

Bashkim Shehu

*Rrugëtimi i mbramë i Ago Ymerit.*

Prishtina. Buzuku. 1995. 157 pp. ISBN 86-7785-025-2.

Bashkim Shehu

*Le dernier voyage d'Ago Umeri*, Anne-Marie Autissier, tr.

Paris, L'Esprit des Péninsules, 1995, 157 pages, 110 F. ISBN 2-910435-04-0.

The novel 'The last voyage of Ago Ymeri' by Tirana writer Bashkim Shehu (b. 1955) confronts us with what he knows best, the Orwellian dimension of a totalitarian state. His leading character, Viktor Dragoti, is a critical intellectual and, as such, is destined to fall prey to the blind machinery of the Leader, the Prince of the Underworld, though in actual fact, it remains unclear throughout most of the novel exactly why he is being persecuted.

When Viktor Dragoti appears in a remote Albanian village, evidence soon gathers that his name is that of someone said to have been slain nine years earlier by the Albanian coastguard while attempting to swim to freedom. But how could he possibly have returned to life? Was he a ghost, or perhaps insane? Word of his presence in the village inevitably reaches the Leader, who takes advantage of the unusual situation to settle some old scores. Meanwhile, Dragoti makes the fatal mistake of exchanging a few confidential words with his bride-to-be.

Exorcising the past is a current obsession in postcommunist Albanian literature. Much contemporary prose and verse, of varying quality, has been devoted to coming to terms with the half-century of Stalinist dictatorship the Albanians have now put behind them. In "The Last Voyage of Ago Ymeri," accordingly, Bashkim Shehu revives the tragic past of one individual and observes his downfall within the context of the tragic past of his whole nation. Also woven into the narrative of the novel is the well-known folk ballad of Ago Ymeri, the legendary hero who is given leave to return from the underworld for one single day. It is a work of creative and fluid fantasy which should be well received.

Bashkim Shehu's own life offers ample proof that his character, Viktor Dragoti, is at least in part autobiographical. Born the son of the dreaded and notorious general, prime minister, and 'Sigurimi' boss Mehmet Shehu (1913-1981), long-time ally and later bitter rival of dictator Enver Hoxha, Bashkim enjoyed a privileged youth and a good education as a scion of Tirana's red aristocracy. It was while he was working as a scriptwriter for the Albanian film studio in 1977 that his first collection of short stories, *Një kohë tjetër* (Another age), appeared.

With the spectacular murder/suicide of his father during the night of 17 December 1981, however, Bashkim Shehu's fortunes took a sudden turn for the worse. The young writer was to spend the next eight years in a concentration camp, followed by a year and a half of political internment, simply for having been his father's son. The purge of Mehmet Shehu and the fortunes of his family are told in his fascinating autobiography *L'automne de la peur* (Paris 1993) / *Vjeshta e ankthit* (Tirana 1994), perhaps the best work of its kind to have come out of Tirana to date. In 1992, Bashkim Shehu moved to Budapest where he studied sociology. He has now resumed his career as a leading Albanian prose writer, as the present novel evinces, and has become a recognized figure of intellectual life in his Balkan homeland.

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