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All correspondence and inquiries should be directed to

Translation Review
The University of Texas at Dallas
Box 830688 - JO51
Richardson, TX 75083-0688

Telephone: (972) 883-2092

Fax: (972) 883-6303

E-mail: translation.review@utdallas.edu

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ALBANIAN LITERATURE IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

By Robert Elsie

It has been about two decades since the opening of Albania, after half a century of Stalinist dictatorship, and almost a decade since the liberation of Kosovo. Albanian literature remains, nonetheless, one of the least known national literatures of Europe. Many interested readers will have heard the name Ismail Kadare, but few other literary associations will come to mind.

While much Albanian literature has been translated into French, and some major and minor works are available in Italian, German, and Russian, even Spanish, English-language translations, with the exception of some works of Kadare, have been sadly missing in bookstores and on bookshelves. This paper endeavors to provide an overview of existing English-language publications of Albanian literature and of the diffusion of Albanian letters.

The first translation into English of what could very broadly be described as Albanian literature was published in 1596. It is *The Historie of George Castriot, Surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albinie, Containing his Famous Actes, his Noble Deedes of Armes and Memorable Victories again the Turkes for the Faith of Christ* (London 1596), a translation by one Zachary Jones from a French version of a Latin work entitled *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi, Epirotarum Principis* (Rome ca. 1508–1510). This “History of Scanderbeg” was written by the historian Marinus Barletius Scodrensis (ca. 1450–1512), known in Albanian as Marin Barleti, who, after experiencing the Turkish occupation of his native Shkodra at first hand, settled in Padua, where he became rector of the parish church of St. Stephen’s. The work was widely read in the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries and also exists in Italian, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish translations, and now of course in Albanian. Although it is not a translation from the Albanian and is more a work of history than of literature, Barleti’s “History of Scanderbeg” is the first Albanian book, if we may call it that, to have been translated into English.

Albanian oral literature was first made available in English in the 1920s and 1930s, in two now rare volumes. The first was *Tricks of Women and Other Albanian Tales* (New York 1928) by Paul Fenimore Cooper, descendant of the American novelist James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), which was translated from French and German. The second, *Albanian Wonder Tales* (Lovat Dickenson, London 1936), by Post Wheeler (1869–1956), is a beautiful edition of ten fairy tales, published with the assistance of Stavro Frashëri (1900–1965) of Kavaja. More recently, I published an edition of folk tales in the volume *Albanian Folktales and Legends*, Peja 2001, and another collection was recently printed by Mustafa Tukaj and Joanne M. Ayers, entitled *Faith and Fairies: Tales Based on Albanian Legends and Ballads*, Shkodra 2002. In 1931, the Scottish anthropologist Margaret M. Hasluck (1885–1948) published a modest, though badly transcribed collection of folk tales under the title *Këndime Englisht-Shqip or Albanian-English Reader: Sixteen Albanian Folk-Stories, Collected and Translated, with Two Grammars and Vocabularies*, Cambridge UK 1931. Peggy Hasluck, who was the wife of the noted archaeologist and orientalist Frederick William Hasluck (1878–1920), was an astounding figure. She bought a house in



Elbasan and spent almost two decades of her life in Albania after her husband's death. I am delighted to announce that, with the assistance of Bejtullah Destani of London, I have come across the full manuscript of her substantial collection of Albanian folk tales in English translation and hope to publish it.

Another, in my view important, addition to Albanian oral literature is the recent collection titled *Songs of the Frontier Warriors: Këngë Kreshnikësh. Albanian Epic Verse in a Bilingual English-Albanian Edition*, Wauconda, Illinois 2004, translated and published by my colleague Janice Mathie-Heck of Calgary, Alberta, and myself. It contains over 6,000 lines of epic verse, primarily from the Mujo and Halili cycle, and endeavors finally to throw more light on the Albanian epic, which has remained in the shadow of the Serbo-Croatian, or more properly, Bosnian epic, with which it has undeniable affinities.

English translations of written Albanian literature are a relatively recent phenomenon. The first translations began to appear in Tirana in the 1960s but were generally not of sufficient literary quality to make them readable. Of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Albanian literature in translation, one may mention the little volume *The Last Lay of Bala*, Tirana 1967, by the Italo-Albanian (Arbëresh) poet and man of letters Gabriele Dara junior (1828–1885). This rhymed English version of the lengthy romantic ballad *Kënka e sprasme e Balës*, Catanzaro 1906, translated by Ali Cungu (1898–1978), is unfortunately more of a bouncy exercise in traditional poetics than a readable and faithful version of the original. Similar in style by the same translator is *Scanderbeg's Return and other Poems*, Tirana 1970, by the classic Rilindja poet and ideologist Naim bey Frashëri (1846–1900). An uncensored version of Ali Cungu's translation of Frashëri's *Bagëti e bujqësija* (Herding and Farming), Bucharest 1886, was published by the translator's brother,

Mahmoud Tsungu, in New York under the title *Frashëri's Song of Albania*, Smithtown, New York 1981. More acceptable from a stylistic point of view is the melodramatic play *Besa* by Naim Frashëri's talented brother, Sami bey Frashëri (1850–1904), translated into English by Nelo Drizari (1902–1978), former lecturer in Albanian at Columbia University, as the *Pledge of Honor, an Albanian Tragedy*, New York 1945.

The works of the pre-revolutionary poet Migjeni (1911–1938), pseudonym of Millosh Gjergj Nikolla, were first translated into English, again by Ali Cungu, in the volume *Migjeni: Selected Albanian Songs and Sketches*, Tirana 1962. Here, again, excessive attention to rhyme and rhythm substantially diminishes the dramatic force and caustic cynicism of Migjeni's verse of growing social awareness. I have published another, I believe much more appropriate, translation of Migjeni's complete poetic works in the volume *Free Verse*, Peja 2001. In addition, a number of Migjeni's short stories and prose sketches have appeared in my new volume *Tales from Old Shkodra: Early Albanian Short Stories*, Peja 2004. This book also includes short stories by Ernest Koliqi (1902–1975), the éminence grise of pre-Second World War Albanian literature, translated by me and by the late British Albanologist Stuart Mann (1905–1986).

Numerous classics of Albanian socialist realism literature were published in Tirana in English translation during the dictatorship. Most of these early translations were awkward, to say the least, although they suffice for the most part to convey a general idea of the questionable Albanian prose of the period. Details can be found in my article in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, London, 70.2 (April 1992), pp. 249–257.

The best example of creativity and originality in contemporary Albanian letters is Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), still the only Albanian writer to enjoy a broad international

reputation. Kadare's talents have lost none of their innovative force over the last four decades. His courage in attacking literary mediocrity within the system brought a breath of fresh air to Albanian culture.

Kadare began his literary career in Albania with poetry but turned increasingly to prose, of which he soon became the undisputed master and by far the most popular writer of the whole of Albanian literature. His works were extremely influential throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and for many readers, he was the only ray of hope in the chilly, dismal prison that was communist Albania. Ismail Kadare lived the next thirty years of his life in Tirana, constantly under the Damocles Sword of the Party. He was privileged by the authorities, in particular once his works became known internationally. Indeed, he was able to pursue literary and personal objectives for which other writers would certainly have been sent into internal exile or to prison. But Kadare knew well that liberties in Albania could be withdrawn easily, by an impulsive stroke of the tyrant's quill. At the end of October 1990, a mere two months before the final collapse of the dictatorship, Ismail Kadare left Tirana and applied for political asylum in France. His departure enabled him for the first time to exercise his profession with complete freedom. His years of Parisian exile were productive and accorded him further success and recognition, as a writer both in Albanian and in French. He returned to Tirana in 2002 but lived primarily back in Paris.

Though Kadare is admired as a poet in Albania, his reputation and, in particular, his international reputation now rests entirely upon his prose, especially his novels, most of which are set in periods of the past. Of his literary works translated into English, mention may be made of the following: *The General of the Dead Army*, London 1971 (*Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur*, Tirana 1963); *Chronicle in Stone*, New York 1987, 2007 (*Kronikë në gur*, Tirana

1971); *Doruntine*, New York 1988 (*Kush e solli Doruntinën?* 1979); *Broken April*, New York 1990 (*Prilli i thyer*, 1978); *The Palace of Dreams*, New York and London 1993 (*Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave*, 1981); *The Concert*, New York and London 1994 (*Koncert në fund të dimrit*, Tirana 1988); *The Pyramid*, London and New York 1996 (*Piramida*, 1993); *The File on H*, London 1997 (*Dosja H*, Tirana 1990); *The Three-Arched Bridge*, New York 1997 (*Ura me tri harqe*, Tirana 1978); *The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice*, Boulder 1997 (*Krushqit janë të ngrirë*, 1986); *Three Elegies for Kosovo*, London 2000 (*Tri këngë zie për Kosovën*, Tirana 1998), also called *Elegy for Kosovo* (New York 2000); *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*, New York 2002 (*Lulet e ftohta të marsit*, Tirana 2000); *The Successor*, New York 2006 (*Pasardhësi*, Tirana 2003); *Agamemnon's Daughter*, New York 2007 (*Vajza e Agamemnonit*, Tirana 2003); and most recently *The Siege*, Edinburgh 2008 (a re-edition of *Kështjella*, Tirana 1970). Some other works have appeared in British and American periodicals, notably the short story *The Albanian Writers' Union as Mirrored by a Woman* (*Përballë pasqyrës së një gruaje*, Tirana 2001), in *The New Yorker* in December 2005. Of the fifteen major works mentioned above, only five were translated directly from the Albanian. The others were translated into English, most recently by David Bellos, from the French-language versions of Jusuf Vrioni (1916–2001) and Tedi Papavrami. I am excluding here the early and very stilted translations of *The Wedding* (Tirana 1968) and *The Castle* (Tirana 1974), which fortunately never circulated much in the West.

Kadare has recently published his collected works in sixteen thick volumes, each in an Albanian-language and a French-language edition, and has been given membership in the prestigious Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques (28 October 1996) and in the French Legion of Honor. He has also been nominated

on several occasions for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

There can be no doubt that Ismail Kadare was a profoundly dissident writer who, at the same time, led an extremely conformist, if you will collaborationist, life. Dissent in Kadare's prose up to the fall of the dictatorship was very discreet but ubiquitous. Notwithstanding its subtle nature, it was sufficiently evident at all times to the educated Albanian reader, and this is one of the major factors that contributed to his popularity at home. Ismail Kadare left no opportunity untouched to attack the follies, weaknesses, and excesses of the Albanian communist system, yet many of his subtle barbs are difficult to grasp for those who did not grow up in or live through that system. The very treatment in a conformist manner of a taboo subject, i.e., of virtually anything beyond the very narrow scope of socialist realism and communist partisan heroism, constituted in itself an act of extreme dissent, amounting to treason in Albania. Though some observers in Albania silently viewed him as a political opportunist, and some Albanians in exile later criticized him vociferously for the compromises he made, it is Ismail Kadare more than anyone else who, from within the system, dealt the death blow to the literature of socialist realism. There can be no doubt that he made use of his relative freedom and his talent under the dictatorship to launch many a subtle but effective fusillade against the regime in the form of political allegories, which occur throughout his works. Ismail Kadare was thus the most prominent representative of Albanian literature under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha (1908–1985) and, at the same time, the regime's most talented adversary.

Ismail Kadare is and remains the flagship of Albanian literature, yet there are many other prose authors who deserve attention. Unfortunately, little has been done to offer more choice to the English-speaking public. Two novels have, however, appeared recently. The

first is by Fatos Kongoli (b. 1944): *The Loser*, Bridgend, Wales 2007 (*I humburi*, Tirana 1992), translated by myself and Janice Mathie-Heck. The second is by Bashkim Shehu (1955): *The Last Journey of Ago Ymeri*, Evanston, Illinois 2007 (*Rrugëtimi i mbramë i Ago Ymerit*, Prishtina 1995), translated by Diana Alqi Kristo.

As far as I am aware, as published books, there have been no other substantial English translations of Albanian prose authors since the Communist period, although there are certainly a number of writers now whose works could and should be made available. Albanian prose is rare even in readers and anthologies. One initial anthology devoted to modern Albanian prose, entitled *The Angry Cloud: an Anthology of Albanian Stories from Yugoslavia*, Prishtina 1991, presented a selection of nine Kosovo authors in the translation of John Hodgson.

I was able recently to publish what I regard as a significant anthology of modern Albanian short stories, titled *Balkan Beauty, Balkan Blood*, Evanston, Illinois 2006, composed of twelve short stories by nine contemporary authors. The authors included in this collection are Elvira Dones, now in Washington, D.C.; Kim Mehmeti of Skopje; Ylljet Aliçka, now Albanian Ambassador to France; Lindita Arapi, now in Bonn, Germany; Eqrem Basha of Prishtina; Fatos Lubonja of Tirana; Stefan Çapaliku of Shkodra; Mimoza Ahmeti of Tirana; Teodor Laço of Tirana; and Dritëro Agolli of Tirana. The anthology was published in the "Writers from an Unbound Europe" series by Northwestern University Press.

The strength of Albanian literature has always been poetry. It is understandable, therefore, despite the difficulties of translating and marketing verse, that there is a comparatively large amount of Albanian verse in English translation — large, of course, by modest Albanian standards. Of earlier authors, mention has been made of the translations of the messianic Migjeni from Shkodra. With my

colleague Janice Mathie-Heck, I completed a major translation of another author from Shkodra, Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940). Fishta, a Franciscan priest and imposing figure of pre-Second World War literature, was the author of thirty-seven literary publications, but his name is indelibly linked to one great work, indeed to what is perhaps the most astounding creation in all of Albanian literature, the national literary epic “The Highland Lute.”

The Highland Lute (*Lahuta e Malcís*) is a 15,613-line historical verse epic, a panorama of northern Albanian history from 1862 to 1913 that mirrors the long Albanian struggle for freedom and independence. This literary masterpiece was composed for the most part between 1902 and 1909, though it was refined and amended by its author over the following quarter-century. The Highland Lute is a work of great significance to the Albanian people and, at the same time, constitutes the first Albanian-language contribution to world literature, yet it is still largely unknown to the outside world.

One of the many characteristics that the northern Albanian tribes have in common with their southern Slavic and, in particular, Montenegrin neighbors in the mountains of the western Balkans is the cult of the heroic. The two peoples, divided as they are by language and by the bitter course of history, have indeed a largely common culture. Although the Montenegrins serve as the “bad guys” in the glorification of the author’s native land, Fishta was not anti-Slav, as communist propaganda portrayed him. Even today, it is rare to hear a northern Albanian highlander speak ill of the Montenegrins. It is known, at any rate, that Fishta was influenced and moved by the literary achievements of the southern Slavs in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular by the epic verse of Slavic resistance to the Turks. The works of the Franciscan pater Grga Martić (1822–1905) served the young Fishta as a model while the latter was studying

in Bosnia. Fishta was also influenced by the writings of an earlier Franciscan writer, Andrija Kačić-Miošić (1704–1760), the Dalmatian poet and publicist of the Enlightenment who is remembered especially for his *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* (Pleasant Talk of Slavic Folk), 1756, a collection of prose and poetry on Serbo-Croatian history, and by the works of Croatian poet Ivan Mažuranić (1814–1890), author of the noted romantic epic *Smrt Smail-age Ćengića* (The Death of Smail Aga), 1846. A further source of literary inspiration for Fishta may have been the Montenegrin poet-prince Petar Petrović Njegoš (1813–1851). It is no coincidence that Fishta’s title “The Highland (or Mountain) Lute” is very similar to Njegoš’s *Gorski vijenac* (*The Mountain Wreath*), 1847. This latter verse rendition of Montenegro’s heroic resistance to the Turkish occupants is now generally regarded as the national epic of the Montenegrins and Serbs. Fishta proved that the Albanian language was also capable of a refined literary epic of equally heroic proportions.

Despite the success of “The Highland Lute” and the pre-eminence of its author, this and all other works by Gjergj Fishta were banned after the Second World War when the Communists came to power in Albania. The epic, however, was republished in Rome 1958 and Ljubljana 1990 and exists in German and Italian translations. The English translation, which took us more than three years of hard work, was published in 2005 by I.B. Tauris in London, in collaboration with the Centre for Albanian Studies there.

Of contemporary poets in English translation, mention may be made first of Martin Camaj (1925–1992), poet, novelist, and scholar, who worked for many years as Professor of Albanian Studies at the University of Munich. Camaj’s verse has appeared in two fine volumes: *Selected Poetry*, New York 1990, and *Palimpsest*, Munich and New York 1991, both

in the translation of Leonard Fox.

The poets of Kosovo are perhaps slightly better known in the English-speaking world than the poets of modern Albania. Among recent publications are my *Who Will Slay the Wolf: Selected Poetry by Ali Podrimja*, New York 2000, and *Neither a Wound nor a Song: Poetry from Kosova, by Eqrem Basha*, New York 2003. Ali Podrimja (b. 1942) and Eqrem Basha (b. 1948) are among the best-known writers of contemporary Kosovo. Another volume of verse I published was *Call Me by My Name: Poetry from Kosova*, New York 2001, by Flora Brovina (b. 1949). Brovina is not only known as a poet and pediatrician but also was widely known as a human rights and women's rights activist. She was taken hostage by Serb paramilitaries during the Kosovo War of 1999 and, despite protests from international and, indeed, from Serb human rights organizations, was sentenced to twelve years in prison for so-called "hostile activities in connection with terrorism." During her trial, she stated that the truth had been so distorted, it reminded her of the metaphor of an "elephant" who admitted to being a "giraffe." Fortunately, Flora Brovina was released in November 2000 and is currently a member of parliament in Kosovo.

Recently published is another noted poet from Kosovo, Azem Shkreli (1938–1997). *The Blood of the Quill*, translated by myself and Janice Mathie-Heck, reflects the values of the culture of the Albanian Highlands. It was published by Green Integer in Los Angeles in a bilingual edition. It is, indeed, the second volume of Shkreli's verse in English. The first one, *The Call of the Owl*, Prishtina 1989, was translated by John Hodgson.

Of the poets of Albania itself, mention may be made of the volume *Fresco: Selected Poetry by Luljeta Lleshanaku*, New York 2002, edited by Henry Israeli of Montreal and translated by no fewer than nine authors. Another well-known poet from Tirana is Visar Zhiti (b. 1952), who

was long a political prisoner of the Communist regime. His poetic works have appeared under the title *The Condemned Apple: Selected Verse in a Bilingual Albanian-English Edition*, Los Angeles 2005, once again in my translation. Another recent volume of verse is *I Don't Believe in Ghosts: Poems by Moikom Zeqo*, Rochester NY 2007, in the translation of Wayne Miller.

Such are the major English translations to date. There are in addition a small number of English-language anthologies, which provide a broader view of contemporary Albanian verse in Albania and Kosovo with excerpts from the works of a larger number of writers. Verse by Migjeni, Lasgush Poradeci, Arshi Pipa, Martin Camaj, and Ismail Kadare appeared in the now rare anthology *Contemporary Albanian Poetry*, Naples ca. 1985, translated by the late Bardhyl Pogoni (1926–1985) of Western Kentucky University.

In Kosovo, two presentable anthologies of verse appeared: *The Sad Branch / Dega e pikëlluar*, Prishtina 1979, published by the Kosovo Association of Literary Translators and including two poems each by twenty leading Kosovo poets, and *Roads Lead Only One Way, a Survey of Modern Poetry from Kosova*, Prishtina 1988, translated by John Hodgson, with 139 poems taken from the three official languages of Kosovo: Albanian, BCS, and Turkish. Represented in this anthology are the Albanian poets Esad Mekuli, Enver Gjerqeku, Azem Shkreli, Rahman Dedaj, Fahredin Gunga, Ali Podrimja, and Eqrem Basha. In contrast to *The Sad Branch*, the latter collection enables the reader to grasp at least something of the particular style and flavor of each writer. A third anthology published in Kosovo, *The Glow of the Passion: a Panorama of Albanian Literature in Yugoslavia*, Prishtina 1991, was a translation disaster and should best be ignored.

The first anthology of modern Albanian verse in general appeared in my volume *An*

Elusive Eagle Soars: Anthology of Modern Albanian Poetry, London and Boston 1993, which was published as part of the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works. It covered 24 poets from Albania, Kosovo, and the diaspora.

A selection of Albanian verse appeared recently as part of a verse anthology entitled *New European Poets*, St. Paul, Minnesota 2008, edited by Wayne Miller and Kevin Prufer. It includes poetry by Visar Zhiti, Mimoza Ahmeti, Gazmend Krasniqi, Luljeta Lleshanaku, Lindita Arapi, Eqrem Basha, Flora Brovina, and Abdullah Konushevci.

A more substantial selection of verse from Albania, 22 authors translated by myself and Janice Mathie-Heck, is now to be found in the internet anthology *Contemporary Verse from Albania*, in *Transcript, European Internet Review of Books and Writing*, volume 24, under www.transcript-review.org.

In connection with the internet, I should note that I have what is probably the largest selection of Albanian literature available in English translation anywhere on my website, www.AlbanianLiterature.net, with about 100 authors.

At this juncture, I am delighted to announce that a major representative anthology of Albanian verse has finally been published in the West. It is titled *Lightning from the Depths: Anthology of Albanian Poetry*, edited and translated from the Albanian by Robert Elsie and Janice Mathie-Heck, Evanston, Illinois 2008. This anthology covers Albanian verse from its beginnings to the present day and includes 277 poems by 48 authors.

From the above survey of publications it is obvious that, although efforts have been made by many writers, translators, and publishers in Albania, Kosovo, and abroad, Albanian literature is still not very well known in the English-speaking world. Many chapters of Albanian literature still remain to be discovered. The basic problem for the transmission of

Albanian literature is and remains the lack of literary translators. As I noted with some embarrassment at a conference for translators of Albanian literature, held in Shkodra in November 2003 under the auspices of the Albanian Ministry of Culture, I personally constituted about 80% of the capacity for literary translations from Albanian into English, if not more. Much remains to be done to overcome this bottleneck, and I would be more than delighted if this short presentation should inspire anyone to take up the torch. The need is urgent. There is nothing Albanian authors would like more than to see their works translated into English and to have direct contact with the world. Indeed, some impatient authors are already beginning to publish their works privately in unimaginably dreadful English translations of their own or those made by their children studying English at school.

