

Beqë Cufaj.  
205.

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For centuries, the Albanians had little contact with the Western world. Recent migration patterns have, however, changed things dramatically in western Europe. There is now an estimated quarter of a million Albanians in Germany alone. Most of these individuals are political refugees from Kosovo, the Serbian-occupied province of former Yugoslavia. Since its military and political takeover in 1989/1990, Kosovo has been undergoing the same process of Serbification and ethnic cleansing as Bosnia, though in a much quieter, discreet fashion. With no job prospects for members of 'the inferior race,' young Albanians in Kosovo have had no choice but to emigrate in order to feed their often large families. Among them is a poet of fresh talent who has given a good degree of poetic expression to the situation of such refugees in Western Europe.

Beqë Cufaj was born in the Kosovo village of Gramaqel in 1970 and studied literature at the University of Prishtina. His first verse collection *Balada budallaqe* (Crazy ballads) was published in Prishtina in 1994. Like so many young men of his generation, he was forced into exile and has found asylum, temporarily at least, near Stuttgart in southern Germany.

There is perhaps no more quintessential symbol of the Albanian in the mid-nineties than that of the deprived and impoverished Albanian refugee, housed in some derelict hotel or container in western Europe and trying to come to terms with the dichotomy of being a sub-Saharan European. It is in this respect that Cufaj's work is of particular significance. The present volume, entitled '205' after the number of the room where the poet spent his first painful months in the affluent West, is a collection of forty-four poems, prose poems and short prose texts which have captured, so to speak, the spirit of the times for Albanians abroad.

In '205,' we enter an age of infinite loneliness in downtown hotel rooms, of anguish on a park bench in the summer heat, and of casual encounters in the bed of a prostitute. There is little of the fulfilment and human dignity that these Albanians seek and hope to find in the West. Such is the present reality for hundreds of thousands of refugees from Kosovo, who while away the weeks, months and now years playing cards in their smoke-filled clubs and exchanging the latest news on their homeland in the cold and unwelcoming halls of train stations. Cufaj's only solace is his work. In 'Portraits of poets' he writes: "Bukowsky is an alcoholic / Ginzberg bisexual / Verlaine sleeps with Rimbaud / Mallarmé lives in a brothel / Apollinaire writes pornographic novels / Hölderlin is insane as is / Baudelaire / Morrison will never die / the abandoned Lasgush [Poradeci] meanders with the stars / Life is wonderful / if you know nothing about it."

It is only to be hoped the poet has since attained a nirvana-like state of blissful ignorance and, in his oblivion, will be able to pursue his literary career until better days dawn for the young and aspiring writers of Kosovo.

Robert Elsie  
Olzheim / Eifel, Germany