

Eqrem Basha  
The snail's march  
[*Marshi e kërmillit*].  
Pejë/Pec. Dukagjini. 1994. 207 pages

Written culture in Kosovo experienced a sudden and quite unexpected burst of creativity in the seventies, only a few years after the founding in 1969 of the University of Prishtinë, then the only serious institute of Albanian-language education in the Balkans. The Albanian majority in Kosovo was first granted full cultural autonomy and linguistic equality with the ruling Serbian minority under the Yugoslav constitution of 1974.

It was during this brief blossoming of education and culture, which lasted up until the imposition of martial law by Belgrade in 1981, that Kosovo Albanians were first able to access the currents of European thought and literature. A good number of Albanian students from Prishtinë, Prizren and Pejë, and from neighbouring Macedonia, managed to study abroad, in France in particular, and lapped up the currents of intellectual discussion in a period of political change and social revolution. The works of contemporary philosophers and sociologists were first made available in Albanian and Serbian translations, and 'Theatre of the Absurd' found its way onto Kosovo stages.

Eqrem Basha, born in Dibër in western Macedonia in 1948, is an author who epitomizes this generation in many ways. He studied at the University of Prishtinë and, in the period from 1971 to 1982, published seven volumes of original short stories and innovative verse as well as translations of the dramatic works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Eugène Ionesco. Later on, he worked for the drama section of Prishtinë television until its definitive abolition by Serbian forces in 1989.

Like other Kosovo writers of his generation, Eqrem Basha was not uninfluenced by the fantastic and the absurd, and it is this aspect which predominates in the present volume of short stories. *Marsha e kërmillit* (The snail's march) is a collection of sixteen tales which evoke the spheres of fantasy that average mortals never experience, at least not without the help of recreational drugs. Basha's journeys may be fantastic, but they are not always pleasant. The tale *Dy vetë përgjojnë zbrazëtinë* (Two individuals on the look-out for emptiness), for instance, in compact dialogue and reduced imagery, mirrors the solitude and futility of existence in the tradition of Samuel Beckett.

Basha's obsession with the absurd is, in a certain sense, a reflection of the culture of the seventies. As is the case with a number of other contemporary Kosovo writers, however, this obsession may also reflect the fact that reality for Albanians there, in the shadow of the apocalypse, has become too difficult to stomach. A collection of Eqrem Basha's prose is forthcoming in a French translation.

First published in: World Literature Today 69.1 (winter 1995)