Albania is certainly the most underdeveloped country in Europe, yet the Albanians are a fascinating and dynamically creative people. After years of isolation, oppression, and incredible poverty, they now have much to tell us. Contemporary Albanian literature, not only in Tirana and Prishtina but also, increasingly, in the centers of Albanian emigration abroad: Italy, the United States, Greece, Germany, Switzerland, and Canada, has many a tiny glittering stone to add to the mosaic of modern culture. ❖

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ISMAIL KADARE

By Gjeke Marinaj

Ismail Kadare (b. 1936) is one of the best writers of our time. He has been translated into thirty languages and has received the prestigious Man Booker International Prize. Quite a few translations of his works into English have been done from works that previously had been translated into French. During over four decades of totalitarian regime in Albania, Kadare's insightful understanding of the political situation became a reassuring guideline for readers and writers in Albania. Many give Kadare credit for saving the Albanian people from entering upon a precipitous political revolution. However, when the time was right, in 1999, Kadare left the communist country to request political asylum in France, which became a signal to the Albanian people to move toward democracy. In that sense, it can be said that Kadare has had two kinds of readers. There are those who look at him as a political and cultural guide and those who see in him the makings of an international writer who has shaped world literature in the 20th century. A list of his works in English translation is featured at the end of this interview.

Gjeke Marinaj: Would you agree with the claim that translators have played a crucial role in reflecting your literary qualities for an international audience? To what degree do you share your success with them?

Ismail Kadare: Translators without a doubt play a unique role in the career of any writer who establishes an international reputation. There is no other known means to transmit literary values across languages. Translators, like everybody else in the world, can be outstanding, run-of-the-mill, or inadequate.



According to such a hierarchy, one can also determine the role that they play in making an author familiar to foreign readers. When it comes to translation, in other words, any given translated author can be fantastically lucky, more or less lucky, or truly unlucky. I have generally considered myself lucky.

GM: Your answer raises yet another question about the work of translators: Do you believe that translators ought to receive a one-time payment for their work, or do they perhaps deserve royalty payments for as long as the book remains in print?

IK: I would think that the most logical manner of rewarding translators would involve two aspects: a predetermined initial payment under the terms of a contract, as well as a percentage of sales, if the book becomes a commercial success. The first payment is necessary because, unlike writers, translators cannot work without an initial assurance. The compensation based on book sales, on the other hand, would be a "happy extra," insofar as it confirms success.

GM: No other Albanian writer has been translated as widely as you have. But you have also translated a considerable number of foreign authors into Albanian. What are some of the similar challenges involved in translating and writing?

IK: Writing is generally a multidimensional challenge. One such dimension involves language. Every writer places himself in a complicated relationship with his own language. I say “complicated” because such a relationship can sometimes be harmonious, but sometimes it may not be. The dynamic between writer and language is constantly evolving. Each tries to fight the other. The writer wants language to serve him in the most individual (meaning original) way possible. But language has its own rules, which it fanatically defends. The war between them is exhausting. But, unlike other clashes, this one is unique in that it resembles love as much as it does war. That is where literature comes from.

GM: Some of your books have been translated from Albanian into French, and then from French into other languages. How does this “double translation” impact the quality of a literary work?

IK: The major translations of my works, those that remain the best ones to this day, were done directly from Albanian into German, French, and Spanish. Among those translated into English, a few were translated from the Albanian originals and a few from the French. In other languages, too, more or less half are translations from the originals and half from other languages, mostly French.

GM: How do you select works to translate into Albanian? What are the criteria you employ when deciding which works are worth your time and effort?

IK: The little that I have translated I have done for my own pleasure. I have never had to translate a single line of poetry or prose for any other reason.

The last book I published before leaving communist Albania in 1990, *An Invitation to the*

Writer’s Studio, carries the feeling of a farewell throughout the pages, the tone of a testament. Although I was convinced that the farewell was only temporary, a departure is a small death (*partir, c’est un peu mourir*), even though such a mood was unavoidable.

An Invitation to the Writer’s Studio contains three parts. The first part comprises both short and longer poems, the second includes translations, and the third consists of notes on various subjects. The second part I titled “Guests in the Studio.” The poets whose works I translated, in other words, I considered guests in my own home, which is the highest honor an Albanian can grant someone. And since they were guests in my studio, they were also guests in the Albanian language. Just as a host strives to make his guests comfortable in his home, I worked hard to make my colleagues feel comfortable in the Albanian language. In short, I have perhaps paid more artistic attention to them than to myself.

Every translation has naturally been an act of friendship for me. The process has been an inseparable part of the challenge of artistic production. I have tested myself, as well as the ability of the Albanian language to “play host” to foreign friends.

The Albanian language is a magnificent tool of expression. It stands up to the most difficult and challenging texts. Albanian and foreign experts routinely confirm that the Albanian translations of Shakespeare and Dante are among the best. I have mainly chosen similarly difficult texts. When I was a student in Moscow, I translated Mayakovsky’s most compelling but also most difficult poem, “A Cloud in Trousers,” scrupulously respecting the poem’s almost demoniac technique. Yet another translation, or rather a retranslation, that served as a kind of a personal challenge was Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia*. In that case, I tried to challenge both myself and the Albanian language regarding whether I would be able to preserve in the

translation its two defining characteristics. The first consisted of a set of imposing verse lines constructed with equally imposing composites of two or three words, which, as Aeschylus' contemporaries used to argue, he employed to "intimidate the audience." In numerous languages, this proud posture has either faded or been lost entirely, and this has not always been the fault of translators. But since Albanian, like ancient Greek or German, naturally employs composite words, it was possible to retain the quality of the original text. The other challenge was to preserve the nebulous saturation, the darker parts of many of Aeschylus' verses that are not rationally explicable. It sometimes seems as if the translator's job is to "explain" the literary work. But I think that the translator ought to not only retain the clarity but also loyally transmit ambiguities and uncertainties. This "uncertainty" — the fog — which is often enigmatic is common in ancient literature. We should not be afraid of it. It is part of the transcendental intentions, one of the noblest of all art.

Other poems, like François Villon's "The Ballad of the Hanged Man" or Arthur Rimbaud's "The Drunken Boat," I have translated with the goal of translating ambiguity. The same goes for other works. Since this interview focuses on translation, let me also offer a personal anecdote. As I have described it in "Invitation to the Writer's Studio," I impatiently translated Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat" at a time when my French was still not good enough. Among other mistakes, I entirely misinterpreted two lines in the ninth stanza. The French version reads:

Pareils à des acteurs de drames très —
antiques,
Les flots roulant au loin leurs frissons de
volets.

Which can be translated as:

Like the actors of very ancient tragedies
The waves rolling away in a shiver of
shutters.

I translated them into Albanian as:

Like blasts at the endings of ancient
tragedies
Loudly the waves crashed into the hull.

When the book was published in France, I suggested to the publisher that he remove the fragment, but he thought it was an interesting curiosity and left it as it was. As a consequence, the two lines were translated into French!

Comme les finales grondants des tragédies
antiques,
Les vagues bruyamment venaient battre la
coque.

I can only imagine how appalled Rimbaud's numerous admirers must have been!

GM: Do you think that works in translation ought to include an introductory note written by the translator, outlining the various challenges s/he faced during translation as well as explaining the choices s/he has made?

IK: It depends on the work. Obviously, it also depends on the translator. I think that every effort aimed at improving the interpretation of a given work is a valuable one.

GM: A number of your novels have been translated by Albanians living abroad. But lately foreigners like David Bellos have shown an increased interest in translating your works. Do you think that the best translators of your works are those who best know the Albanian language or those who best know the language being translated into?

IK: Translators ought to know both languages well. But, whereas they ought to know the original language of the work exceedingly well, without necessarily being able to write in it, they should obviously be able to perfectly understand and write in the language of translation. The language into which the book is translated, in other words, plays the crucial role in this adventure.

GM: One more question about your relationship with translators: Do you work closely with them throughout the translation process, or do you give them room to play around with the text, accepting the fate of the translation whatever it may be?

IK: I believe that close consultations with translators are necessary. But, obviously, they should not be exaggerated either.

GM: While writing under the strict surveillance of the communist regime, which sometimes caused you trouble, you often resorted to a kind of allegory that has become immediately recognizable among Albanian readers. How can one translate “Dimri i madh” (“The Great Winter”), not the lexicon aspect of the work but the indirect employment of the allegoric language contained therein?

IK: This subject is too rich to be contained in a single interview. “Dimri i vetmisë së madhe” was translated and published abroad as early as 1978, when the ferocity of the Albanian dictatorship was at a height. Readers in the free world understood the meaning of the work, even though it was written in a country that was very far from free. I believe that those readers comprehended the crux of the work: the general tableau of the communist world. While the socialist realist literature of the eastern bloc described this world in vivid colors full of optimism, this novel painted exactly the

opposite picture: dark, desperate, dreadful. Take, for example, the scene of the official reception of the Albanian communist regime where the ghost of the dead prime minister roams around, gunshot wounds visible on the body, as if in one of Shakespeare’s plays. You know very well what socialist realist literature was, so you understand that such a scene was inconceivable at the time.

GM: It has recently become quite common to publish original poetry translations alongside the original poems. Do you see such a practice as useful? Does it put too much focus on the translation of individual words as opposed to the overall substance of the piece?

IK: I believe that publications in two languages, as you describe them, are useful.

GM: Could a translation be better than the original? If so, would you say that the translator is at fault for deceiving — even if slightly so — the reader?

IK: It could happen, especially in poetry, but rarely. It strikes me as impossible for this to happen with prose. With poetry, if the translator is especially talented, the paradoxical situation you describe could arise in certain circumstances.

GM: I am sure you have read *The Iliad* in more than one language. What are your thoughts on the translation of that work’s first line?

IK: Your question probably stems from something that I may have written or spoken about at a conference — can’t quite recall where — concerning that work’s first line, which is practically the first line in our world’s greatest poetic legacy. This observation is not originally mine, but I have expanded on the thoughts of the great Albanian author Faik Konica,

who claimed a century ago that the first line of *The Iliad* has been inaccurately translated for over two thousand years. Konica was a rather whimsical author who reveled in word games, but in this observation he was entirely correct. He was deeply knowledgeable in the major European languages, including Latin and ancient Greek. To support his claim, he pointed to a French version of Homer's line, which in English goes something like this:

Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus

Konica writes that the word "Achilles" is the only correctly translated word in that line. "Sing," according to him, in the original is actually "tell us," a more emphatic, common expression. The word "goddess" in the original is actually "young woman," referring to the young women who would chant prophecies or poems, something like the rhapsodists or the muses and the fairies. But the most egregious mistake, according to Konitz, is the word "anger." In ancient Greek, the line begins with "menin," the accusative of "menis," which describes a grudge, a prolonged and profound resentment, the opposite of a short-lived fit of anger. Achilles' resentment lasts for weeks. Konica thought that it was a deep depression. (According to him, also, "menis" moved through Latin into "mania" and from there into other languages, where it came to refer to a sort of obsession or sick preoccupation.) Unsparing as he was, Konica went on to show that even "son of Peleus" was not an accurate translation, because the original words were "Achilles of the Peleuses," meaning Achilles of that tribe, and for the ancient inhabitants of the Balkans, one's tribe was a more important identification than one's father

GM: Which of the translations of your works do you consider the most accomplished, and why?

IK: Three of my translators have been recognized with various awards: Joachim Rohm, who translates into German; Ramon Sanchez, into Spanish; and David Bellos, into English. For German and Spanish, they have won awards given for the best translations in any given year, while the Man Booker Prize was for the English-language translation.

GM: What have you done, as a world-renowned writer, to promote other Albanian writers?

IK: I believe that I have made efforts to promote my Albanian colleagues. Some ten books written by both Albanian and Kosovar authors have been translated into French with my involvement. Most of them include introductions that I wrote. One of these volumes is a massive anthology of some six hundred pages containing twenty-six Albanian authors, both old and new. It was published in 1978 by Fayard.

To make Albanian literature better known abroad, I also volunteered to head the journal *Les lettres albanaises*, which was published in French in Tirana. Thousands of pages were translated and published in that journal, but very little was picked up by Western publishers to republish abroad. One can only imagine why that was.

GM: You are perhaps least known in the United States. Favorable reviews in highly reputable publications, such as the article titled "Ismail Kadare: A Modern Homer or Albanian Dissident?" published in the journal *World Literature Today*, seem not to have helped. Is this perhaps connected to the poor quality of translations into English, or is there some other reason?

IK: I have published fifteen books in the United States so far. I have been published there since 1971, which was highly surprising for a writer

coming from an isolated Stalinist country. Building a reputation in the Anglo-Saxon world, of course, is much harder than in Europe, but I am nevertheless fairly satisfied. I will give two examples to illustrate why I do not believe that I am least known in the United States. Many years ago, when my book *Chronicle in Stone* was published in New York, the eminent author John Updike wrote a very favorable and warm review in *The New Yorker*. I have been greatly touched by that article's noble posture. I use the word "noble" because John Updike was significantly better established than I was. I have always prized the generosity of American writers toward their colleagues.

Other examples that reflect the engagement of the English-speaking world include the various invitations I have received from Columbia, Princeton, and Bard College, as well as the Man Booker Prize in 2005. ❖

This interview was translated by Elidor Mehilli.

The following works by Ismail Kadare have appeared in English translation.

The General of the Dead Army. Tr. Derek Coltman, from Jusuf Vroni's French version. Kuoleen armeijan kenraali (suom. Seppo Tuokko, 1972).

The Wedding. Tr. Ali Cungo, from J. Vroni's French version, 1968.

The Castle. Tr. P. Quesku, from Jusuf Vroni's French version, 1974. / *The Siege*. Tr. David Bellos, from Jusuf Vroni's French version, 2008.

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The Palace of Dreams. Tr. Barbara Bray, from Jusuf Vroni's French version, 1993.

The Concert. Tr. B. Bray, from Jusuf Vroni's French version, 1994.

The File on H. Tr. David Bellos, from Jusuf Vroni's French version, 1998.

Albanian Spring. Tr. Emile Capouya.

Elegy for Kosovo. Tr. Peter Constantine.

Spring Flowers, Spring Frost. Tr. David Bellos, from Jusuf Vroni's French version, 2002.

Agamemnon's Daughter: a Novella and Stories. Tr. David Bellos, 2003.

The Successor: a Novel. Tr. David Bellos, from Tedi Papavrami's French version, 2005.

ON TRANSLATING ISMAIL KADARE

By David Bellos

I first encountered Kadare in the early 1990s. A publisher sent me *The File on H.* and asked me if I would like to translate it — from French. I was very struck by Kadare's reworking of the story of Parry and Lord, which I had learned about a long time before in connection with quite other interests. I was deeply impressed by the blending of past and present, of history and poetry, of comedy and political insight in this superficially page-turning narrative. It seemed like a work well worth translating, but when I began to read other novels by Kadare already available in English — *Broken April*, *Palace of Dreams*, *The Concert* — I became aware of having stumbled onto a writer of huge importance. But I was puzzled as to why the book should not be translated directly from Albanian, or, at worst, by someone familiar (as I was not) with the literatures of one or more of the Balkan languages. And so my education in the darker side of the world republic of letters began.

Albania withdrew from the Universal Copyright Convention when it abolished most aspects of private property following the seizure of power by the PLA under Enver Hoxha. As a result, no book published in Albania could be sold on the international market, since there was nothing to buy; and conversely, no sanctions were available against Albanian publishers if they published works copyrighted abroad without purchasing rights, because Albania did not recognize the existence of intellectual property. This made Western publishers, and particularly British and American ones, extremely wary of publishing anything from Albania, since the possible riposte — pirate editions of English-language bestsellers for resale in third countries — would be far more painful than the hypothetical loss of a good

novel or two. In the absence of a market for Albanian literature in English, there were no literary translators working from Albanian into English.

At least, not in the West. Inside Albania, and in imitation of the Foreign Languages Publishing House set up in Moscow in the 1930s alongside Gorky's huge "translation factory" for bringing world literature into Russian, a few brave and stubborn individuals were translating Albanian literature into foreign languages, primarily French, but also into English. Kadare's most politically orthodox novel, *The Wedding*, had been produced as an English-language pamphlet and distributed in the United States by Gamma Publishing, which shared its mailing address with the Albanian Legation to the United Nations. *The General of the Dead Army*, *Chronicle in Stone*, and *The Rain Drums* had all been translated into French by Jusuf Vrioni and published in Tirana, and it was these Albanian editions *in French* that first Albin Michel, then Hachette, picked up for free and republished in Paris. But as France is a member of UCC, the French editions, unlike the Albanian ones, were copyrighted, and so their translation into English required the purchase of rights *from the French*. The publisher who asked me to translate *The File on H.* had purchased the English-language rights to a text in French, which was why he was asking me to translate it.

That is how it all began. I still haven't learned Albanian, though I have now visited the country more than once and have gotten to know some of its strange history and culture. I have also had the immense privilege of getting to know Ismail Kadare, and, as his command of French has improved over the last ten years, we have been able to communicate over the many issues and problems that arise in the re-

translation of his works. He is quietly confident that what he has to say can be said in any language, and he is unusually relaxed about the “language barrier”; I for my part also recognize that the strength and solidity of Kadare’s narrative art not only survive translation but would shine through even a mediocre rendering. This is certainly connected to Kadare’s view that literature is itself a universal language, just as it undoubtedly flows from Kadare’s subtle negotiation between ancient, pan-European themes and plots and the description of a local culture. But there is more to it than that.

From the 1960s until his death in 2002, Jusuf Vrioni was Kadare’s sole translator into French. Vrioni was the son of a baronial family (the Vrioni mansion at Berat is now a national museum of Ottoman Albania), and his pre-war education in France, Switzerland, and Italy turned him into a cosmopolitan member of the European aristocracy. He returned to Albania in 1945 hoping to participate in the resurrection of his sorely harried homeland but was thrown into jail for many years for having, as the saying went, “a bad biography.” He survived his prison ordeal in part by cultivating those treasures of European culture that he had in his head, and he kept his French alive by translating. It was he who thought of making a French version of *The General of the Dead Army*, as a hobby and as a diversion from the altogether more burdensome task to which he owed his release — the translation into French of the works of Enver Hoxha. Vrioni’s French was apparently not perfect, and the versions that were published are said to owe quite a lot to the careful copy-editing of Claude Durand, who eventually became the editorial director of Editions Fayard. Nonetheless, the huge set of Kadare novels done by Vrioni have their own literary dynamic, for the work is much more than a merely professional translation job. Translating Kadare corresponded to a personal need and aspiration of the translator — to keep himself, and to keep

Albania, connected to the wider world even as it cut itself off in ever more bizarre forms of paranoid isolation. Vrioni’s Kadare, while remaining obviously tributary to the imagination and artistry of the novelist, is a parallel achievement, with its own artistic and personal integrity. Using these French translations as the basis for English is not quite as second-rate as it sounds.

Since Vrioni’s death, Tedi Papavrami, a musician of international standing (touted as the Albanian Mozart when he was a child and sent on to the Paris conservatoire by Enver Hoxha) has taken over the role of translating Kadare. Papavrami is some fifty years younger than Vrioni, and his French is of a different age and register. In the stylistic gap between Vrioni and Papavrami (a gap that does no discredit to either, but which speaks of the passing of time and of different artistic sensibilities), some idea of what might have been lost in translation can be gained, irrespective of whether you know Albanian. Kadare’s “true voice” is neither one nor the other, of course, but some hint of what its sound might be can be deduced or intuited from the dissonance between his two French translators.

In Albanian and in French, and despite the immense artistry and care applied to both iterations of his imaginary universe, Kadare’s texts are never quite finished. A typical path for an idea or a theme or an anecdote in “Kadaria” is to begin life in a poem, to re-emerge in a short story published in a periodical, which is then rewritten to some degree when brought into a collection of stories, and then to find its way into a novel, either as the main idea or as an incorporated fragment, the novel itself appearing in a second, then a third revised edition, and the theme or idea or anecdote expanding, and perhaps contracting, or even disappearing entirely. I don’t think there is a single Kadare text that is not in some kind of communication with others, nor a single edition

save the last that happens to be published that can be considered the author's last word in that vein. Like a Balzac or a Dickens, like the ancient bard that he is, Kadare *performs* his material anew each time. Of course, he aspires to a final, definitive form, and he has devoted much of his energy since taking up residence in Paris in 1990 to the publication of his *Complete Works*, in parallel Albanian and French texts, intended to provide the final, stable versions of his works, which now run to sixteen thick volumes of print. But he can't help himself. The English translation of *The Siege*, previously titled *Les Tambours de la pluie* (*The Rain Drums*) in French and *Kështjella* (*The Castle*) in Albanian, includes a couple of paragraphs (translated by Elidor Mehilli directly from Kadare's Albanian manuscript additions) that have never been part of the novel before. This does not produce in the translator a sense of frustration but, on the contrary, the confidence that his version is but another *performance* of material that has no definitively fixed and final form and, in a sense, *no original* save for the living mind that conceived it.

All Kadare's stories and novels are explicitly located in an identifiable historical frame — Ancient Egypt, Mao's China, Ottoman Istanbul in the Tanzimat period, Zog's Albania, and so on. But Kadare does not write historical novels; indeed, he has often asserted that he does not know what a "historical novel" would be. Equally characteristic of Kadare's universe is the co-presence of historically incompatible material — that is to say, of various kinds of material, intellectual and emotional anachronisms. Postmodern it is not; rather, the reflections of a modern bureaucrat in a world of medieval legend (*Doruntine*), the interruption of political negotiations in Beijing by a revised version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (*The Concert*), or the resurgence of Homer on a ferryboat leaving Durrës for Bari in the 1930s (*The File on H.*) create the sense

of a universal, human time unrelated to the passing of centuries, political creeds, clothing styles, or street furniture. Kadare's manipulation of chronological time provides the backbone and the whole point of his often quite peculiar sentence structures, which simultaneously assert and deny the monodirectional flow of time. This is a real problem in French, a language with extensive, elaborate, and extremely rigid rules about verbal tense and mood. Because of this, Vrioni and Papavrami have to "smuggle" Kadare's timewarps in ways that a translator into English has to confront, for English has different ways of structuring time.

Here is an example from the early pages of Kadare's recent novel, *The Successor* (*Pasardhësi, Le Successeur*).

Le lendemain matin, depuis longtemps déshabitués du glas des cloches, les gens avaient cherché les signes de deuil là où ils pouvaient: aux façades des bâtiments officiels, dans les airs de musique diffusés à la radio, ou sur le visage de leur voisin dans la file d'attente qui s'étirait chez le laitier. L'absence de drapeaux en berne et de marches funèbres avait fini par ôter leurs ultimes illusions à ceux qui avaient préféré croire que ce retard n'avait été que fortuit.

Les agences de presse internationales continuaient à répandre l'information en exposant les deux hypothèses: suicide ou meurtre.

