed a fleeting period of relative freedom and prosperity. It was during those years, after decades of suffocation, that Kosovo Albanian culture came of age. University education in Prishtinë took root, and publishing and cultural activity advanced substantially. The suffocation has now resumed with even greater intensity since Slobodan Milosevic's coup d'état in July 1990.

Of the many daring poets, prose writers and critics of the generation that grafted Western European ideas onto the traditionally tribal culture of the northern Albanian mountains and the fertile plains of Kosovo, one writer has emerged as a figure of international literary stature.

Ali Podrimja has remained an elliptic poet over the years and one of harsh, uncompromising metaphors. The rock, the snake, the wolf, the distant riverbank and the lonely stone tower haunt his verse. The poet's work was marked more than anything by the suffering and distress of his youth. A deprived childhood in Kosovo and the early death of his parents gave the young Ali Podrimja little opportunity to relish in the joys of life and little time to take flight into the spheres of the sublime. Profoundly shaken in later years by the death of his son Lumi, Ali Podrimja is now faced with the possibility of yet another tragic loss, that of his country. The poet must come to terms with the cruel and overwhelming reality that his whole people have fallen victim to the ravenous appetite of the wolf.

In the summer of 1992, the city of Munich invited the poet to spend a few months of seclusion at a villa on Lake Starnberg in the Bavarian Alps, a stay which gave him temporary respite and an opportunity to extract himself emotionally from the Balkans, to breathe freely, and at the same time, to reflect on the sombre fate of his people.

*"God gave them nothing, not even grass  
Only snakes and stones"*

It was a period of profound creativity for the writer who has now become the literary representative of his people at the international level. In his most recent verse, Podrimja's stoic composure has, not surprisingly, been overlaid by a new, political dimension which was previously marginal in his work. Poems such as the 'Black angel of Sarajevo' and 'Wandering with wolves' evince not only his sense of helplessness and anguish, but also his growing bitterness at Europe's indifference.

The forty-one poems of the present bilingual (German/Albanian) edition entitled 'The smile in a cage' constitute Ali Podrimja's second major verse collection to appear in German translation. In preparation at the present time are editions of his works in English and French which will offer the international reading public further opportunities to discover a recusant voice and a little known culture.

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