

Dritëro Agolli  
The belated pilgrim  
[*Pelegrini i vonuar*].  
Tiranë. Progresi. 1993. 270 pages

Have readers not had enough of Dritëro Agolli, head of the party-controlled Union of Writers and Artists from the purge of the liberals in 1973 to the end of the dictatorship in 1990, and cynosure of the official literary establishment of communist Albania, and now, a leading politician of the opposition Socialist Party to boot? Somber dealings, his opponents and critics would say, somber not only in view of the daily electricity cuts in the Albanian capital, but also because of all the mud-slinging in and around the Albanian parliament.

No, in fact, readers have not had enough. Dritëro Agolli, short-story writer and poet of the soil, is a rare voice of humanity and sincerity in Albanian letters. He is a poet who, despite the vicissitudes of public life, has managed to remain true to himself and to his readers.

*Pelegrini i vonuar* (The belated pilgrim) is Agolli's first volume of verse since *Udhëtojt i menduar* (Pensive I wander) of 1985, and his first book ever written without an eye to the invisible censor. It is an impressive collection of 217 previously unpublished poems in which we encounter a new chapter, not only in the life of the poet, but also in the struggle of his people for survival.

It will be years before the Albanians recover from the decades of isolation, inhumanity and terror they lived through under the surrealist reign of Enver Hoxha. Like victims of a sudden traffic accident, they are only now waking, slowly and painfully, to understand what hit them in the first place. Gone is the trepidation, but also gone are the all-encompassing ideals and values of that age. The aging poet is left to pick up the pieces and start again.

*"A pilgrim I have been for ages  
I wander through a land of vanished hopes  
Separated unwittingly from my caravan."*

In a postscript, Agolli confesses:

*"For poets of my generation, an age of disappointments and dilemmas has dawned, an age in which to re-evaluate what we produced, without forgetting or denying those fair and humane values we brought forth. But the fortress of ideas and ideals which we believed in, some of us completely, others partially, has all but collapsed, and in its walls burn the fires of our dreams. Those fires have awakened a different type of verse..."*

If comprehending the past enables people to deal with the present and prepare for the future, Dritëro Agolli's verse - the bread of life, as a younger writer recently put it - will certainly be of assistance to the Albanians in digesting the collective trauma that nation has suffered.

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