The main verb of the first sentence is in the pluperfect tense. This "remote past" in French implies the existence of a point in past time in respect of which the action is doubly past. But where can that narrative zero-point in the past be? It's as if the speaking voice of this passage is re-telling a story told in the past — save that nowhere in the text is such a position established explicitly. This is an example, at microtextual level, of that double articulation of time in

Kadare which, on a grander scale, blends the ancient and modern, the medieval and the up-to-date, in a universal, paradoxical non-time. Here, in the space of a short paragraph, it transforms a plain story about a political murder into something approaching a legend. This contorted use of the French verb system de-realizes the time reference of the tense, something that is very hard to do in the less rigid, and thus more sturdy, verb system of English. My translation is clearly deficient in this respect.

Albanians had long been unaccustomed to the tolling of bells, so they looked next day for signs of mourning wherever they might be found — on the façades of government buildings, in the melodies broadcast by national radio, or on the faces of other folk stuck in the long line outside the dairy. The non-appearance of flags at half-mast and the absence of funeral marches on the airwaves eventually peeled the scales from the eyes of those who had chosen to believe that things were just a bit behind schedule.

News agencies around the world persisted in reporting the event and in giving the two alternative explanations: suicide and murder.

The first sentence speaks of what people did: they sought signs of national mourning. The expectation aroused by the sentence is that they found them. The second sentence doesn't say that they found none, it takes their *absence* as its verbal subject, it takes for granted what the first sentence deceived us into not expecting. This positive use of a proleptic negative leads to the conversion of the optimists to the opposite point of view. Almost everything is compressed into the last leg of the sentence, in the last ten words of the whole paragraph. This is a special kind of reverse-order narration, in which the delayed release of information is simultaneously ironic

and dramatic. By the same token, the sentence, while appearing to take us forward in time, from the looking for signs of mourning to the realization that there were none and that their absence is not just a matter of delay, takes us backward at the end, from the unsealing of the optimists' eyes to an understanding of what they had *previously* believed.

This superficially straightforward introductory paragraph is a product of a bag of verbal tricks, and its ironical density is a direct measure of the liberties taken with the sequence of tenses and the rhetoric of story-telling order in French. In English, one of the tricks, parallel point of view, has to be lost, for basically grammatical reasons. Even so, the deferred release of prior information remains just as strong, and the double articulation of time, moving backward and forward in equal measure, seems to me to be even clearer.

The stylistically elaborate nature of the first paragraph is confirmed and enhanced by the following lines, which revert to standard narrative tense usage, standard time reference, single point of view, and single articulation of time, as if to say: I don't have to do it that way, but I *choose* to. The artist swings on his trapeze not because it is the only thing he can do, but because he chooses to perform in that particular way. And, approximately and no doubt more clumsily, so can I.

A second example of the ultimate translatability of Kadare's subtle manipulation of time and tense comes from a later chapter in the same novel, where we hear Petrit, the pathologist summoned to the Successor's palatial residence to perform an autopsy, thinking as he walks back home.

On remettra ça, avait dit le ministre d'une voix désinvolte, presque joviale.

Plus que les mots d'un haut responsable chargé d'une autopsie cruciale, la plus importante de l'histoire de l'État

communiste albanais, peut-être même de toute l'histoire de l'Albanie, ceux-ci auraient pu convenir à l'heure de se séparer au terme d'un gueuleton de vieux copains dans les collines bordant le lac artificiel de Tirana: Le poisson est rudement fameux, dans ce restau, on remettra ça, hein ?

Va-t-on la résoudre ou pas, cette affaire ?

Tout en arpentant le Grand Boulevard en direction de l'Hôtel Dajti, Petrit Gjadri, médecin légiste, ne cessait de se remémorer ce propos qui, d'instant en instant, lui semblait un peu plus inconcevable.

Face au ministre, l'architecte buvait ses paroles avec des yeux brûlants qui pouvaient aussi bien exprimer une curiosité maladive qu'une joie malsaine, de celles qui font fureur aux spectacles de cirque ou lors d'une rixe en plein marché, quand spectateurs ou badauds se frottent les mains, l'air de dire: On va voir ce qu'on va voir !

Sont ils tous deux aveugles ou font-ils semblant ? s'était dit le médecin lorsqu'il les avait vus faire assaut de plaisanteries comme deux gamins.

Lui-même se souvenait avec netteté quand on l'avait officiellement avisé qu'il aurait à procéder à une autopsie de toute première importance. Celle du Successeur.

L'espace d'un instant, il n'avait plus rien entendu. L'univers entier était devenu sourd, et en lui-même tout s'était arrêté: les battements de son cœur, son cerveau, sa respiration. Puis, lorsque ces fonctions lui étaient peu à peu revenues, avait pris forme dans son esprit cette pensée-ci: Voilà, on peut tirer un trait sur cette affaire-là.

"Cette affaire-là", c'était sa propre vie.

In English:

"Let's do this again," the Minister said in a casual, almost jovial tone of voice.

His words sounded less like those of a

senior official in charge of a crucial autopsy, the most important to have taken place in the history of the Communist State of Albania and maybe in all Albanian history, than like an adieu to old friends after a blow-out in one of the restaurants in the hills around Tirana's artificial lake. "The fish is really great here. Let's do this again, OK?"

Is this case going to be tied up, or not?

Petrit Gjadri, the forensic pathologist, strode along the Grand Boulevard toward the Hotel Dajti, thinking all the while about the Minister's remark, which grew a shade more inconceivable with every step he took.

The architect drank in the Minister's words with feverish eyes that could have signified either pathological inquisitiveness or prurient pleasure — the kind of look that spreads like wildfire at the circus or at a fist-fight in the market, when onlookers rub their hands as if to say: Now this is going to be something worth seeing!

Are they both blind, or are they just pretending? the medic had wondered as he watched them trading jokes like a couple of youngsters.

As for himself, he recalled quite clearly when he had been officially notified that he would be required to undertake an autopsy of the first importance. On the body of the Successor.

He had gone deaf for a brief instant. The whole universe had gone silent. Inside him, everything stopped — his heartbeat, his brain, his breathing. Then, as those functions gradually returned to life, a thought slowly formed in his mind: So that's how we'll put an end to this business.

"This business" was his own life.

The first three paragraphs are revealed to be not forward narration, but a retrospective summary of the thoughts of the pathologist as he walks home. They are not cast in any

ordinary free indirect style, but in something like a “super-free” indirect, in which we find nested, first, a piece of direct speech belonging to the same level of narration as paragraphs two and three, and also, buried deeper within paragraph two, a simile or comparison which itself spawns an expression in direct speech. The liberties taken with sequence are such that you could easily believe, until you get to paragraph 4, that paragraphs 1, 2, and 3 were the narration of events in forward chronological order — but then Kadare turns it all on its head and transforms the preceding matter into the re-enactment of prior events in the head of a worried man. The twin devices of “super-free” indirect and reverse-order narration are brought back into service in paragraphs 5 and 6, but to slightly different effect, as the reader has now learned what the true sequence of events in time actually is. That’s what allows the pluperfect tense of paragraph 6: “the medic had wondered” (*s’était dit le médecin*), which relates to a now explicit double articulation of time: the narrative past of Petrit walking home and the doubly past moment of his having encountered the minister and the architect. But this moment of relief for the puzzled reader is only a trick to allow Kadare to plunge us into a truly paradoxical time, that of paragraphs 7 and 8. English and French have only one tense for the doubly remote past, and so the pluperfect has to serve both for the time of Petrit’s meeting with the architect and for a *triply prior* time, when he first heard that he was to carry out the autopsy of the Successor. As through a trap-door into a past that contains the future, the story loops back to the point at which its outcome is made

manifest: “that’s how we’ll put an end to this business,” in super-free indirect, is glossed for us as a reference to a *future* event, Petrit’s now certain death. Which is the point of the entire passage, carrying us both backward through three separate moments and forward toward a bleak but certain future.

Now I can’t rule out the existence of some human language with a verb system so perverse, so robust, or so delicate as to make reverse-order narration and a triple level of reference to chronological time ordinary and banal. I can’t rule out that that language of ambiguity and manipulation is Albanian. But I don’t believe it. Kadare’s craft of leading his reader by the nose at sentence and paragraph level is so fully integrated with his creation of universal time in the plots and material subjects of his novels that it can only be the fruit of a powerful imagination and the result of conscious artistry. That is why it is, in the end, infinitely transmissible by acts of translation across the allegedly watertight boundaries of those imperfect things called languages. And that is why, despite the obvious objections to double translation, despite the relative poverty of a target text divorced from contact with the original, I keep on translating Kadare and hoping that my re-enactments of his rich and powerful imagination bring things that are still worth having to a far wider readership than Ismail Kadare, the “national writer” of a tiny, backward, and isolated nation, could have reasonably expected to have. ❖

ISMAIL KADARE: MODERN HOMER OR ALBANIAN DISSIDENT

By Peter Morgan

Ismail Kadare has experienced a life of controversy. In his own country and internationally, he has been lauded as a potential Nobel laureate and criticized as a sycophant of the Albanian dictatorship. In awarding the first International Man-Booker Prize for Literature in 2005, John Carey hailed Kadare as “a writer who maps a whole culture — a universal writer in a tradition of storytelling that goes back to Homer.” This assessment of Kadare as a guardian of Albanian identity certainly captures one important aspect of his life’s work. Kadare brings a powerful sense of ethnic identity to his writing, introducing for the first time on the international stage the customs of his native land. However, Kadare does not dwell on local color for its own sake. This aspect of his work exists alongside something much more modern, relevant, and unsettling to a contemporary audience. He is also the last great chronicler of everyday life under Stalinism.

Born in 1936 in the southern Albanian town of Gjirokastër, Kadare was nine years old at the end of World War II when Enver Hoxha, ex-playboy turned partisan, formed the new communist government. In *Chronicle in Stone* (1970), he documents a childhood of war and occupation as Italian, Greek, and German forces fight for control of Gjirokastër near the Greek border. This town, with its mixed Muslim and Orthodox population, was also the birthplace of the future dictator and of many in his ruling clan. *Chronicle in Stone* is about the meeting of two worlds, seen through the eyes of the child and retold by the adult. In an episode foreshadowing the end of the traditional Albanian-Ottoman class structures, the child watches as the age-old practices and traditions of his town come to an end in an apocalypse of fire and violence.

Too young to have been involved in fighting or to share the responsibility for the establishment of communism and not old enough to oppose the communists, Kadare was the beneficiary of the early years of his country’s postwar modernization. Gifted and precocious, he published his first poems at sixteen and was sent to study world literature at the famous Gorki Institute in Moscow. Here he witnessed firsthand the workings of a sophisticated communist regime in cultural affairs, with its cycles of thaw and frost in which dissident intellectuals would be identified and silenced. It was the time of the Pasternak affair, when the author of *Doctor Zhivago* was censured by the authorities after winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1958. Observing the intricate links between politics and literature in the communist state, the young Kadare drew his own conclusions. These experiences are documented in his second autobiographical work, *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods* (1976).

In 1961, Hoxha broke off relations with the Soviet Union in opposition to Khrushchev’s ideological revisionism and in order to put an end to Soviet hopes of gaining access to the Adriatic via Albania. Along with all other Albanian students in Eastern Europe, Kadare was repatriated as the regime began to close the country off from the communist as well as the capitalist world. From that time onward, he lived in and wrote under the regime of Hoxha, a clever and brutal postwar Eastern European dictator, who held complete control over his tiny country from 1945 until 1985.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Kadare worked as a journalist and writer, penning a masterpiece of ambiguity, *The Great Winter*, both a socialist-realist paean to the dictator and a tacitly critical view of communist

modernization. As students of the literature of socialism know, the line between opposition and collaboration was often a fine one in postwar socialist environments. Kadare's story is paradigmatic of the situation of the intellectual under socialism, caught between survival and commitment to humanist ideals, cognizant of the urgency of modernization in a backward and humiliated country, and inexperienced in the seductions of power. The softening that took place after Khrushchev's reforms did not take place in Albania. Punishments for any sign of "counterrevolutionary activity," such as the writing or publication of dissident opinion, were extremely harsh, including lengthy jail sentences, torture, and even assassination or execution.¹ This was not a "post-totalitarian" environment in which a Václav Havel or an Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn could begin to "speak truth to power."

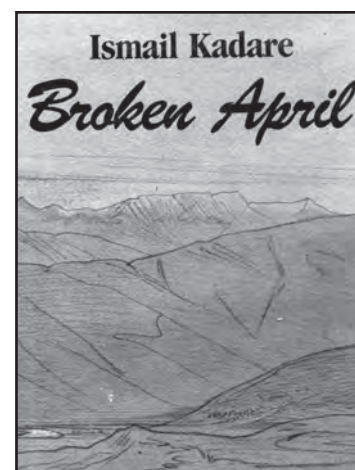
The Great Winter protected Kadare over the following decade.² Having idealized the dictator and become a household name, he could no longer simply be dispensed with. He had already gained an international profile through the publication of *General of the Dead Army* (1963) in France in 1967 and with the film starring Marcello Mastroianni (1983). Hoxha himself clearly harbored intellectual ambitions. Having attended university in Montpellier, visited Paris, and worked in Brussels during the 1930s, he remained impressed by French culture.³ Whether Hoxha's deference to the French was the salient factor protecting Kadare, whether the writer's international name afforded relative protection, or whether the dictator was playing a more sophisticated game of divide and rule among the Tirana intelligentsia remains open to conjecture.

During the following decades, Kadare produced a steady stream of works that, while never overtly political, made use of "Aesopian" modes in order to criticize all aspects of the dictatorship. The use of historical disguise and displacement of political themes into the realm

of everyday life are the hallmarks of these works. In *The Citadel* (1969–70), *The Niche of Shame* (1974–76), and *The Three-Arched Bridge* (1976–78), Kadare drew on the historical figures of Skanderbeg and Ali Pasha and on the era of transition from Byzantine to Ottoman rule to explore Albanian national history and to draw comparisons and contrasts with the present. Questions of leadership, cultural influence, and patterns of domination and control figure large in these stories.

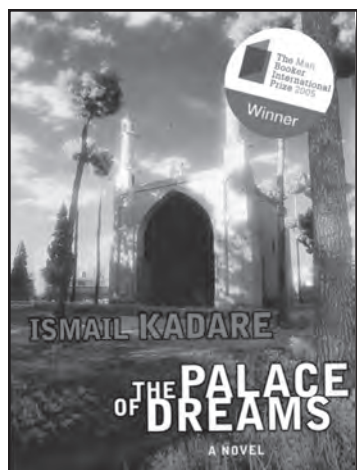
One of the key themes of Eastern European literature in the 20th century has been the tragedy of modernization. In an early work, *The Wedding* (revised and renamed *The Drum Skin*), Kadare wrote about the conflict between age-old tradition and rapid, enforced modernization along the Soviet model. Against the background of the deeply ingrained traditions of his native country, born of centuries of occupation by the Ottomans and other powers, Kadare depicts the processes of modernization that would enforce civic peace, liberate women from extreme servitude, and eliminate illiteracy and superstition through mass education. In *Broken April* (1978), he takes up the theme of vendetta to contrast the tragic past with the dead present.

While he did not acquiesce to the political vision of Stalinism, Kadare, like many Eastern European intellectuals, recognized the need for modernization in his country. Such issues as the treatment of women, levels of education and health, traditional customs, superstitions, and destructive practices such as blood feud could not be ignored. Early in his life, he hoped it



might be possible to take on the role of educator of the political elite. Literature, he envisioned, could function as a “corrective mask,” educating the dictator and nudging the country in different directions. This hope was dashed, however, and his political vision became much darker during the 1970s. The writer’s experiences in Moscow are documented in the novel *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods* (1976). The description of the Pasternak affair in this work marks the point at which he began to realize that literature and dictatorship cannot coexist. In his long essay *Eskili, ky humbës i madh* (1988; Aeschylus or the great loser), Kadare pits the figure of Prometheus, the modernizer and creator, on the one hand, against Zeus, the administrator and representative of order, on the other. The figure of the young pharaoh in *The Pyramid* (1992) is perhaps his most subtle portrait of the dictator as both modernizer and tyrant.

In the early 1980s, when unrest was rife in Kosovo and the dictator was becoming frail and



unpredictable, Kadare wrote his masterpiece. *The Palace of Dreams* is a political novel in the tradition of Orwell and Kafka, a modern *Castle*, haunted by the theme of Albanian ethnic identity in the

form of ancient bardic songs. The palace of the title is a government ministry responsible for the collection and analysis of the dreams of the empire and for policy formulation on the basis of the information gathered. Kadare’s protagonist, Mark-Alem, the employee of the Palace of Dreams, is torn between his family’s role as an assimilated Albanian dynasty of viziers and ministers in a modernized Ottoman

Empire at the end of the nineteenth century and his own nascent yet powerful sense of ethnic identity. In the novel, the mixed feelings of the family toward their ethnic Albanian and imperial Ottoman identities are expressed as Mark-Alem’s uncles discuss the advantages and disadvantages of their situation. “It’s the Turks who helped us to reach our true stature,” says one. But the point is momentarily lost on the young man who has just discovered the epic songs of his Balkan ancestral heritage, played on the single-stringed Albanian *lahuta*.

Mark-Alem couldn’t take his eyes off the slender, solitary string stretched across the sounding box. It was the string that secreted the lament; the box amplified it to terrifying proportions. Suddenly it was revealed to Mark-Alem that this hollow cage was the breast containing the soul of the nation to which he belonged. It was from there that arose the vibrant age-old lament. He’d already heard fragments of it; only today would he be permitted to hear the whole. He now felt the hollow of the *lahuta* inside his own breast.⁴

The novel culminates in a spectacular showdown between political might and ethnicity. It is one of the greatest works to come out of the Central and Eastern European communist dictatorships.

After *The Palace of Dreams*, Kadare’s situation became more difficult. He was subjected to intense criticism by the party and seriously considered seeking exile in France. Moreover, the dictator was dying and the sound of sharpening knives could be heard throughout the “Block” in central Tirana where the powerful lived. Kadare’s novel of despair, *The Shadow* (1986), was smuggled out of Albania

and deposited in a bank vault in Paris, to be published should anything happen to its author.

In late 1990, during the “time of dark forces” when the Sigurimi, the feared security police, and various oppositional groups were battling for power in the wake of the fall of communism, Kadare finally left his shattered homeland for the safety of France. In *Albanian Spring: The Anatomy of a Tyranny* (1990), he gave his reasons for leaving, citing that the political reforms had not gone far enough. However, there was good reason to suspect that he felt very unsafe in the environment where old scores could be settled in a context of upheaval and change.

Kadare returned to Albania in May 1992. He has maintained his residence in Paris and continues to revise his works for the complete edition published by Fayard, while continuing his prodigious output of new material. In the short stories and novels *Spiritus* (1996), *Cold Flowers of April* (2000), *The Life, Game and Death of Lul Mazrek* (2002), and *The Successor* (2004), he continues to explore and reveal the secrets and perversions of the “captive mind” under the dictatorship. In his autobiographical works, *Invitation to the Writer’s Studio* (1990) and *The Weight of the Cross* (1991), and in published interviews with Eric Faye, Alain Bosquet, and others,⁵ he has sought to present a record of his actions and responsibilities under the regime, although for some these accounts are characterized by “omissions and mystifications.”⁶

It would be a mistake to represent Kadare as a silenced figure under the dictatorship. His work was published selectively, and he was a well-known member of the Albanian Writers’ Union and the party. He was later made a deputy and was able to travel abroad. He managed to avoid prison, the labor camps, and the other forms of punishment meted out to those who stepped out of line. Nevertheless, he also suffered tremendously from the strain,

the threats, and the terror arising from Hoxha’s unpredictable moves. While there were indeed privileges, it is important to understand that Kadare was not at liberty to refuse them and that they came with a price. Like every other aspect of his life in Albania, they were controlled from above. In order to survive, he had to acquiesce to the regime and use his privileges to further the cause of his writing. No one has yet come forward with evidence that Kadare compromised himself or that others suffered as a result of his activities.⁷ That he was obliged to find cover in his official position as a writer is hardly surprising. Hoxha retained a level of respect for France, and he was wily enough to recognize that Kadare was a writer of greatness, valuable to display in the international arena. Kadare did not give his imprimatur to the regime in this role as ambassador, however. On the contrary, he used whatever opportunities arose to disseminate the literary works that spoke so eloquently of his country’s plight. While the life he led in Albania can be criticized (especially in retrospect and from the outside), his literary record remains impeccable.

As the voice of an alternative, better Albania, Kadare offered to his countrymen one of the few sources of hope for change. He exploited the techniques of “Aesopian language” and experimented with various forms of fiction, including socialist realism. Even *The Great Winter*, in which he appeared to celebrate Hoxha, cannot be read as a hymn of praise. On the contrary, it represents the country as having been led into a “winter of discontent” isolated and impoverished by the inflexible dogmatism of the leader.

As the memory of the Eastern European dictatorships fades, we must try to re-create in our minds the environment of the dissenting voice. To a certain extent, the expectation that Kadare was a figure comparable to Havel has created a false image. Kadare’s opposition was expressed through literary language, not

doctrine or ideology. He expressed dissent through the representation of the impossibility of everyday life under communism and through the evocation of an eternal Albania that was more ancient and more durable than the new Albania of Hoxha. His opposition was a form of praxis inasmuch as he steadfastly refused to surrender his language and identity or to be forced into exile. But he paid dearly for this refusal. In such works as *The Shadow*, he also questioned his own role and motives.

Kadare's creativity must be plotted in terms of its antinomies. He is both Albanian patriot *and* European existentialist, repository of the legends of his nation *and* communist modernizer, dictator *and* dissident, Zeus *and* Prometheus. This is what makes him a great writer rather than a political dissident. Kadare is the voice of Albania's modernity *and* the singer of its ancient identity. He is the alter ego and the nemesis of the dictator, and in this ambiguity lies the key to his role, his reputation, and the value of his works.

Many of Kadare's novels have been translated into English from the French of Jusuf Vroni and Tedi Papavrami, rather than from the original Albanian. John Hodgson's translation of *The Three-Arched Bridge* is one of the few to have been directly translated from Kadare's original language. Kadare has always worked closely with his French translators, however, and Jusuf Vroni, the French-educated, bilingual Albanian detained in the country after the communist takeover, devoted himself to the task of translation. In addition, Kadare has revised his works for the complete edition (currently twelve volumes) published simultaneously in Albanian and French by Paris-based publisher Fayard since the early 1990s. Kadare's best-known works available in English include *The Palace of Dreams*, *Broken April*, *Doruntine*, *The Three-Arched Bridge*, and *Chronicle in Stone*. His controversial socialist-realist novel *The Great Winter* is available in French and

German but not yet in English translation. *The Successor*, Kadare's novel about the mysterious death in 1982 of Hoxha's partisan comrade and second-in-command, Mehmet Shehu, has recently appeared in English translation. ❖

Notes

¹Maks Velo provides information on the treatment of writers and critical intellectuals under the Hoxha regime in his documentation of the controversy over Kadare's poem "The Red Pashas" in *La disparition des "Pashas rouges" d'Ismail Kadaré: Enquête sur un "crime littéraire"* (Paris. Fayard. 2004).

²The original title was *L'Hiver de la grande solitude* (1971); a second, enlarged version, *Le grand hiver*, was published in 1978.

³Thomas Schreiber, *Enver Hodja: Le sultan rouge* (Paris. Lattès. 1994), 43–61.

⁴Ismail Kadare, *The Palace of Dreams*, translated from the French of Jusuf Vroni by Barbara Bray (London. Harvill. 1993), 151.

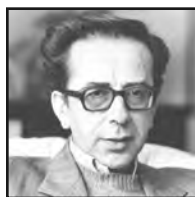
⁵Ismail Kadaré, *Entretiens avec Eric Faye en lisant en écrivant* (Paris. Jose Corti. 1991); Ismail Kadaré, *Dialogue avec Alain Bosquet*, tr. Jusuf Vroni (Paris. Fayard. 1995).

⁶See Noel Malcolm's review of *The Three-Arched Bridge* in the *New York Review of Books*, November 6, 1997 (21–24), as well as the exchange with Kadare in the January 15, 1998, issue (59–60), and Steven Schwartz's comments in the April 9, 1998, issue (80).

⁷At the time of writing this article, a documentation of Kadare's files with the state security police has been published, in which the author is shown to have been under attack from the age of twenty-two by the Sigurimi and to have remained uncompromised in his dealings with the regime.

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ALBANIAN LITERATURE

By Peter R. Prifti

The Ottoman Empire, which ruled Albania from the 15th to the early 20th century, prohibited publications in Albanian, an edict that became a serious obstacle to the development of literature in that language. Books in Albanian were rare until the late 19th century.

The oldest example of writing in Albanian is a book-length manuscript on theology, philosophy, and history by Teodor Shkodrani that dates from 1210; it was discovered in the late 1990s in the Vatican archives. Among other early examples of written Albanian are a baptismal formula (1462) and the book *Meshari* (1555; “The Liturgy” or “The Missal”) by the Roman Catholic prelate Gjon Buzuku. The publication in 1635 of the first Albanian dictionary was a milestone in the history of Albanian literature. The author of the *Dictionarium latino-epiroticum* (“Latin-Albanian Dictionary”) was Frang Bardhi, a Catholic bishop.

The earliest works of Albanian literature were written by Catholic clerics, whose ties with the Vatican enabled them to circumvent Turkish restrictions by publishing their works outside Albania, mostly in Rome. The earliest books, from the mid-16th to the mid-18th century, were mostly religious and didactic in character. A change occurred with the advent of Romanticism and the nationalist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries. The range of genres broadened to encompass folklore and linguistics, and books of a Romantic and patriotic nature also emerged.

The first writers to cultivate the new genres were Albanians who had migrated centuries earlier to Sicily and southern Italy. The Arbëresh writers, as they are commonly called, profited from the absence of state-imposed restrictions in Italy and published freely to preserve and

celebrate their ethnic Albanian heritage. (The term Arbëresh denotes both their dialect and their ethnic origins; it is derived from the word Arbëria, the name by which Albania was known during the Middle Ages.) Foremost among Arbëresh writers was Jeronim (Girolamo) de Rada, regarded by some critics as the finest Romantic poet in the Albanian language. His major work, best known by its Albanian title *Këngët e Milosao* (1836; “The Songs of Milosao”), is a Romantic ballad infused with patriotic sentiments. De Rada was also the founder of the first Albanian periodical, *Fiámuri Arbërit* (“The Albanian Flag”), which was published from 1883 to 1888. Other Arbëresh writers of note are Francesco Santori, a novelist, poet, and playwright; Dhimitër Kamarda (Demetrio Camarda), a philologist and folklorist; Zef (Giuseppe) Serembe, a poet; Gavril (Gabriele) Dara (the younger), a poet and savant; and Zef Skiroi (Giuseppe Schirò), a poet, publicist, and folklorist.

Literary activity gathered momentum in the wake of the formation of the Albanian League of Prizren, the first Albanian nationalist organization. The league, founded in 1878, spurred Albanians to intensify their efforts to win independence from the Ottoman Empire, an event that would occur in 1912. Albanians in exile — in Constantinople (Istanbul); Bucharest, Romania; Sofia, Bulgaria; Cairo; and Boston — formed patriotic and literary societies to promote the propagation of literature and culture as instruments for gaining independence. The national motif became the hallmark of the literature of this period, known as Rilindja (“Renaissance”), and writers of the time came to be known collectively as Rilindas.

The spirit of the Albanian Renaissance found expression, above all, in the work of

the poet Naim Frashëri. His moving tribute to pastoral life in *Bagëti e bujqësia* (1886; “Cattle and Crops”; English trans., *Frashëri’s Song of Albania*) and his epic poem *Istori e Skënderbeut* (1898; “The History of Skanderbeg”) — eulogizing Skanderbeg, Albania’s medieval national hero — stirred the Albanian nation. Today many regard him as the national poet of Albania.

Albanian literature took a historic step forward in 1908, when Albanian linguists, scholars, and writers convened the Congress of Monastir (in what is now Bitola, Macedonia), which adopted the modern Albanian alphabet based on Latin letters. The congress was presided over by Mid’hat Frashëri, who subsequently wrote *Hi dhe shpuzë* (1915; “Ashes and Embers”), a book of short stories and reflections of a didactic nature.

At the turn of the 20th century, a note of realism, combined with cynicism, appeared in Albanian literature as writers sought to identify and combat the ills of Albanian society, such as poverty, illiteracy, blood feuds, and bureaucracy. The major authors of the time were Gjergj Fishta, Faik Konitza (Konica), and Fan S. Noli. Fishta — a native of Shkodër, the literary center of northern Albania — was a powerful satirist but is best known for his long ballad *Lahuta e malcís* (1937; *The Highland Lute*), which celebrates the valor and virtues of Albanian highlanders. Konitza, a foremost polemicist, is the pioneer figure in Albanian literary criticism. As the publisher of the review *Albania* (1897–1909), he exerted great influence on aspiring writers and the development of Albanian culture. Noli is esteemed as a poet, critic, and historian and is known in particular for his translations of William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Miguel de Cervantes, Edgar Allan Poe, and others. Among the lesser figures in this period are Asdren (acronym of Aleks Stavre Drenova), a poet; Çajupi (in full, Andon Zako Çajupi), a poet and playwright; Ernest

Kolliqi, a short-story writer, poet, and novelist; Ndre Mjeda, a poet and linguist; and Migjeni (acronym of Milosh Gjergj Nikolla), a poet and novelist.

A lone figure in the landscape of 20th-century Albanian literature is the poet Lasgush Poradeci (pseudonym of Llazar Gusho, of which Lasgush is a contraction). Breaking with tradition and conventions, he introduced a new genre with his lyrical poetry, which is tinged with mystical overtones.

Writers in post–World War II Albania labored under state-imposed guidelines summed up by the term Socialist Realism. Nevertheless, the most gifted writers by and large overcame these restrictions and produced works of intrinsic literary value. Among the most successful were Dritëro Agolli, Fatos Arapi, Naum Prifti, and Ismail Kadare. The first two are known primarily as poets, whereas Prifti’s reputation rests mainly on his books of short stories, the most popular of which is *Çezma e floririt* (1960; *The Golden Fountain*). The outstanding figure in modern Albanian literature is Kadare, whose groundbreaking novel *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (1963; *The General of the Dead Army*) catapulted him to worldwide fame.

Following are brief notes on a few writers of the younger generation who have gained prominence in recent years.

Rudolph Marku has published several books of poetry and has also translated into Albanian such poets as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W.H. Auden. Another poet, Visar Zhiti, was imprisoned and persecuted as a “dissident” writer during Albania’s Communist era. He tells of his prison ordeal in some of his books. Zhiti has also published short stories and translated into Albanian works of Mother Teresa and Federico Garcia Lorca. Moikom Zeqo stands apart from other writers in the country in that his work is essentially intellectual and focuses largely on the grandeur

of Albania's archeological past. Apart from his literary writings, he is widely respected for his publications on Albanian history, mythology, and culture.

Among young female writers, the one who has commanded the most attention in recent years is Mimoza Ahmeti. In her book *Delirium*, 1994, she writes openly of feminine desires and sensual delights. The boldness and rhythm of her style have attracted a large number of young readers in tune with Western values. Gjeke Marinaj attained sudden notoriety in Albania when he published an allegorical anti-Communist poem titled *Kuajt* ("Horses"). To evade arrest, he fled his native country, eventually migrating to America, where he has since published a number of books, among them *Infinit* ("Infinite"), 2000; and *Lutje në ditën e tetë të javës* ("Prayer on the Eighth Day of the Week"), 2008. He has also translated into Albanian works of American authors Rainer

Schulte and Frederick Turner. A writer of notable prose and poetry, Agron Tufa has taught literature at the University of Tiranë. He is the author of the novels *Dueli* ("The Duel"), 2002; and *Fabula rasa*, 2004. Moreover, he is one of the leading translators of Russian literature, including works of Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Nabokov, and others.

Albanian literature has traditionally been written in the two main Albanian dialects: Gheg (Geg) in the north and Tosk in the south. In 1972, however, a Congress of Orthography held in Tiranë, Albania, formulated rules for a unified literary language based on the two dialects. Since then, most authors have employed the new literary idiom. ❖

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I Don't Believe in Ghosts

Boredom often creates strange ghosts,
white fogs in which the buildings sway
and there's no stability or law. What happened
to the old choreography of vanishing ghosts?

Rain in Europe. Clouds on the horizon
open and close for the tragedies of the time.
Sober above Shakespeare's statue,
Romeo and Juliet have fallen out of love.

Now that I know all the legends,
I pick them up, strangely focused,
to light (as if with a magnifying glass)
the unfiltered cigarettes of my poems—

fuses of metaphors for poetic explosions
that change the core of a person to the core
of the universe. I've never believed in the ghosts
weak-minded people weave on their looms.

I believe in life, everything I love,
the entirety of a giant stadium.
I want to kick the planet like a soccer ball
into the open goal of the future.

Often I get up in the night,
but you need to know I never sleepwalk.
I stretch out my arms like two streets,
blood moving through them like traffic.

And sometimes I'm an extraordinary optimist,
though the cancer of bureaucrats tortures me.
It's more difficult to leave
than to take gloves off icy hands.



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TRANSLATING MOIKOM ZEKO'S *MEDUZA*

By Wayne Miller

The period 1966 to 1974 was a strange and complicated period in the history of Communist Albania, the most isolated and repressive country in Eastern Europe for much of the 20th century. In 1961, the Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha had severed his nation's ties to the Soviet Union because, as he saw it, Khrushchev had abandoned Stalin's legacy. Hoxha then realigned his country with Maoist China. This put Albanian writers on uncertain ground, because now not only Western cultural and artistic influences were considered ideologically unacceptable, but potentially so was traditional, Gorky Institute-style socialist realism (Logoreci 159). In the prevailing literary anomie, several young poets, among them Ismail Kadare, Dritëro Agolli, and Fatos Arapi, published books that introduced new poetic techniques, including free verse. When these writers were subsequently attacked by senior members of the Albanian Writers Union, Hoxha surprisingly sided with the younger innovators (Elsie xv). This tentatively broadened the aesthetic palette available to Albanian poets, but it also meant that there were no hard and fast rules as to what would be deemed acceptable by the Albanian government.

Then, in 1967, Hoxha officially prohibited all religions and religious practices; he soon began to fill the resulting void with cultural offerings. Albanians, whose modern cultural history up until the 20th century had been severely limited by several hundred years of Ottoman occupation, suddenly found themselves in the midst of a palpable cultural blooming. In 1972, the Philharmonic Society gave its opening concert, the Albanian Institute of Folklore published four enormous collections (of fables, proverbs, folk dances, and love songs, respectively), and the Academy of Sciences was founded. In 1973, the Congress of Albanian Orthography published

a volume establishing an official written Albanian (balancing the two dialect groups, Geg and Tosk), potentially unifying the nation's literature. Albania's cities also experienced a collateral flourishing of "youth culture": rock and roll, tight jeans, miniskirts, absenteeism, disinterest in indoctrination courses, petty crime and vandalism, men wearing long hair, etc. In one instance, the Tirana-Durrës train was forcibly stopped by its passengers so they could pick fruit from a trackside orchard (Jacques 494).

Meanwhile, inspired by Mao, Hoxha invited Albanians to voice "criticism from below." Thus, the political climate seemed to be thawing, though no one knew how much, and various organizations began pushing for reform. For instance, in 1969, the head of the Albanian Writers Union, Dhimiter Shuteriqi, asserted that "greater repression had bred indifference and mediocrity" in too much of Albania's literature (Logoreci 162). Also in that year, thirty university students were expelled from the University of Tirana for demanding more open discussion in the classroom (Logoreci 162). In 1973, the Labor Youth Union of Albania criticized the educational system's emphasis on nationalism, asked for an increase in the availability of books by foreign authors, and urged the central government to remember that Albania was part of Europe, not China (Jacques 494).

This was the confusing period during which Moikom Zeqo began to write *Meduza*, the book from which the poems in *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* were selected. At the time, Zeqo had published two books (*Vegime të vendlindjes* [*Visions of my Native Land*] in 1968 and *Qyteti*



feniks [*Phoenix City*] in 1970), and he currently held the prestigious editorship of *Drita* (*The Light*), which was Albania's primary — and official — literary publication. Yet, the poems in his new manuscript were bolder than his previous work, and at the same time more overtly personal, thus straying from the generally accepted communal, historical, and nationalist themes of Albanian socialist art. Moreover, in numerous instances they could be read as criticizing the Albanian communist system, however indirectly or covertly.

For example, several poems in *Meduza* express optimism about the potential thawing of the Albanian political situation and at the same time are understandably apprehensive about such a thaw failing to emerge. In the poem “Vjeshta në Tiranë” (“Fall in Tirana”), Zeqo describes the Tirana cityscape as consumed by a storm, the “electroscope of the sky shaking” (51) with its power — which on the surface seems to be a simple description of the city and the storm's natural phenomena. But the Tirana described in this poem is populated with “[b]oys wearing sunglasses” and “modern girls / with half-moon hair” (51), thus subtly addressing Tirana's modernization and cultural flourishing, for which the storm serves as metaphor. In the distance, “[t]he moon watches, / the face of autumn” (51), representing perhaps the dictator, who watches over everything from his remove, as if he were commanding the seasons themselves; or else perhaps the moon represents the natural world as a whole, which is ultimately indifferent to the cultural and political shifts of any particular political system.

In the poem “Njeriu me fyell” (“The Man with the Pipe”), Zeqo addresses again, this time more overtly, Albania's political and cultural rejuvenation: “History is moving — / the pulse has switched to allegro” (49). And in the poem “Shqetësim” (“Trouble”), which serves as something of a manifesto for the book, Zeqo begins by apologizing for his

complex, metaphorical style, which diverges from the aesthetic prescriptions for socialist realism: “When I write poems / I don't want to overwhelm you with metaphors. // I could tell you, for instance, that the Eiffel Tower / is an iron giraffe / grazing on the stars. // But this in itself / would be meaningless.” He then goes on to defend his project, claiming that he nonetheless sees it as connected to the ultimate goals of socialism: “For everything delicate I've written, / for all the lines that don't say anything, // please understand! I'm searching for the poetry of the people” (33).

Zeqo most overtly takes up the cause of offering “criticism from below” when in a number of poems he attacks what he sees as a lazy and dysfunctional bureaucracy wielding power within the Albanian system. In “S'i kam besuar fantazmat” (“I Don't Believe in Ghosts”), he asserts, “[T]he cancer of bureaucrats tortures me” (27), and in “Motiv Majakovskian” (“Mayakovskian Motive”), he compares the façades of houses to “bureaucrats who don't leave their chairs” (35). Continuing on the theme of chairs, in a poem titled “Karriget” (“Chairs”), he compares a bureaucrat's chair — a seat of power — specifically to a womb, noting how bureaucratic and/or political meetings produce facsimiles of those in charge, while at the same time establishing a system perpetuated by individuals who are neither leaders exactly nor clear subordinates. Thus, as Zeqo describes it, in “meetings solemn as weddings” a “man dissolves slowly into his chair: / mixes, enters, quivers — amazing!” When the man reemerges from the chair, its “womb doubles with joy — / the father, who's also the son” (163).

Looking back, it seems inevitable that Hoxha would retaliate against his critics, which he did in what today is generally called the Purge of the Liberals, begun in 1973 at the Fourth Plenary Session of the Albanian Communist Party. Writers, artists, and intellectuals who had objected too vociferously to aspects of

Hoxha's governance, or else who were deemed to have been simply too free in their artistic and intellectual endeavors, were quickly denounced for encouraging "bourgeois revisionism" and "decadent trends" (Jacques 495). Various members of the Union of Albanian Writers and Artists were removed from their posts, and many such reformers were then relocated to various sites outside the capital, where they were forced to work on farms and in factories, dig ditches, build railway lines, and thus reground themselves in the fundamentals of socialist realism.

Zeqo was no exception; having published in literary magazines a few cycles of poems from the as-yet-unpublished collection *Meduza*, he became an object of Hoxha's crackdown. At the Fourth Plenary Session, his work was labeled "hermetic, with modernist influence, dangerous, [and] foreign," and he was removed from his post at *Drita*, after which he was relocated to the Albanian countryside, forbidden to enter Tirana for an extended period of time, and "mercifully" (as Zeqo puts it) obliged to work as a schoolteacher. Ismail Kadare was the only writer who defended him; most others were either party-liners or else also suffering from similar — or worse — retribution.

One poem in particular was singled out as embodying the worst kind of anti-Albanianism, though such a strong reaction to this particular poem might seem strange to today's American reader. Titled "Spjegimi i fjalës vetmi" ("An Explication of the Word *Loneliness*"), it describes through a series of metaphors the despair of solitude, a common poetic theme, which though perhaps too personal to fall generally within the prescribed subject matter of socialist realism, would not seem to garner such specific and pointed attack. In the poem, Zeqo claims, "Loneliness is a clock / without numbers or hands, frozen in dead time," and further explains that "[w]ithout people, / you're without everything — / even time and space abandon you. // And you turn gray like Crusoe, /

not just on a distant island, / but here, too, closed inside yourself" (63). In fact, despite what seems to be personal subject matter, the poem was interpreted as a critique of Albania's extreme political isolation in the wake of its withdrawal for the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. Thus, the withering away of the individual that Zeqo describes in the poem was viewed as a metaphor for an Albanian cultural withering caused directly by Albania's political and economic seclusion, one of Hoxha's central policies, which explains why it was criticized so harshly.

In fact, it is just this sort of subtle duplicity that makes many of Zeqo's poems so effective on both personal and political levels. Throughout *Meduza*, the isolated individual that recurs can often be read as representing the plight of Albania under Hoxha. For instance, in the brief poem "Këtë mbrëmje" ("Tonight"), when the speaker addresses a lost love on a lonely night — "Tonight I'm sitting / quietly alone. / Only a memory / of you remains" (61) — we can also read the lost love as Zeqo's — or Albania's — loss of contact with the intellectual and poetic world outside Albania. In such a reading, the closing quatrain strikingly and surreally emphasizes the profound importance of whatever brief moments of contact Zeqo — or Albania — has had with outside thought and thus takes on an added poignancy beyond that of a simple lost love: "I balance / on that memory, / the cosmos hanging / on the moon's coathook" (61). Similarly, in the brief poem "Mbas ndarjes" ("After the Separation"), Zeqo simply offers metaphorical descriptions of the effects of the "separation" — perhaps a breakup, but also Albania's separation from the Soviet Union: "[E]ach word / became a broken Aphrodite, / a train run off its tracks. // Now the images flash — / pulling out the rain's hair" (153).

In another poem, "Efemera" ("Ephemera"), Zeqo offers varied layers of reading. On all levels, the poem reads like a curse, and at the outset it seems addressed to an ex-lover in the

wake of a bad breakup: “You are Ephemera, / you are Ephemera, / Ephemera, Ephemera, Ephemera. / More fleeting than everything fleeting, less / significant than all that’s significant / [. . .] / you, my Ephemera. (Mine, indeed . . .)” (85). Yet, the more Zeqo pushes forward into the poem, the more he asks us to seek a more complex reading. When he writes, “You’re like those insects born in a certain hour, / only to die within the day” (85), it seems possible that he’s pulling into focus the general brevity of human life. And when he asserts that “[t]hey don’t exist — they who leave behind no memories. / Ephemera, your epitaph is silence” (85), his tone sharpens, offering two more potential readings: (1) he’s cursing Hoxha and his underlings, predicting that they ultimately will be relegated to the dustbin of history; or (2) he’s addressing the Albanian people as a group, warning them that the position they’ve been reduced to by Hoxha’s policy of isolation is that of living outside the collective memory of the world — that their very lives have been rendered utterly ephemeral by Hoxha’s choice.

In another poem, “Gjeli i remë” (“The Weathercock”), Zeqo’s strategy is slightly different, though akin to one used by fellow Albanian writer Ismail Kadare. In his novel *The Palace of Dreams*, Kadare tells the story of a government agency charged with the task of monitoring citizens’ dreams for subversive thoughts. The novel is set in a magical-realist, ahistorical Albania still under Ottoman rule, and thus the protagonist hired to work in the agency is forced to do the work of Albania’s long-time Ottoman oppressors. Despite the fact that on the surface *The Palace of Dreams* is critical of a central enemy of Albanian nationalism, something that seems to have helped the book get through the censors, in fact, it’s difficult to read the book as addressing anything other than the oppressiveness of Hoxha’s Albania. Similarly, in “The Weathercock,” Zeqo describes a “tin rooster on the roof” (119) observed by

birds pecking around on the shingles far beneath him. This weathercock “knows only how to spin around himself” and “won’t wake anyone” (119), because of his artificial existence. In comparison to him, Zeqo exalts the “[b]irds who are living, / birds who are small,” and praises them for “how many dimensions / [they] uncover / through [their] living” (119). Here, it’s quite possible to interpret the weathercock as representing a classic enemy of communist ideology, the bourgeois capitalist, though the poem can just as easily be read as a scathing critique of Hoxha himself.

Though so many of Zeqo’s poems work well on both personal and political levels, it’s important to note that simply addressing the personal itself could be seen as politically subversive in Hoxha’s Albania, as could Zeqo’s sweeping, wild, and sometimes indulgent metaphors that combine the surreal with complicated conceits. Thus, a poem such as “Cili je ti?” (“Who Are You?”), which depicts grazing horses “laughing: ha ha” and asks “[y]ou graze on the heart, / who are you?” (115), risked being accused of purposelessness and extravagance. A poem of inward reflection such as “Pusi i vjetër” (“The Old Well”), in which Zeqo imagines myths pouring “from the mossy bucket” and asserts that the well itself is “my stone telescope / for looking / into the depths” (89) — the depths of history, presumably, but also into his own depths — risked being read as self-indulgent and problematically individualistic.

Despite the relative aesthetic isolation of Albanian poets under Hoxha, Zeqo is — and to a lesser degree was — quite erudite in a broad range of European and American literatures (in fact, Zeqo has translated a number of Shakespeare’s sonnets into Albanian), and at the time that he wrote *Meduza* he was aware of, and to a certain extent, influenced by, the Metaphysical poets, with their complex conceits. Perhaps more importantly, Zeqo has a great affection for Shelley, his favorite of the British

Romantics, whose individualism, revolutionary spirit, and Romantic attention to the natural world inform Zeqo's poetics. This, too, was a risk, since it reached overtly toward non-Albanian influences.

For instance, in the brief poem "Apoteoza e syve" ("Apotheosis of the Eyes"), the speaker, who it seems is waiting for a lover to return from afar, joins with the natural world, such that "Every dewdrop is [his] tiny eye" watching "as you approach from the horizon, the sea" (37). Thus, as his beloved approaches, "the hills and woods watch with a million eyes" (37), universalizing the fervor of the speaker's anticipation. Again, though, the poem's meanings are layered. The closing assertion, "Only death has no eyes" (37), is darker and more foreboding than what comes previously and seems also to address the constant surveillance that was rampant in Hoxha's Albania. Furthermore, during his time in power, Hoxha constructed literally hundreds of thousands of dome-shaped bunkers all over the Albanian countryside, purportedly for defense in case of attack from either the West or the Soviet Empire. In light of this, it's hard not to read all those eyes looking outward from all over the country as visual metaphors for Hoxha's absurd bunkers, another example of Zeqo's layering and subtle political critique.

Except for a chapbook-length excerpt, which, unbeknownst to the authorities — and, for many years, unbeknownst to Zeqo — was published in Prishtina by Kosovar poet Rrahman Dedaj under the title *Brenda vetes (Inside Yourself)*, *Meduza* was suppressed, and it remained so until 1995, after the fall of Albanian Communism. In the interim, Zeqo continued to write. In addition to several "safer" books of poems, he wrote children's books and short fiction, and generally focused his intellectual energies on archaeology, his field of academic study and expertise. (Among his varied pursuits, Zeqo has been a prominent underwater archaeologist.) During this period, he also produced, and has continued to

produce, numerous monographs and articles on Albanian history and culture.

In 1985, Ramiz Alia succeeded Hoxha, and the political situation in Albania slowly began to improve. Right at the end of Alia's governance, in 1991, Zeqo served briefly as Albania's Minister of Culture, a fact that would create problems for Zeqo after Alia's ouster in 1992, because in 1995, just after *Meduza* was finally published and while Zeqo was serving as a member of Albania's Parliament, the succeeding Democratic government of Sali Berisha passed what was dubbed the "Anti-Genocide Law." This law prohibited anyone who had held a political office during the communist period from participating in Albania's new government. As tensions rose between the Democratic and Socialist Parties, Zeqo began to fear for himself and his family. When his wife, Lida Miraj, also a prominent archaeologist, received a fellowship to do research in Washington, D.C., the family relocated to the United States. There, they watched from afar the now infamous collapse of Albania's "pyramid scheme" and the subsequent weakening of Berisha and the Democrats.

Late in 1997, Zeqo returned with his family to Albania. For a number of years, he directed the National Historical Museum in Tirana; today he lives in Tirana and works as a freelance writer and journalist, continuing to publish poetry, fiction, history articles, and criticism at a rapid pace. Nonetheless, Zeqo remains uniquely fond of *Meduza*, because it caused a lot of trouble, took so long to publish, and represents the beginning of what he sees as his mature work.

I met Moikom Zeqo in the early spring of 1997, when I was a junior at Oberlin College and he came to campus to give a lecture on Albania's language and literature in Professor Stuart Friebert's translation workshop. After the class, I approached Zeqo and asked if I could work on translating some of his poems for an end-of-the-semester project. After several phone calls, my friend, Aaron Page, and I found ourselves a few

weeks later in Washington, D.C., working with Zeqo on getting down “trots” for a much larger project: the translation of *Meduza*.

It took me a number of years of substantial reworking to finally put together a translated manuscript that, at least to my ear, is composed of effective poems in English. Along the way, I gratefully received help from three Albanians living in the U.S.: Petrit Rragami, an Albanian émigré then living in New York, and Silvana Faja and Adriatik Likcani, a professor and counselor, respectively, who live in Warrensburg, Missouri. Although the majority of the poems in *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* were co-translated primarily by Zeqo and myself (with important contributions from Aaron and Arnisa), a number of others, which we didn't get to before Zeqo's return to Albania, were first co-translated with these other Albanian-speaking colleagues. In addition, many of the poems in this book are the product of several re-workings over time and thus developed through multiple collaborations.

Of course, the most ideal situation for translating poetry generally involves an English-language poet translating from a language in which he is entirely fluent. Nonetheless, much has been written about collaborative translating, and many strong translations have emerged over the years through collaborative efforts. For the translation of *Meduza*, I took my initial cues from Robert Bly's *Eight Stages of Translation*. To the best of my knowledge, only a few of Zeqo's poems had appeared in one small anthology in English, and because none of the poems in *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* had previously appeared in an English-language volume, I tried in my translations to be as straightforward as possible while still incorporating effective tonal and prosodic choices. Thus, the poems in *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* are generally not intended to be “imitations” (à la Robert Lowell) or “versions” (as Don Paterson calls his wonderfully loose translations of Antonio Machado in *The Eyes*). They are intentionally and self-consciously

“translations.”

That said, if the poems in English are actually to be *poems*, the process of poetic translation, as noted translator Jascha Kessler has pointed out, must finally be one of “re-creation” (103) rather than direct, literal translation. Albanian, like any language, has its peculiarities that complicate the translation process, and Zeqo, like any poet, has his own particular idiosyncrasies that outside of the context of Albanian literature and culture might not be conveyed effectively. Thus, when confronted with such difficulties, I resorted to moments of what I would call “approximation.”

The first, most obvious problem I confronted in *Meduza* was Zeqo's frequent and exuberant use of exclamation points. From my conversations with Zeqo, it seemed to me that this choice was a product of two things: (1) Zeqo's overall demeanor and personality is prone to grand gestures, and thus his exclamation points should be read, generally, as earnest; and (2) Zeqo's use of exclamation points is largely informed by a Romantic ethos, à la Shelley (“I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”), which for an Albanian audience, especially one in the politically and culturally isolated Albania of the 1970s, would mean something very different than it does to a 21st-century American audience. To us, a poet stylistically imitating Shelley — or the other Romantics, for that matter — would seem naïve, as if he had little awareness of the influence of Modernism. What's more, a peppering of exclamation points in American poetry, the poetic idiom into which I was translating Zeqo's poems, would come off as either amateurish or ironic, with little room for landing in between. In contrast, for Zeqo's intended audience in 1970s Albania, paying homage to Shelley would potentially indicate a kind of internationalism and Romantic individualism that would feel politically loaded — edgy, even. Given the gap between these potential effects, I quickly decided to drop the majority of Zeqo's exclamation points. The last

thing I wanted was to portray Zeqo as naïve or amateurish, or else ironic, since that would not have been the effect of his poems on an Albanian audience.

A particular problem I encountered comes from how adjectives and possessives are formed in Albanian. Without going into too much detail, I'll say briefly that adjectives in Albanian most typically follow nouns and are joined to them by short connecting words called clitics. Interestingly, the genitive case works more or less the same way, meaning that possessives modify nouns more or less as adjectives do. In practice, this adjectival/genitive construction, in combination with other possible adjectival constructions, allows nouns to accumulate modifiers in Albanian more seamlessly than nouns do in English. Often, Zeqo groups several modifiers around a noun, and the word-for-word equivalent in English feels excessively tangled, something that demanded various strategies to smooth it out.

For example, in the poem "Burotinoja" ("The Marionette"), the first stanza reads in Albanian, "Burotino, Burotino, / Hamlet i drunjte dhe i vogël / në teatrin intim, përrallor të feminisë" (76) and translates word-for-word: "Marionette, Marionette, / Hamlet wooden and little / in the theater private, mythical of childhood." In this case, I decided to add a line to the stanza, since, in my mind, "in the theater private, mythical" provides more than enough material for a line on its own. It was my sense that a line break before "of childhood" would add an extra "twist" to the stanza since, once the word order was reversed in the English, "theater" would feel like an expected place to land at the end of the third line. Or in other words, the additional line "of childhood" would offer an unexpected revelation about the "theater" ending the line just above it. Finally, I added "my" to "of childhood," since to me it seemed implied, arriving at: "Marionette, Marionette, / little wooden Hamlet / in the private mythical theater / of my childhood" (77).

Elsewhere, confronted with the same problem, I decided to drop adjectives and/or modifiers that seemed inessential or redundant to the meaning of a line. For example, in the second stanza of "Shqetësim" ("Trouble"), Zeqo writes: "Mund të them për shembull se kulla e Ejfelit / xhirafë vigane fantastike prej hekuri / Kullot mbi glob yjet" (30), which translates word-for-word something like: "I could say for example that the tower Eiffel / giraffe giant fantastical made of iron / grazes (grazing) on globe starry" (30). First of all, it seemed to me that "fantastical" wasn't necessary in English, as Zeqo already claims in the poem that his metaphor here is a "fantastical" invention, not to mention that it seems less wildly "fantastical" outside the Albanian poetic context, where leaps of the poetic imagination for their own sake were frowned upon. To an American reader, drawing attention to the imaginative nature of a metaphor might seem foolish, which would likely not have been the effect in Albanian. Second, that "starry globe" seemed to me a little clunky in English, since we don't usually describe the stars as connected to the globe. So I dropped the globe and arrived at: "I could tell you, for instance, that the Eiffel Tower / is an iron giraffe / grazing on the stars" (31).

Sometimes Zeqo's modifiers seemed to point toward a more specific word in English, and when it was possible I went with the more specific as a way of streamlining the English. For example, here's one of Zeqo's shorter poem in its entirety:

"KANUN I SHEKUJVE"

I bije ne grusht portës së yllit më të largët
"O i zoti i kullës! A pret miq?" i them.

Here's more or less a word-for-word translation:

"THE CANON OF CENTURIES"

I knock with my fist on the (outer) gate of the
farthest star

“O man (owner) of the tower/turret/manor house)! Do you welcome guests?” I say.

Immediately, that “Canon of Centuries” looks clunky, since in English we would refer to what Zeqo seems to be describing as either “the literary canon” or simply “the canon.” So, in my mind, there was no reason to include “of Centuries.” Also, “knock with my fist” seems awkward. Knocking with a fist would, presumably, be in contrast to knocking with the knuckles, which in English we just called “knocking.” Knocking with the fist, then, would be something like “pounding.” Finally, the word Zeqo chose for the building in the poem, “kullë,” conjures a particular picture. The structure in question is something like a tower, or a turret, or an old-fashioned country manor house — almost a castle. The scene in the poem, then, is similar to one from classic Romances: a desperate, solitary, late-night traveler seeks shelter at a strange nobleman’s house. I decided that the way to make the poem work was to choose words in English that would play up this archaic feel. Thus, my translation reads:

“THE CANON”

I pound on the gate of the farthest star,
shouting

“O man of the house! Do you take boarders?”

Another potential pitfall I encountered while translating *Meduza* is the fact that Albanian indicates definite and indefinite nouns through their endings. For example, in the final stanza of “Burotinoja” (“The Marionette”), the closing two lines read: “për të ngrohur çdo fëmë të varfër / do të digjeshe pa ngurim në vatër” (76), which I have translated: “to warm each destitute child / you’d have burned yourself / without hesitation in the fireplace” (77). In the Albanian, the noun “vatër” is indefinite singular and literally translates “fireplace” or “a fireplace.” (In contrast, the noun “vatëri” is definite singular

and would translate “the fireplace.”) Yet, despite a noun’s necessary and inherent specificity in Albanian, whether or not the same noun should end up as definite or indefinite in English is sometimes colloquially different than in Albanian. If I had ended the above poem with “in fireplace” it would have sounded ungrammatical, and if I had translated it “in a fireplace” it would have sounded as though the Marionette threw himself into a random fireplace while wandering through town, rather than into the fireplace in front of the destitute child needing warmth.

As an illustration of the difficulties I sometimes encountered in translating Zeqo — and the difficulties generally inherent in translating poetry — I should briefly mention an entirely untranslatable moment in *Meduza*. The poem “Jeta” (“The Life”), a fairly direct politically allegorical poem, describes how “[f] all made the flowers disappear” and “[w]inter froze our eyes,” and in each circumstance the inhabitants of the poem survive by calling on summer, who returns to “fill [their] hands with petals” and “melt [them] with a bit of sun” (109). This seems fairly direct, but in the first two stanzas the line that repeats, “[n]e i thirëm verës” (108), contains an untranslatable pun. In fact, the word “verë” means both “wine” and “summer,” and so the implication of that line is that when things get bad in the depth of winter, the people can always have wine, which is capable of producing for them a momentary bit of warmth. I debated whether or not to translate the line as indicating “wine” rather than “summer,” but that would have disrupted the overall conceit of the poem, since the closing stanza continues with the idea of the seasons, asserting (in relationship to the nascent thaw of the early 1970s) that “[s]pring has come” (109). And though I briefly considered not including it, the poem seemed too important a statement regarding the political and cultural moment Zeqo addresses in *Meduza* to be left out. In the end, I went with “summer,” knowing that my translation had lost something

fundamental to the poem.

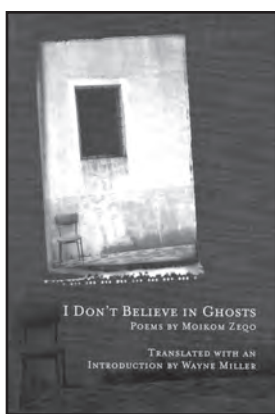
I hope the above examples offer a brief glimpse into my translation process throughout *I Don't Believe in Ghosts*. Overall, my goal in this project was to bring to an American audience the feeling of foreignness and metaphorical complexity that Zeqo's poems would have produced in their intended Albanian audience in the 1970s. Unfortunately, some of the very influences on these poems that would have made them feel foreign and strange, perhaps even exotic, in Albania — I'm thinking especially of Shelley — would have made them feel a little outdated to an American audience if I had translated them too directly. It was my sense that that would have done the poems a disservice by misapproximating their original effects, and so I sometimes gave myself some necessary flexibility in my translations. Nonetheless, despite my occasional deviations from the "literal," the spirit of my translating throughout *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* was more often than not that of working "close to the bone" (as J.D. McClatchy describes it in his introduction to *Horace, the Odes*). I tried to make approximations only when it seemed necessary.

Meduza made this easier than another book might have done for two primary reasons. First, Zeqo's poems almost never rhyme, so I didn't have to address the potentially sticky question of whether or not to rhyme in English. Second, the original book *Meduza* actually contains 152 poems. Consequently, it was easy to simply ignore poems that were less effective in English or else became tangled in process, either because of syntactical problems or obscure Albanian references, and still put together a book-length work that feels complete. Thus, what ended up in *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* is really the strongest and most translatable 67 poems from *Meduza*.

Finally, in *Meduza*, each poem has a date

on it, because the book was published only in 1995, when the poems were more than twenty years old. Because I was putting together a selection from the original book, thereby disrupting Zeqo's original order, and since part of what is potentially fascinating about Zeqo's work, especially to an American audience, is the historical context from which the book emerged, I decided to group the poems according to year of composition, thereby foregrounding their historical progression. Within each year, though, I tried to construct something of a poetic arc so that the poems would interact with each other

thematically and aesthetically. My hope is that my translations are able to convey in an American idiom Zeqo's exuberance, his hope for the future, and his overall view that even in a country and political climate from which "it's more difficult to leave / than to take gloves off icy hands" (27), truth and beauty continue to become entangled with the difficulties of everyday human experience. For Zeqo, it's the case that the resulting wounds — of both daily life and political oppression — are "wrapped in mother-of-pearl" (79). ❖



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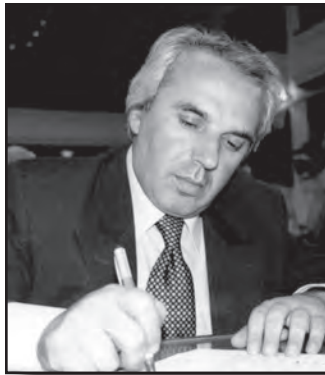
THE POETIC VISION OF PREÇ ZOGAJ IN TRANSLATION

By Gjeke Marinaj

The Poet Preç Zogaj

It was in the mid 1980s that Preç Zogaj emerged as one of Albania's most promising poets. For the previous four decades, the Albanian people had suffered a great deal of repression under a disgusting totalitarian regime ruled by Enver Hoxha. People were imprisoned anywhere from 10 to 25 years for simply complaining about the poverty they lived in or for expressing any kind of resentment about the regime. Execution was the preferred mode of punishment for people like Gjin Jaku and Ndue Jaku (both were uncles of Zogaj's father), who were killed for confronting the regime.

Unlike today, when a poet in Albania earns his reputation on the quality of his poetic achievement, the reputation of a poet during the communist regime was often determined by the government that used him as an instrument to glorify the communist ideology. In the context of Albanian Socialist Realist literature, there were three categories of poets. With the exception of Ismail Kadare and Dritëro Agolli, who were then and are still today the "giants" of Albanian literature, the first category of poets consisted of those who benefited the most from the government. They were professional or hired poets and were paid to write. Many of them already resided in or moved to the capital city, Tirana, where they enjoyed virtually free housing and many other privileges provided for them by the government in exchange for their work. They were called "poetucë" by the people, "puppet poets" who had no real talent. They were hired to praise and continuously applaud the government. The only job requirement for them was that their chants and



their praise of the government had to be thunderous, frequent, and written in some kind of verse form.

A second category of poets such as Zogaj, Rudolf Marku, Bardhyl Londo, Ndoc Gjetja, Mujo Buçpapaj, Agim Spahiu, Adem Istrefi, Moikom Zeqo, and Ilirian Zhupa also appeared at that time. They were extremely talented individuals, but because they

remained absolutely passive toward politics and the politicians, most of the privileges provided to the puppet poets were unavailable to them. The majority of them were editors of major publications and newspapers. That meant that they had to have a real job: that real job was to transform the inferior works of the puppets of the first category, who could not write, into publishable format; and that they had to find free time to follow their own passion to compose new works.

If Zogaj and the entire group of poets to which he belonged did not follow the mandate of the communist regime, they could easily fall into the third category of poets, like Vilson Blloshmi and Genc Leka (both public school teachers), who, among many others, were executed simply for being uncomfortable poets for the regime. To be more specific, Blloshmi was killed because he had written a poem titled "Sahara," which alluded to the notion that Albania is like a wasteland and has no friends in the world. Leka, in contrast, was executed by a firing squad for writing pessimistic and unrealistic poems that were not in accordance with the ideology of the communist party of Albania and that of Marxism and Leninism. Both were killed and dumped somewhere into a ditch on July 17, 1977. At that time, Zogaj

was only 20 years old, and his first book-length collection of poetry had been rejected over and over again by the government-controlled publishing houses of Albania.

Getting killed by the government was only one side of the problem. It also meant that the immediate family and all their relatives would be treated as treacherous people. They were entitled only to manual work and elementary education. Since the Jaku brothers were his father's uncles, Zogaj's chances of pursuing a high school education were extremely low. But under the secret guidance of Nush Radovani, a distinguished translator who had studied physics and mathematics in Rome, Italy, Zogaj won a national literary contest and was able to continue his studies in a specialized high school in the field of Albanian Culture in Tirana. Winning the contest created a loophole for him to bypass the local authorities, who had already denied his older sister the opportunity to acquire a high-school education.

Understanding the importance of learning, Zogaj became a compulsive reader. He spent most of his free time studying Albanian and world literatures. In 1975, in the school campus library, he discovered a book by Walt Whitman titled *Leaves of Grass*, translated by Skënder Luarasi. He was so excited that when his grandmother visited him, she noticed a change in his behavior: "She asked me 'what is the matter with you?' and I cheerfully answered: I am going to be a poet!" (Zogaj). Aware of the fact that one of the most important steps in the preparation of a poet was a university education, he paid maximum attention to his high-school studies and graduated with distinction in 1976. Although his poetry does not bear a particular resemblance to Whitman's works, he was greatly inspired by him. "The role of Whitman in my early poetry was comparable to that of Rudolf Marku's in a later period in my career. Whitman pulled me from the old path. For a while I had no real direction as a poet and

merely kept trying to improvise.... Then I got to know Marku, another poet from Lezhë, and my poetry entered yet a new direction, a unique path that I still take today each time I write a poem" (Zogaj).

With Whitman in mind, he became a poet who effectively articulates the core concept of his whole Albanian culture in his poetry. Accordingly, there was a kind of progression in his works. His first and second poetry collections "Your names" (*Emrat tuaj*), 1985, and "Unfinished" (*E pakryer*), 1987, indicate that Zogaj started his poetic journey by writing all kinds of lyrics, mostly autobiographical poems and poems closely related to his childhood and youth experiences.

WHY

The words I write
I have gathered on the streets.
Why then when the door opens
do I get anxious
As if kissing the one I love (Zogaj).

He then moved to longer poems that had a narrative and an argumentative structure, a logical structure made of different parts related to each other in a coherent way. The poem "The new house" (*Shtëpia e re*) is one of his best-known longer poems.

His third collection of poems, "Will you come smiling" (*Athua do të vish duke qeshur*), published in 1998, is considered, because of its cheerfulness, to be one of the most delightful poetic works of contemporary Albanian literature. Merely two years later, however, he authored another collection of poetry titled "Everyone's Sky" (*Qielli i gjithkujt*). Both were of a quality that would make two of the leaders of Albanian literature, Dritëro Agolli and Llazar Siliqi, proud that in 1979 they had helped Zogaj to get out of a three-year period of farming work and to be accepted at the University of Tirana,

where he graduated in Albanian Language and Literature in 1983. Agolli, at the time, was also the head of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists and claims that “helping Zogaj to become a student at the University of Tirana with his family’s political background was like making the impossible possible. But above all, it was my duty as a poet and my pleasure as a man. The results are obviously amazing and that makes me really happy” (Agolli).

After graduating from the University, Zogaj won a national contest for an open journalist’s position organized by *Zëri i Rinisë*, a major newspaper of that time. But knowledge and talent without strong connections were equivalent to a man’s life without his thick prescription glasses. According to Zogaj, if it had not been for the help of the First Secretary of the Albanian Youth, Mehmet Elezi, who insisted on getting him the job and ignored the relentless local resistance against the poet in 1984, Zogaj would have never become a reporter at the national newspaper *Zëri i Rinisë* (The Voice of the Youth). More importantly, he would not have been in a position to promote works by poets of the younger generation.

By 1990, Zogaj had established himself as a well-known journalist and a respected literary figure. By then he had been a farmer, a schoolteacher, and the author of four books of poetry and one book of short stories, “One of them” (*Njëri nga ata*), 1986, and one book of novellas, “The delay” (*Vonesa*), 1989. He was the kind of poet and leader Albanian people needed and could fully trust. In early December of that year, Zogaj became deeply involved in politics, helping to overthrow the communist government, to establish a pluralistic system, and to start the first free elections ever held in Albania. Within a matter of just a few weeks, he became one of the founders of the Democratic Party of Albania and was appointed to direct the operations of the Party’s new newspaper

RD or “The Rebirth of Democracy” (Rilindja Demokratike), starting with its first number on January 5, 1991. Less than three months later, on March 31, Zogaj became a representative of his party in the Albanian parliament, a step that would lead to his becoming the Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports of Albania in June of that same year.

Since 1990, he has maintained his full-time job as a politician and has published fourteen books. These include four collections of poetry: “Pedestrian in the sky” (*Këmbësor në qiell*), 1995; “The Passing” (*Kalimi*), 1999, which won the Argent Pen, the highest literary prize awarded by the Ministry of Culture of Albania for the best book by a living author; “After a New Wind” (*Pas erës së re*), 2004; and “Alive I saw” (*Gjallë unë pashë*), 2008, and seven other books of artistic and political prose. His novels include “Grandfather’s Agent” (*Agjenti i gjyshit*), 1993; “Without History” (*Pa history*), 1994; and “The Border” (*Kufiri*), 2007.

Despite his impressive and productive past, his devotion to politics has indeed affected the overall mood of his poetry. I do not mean only the price he paid by sharing his writing time with the time-consuming responsibilities of a politician, but also about how politics changed him as a poet and as a man. Deep down, Zogaj is first of all a poet. But when democracy was established in Albania, many people questioned his continued involvement in politics. Here is his explanation: “Politics, in a way, has connected me with the people of my country. Politics has helped me to better understand the social layers, the needs and interests of my people. Now I am a better visionary man and more laconic in my articulations. For all these and other things that I am not mentioning here, I am truly grateful to politics” (Zogaj). Actually, because of his political outlook, he has become a lonelier, sadder person in his poetry, in which the speaker in most cases is the poet himself:

I TOOK SORROW BY THE HAND

I took sorrow by the hand,
Went to drown it in the river,
But the stream was too shallow.

Tossed it over my shoulder like a sack,
Went to throw it from a cliff,
But the ground was too near.

Then I swaddled it in a cradle,
Two days and nights I rocked it,
But it wouldn't fall asleep.

Now I wander the streets
With sorrow on my face:
Forgive me, I say to all.

This is the post-1990 Zogaj, a man of different concerns, a poet of a darker and more apologetic verse than ever before. He is a poet who on April 20, 2000, precisely ten years after he had asked forgiveness for wandering around with a (suicidal) face of sorrow, goes even further into his depressive frame of mind in "Quietly at night," confessing: "To a glass like to a shrine / I asked for forgiveness / for waking up at all." The poetic "I" is deeply injected into his poems. Nevertheless, it is the "I" that can bounce back to continue speaking directly to people, meeting their every need in their day-to-day arguments, in their disagreements, in their politics, and in the ways they live their lives. The following lines are part of his poem titled "September" and exemplify the directness in his later poetry:

SEPTEMBER

In the annex they talk elections.
Men drink Coca-Cola,
Women prefer cappuccino.

That girl will come to collect

her golden laughs
previously forgotten in this area.

In ten years I shall see
her face as more
intimate than mine.

In dealing with his audience, Zogaj characteristically goes out of his way to facilitate the reader's needs. The fortunate experience of earning the trust of his readers in the early stages of his creative career has put the poet in a unique position. The circumstances under which he initially established himself as a trustworthy poet are no longer synonymous with the present state of political and public affairs. Then he was a poet, now he is a poet and a politician. With that "mess" in mind, I asked him for a brief poetic statement, hoping that the issue of dealing with the reader's trust would be part of what he had to say:

I have never written and I do not write without a specific purpose in mind. In the past they (the communist ideologists) used to teach us that the mission of poetry is to educate people; the peripheral poets would pretend as if they had come to attend to the unfinished creation of the world in an attempt to push it to the edge of its perfection. I found such thoughts to be violent. One evening of this past September I was sitting in my half-dark living room looking with my mind's eyes at the Adriatic Sea like looking at a huge blue theater screen. Then my imagination placed there my parents who will pass away one of these days and the unavoidable mourning scream that would come from the hallways.... At that moment, I quickly sketched the motive for a poem that I thought to be titled "The scheme." Lying down, motionless in silence, as a sufferer of the emotions that I had just experienced, I was about to get up and write

down the lines that went through my mind. But I didn't. Instead I asked myself: why should I write the poem? Why should others know about this? These are questions that I hadn't thought about in the past. I have always written based on a credo that is well stated in a poem of mine: "I walked all day with my smile, / almost for no purpose; / why should I have to know why? / Should an April day be asked / why does it crimson the roses?" My poetry, too, in a way is like the blossoming of a flower, even like a fall flower. The motive is the stem, the writing is the budding. Why should I compose the poem "The scheme"? The question has come to me late in my life, but the answer had been already given and lived without question for a long time. Every poetic motive that is verifiable as such by culture and intuition is an invention. The writing comes as a need to record or experience the invention. My writing is an extraordinary talk with myself; a very intimate talk that is articulated, given; it is a conversation spoken in the language of poetry with some rare themes and visions. In other words, my poetic statement, if I have to give one, would be uttered in two words: Sincerity and lyricism (Zogaj).

Sincerity and lyricism are subjective in their nature and can be defined in various ways. Nevertheless Zogaj's poetry is consistent with everyday life; it is nearly free of artificial and "flowery" language. Every single poem published under his name does portray him as a poet who is deeply involved in people's lives. "Occurrence on earth" is an illustration of Zogaj's work as a public poet. Here is the first stanza:

To these deep gorges,
Through snow and wind,
come the mourning women

overflowing with prayers:
O God, accept the best among us
in your hereafters! (Zogaj)

These six lines alone are another perfect example of Zogaj's poetic philosophy of dealing with his audience. What distinguishes him as a poet from the politician is that as a politician he would say to his supporters "I know what you are going through." But as a poet he creates a disturbing, vivid imagery and places himself in the center of it, a platform from which he can communicate to people that "I see what we are going through," I was here when you entered "to these deep gorges, / Through snow and wind." I am here now with all of you "mourning women / overflowing with prayers," and I will be there when God accepts you in his "hereafters!" Yes, it is his poetry that plays a great physiological role on his readers, reminding them to trust the man who is embedded in the lyrics and elegies such as the "Occurrence on earth." Poems like this "require" us to trust Zogaj the poet, who is trying even to soften the idea of death for us, treating it as an internal revolution to hunt to free itself from the common ambient and the daily routine.

The Multiple Layers of Translating Zogaj's Poetry

In the following section, I will provide the reader with insight into some of my own translation techniques.

Zogaj's poetic grammar is based on not one but three general types of grammar: (1) the traditional classroom grammar (bie shiu i verës), which is based strictly on the official Albanian language rules; (2) Albanian structural grammar (I heshtu(n)r si shiu i verës), the systematic account of the structure of the Gheg (Geg) dialect (the dialect of the northern part of Albania and the former official language of that country); and (3) the transformational-

generative grammar (a kam qenë ndonjëherë i qelibartë), which is a combination of the deep and the surface structures of the language.

The poem “Summer rain” mirrors perfectly the importance of these three types of grammar as supporting elements of the (in this case) transparency of the poem. The word “pure” (i qelibartë) in the traditional classroom grammar denotes “I pastër” and means “clean” in the hygienic sense. In Albanian structural grammar, the word can also function as the English word “net” (neto) as in “all things considered — the net result,” whereas, in the transformational-generative grammar, it is normally utilized as either one or both of the above meanings plus, in a deeper sense, as “free of sin.” In this grammatical sense, Zogaj introduces the reader to a rare equilibrium of metaphors within which the use of grammar creates a parallel imagery with that of the overall imagery of the poem. It is a parallelism that places the readers at the center of a new scenery that stimulates their emotions, challenges their imaginations, and entertains their thoughts at the same time: “My joys tour in the rain / And in a rush, strip off / Their shirts, hats ... remain naked.” These lines alone were indicative of the challenges that I had to face while translating not only the rest of the poem’s figurative language and vivid imagery but the rest of the poems of this selection as well.

To get closer to the voice and tone of Zogaj’s poem, I used a digital recorder and read the poem aloud several times to recapture the overall poetic flow. As I repeatedly listened to the recording, I was able to gain a better feel for its sound and rhythm in lines such as “...Hushed like the summer rain” and their specific function in the body of each poem. The uncertainty in Zogaj’s behavior in the past is embedded in the entire structure of the poem and reaches its climax when the poet asks himself the question: “have I ever been / Pure?” The answer, of course, is: No. It is a confession that makes

him (who admits “I am the voice of the poem” [Zogaj]) feel remorseful that his former joys are outside the scope of his control and keep touring shamelessly naked. And all he can do is merely keep watching joys “hush(ed)” like the summer rain, as becomes obvious in the final draft of the poem:

SUMMER RAIN

The summer rain falls
Oblique, meek,
As if sliding on a crystal window.

Have I ever been
Pure?
My joys tour in the rain
And in a rush strip off
Their shirts, hats ... remain naked.

In front of the window
With a cigarette in my mouth,
Hushed like the summer rain,
I see them.

While “Summer Rain” is on a superficial level (in terms of its open form, syntax simplicity, and vivid imagery act) representative of Zogaj’s poetry, it does not fully express his aesthetic philosophy. Its superficial lucidity falls short of displaying the fact that Zogaj is a great admirer of the folkloric, legendary, and historic epic songs of Northern Albania. This is relevant because a vast majority of his poems are inspired by the geography of northern Albania and are dedicated to his family and his neighbors who still live in that part of the country; he is profoundly in love with its distinctive natural beauty. As a result, a fair amount of the cultural substance of his background has been infused into his verse.

As I will illustrate below, some culture-specific words and phrases do penetrate deeply into his poetic language and aesthetic

philosophy. Being Albanian-born myself has given me some advantages during the reconstruction process of these types of poems: I am familiar with the cultural labyrinths of local languages, I have extensively studied old and contemporary Albanian literature, and I have followed Zogaj's literary works since 1983, when he published his first poems in an anthology of young Albanian poets. All of this aided me in bringing Zogaj's poems into English. For example, in the poem "Occurrence on earth," the poet dramatizes events that dealt with the subject of emigration. Using an elegant (locally based) figurative language, he directs our attention to a ceremony that takes place in Dibra (a city in North Albania), where a mother's burial takes place in the absence of her son, who resides in California.

Because of its specific language of the northern culture, Zogaj's "Occurrence on earth" is one of the poems in which cultural words made the translation process a little difficult for me, resulting in a less than "faithful" final product. The Albanian of the first stanza, juxtaposed to the first draft in its literal English, appears like this:

Në ato gryka të thella.
In them canyons down from surface.
Midis dëborës dhe erës,
Among snow and wind,
po vinë të zezat gra
are coming the black woman
plot e përplot me lutje:
full and overfilled with requests:
O Zot, më të mirën ndër ne
O God, the best among us
pranoje në ahiret e tua!
admit in your heavens!

Two of the words that were in my first English draft are greatly ineffectual in achieving the sad and mournful tone of the poem: "zezat" and "ahiret." In my second draft, I translated "zezat"

(plural) literally as the color black. But it presented an immediate problem. The first three lines would have appeared as follows:

To these deep gorges,
Through snow and wind,
come the black women...

If translated as such, it would mean we have an Albanian word that could provide misleading information to the target readers, who might think the subject of the poem is a number of black women. That would be demographically incorrect as well, because no black people resided in Dibra at the time the poem was written.

The word "ahiret" presents a problem of a different nature within the general meaning of the stanza and therefore the entire poem. This Arabic-rooted word in its literal meaning is equivalent to the English word heaven. But the plural use of the noun troubled me. It would read as follows:

To these deep gorges,
Through snow and wind,
come the black women
overflowing with prayers:
O God, accept the best among us
in your paradises!

Moreover, the Albanian language has a precise word for heaven or paradise — "parrizë or parajsë" — which would have been available to the poet. He chose instead "ahiret," a word used in the Muslim religion, an Arabic word that has been naturalized into the Albanian language, which also exists in Turkish as "ahir" (the last, the final decision).

In my next draft I decided to work on these two words in terms of their linguistic properties and their intended function in the poem. First, I wrote down their functions in the Albanian culture on a separate piece of paper, and then

I verified their meaning (including how they were defined in different periods of time) in the Gheg lexicon. Both words carry an immense weight not only in the cultural sense but also as an extension of that culture in social life and religion. The word “Zeza(t),” especially in terms of how it is used in the poem, denotes much more than a lack of happiness or one experiencing the darkest side of life. It describes a deep grief or expresses sympathy for the loss of a loved one. But in more casual and relaxed surroundings it is also used like its English corresponding word “poor,” as in “Ooo, poor you...” or “leave the poor guy alone.”

“Ahiret,” on the other hand, signifies the complete opposite of the word “Zeza.” In a religious sense, “ahiret” is closer in meaning to the highest joy, the safest place, or the truest delight one can possibly have. But the pleading tone in the first stanza, followed by the mournful tone in the second, and concluded by a displacement — ironic — tone in the last stanza suggest that the word “ahiret” has a deeper, more specific semantic mission in the poem. It symbolizes, indeed, a religious word, but in contrast, the women are expressing a plea only for survival, for physical and psychological peace or calmness in a very difficult moment. In light of these considerations, in the third and final draft of the poem, I replaced the word black (zezat) with “mourning” and the word “ahiret” with “hereafter.”

OCCURRENCE ON EARTH

To these deep gorges,
Through snow and wind,
come the mourning women
overflowing with prayers:
O God, accept the best among us
in your hereafter!

The mountains of Dibra slumber.
God is thinking.

Aircraft rush
from the east and south.
None of them brought back
their son from California.
The mourning women hug
their dead friend.

The good news is.
At least here
God is much older,
more merciful
than he is far away in California.

My reasoning was that the term “mourning” would better serve the authorial intentions, seeing the women temporarily rather than permanently heartbroken. It also would serve as a foil to the somewhat sarcastic first line of the last stanza: “The good news is.” I further believe that with the last stanza in mind, in an attempt to keep a consistency between the sad and sarcastic tones of the poem, I thought that the word “hereafter” worked better for the poem than “paradise(s)” or “heaven(s).”

There are two other words that I would like to bring to the reader’s attention. They are “bohemë” and “makare,” neither of which are part of the Albanian lexicon. The first occurs in “Death comes and goes” and the second in “Occurrence on earth,” the poem already discussed. For both words, as a part of the process, I conducted thorough research in other languages as well. As I found out, in French “bohème” denotes a gypsy and means (the same thing as it means nowadays in Albanian) a homeless person or a wanderer who does not live up to his/her civil responsibilities. There are two reasons that justify Zogaj’s choice. First, the homeless phenomenon as we know it here in America, at least until the time the poem was written, did not exist in Albania. For a long time, “homelessness” was only known in anti-American communist propaganda; many Albanians believed it a myth. Second, for

similar social characteristics and given that, due to racism, gypsies were not especially admired at that time in Albania, using the word “gypsies” (ciganë or arixhnjë) would not do justice to the poem. The last line of the fourth stanza would turn into a conflicted sentence where the word “gypsies,” in this context, would be in semantic contradiction with “angels.” But there might have been a third reason that I cannot confirm: if Zogaj turned for help, for just the right word he needed, to not the French but the German language, in which “boheme” has a direct connection to bohemia as an artistic sphere, then the ambiguity we have here is the poetic move of a master. I chose to translate it in English as “wanderers.”

But I was no longer their contemporary.
They all would know and leave
in the yesterdays that would start over again
without wanderers and angels.

The choice I made is indicative of the freedom I granted myself. Of course, according to Willis Barnstone, freedom in translation is permitted (Barnstone 35), but that was not the only reason that brought me to the final decision to use “wanderers.” I did it because the voice of the poem is also a wanderer who keeps traveling from life to death and back to life again and again.

During the reconstruction process of translating “Occurrence on earth,” while searching for the best English word to bear the functions of the Albanian word “makare,” I applied the same principles and followed procedures similar to those that I used with the word “boheme.” The trouble with this word was of a different dimension. Serbo-Croatian is the only language in which I could find a word that had the same spelling and the same pronunciation as it does in the Albanian. But with these linguistic properties, “makare” means a “driving rig-pile,” which is not consistent

with the second line of the fourth stanza where the word is used. With the possibility of the poet’s reference to the Serbo-Croatian version of “makare” ruled out, I had nowhere to turn for help but going back to the Albanian language. Indeed, the Albanian language has an imported word, of Turkish origin, that would be the perfect fit for the line, but it differs slightly in the spelling. The word is “maker” and it means “at least.” Obviously the problem is a single missing alphabetic letter at the end of the word. But a letter can be fatally inflectional and derivational to the word and therefore to the accuracy of the translation. With all that in mind, though, I decided to proceed with the idea that the words “at least” were the best choice I could possibly make. My decision, however, was made final after I asked myself this question: if there was a blank space in the line instead of the word makare, as a poet, what would I put to fill that blank? And the answer was “at least,” which I believe works out well:

The good news is,
At least here
God is much older,
more merciful
than he is far away in California.

In Zogaj’s works, as in the rest of Albanian language and literature, there are some additional words that are perhaps untranslatable and are more effective if presented as they appear in the original. In the third stanza of “Isn’t returning,” a melancholic poem with many references to eternity and mythology, the poet deliberately uses a rare but typical Albanian word, “çetela.” This word has been used before as well, in a similar poetic situation, by another famous Albanian poet by the name of Lasgush Poradeci (1899–1987). “Çetela” is a typical Albanian word that, to the best of my knowledge, does not have an exact English corresponding word. This word, denoting

what in Albanian mythology is mentioned as a description of the honorable committee of the prominent dead people, has no other particular meaning. So under these kinds of circumstances and many considerations, I took the liberty to present the word as it is used in the Albanian version of the poem:

Çetela filled up my eyes
with a silver grief.
In fact any hour is the right time
For Saint Peter to call me.

Furthermore, Zogaj loves to introduce new words and faces to his poetry and simultaneously to the Albanian language. Neologisms have played a great role in enhancing his poetic style and enriching his reputation as one of the most linguistically innovative poets of Albanian literature. I find his newly created words most fascinating, but as a translator I found them demanding. Let's take, for instance, one of the neologisms that I had a great deal of trouble with during the translation process. The word is "Erinitë," found in a poem titled "Tranquil is the sea" (I qetë është deti). I enjoyed its ambiguous appearance and how the ambiguity was utilized in the poem; separated by a comma, the poet placed "erinitë" immediately after another melodious word, "era" (the wind). I started to understand the enormous importance of the word to the body of the poem. Zogaj begins the poem not with words but with three asterisks, which in the Albanian represent a punctuation mark indicating the end of a thought and the beginning of a new one without losing the background connection that they might have in common. After two stanzas, the asterisks are repeated again in the beginning of the last stanza of the poem. So the poet divides the poem visibly into three important parts. All that, however, would have little meaning in the poem if the word "Calypso" weren't used.

The first clue that Zogaj is referring directly to the Greek mythology came to me by knowing that there was a sea nymph named Calypso who pursued Odysseus for almost seven years on the island of Ogygia. Furthermore, from the tone of the poem, the word "erinitë" could be a further reference to the "Erinyes," one of the three avenging spirits (Alecto, Tisiphone, Megaera) in Greek mythology. The three parts to the poem might suggest the representation of each of the three angry spirits. Based on these considerations and the fact that the poem is about revenge and offensive pursuits by dreadful people in life, I translated the ambiguous neologism "erinitë" as "Erinyes":

How many days, months, how much time
has passed
since we came here for the last time,
with someone like the nymph Calypso,
who was
pursued step by step by winds, Erinyes.

A discussion of the reconstruction of the translation process provides the reader with a deeper insight into the complexity of Zogaj's poetry. The transplantation of a poet's landscape from one language into another also reveals the various compromises that a translator has to make. The following selection of Zogaj's poetry reflects some of the difficult decisions I had to make in arriving at a final draft of each poem. With respect to the translation process, challenges are synonymous with uncertainty, and uncertainty is part of the definition of the art and craft of translation. At least in this sense of the word, while translating Zogaj, I agree with Rainer Schulte's statement that "The reader/translator reestablishes at every step of his or her work the inherent uncertainty of each word, both as an isolated phenomenon and as a semiotic possibility of a sentence, paragraph, or the context of the entire work." ❖

COME NEARER, JOYFUL HOUR OF
THE POET

The house sleeps and the soul suffers long:
a thousand voices around, not a single face,
a thousand words like bees and not a line,
a thousand calls in glass, not a single mirror.

Come nearer, joyful hour of the poet!

I certainly must write,
but a golden strand of hair
reflects straight onto the white paper.
How to pass through unburned?
How to press the pencil
when the untainted angel
vibrates through the fingers?

It has been some time since writing poetry
has caused the coursing of my blood
to suffer and become inebriated.

But the hour has arrived.
Mend thread by thread, soul —
red flag of triumph,
white mantel of love,
clear mirror of faces
that are to the end human...

Come nearer, joyful hour of the poet!

AFROHU, ORË E LUMTUR E POETIT

Shtëpia fle e shpirti vuan gjatë:
një mijë zëra përqark, asnjë fytyrë,
një mijë fjalë si bletë dhe asnjë varg,
një mijë thirrje në xham, asnjë pasqyrë.

Afrohu, orë e lumtur e poetit!

Duhet të shkruaj patjetër,
po deri te letra e bardhë
zverdhon një tufë flakësh.
Si të kalosh pa u djegur?
Si ta shtypësh kalemin
kur engjëlli i pazbutur
dridhet nëpër gishta?

Ka disa kohë që shkrimi i poezisë
më shkakton vuajtjen dhe dehjen
e dhurimit të gjakut.

Por vjen ora.
Endu, ende fije-fije shpirt —
flamur i kuq triumfi,
mandile e bardhë dashurie,
pasqyrë e kthjellët fytyrash
deri në fund njerëzore....

Afrohu, orë e lumtur e poetit!

I TOOK SORROW BY THE HAND

I took sorrow by the hand,
Went to drown it in the river,
But the stream was too shallow.

Tossed it over my shoulder like a sack,
Went to throw it from a cliff top,
But the ground was too near.

Then I swaddled it in a cradle,
Two days and nights I rocked it,
But it wouldn't fall asleep.

Now I wander the streets
With sorrow on my face:
Forgive me, I say to all.

E MORA PËR DORE TRISHTIMIN

E mora për dore trishtimin,
Shkova ta mbys në lumë,
Po rrjedha ishte e cekët.

E hodha ne krah si hobe,
Shkova ta hedh nga shkëmbi
Por toka ishte afër.

Atëherë e lidha në djep,
Dy ditë e net e përkunda,
Po gjumi s'e zuri.

Tani bares në rrugë
Me trishtimin tim në fytyrë:
Më falni u them të gjithëve.

TO GO AND TO COME BACK

To go and to come back, that is the issue.
To be absent and not a soul to miss you.
To touch the other world and to return again.

Here you have forgotten to play,
You feel sorry to eat,
It hurts you to talk.
You have been there and returned
A few moments ago.

Rush, rush because the evening light
is vanishing on the banal dusk.
The divine meditations of the world
get killed on today's land.

Now we are equal again.

TË IKËSH E TË VISH

Të ikësh e të vish-kjo është çështja.
Të mungosh dhe askush të mos vuajë për ty.
Të prekësh botën tjetër dhe të kthehesh.

Këtu ti ke harruar të luash,
Të vjen keq të hash,
Të dhëmb të flasësh.
Ti ke qenë atje dhe je kthyer
Para pak çastesh.

Shpejt, shpejt se drita e mbrëmjes
po shuhet në muzgun banal.
Mendimet hyjnore të botës
vriten në tokën e sotme.

Tani jemi prapë të barabartë!

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSLATIONS

By Peter R. Prifti

It is said that translation of literary works is an art in itself. It is also an indispensable activity in the world of publishing. Translation is the vital link that makes communication possible between one language and another, one culture and another, one body of literature and another.

The world of literary translations is vast and varied. Its scope or range seems boundless. Even a brief survey of the holdings in any major public library or university is enough to leave one with a sense of wonderment.

Think of the numerous translations that have been made of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Goethe's *Faust*, Shakespeare's dramas, and countless other classic works of literature, to say nothing of lesser works. One cannot help but be impressed by the variety of styles employed by different authors in translating a particular literary work. And not only the styles but also the philosophy behind the translation; that is, the guiding concept and the criteria used in translating. There is enough material on these differences to justify writing a bundle of academic studies.

Before continuing any further, I suppose it's proper to raise the age-old question of whether translation is indeed an art, or a bogus enterprise. For it has been said by a cynic that "Translation is what is lost in a literary work in the process of translating," or words to that effect. In other words, literary translation is not possible. To believe otherwise is self-deception or self-conceit.

Well, I have to say that I do not agree with this pessimistic view of translation. I don't doubt that this assessment holds for mediocre translations, but it definitely is not true of all translations. Respected literary critics tell us that there are many translated works that are as good as the originals. Indeed, some translations, they

contend, are "superior" to the original works.

Such a claim may seem paradoxical, but it is not far-fetched. For example, Edward Fitzgerald's translation into English of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* is considered by some, if not all, critics to be better than the original in Persian. The same can be said of certain translations in the Albanian language. Albanian speakers are united in the belief that translations in their language of works of Shakespeare, Longfellow, and Edgar Allen Poe by the late Fan S. Noli, the greatest translator in the history of Albanian letters, sound better in Albanian than they do in English. One can cite other examples from other languages, as well.

So much for a prologue to this article. I shall now speak of my own experience as an Albanian-English, English-Albanian translator, an enterprise to which I have devoted many decades. Translating is an activity I have enjoyed doing, even more than engaging in creative writing of my own. It is work that engages me completely, almost as if I was meant to be a translator, above all things.

This does not mean that translating is all fun and games for me. Not at all. Like all creative work, at least, for most people, translating has its share of snags, mental blocks, frustration, and pain. In other words, it has its ups and downs, which necessarily slows down the pace of the work. As a result, substantial translations, in my case, almost always take longer to finish than planned. But, like women giving birth to babies, the satisfaction that comes at the end, when the job is done, makes up for all the suffering experienced on the way.

What, then, is the process at work when I translate? What are the criteria or guidelines that I employ in translating?

Well, one of them — and I would say, the

most important — is fidelity to the original. The translation must be true to the contents of the work I'm translating. It must be factually correct in all respects and in every detail.

Another is clarity. The translation must be as clear as possible to the reader. There is no room for vagueness or cloudiness of meaning in a good translation. However, to achieve clarity in the second language (i.e., the language into which the original text is translated), it is sometimes necessary to use more words than there are in the original. No matter. When I'm confronted with a choice between clarity of meaning and economy of words, I opt for clarity.

A third consideration is the spirit of the translation. Every story or work has its own atmosphere, its own set of intangibles or nuances that go beyond the written word. Properly speaking, this is the inner world of the author, a world I try to grasp in my translations and convey to the reader.

A fourth guideline is beauty of expression, which is to say that I try to give a literary flavor to my translations. It is not enough for a translation to be faithful, and clear, and true to the spirit of the author. To be fully adequate and satisfactory, it must also be expressed beautifully, in a language appropriate to the subject matter. What this comes down to, I suppose, is style. The style of the translation must be relevant to the work, as well as attractive to the reader.

I have so far discussed the theoretical background, as it were, of my work as a translator. In other words, I have dealt with the form and structure of the discipline or subject matter of translating. It is now time to illustrate my work with actual translations I have done over the years. These include books of short stories, poetry, speeches, a novella, a memoir, and so forth.

My first book-length translation was a book of short stories by Naum Prifti, a well-

known Albanian writer, titled *The Wolf's Hide* ("Lëkura e ujkut"). The year was 1988. Many of the stories in the book are about real people in the district where he grew up in Albania. Prifti tells their stories in the idiom they spoke, which is simple, colorful, and, on the whole, humorous. This is also the style and tone of the next two books of his that I translated in the late 1980s; namely, *Tseeko and Benny* ("Cikua dhe Beni"), a semi-autobiographical work set in wartime Albania (World War II); and *The Golden Fountain* ("Çezma e floririt"), generally regarded as Prifti's best work of short stories.

I was fortunate to start my "career" as a translator with these books; first, because they were written in the everyday language of the people, mostly rural; and second, because I was personally familiar with many of the stories, having grown up in the same region as the author himself. Here is an excerpt from *The Golden Fountain*, in the original, which tells the sad story of a young girl who waits in vain for her lover, a freedom fighter when Albania was under the rule of the Ottoman Turks:

Dhe Trandafilja priti te burimi, sipas fjalës,
të shtatën ditë gjer u err,
por trimi nuk erdhi. E priti ditën tjetër, sa leu
djelli e gjersa majë kreshtës
së pyllit dolli drapri i hollë i Hënës, po kot;
dhe duke pritur, qante nga
malli e nga dhëmbja e nga kobi i zi që
ndjente në zemër.

And here is the translation in English:

As she had promised, Rose waited by the
spring on the seventh day
until dusk, but the warrior did not come. The
next day she waited from
sunrise till the thin crescent of the Moon
appeared over the edge of the
woods, but all in vain. And as she waited,
she wept from the longing and

the pain and the dark premonition she felt in her heart.

My most ambitious book-length translation to date is a memoir by Prenk Gruda (1912–1994), titled *Diary of a Wounded Heart* (*Ditari i nji zemres së lëndueme*). The work was originally published in 1985; the translation appeared in the year 2000. The theme of the Diary is essentially political in nature. Gruda was deeply sensitive to the social injustices in Albanian society, and even more so to the political injustices suffered by the Albanian people, owing to the Turks and Albania's neighbors. In his Diary, he makes it his mission to expose and denounce in the strongest language the wrongs done to the Albanian people, both in the past and in the present.

It was in the 1980s also when I started to translate poetry. My first effort in this genre was a ballad by Xhevat Kallajxhiu (1904–1989), called *The Dance of Death* (“Vallja e vdekjes”), which tells of certain Albanian women at the turn of the 19th Century, who preferred to jump from a cliff to their death, rather than surrender to their enemies. Following are a few verses in the original:

Majë shkëmbit po qëndrojnë
Gratë e Sulit dhe këndojnë:
“Lamtumir” o vendi ynë,
“Ne nuk rrojmë dot pa tynë,
“S’e peshojmë varfërinë,
“Po s’durojmë robërinë.”

In the English translation, they read as follows:

From the top of a rock, voices ring,
As the women of Sul, gather and sing:
“Farewell, oh, land so pure,
“Apart from you we can’t endure,
“We can live with poverty,
“We won’t bow to slavery.”

The most demanding challenge, by far, at

translating poetry came for me in 1994, when I was asked by the poet Gjeke Marinaj whether I would be interested in translating a number of poems he had written in the Albanian language. I looked them over, liked them, and agreed to translate them. Marinaj became famous overnight in Communist Albania on the strength of a single poem called *Horses* (“Kuajt”), which in a few taut verses tells of the suffocating life people led under the dictatorship. The poem caused such a stir that Marinaj had to flee the country to avoid arrest. One gets an idea of the poem’s “subversive” nature from the lines that follow:

Ne nuk kemi emër
Ne gjithëve kuaj na thonë,

Heshtim,
Dëgjojmë,
Hamë atë ç’na japin,
Ecim nga na thonë.

This in my translation read as follows:

We are nameless;
“Horses” is what everybody calls us.

We keep quiet.
We listen.
Eat what is set before us,
Go where we are told.

Of the poems in that particular collection by Gjeke Marinaj, I was especially moved by “The Girls of California” (“Vajzat e Kalifornisë”); “To Dusitsa-Unawares” (“Pa e kuptuar-Dusitës”); “Do Not Depart from Me, Muse of Poetry” (“Mos më ik larg, poezi”); and “To a Woman’s Eyes” (“Syve të gruas”). I shall quote here just the opening verses of the first of these poems:

Ecim majë gishtave mbi krahët muskuloz

të tokës
Duke endur çudira në lëvizjen e hijeve,
Çudira të pasqyrta — kurthe vështrimesh
Prekje që e ndajnë gjithësinë në kube të
qelqta.

And in English:

They walk on tiptoe on the muscular
arms of mother earth,
Spinning magic webs with the shifting
shadows of their movements,
Translucent wonders — glances that
ensnare;
Touch them, and the universe is
transformed into crystal domes.

Marinaj has published several books of
poetry, two of which are works of American
authors whom he has translated into Albanian.

Apart from works of prose and poetry, I

have also done a few translations from Albanian
with a clear patriotic motif. They include a
rousing speech by Albania's national hero,
Scanderbeg, in 1443, taken from a renowned
biography of him by Marin Barleti, a medieval
humanist; an inspiring essay on Scanderbeg by
Fan S. Noli, written in 1915; and a short speech
by Ismail Kemal, regarded as the founding
father of modern Albania, delivered on the
occasion of the proclamation of Albania's
independence in 1912.

In conclusion, I can say that my journey into
the realm of translations has been rewarding
in many respects. One of these is the pleasure
I have had from working closely with authors
whose works I have translated. All in all,
translating has been "a labor of love" for me.
I consider myself fortunate to be able to make
such a statement. ❖

TRANSLATING ALBANIAN FOLK POETRY: A COLLABORATIVE VENTURE

By Frederick Turner

Gjeke Marinaj, an Albanian poet of the young generation, and I have become fascinated with Albanian folk poetry. There is no published anthology of Albanian folk poetry, which prompted us to bring some of the most beautiful folk poems to the attention of an English-speaking audience. Most of the poems have never been in print — certainly not in these particular versions, and never before in English. These poems, like the lives of the people they record, are things of breath and memory, as vulnerable to time and death and forgetfulness as the heartbeat itself, and the more vivid and committed for that very fact.

Our method of translating Albanian folk poetry has been as follows. A few years ago, Gjeke Marinaj and I conceived the project of translating Albanian folk poetry. Originally, we were to have gone together to Albania, but illness prevented me from making the trip. Marinaj, however, traveled alone deep into the mountains of Albania, relying on his own background as a child of mountain farming parents and his considerable reputation as a national poet to gain entry to the inns and coffee-houses where local and itinerant poets give their recitations. Marinaj is known in Albania as a heroic dissenter against the brutal Communist regime under which he grew up (and which fell only in 1991). His poem “Horses” slipped by the censors because of its metaphorical subtlety and was published in a major literary periodical. Albania, like a few other odd countries around the world, is mad for poetry, and the intelligent oppressed national audience soon realized what the censors had missed — the poem imaged the Albanian people as the patient brutalized horses of a cruel master. This then became clear to the regime. To save

his life Marinaj, had to escape into exile at night over the mountains, pursued by the state secret police, abandoning his promising career as a major cultural media figure. So my co-translator had heroic credentials of his own, which were readily appreciated by his brother and sister poets in the mountain hamlets. All doors were open to him.

Using new portable computing and recording technology, Marinaj photographed the poets, the landscape, and the venues of oral performance. He took notes on the names, locations, and backgrounds of the oral performers and made recordings of the long and often festive evenings of poetry. Snatches of conversation, music, and ad hoc commentary are also preserved in the process; and the whole collection, compiled under huge difficulties and at some personal sacrifice, is I believe an extraordinary and valuable achievement.

Our collaborative work begins with listening to the recording together, often with reference to photographs of the poet and the scene, and sometimes concluding with a final decision as to whether this particular work is of the quality that we want for our first selected volume (there is much more in Marinaj’s archive than is needed). Hearing the recording, I am able at once to score and scan it and identify the meter and rhyme scheme, picking up a good deal — though I have only a few words of Albanian — about the tone, mood, style, and music of the poem. Marinaj used to provide a written trot for the poems, but we now find it unnecessary — Marinaj’s software enables us to hear the poem line by line, upon which he gives orally an instant literal translation. I usually inquire about the nature of the language — is it archaic, rural, noble, urbane, colloquial, epigrammatic,

biblical, humorous, learned, scatological, neologistic, polite, “poetic,” vulgar, technical, etc.? Is it in a local dialect, does it involve puns or suggestive assonances or multiple meanings? I write down a rough English version of what I hear, together with some variants and cognates if there is an ambiguity. Albanian grammar and word order are not unlike English, which makes it easier in that respect than, say, German, Hungarian, and Chinese in my experience.

I then take the result home and render it into the same metrical form and rhyme-pattern in English as the original, taking care to include variations and metrical reversals in about the same ratio as in the Albanian, and attempting to find the same diction register in the English as in the Albanian. I make no attempt to “Anglicize” the language or bring it up to date if, as many of these oral poems do, they contain archaisms indicative of earlier versions of it and concomitant traditional worldviews. For instance, the word “bardhë” as applied to a woman is, I believe, cognate with and properly translated by the archaic/poetic English word “fair.” I do not try to modernize it to “beautiful” or literalize it to “pale” or “white” lest the social and even moral implications of the old word be lost.

I then share the draft of the finished version with Marinaj at our next meeting, and make needed corrections. Matters of judgment often come up, for instance where it becomes obvious to one of us that a later poet has at some point interpolated disparate material into a finely honed old poem or has forgotten an essential plot point in a longer poem. For instance, in the strange and supernatural poem “Muje and the Three Witches,” which exists in other known oral versions, the reciter of it has clearly forgotten and left out the key to breaking the spell of the golden goats, which is that they lose their magic if they drink human blood. Later in the recitation it becomes obvious to the reciter that he has erred, and he then, rather flustered,

alters the ending to give the poem a different (and rather misogynistic) ending. In this case, I, as another oral poet, so to speak, improvised a few lines to repair the damage and gave a construction of the ending that made more sense without altering the general literal meaning.

The canonical meter of Albanian folk poetry is the trochaic tetrameter rhyming couplet. It is varied by the addition of light syllables, including an extra one at the end to make a feminine ending, by using interlaced rhyme schemes instead of the couplet, and by the addition of several lines with the same rhyme to create a climax. As an example of the last, in “Poor Hysen,” a rich young man has just bought the beautiful wife of a bankrupt and married her, but he learns to his horror, after the marriage is consummated, that his second-hand bride is his own long-lost sister. She (like Jocasta in *Oedipus the King*) tries to help him escape his fate, but the relentless rhymes, so to speak, draw them to the shocking surprise ending:

Now to comfort him, she tried
 Questioning him of his mother:
 “Poor man, did you have a sister?”
 “Wretched girl, had you a brother?”
 “I left behind a little brother
 With a birthmark like a blister
 On his forehead, from his mother.”
 Lightning-fast, he fetched a light,
 Parted his hair to show the sight:
 There the mark was, red and white.
 Bare as she was, she hugged him tight,
 Naked in her brother’s hold;
 “Since for us there is no light,
 Give my brother back his gold.”

Another example might help clarify the power of poetic form as a key element of poetic meaning and a vital guide to translation. One of the favorite devices of the Albanian oral poet is the repetition of a line but in reverse grammatical order for emphasis, while

preserving the metrical rhythm, as here:

I'll not give up my guns alive,
My guns I'll not give up alive!

In another poem, delightfully reminiscent of Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale," this technique is used for comic effect, partly to mimic the sound of the chickens who are speaking:

THE PROUD ROOSTER

Twelve red hens were dancing, dancing,
Dancing, dancing, twelve red hens;
Picked a bride for that proud rooster,
For that rooster picked a bride:
Chose for him an ancient chicken
Ancient chicken chose for him.
But that rooster lost his temper,
Lost his temper, that proud cock.
"I don't want that ancient chicken,
No old chicken do I want."
Cock-a-doodle, cock-a-deedle,
Cock-a-deedle, cock-a-doodle.
Twelve red hens were dancing, dancing,
Dancing, dancing, twelve red hens.
Picked a bride for that proud rooster,
For that rooster picked a bride.
Now they chose a sweet young pullet,
Sweet young pullet now they chose.
Then the proud cock was right merry,
Merry was that proud cock then.
"How I love that sweet young pullet,
How I love that sweet young pullet,
She is just the bride for me,
She is just the bride for me."
Cock-a-deedle, cock-a-doodle,
Cock-a deedle, cock-a-doodle.

At the end of the poem the resolution of the discord between the rooster and his hens is indicated formally by the restoration of concordant word order in the last six lines.

Though the trochaic tetrameter is as dominant in Albanian folk poetry as the iambic pentameter in traditional English literary poetry and the ballad form in English folk poetry, it makes room for many other forms; and the clear distinction among them and the difference of their rhythm can help guide the translator in individualizing the poems. Too often even sensitive and nuanced free verse translations of metered originals can have the effect of reducing everything to the same international aesthetic. The difference from the trochaic tetrameter can clearly be seen in the following examples:

MILKING-TIME

Milk sweet, milk sweet!
Pail full from the sheep's warm teat.
Milk sweet, milk sweet
From the valleys where they eat.
Milk sweet, milk sweet
Where they dream upon their feet.
Milk sweet, milk sweet,
Youth's and age's living heat:
Milk sweet! Milk sweet!

This is an ancient chanting measure:

//, //

/-/-/-/

and it carries a flavor of great chthonic antiquity. The following verses from "Shepherd's Song" are different again, clearly a call-and response song:

Why, oh why, does the shepherd cry?
Cry, shepherd, cry:
The wolf is in the fold, that's why;
Cry, shepherd, cry.
The teeming ewes, throat-bitten, die;
Cry, shepherd, cry;
The unborn lambs are lost for aye,
Cry, shepherd, cry.
They bit his fingers off today,

Cry, shepherd, cry,
So now his flute he'll never play,
Cry, shepherd, cry.

The meter, with variations, is basically as follows:

-/-/-/-/
/, /-/

The trochaic tetrameter couplet is a folk meter well suited to swift narrative with an unrelenting onward energy:

/-/-/(-) A
/-/-/(-) A

Versions of it can be found in Lonrot's *Kalevala*, which echoes and compiles Finnish folk epic, and Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, a neglected masterpiece that with great learning simulates a folk form. Contrast it with the English ballad form, in which the iambic tetrameter alternates with the iambic trimeter:

-/-/-/-/ A
-/-/-/ B
-/-/-/-/ A or C
-/-/-/ B

as in the Ballad of Chevy Chase:

God prosper long our noble king,
Our lives and safeties all!
A woeful hunting once there did
In Chevy Chase befall.
To drive the deer with hound and horn
Earl Percy took his way;
The child may rue that is unborn
The hunting of that day!

A naïve translator might want to use the English ballad meter to translate Albanian heroic folk poetry, on the theory that it evokes the same sociocultural space. But such a decision would, I believe, be a mistake, because it would ignore the difference in basic texture and music between the two metrical forms, a difference that is prosodic, transcends the bounds of the strictly linguistic, and is based on natural human universals. The English

ballad comes to a conclusion and resolution at the end of each four-line stanza, a conclusion with a dying fall as the shorter three-stress line comes to the final rhyme. The Albanian trochaic tetrameter drives onward with a restless energy, as here in "Zek Jakini":

Ali summons his vizier;
With the horn he always carries,
Calls up all his janissaries,
Beckons Kul Bektelin there.
Soon enough Bektelin came,
With his golden sword of fame.
And Bektelin came to Trush,
This the city he would crush.
But Jakini fears him not —
Son of a fiery patriot:
Grabs his rifle by the breech:
"God give just desserts to each!"
And now parley Kul and Zek:
"Death is rushing on us here —
Let us fight like Tuç and Lek,
Let us be sung like brave Gjinglek"...

As a result Albanian narrative poems often end with a suddenness that is shocking even when the story as such is complete. There is rarely an epigrammatic or sententious summing-up as there often is in Anglo-Saxon folk poetry. The epigrammatic force is certainly there in Albanian poetry, but it is usually given to something said by one of the characters. Some of the longer Albanian oral narrative poems abandon the strict trochaic form and use a sort of rhythmic free verse, not especially trochaic, with four major stresses, which I have represented by a loose blank verse, an iambic pentameter that lightens or suppresses one of the heavier syllables. But it is still memorable enough for the oral poets to recite/improvise in the way that Lord and Parry observed in Serbian epic verse, using stock phrases and epithets and sticking to a story with a number of possible digressions depending on the amount of time

available. I believe that some of the tragic and heroic “bite” of these poems is lost by being so translated and have sometimes felt that I would prefer to render them into the classic tetrameter, even if by doing so I would falsify the metrical form of the original. But the stories these poems tell are usually so striking, graphic, horrific, and moving in themselves that perhaps the heavy beat of the tetrameter over a long period would be unbearable in addition.

In traditional English verse, as I have already noted, there was from early days a distinction between the “high” urban cosmopolitan educated voice of the iambic pentameter and the “low” rural provincial unlatined (and even illiterate) voice of the 4-3-4-3 ballad form. This class distinction can be seen in other literatures, too, the alexandrine and the endecasillabo playing in French and Italian the same role as the English iambic pentameter. Medieval popular Latin verse, based on stress, and often in trochaic tetrameter (“Dies irae, dies illa”), existed in a social space below the quantitative classical poetry of the ancient Romans and Greeks. But Albanian poetry seems to share with the Chinese classical poetry the peculiar feature that for most of its history it never diverged into high and low styles. Albanian and Tang poetry is both “high” and “low,” and there is no difference in metrical form between the voices. I believe the reasons for this similarity are quite different, however. Albanian society was in a class sense beheaded by the Turks — its upper courtly and cosmopolitan class was replaced by Turkish beys and administrators. Thus poetry had no chance to formally separate in terms of class. Chinese Tang society, however, was so dominated by the mandarin class at all levels, a class of people chosen by examination for their poetic gifts from the whole population, that a separate folk tradition never got a chance to emerge into the light before it was co-opted into the clerical class.

The love of the land is one of the most prevalent subjects of Albanian poets. The flavor of their ferocious love of their land is nicely caught in “Homage to the Warriors”:

HOMAGE TO THE WARRIORS

When I take my lute to sing
 Snow-peaks perch upon my string,
 And the forest heights fall still
 And the starry heavens chill
 And the ice-fields and the crests
 Come to sing the heroes’ gests.
 Words like water from the spring
 Teach the heroes’ deeds to sing;
 Green-clad hillsides raise the call
 Echoed from the mountain-wall.
 Time harrows rocks and stones and all,
 Yet heroes for the flag still fall;
 The Cemi brook runs red with gore,
 But their mothers will bear more.
 They give birth to bravery,
 Let the Alban eagles fly.

It is not only the males who guard women’s honor with violence. In “Kole’s Peerless Women,” Drane avenges an attempt on her honor by Gjin Ndresa with a quick shot from her faithful pistol while they are talking it over afterward. And she warns the judge, before whom she is brought for the murder, that there is another bullet meant for him if he does not acquit her.

Any society in which the opposite sex is a forbidden object guarded by dangerous protectors is going to be a pressure cooker for sexual passion. The Albanian folk poets evoke with appalling frankness the pain and existential vividness of desire and recognize with a clear-eyed tragic honesty the ruthless politics of love. In these politics, the women often seem to have the upper hand:

BEAUTY WITH A WHITE SHAWL

“Hey, beauty in your milkwhite shawl,
Have those breasts budded out at all?”
“They started just a week ago,
A week, I think, maybe a year.
They’ve got bad habits as they grow,
They’re hard, and they stick out to here.
My bodice chafes them, and they flow
With sherbet if you touch them, so.”

“Now won’t you give some to the squire,
Some of that sweet stuff to me?”
“I’ll save it for a boy with fire,
Young, unmarried, young and free,
Someone who will rise much higher,
Who sings and plays his flute for me.”

This apparent freedom, however, exists in the context of a system in which a father can make his daughter marry a rich and nasty old man:

MARTA GOSSIPS

Marta tells the girls that please her:
“Poor wife saddled with a geezer.
Daddy wed me to this oldie,
Buried me alive with Moldy.
Nothing’s worse than when you face
Death’s-head by the fireplace.
Sixty years went to create
Gray-bush beard and barren pate.
Drool is all he gives, or worse:
Daddy, here’s a daughter’s curse.”

But fierce and lasting love can emerge from the repression and the explosive physical passion of these mountain people:

HEY, BEAUTIFUL!

“Beauty by the flowerbed,
Head up like a thoroughbred,
Hear what I have got to say:

If I catch you, caught you’ll stay.
I have got a heavy jones,
I’ve a yen to jump your bones,
Pink cheeks, breasts as white as snow,
Two big handfuls, just like so,
Damned if I will let them go!”
“Suck my white tits, young Sir Randy?
You’d go crazy, like they’re brandy,
Kill somebody, like enough,
Then go home to sleep it off.”
“I’d kill twenty, literally,
Just to lie upon your belly —
Where’d you get those cheeks I see?”
“Almighty God gave them to me,
Given me by God Almighty:
Partly fat and partly meaty,
Partly muscle, partly fatty,
Just to please my latest sweetie,
Just to keep my lover happy —
But he must be young and peppy,
So that when I hear his call,
I will let my dinner fall,
I will leave my own grave-dust
To be the roadmap of his chest —
But I hope we will both die
On the same night, you and I;
And we’ll lie there, grave by grave —
Who needs Heaven if you’ve love?”

These are, in fact, the themes of traditional pastoral — naïve love, the celebration of the land and the shepherd’s life, the emblematic contrasts of old and young, city and country, the lament of the lover, the satire on human nature, the cruelty of the fair maid. These shepherds, then, are not unlike their colleagues a few hundred miles south and seventeen centuries earlier, whose Arcadian lives were celebrated by the Hellenistic bucolic poets, Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus. Hearing and translating these Albanian folk poems is like encountering for the first time the astonishing limestone landscapes of the river Li in China: suddenly we realize that the strange little sugarloaf mountains in

the ancient scrolls were not, after all, some conventional symbolism for the arcadian countryside but the literal, representative truth. Certainly the pastoral poets (on down through Virgil and Sannazaro, Marot and Ronsard, Sidney, Shakespeare, and Marvell) clean up the shepherd's act a little, as the Chinese poets clean up the pine forests and little pavilions on the crags — but they are not exaggerating the frank intensity of the native oral poetry they imitate. Lord and Parry were astonished to find Homeric epic in modern Serbia; the American collectors of country music found ancient Scots-Irish heroes in the guise of cowboys; here we can find ancient pastoral still surviving in the mountains of Illyria.

But pastoral is not the only genre represented in the Albanian folk tradition. There are, besides, poems that might best be called anthems in praise of regional or national identity and invocations of God's aid to it; heroic ballads about individual named adventurers and fighters; and what might be the makings of an epic, in the cycle of longer heroic poems telling of the exploits of Cetobasho Muje.

Given the rich materials outlined here, how can they be translated into English? One fundamental problem, that of course a written poem is not the same as a (partly improvised) oral poem, has already been mentioned. The ethical issue is in a sense moot, since human practice in general has been to render oral materials into literate form, and some of the greatest works of human genius, such as the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Popol Vuh*, have been the result. And this problem contains

the glimmerings of a solution to other problems, such as the faithful rendering of the tone, style, sound and ethos of the original.

The key is what English and Albanian have in common, that is, prosody, with all its rich indications of stress, rhythm, musical tone, meter, and rhyme. Gjeke Marinaj and I resolved to reproduce as exactly as possible the metrical form and rhyming patterns of the original, believing that if an English-speaking audience hears the sound of the original — both its basic beat and its characteristic variations — the emotional content will at least in part come through.

The rules of metrical form may in fact have originated in all the literate cultures as an attempt, at the point of the introduction of literacy, to analyze and reproduce exactly the sound and emotional emphasis of the original oral poetry. Today the most reliable guide to, for instance, Elizabethan pronunciation is the implicit map to it that is provided by the rhyme sounds and metrical emphasis of Tudor poetry. So in attempting to match the sound of the Albanian poems we are, as it were, reproducing the efforts of any nation's scholars to preserve its oral poetry into the era of literary communication and record. That is, the prosody and meter of literary poetry is its oral element, preserved almost like a tape recording or a musical score — literate poetry is a dry and robust container for the volatile and fugitive potion of its oral essence. Beyond all technical and sociological considerations, however, is the living presence of a vital folk tradition that is still reproducing itself in the hills of Albania. ❖

VANISHING BALKAN WORLDS: THE TRANSLATOR AS LANGUAGE PRESERVER

By Peter Constantine

The Greek side of my family is from Corinth, from the Arvanitic villages established in the Middle Ages by migrating Albanian tribes. The language of these villages — Arvanitika, or Arbërishtë, as we call it — is a medieval form of south Albanian (Tosk) that developed independently of modern Albanian, creating a separate language that is to Albanian as perhaps German is to Dutch. (The first written reference to the Arvanites is in 1079 by the Byzantine historian Michael Attaleiates.) I grew up in Greece in the 1970s, and everyone over forty in our world seemed to speak Arvanitika well, though never in front of non-Arvanites. The elders would speak Arvanitika to us, and we, as a young modern city generation, would reply in Greek. My uncles would speak the language to grandmother, whose Greek was not fluent, but among themselves they spoke Greek most of the time, sprinkled with a few phrases of Arvanitika. Jokes, puns, and word games were always in Arvanitika. It was the code-switching that speakers of dying languages do, but we were not aware of that at the time.

Today there is a growing concern for the world's linguistic diversity, as many lesser-spoken languages are marginalized and dying out, replaced by national tongues. These too are felt to be under threat by the globalizing force of English. Albanian, Greek, Bulgarian, and other mainstream Balkan languages struggle to absorb a steady flow of new technical vocabulary, either importing it directly or creating vibrant neologisms. The marginal sister languages of these national tongues, however, oral languages spoken by dwindling populations in remote villages, are being abandoned by a younger generation that looks to Tirana, Skopje, or Athens for its speech models. These marginal

languages, like dying native tongues worldwide, live within their own cultural reality: in Albania alone there are villages where there are speakers of local Slavic forms of Montenegrin, Macedonian, and Bulgarian, the Latinate Aromanian and Vlach, and probably a handful of elderly speakers of Adhyghe, a Caucasian Circassian language that has survived since Ottoman times. These are rich and expressive languages within the strictures of their local worlds, but their local worlds are becoming marginalized and in many cases no longer exist. The Albanian Montenegrin, spoken in villages north of Shkodër, has no words for machinery, electronics, or modern commodities but does have an intricate vocabulary for botanics and agriculture. *Ujem* and *korrike*, for instance, are words for the amount of grain a farmer pays a miller to grind his harvest, while *polonitse*, *babuna*, *mashterk*, and *koshik* are the names of different weights of grain ranging from ten to a hundred pounds. There are different kinds of ploughs — *pluzhitse*, *jarm*, and the two-handled *demalug* — and there is a word for every inch of a plough. But for the simplest modern household items — *llampë* (lamp), *frigorifer* (refrigerator), *prizë* (electrical outlet) — there are only Albanian words. The Greek Epirotic dialects of southern Albania, which are almost unintelligible to Athenian Greeks, also have extremely focused vocabularies. Villages that used to thrive on tin work, for instance, have dozens of words for leather strips and animal skins of different sizes that are used for polishing the metal at various stages of plating — τσουβρίμ (tsouvrim), τσαρμπίμ (tsarbim), σιουλοσκοῦτι (siouloskouiti).

Whole microcosms of Balkan languages have become critically endangered in the past

quarter century, as new worlds have become established. Language communities that miraculously prevailed throughout the harsh and homogenizing years of Albania's Enver Hoxha dictatorship are now facing extinction as Albania forges ahead in its effort to modernize.

Greece's minority languages are also facing extinction, as younger speakers of Arvanitika, Vlach, Pomok, Po-Nash, Romany, and Tsakonika neglect their languages for the opportunities mainstream Greek offers.

As an American literary translator, I felt that Arvanitika, a purely oral language, was outside my field. Whenever I asked my family about our oral poetry, village narratives, or songs, the answer was always that life in the old days was too hard for such indulgences as gathering around the hearth to tell tales or sing. Every minute of the day or night had been a struggle for survival. *Nde mës të natësë shkarisinjëm dhítë për të klósinjë, edhé i përrjërën menate nde shtrúngë për t'i mjëlëm* — "In the middle of the night we'd take the goats out to graze, and in the morning we'd bring them back to the sheepfold to milk them." *Chë kur njóxa vete hënë time, ngindem me nje kopë dhí* — "Since I can remember, I found myself herding a flock of goats."

By the year 2000, there were no fluent speakers of Arvanitika under seventy left in our village. There were many deaths in our family, and during an Easter trip back to Greece in 2004, I realized that my seventy-five-year-old uncle was the last fluent speaker I knew. Should he fall silent, there would only be what linguists ominously call "terminal speakers" left, speakers like myself who can understand what is being said in Arvanitika but were never expected to be able to carry on a sustained conversation. I realized that ours was indeed a vanishing world, and that this was the last chance to capture as much of its language as possible.

In Greece, there is no concerted effort to

document and record our language. In the 1990s, the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages had sent linguists to our villages for an initial survey of the state of Arvanitika and the number of speakers, but they left after they were attacked with sticks by villagers wary of outside interest. There have been extremely valuable linguistic studies of Arvanitika, but they are mainly specialized books and articles written by linguists for linguists in German and English. However, the titles of these works are unfortunately offensive to our community, as they identify Arvanitika as at best a marginal Albanian dialect and at worst as a degenerated form of Albanian. (The title of the single most comprehensive and expert linguistic description actually refers to our language as "*Albanian language remnants*.")

My work as transcriber began with many hours of one-on-one Arvanitika sessions with my uncle; passive knowledge of a language, however deep, usually means that one has little sense of the structure of the language. One has to relearn it from the beginning. *Punónj, punón, punón* — I till the fields, you till the fields, he tills the fields. *Kam punúare, ke punúare, ka punúare* — I have tilled the fields, you have tilled the fields, he has tilled the fields.

We discussed things such as greeting rituals. You don't just ask *Ch'bënëttë?* — "What's up?" If you meet an acquaintance from another village on a mountain path, your greeting must begin with *Si yanë uiñtë?* — "How are your olives?" *Ch'bënëttë stani?* — "How's the sheep pen doing?" *Si ishtë grurtë?* — "How's the wheat?" One might then also ask about the wife and children.

After weeks of verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, my uncle began to describe the old village life in intricate narratives. I started making sound recordings with the idea of setting up an Arvanitika language website and archive that might serve as a forum for current and future generations interested in

relearning the language. As often happens with critically endangered languages worldwide, a community's interest in its neglected and dying language seems to resurge once it is irrevocably lost.

Arvanitika Proverbs from Corinth

By Shon ArieH-Lerer

Mali i lhartë nuku ùljetë për t' i prëzmë luljëtë.

The high mountain will not bend down for you so that you can pluck its flowers.

Kózmi dígjetë edhé bljáka krikhëtë.

The world is on fire and the old woman is combing her hair.

Kasidhjári kur zu lesh, e vu ksúlene nde vësh.

When a bald man grows hair he carries his cap in his hand.

(Literally, "he wears his cap on his ear.")

Milingóna chë dó të báretë bën krykhë.

If an ant wants to get lost, it should sprout wings.

(Don't try to be different, it will get you into trouble.)

Gljúkha kokálj nuku ka, edhé kokálj chan.

The tongue has no bones, but will break bones.

Rredh bishti i ghaidhúrit nde pus!

The donkey's tail is dripping into the well!

(After a donkey has fallen into the drinking well and been pulled out, the least of one's worries should be that dirty water from its tail is still dripping into the well. The proverb suggests that one focus on the real problem at hand.)

"Na ùlku!" — "Ku'shtë gjúrma?"

"Here's the wolf!" — "Where are his tracks?"

(When a wolf is attacking you, don't worry about where his tracks are. There are more immediate issues.) ♦

French Women Poets of Nine Centuries

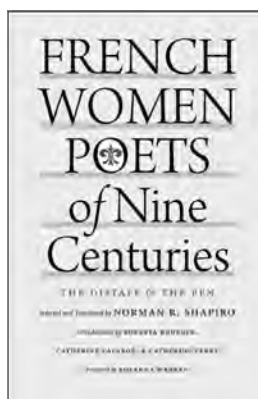
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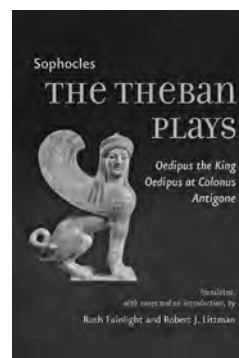
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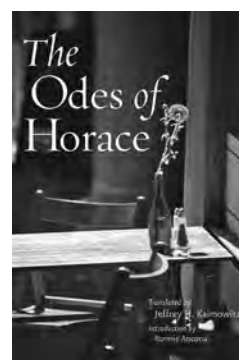
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TRANSLATING GJERGJ FISHTA'S EPIC MASTERPIECE *LAHUTA E MALCIS* INTO ENGLISH AS *THE HIGHLAND LUTE*

By Janice Mathie-Heck

Both Robert Elsie and I are delighted that our translation of Gjergj Fishta's *Lahuta e Malcis* (the Albanian national epic) has emerged into the light of day and that it will receive exposure to a worldwide readership. We worked hard on it, line by line, and are pleased with how *The Highland Lute* sounds in English. The epic poem contains 15,613 lines. It mirrors Albania's difficult struggle for freedom and independence, which was finally achieved in 1912. It was important for us to achieve an atmosphere similar to that of other important European epics, such as *Beowulf* (England), *The Kalevala* (Finland), and the grand medieval poems of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, such as *The Song of Roland* (France), *The Nibelungenlied* (German), and *Poem of the Cid* (Spain). Rhythmically, *The Highland Lute* is very much like the American writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *Hiawatha*, parts of which I loved to recite as a young girl.

Of course, Fishta wrote in the old Gheg language of northern Albania, which was his natural and native tongue. He was strongly influenced both by the traditional oral epics of his own culture and by the Greek epics, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and the Latin *Aeneid*. He also admired the Montenegrin national epic, *The Mountain Wreath*, by Njegos (1847). I believe that he was consciously preserving the historical and linguistic dimension of the era in which events described in *The Highland Lute* took place — that is, in the latter part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th — from 1862 to 1913. He also felt that Gheg was perfect for a literary language. As with English dialects, the Gheg dialect has evolved over the years, and Fishta's original words are difficult to understand for many Albanian readers today. To

illustrate, when one looks at the original text of the English epic *Beowulf*, it is almost impossible to decipher and was revised recently and very successfully by Seamus Heaney of Ireland, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.

Our task with translating *The Highland Lute* into English has been to make the language relevant and understandable for the modern reader while still retaining its colloquial, archaic, majestic, and heroic feel, which gives a strong sense of the past. Quite a challenge! We translated many expressions unique to Gheg and did our best to describe symbols of Albanian mythology and legend, such as oras (female spirits), zanas (protective mountain spirits), draguas (semi-human figures with supernatural powers), shtrigas (witches), lugats (vampires), and kulshedras (seven-headed dragon-like creatures). We kept the octosyllabic rhythm consistent throughout, and we captured the qualities common to all epics: alliteration, assonance, repetition, hyperbole, metaphor, archaic figures of speech, concrete descriptions, color, drama, passion, a range of emotions, intensity, sensuality, lots of action, rhyme where possible, and an exalted, dignified tone.

Of course, translation is never a simple matter. One can't merely switch the exact words of the original language into neatly corresponding words and phrases of the new one. We sometimes had to rearrange the word order and needed to use some old-style phrases and poetic expressions. In this way, we were more faithful to the original Albanian (which uses exact meter, assonance, and rhyme) than a more literal translator would have been. We wanted to preserve the nuances and "meanings between the lines" and retain the flavor of the original. So we attempted to keep the essence,

the fragrance, the spice, and the color with all of the devices we had at our disposal.

The following stanzas are taken from Canto 24, "The Zana of Mount Vizitor." They illustrate the almost-finished draft with the suggested final revisions to be made.

Thus when on that promontory
 Sitting up, the Good One noticed
 How in Nokshiq war was raging,
 She surveyed Curr Ula's courtyard,
 And she saw what she had dreaded,
 220 Had her eyesight but been weaker!
 Saw her Tringa dead and **lifeless**, (*take out "perished"*)
 Lying stretched across the courtyard,
Severed (again, "Sawed-off" sounds like a shotgun) head beside the
 doorway
 In a pool of blood, and **shuddered**.
 (*Take out "quivered"*)
 225 Down her spine did run the shivers.
 Yes, the Good One could not fathom,
 Not accept that something evil
 Could occur and **fell** (*take out "strike"*)
 her Tringa.
 To her **sight** (*take out "eyes"*) she gave
 no credence,
 230 And her hand, as fair as sunshine,
 Did she place **upon her forehead**, (*take out "above her eyebrows"*)
 Stood up straight upon the cliff side,
 Up and down her head was bobbing,
 Raised her eyebrows, bolts of lightning,
 235 Lowered then her **lids** (*take out "eyes"*)
 in sorrow,
 Like a mother when she learns
 The foe has **slain** (*take out "killed"*) her
 son in battle,
 In the Highlands or the lowlands,
 Or some other peril's struck him,
 240 When the others bring the message,
 Not to break her heart entirely,
 With a **vague word or a "maybe."** (*Take*

out "vaguely worded")
 To her feet will rise the mother
 At the news and set off running,
 245 But her **aged legs** (*take out "legs with age"*) won't bear her.
 Thus in anguish she starts **hoping** (*take out "thinking"*)
 It won't be her son who's perished,
 It will be another fighter
 Who perchance **bears the same**
surname. (*Take out "will have the same"*)
 250 She refuses to imagine
 That her son could be in danger.
 When she nears the sad location,
 Does she see her son has perished,
 With an "ah" she gives a **whimper**, (*take out "yammer"*)
 255 Beats her head, that withered widow,
 Pain within her heart a-welling. (*Take out "rising"*)
 So it was with the fair Zana,
 When she saw that Tringa'd perished.
 From the lofty promontory
 260 Did the Good One like an arrow
 Shoot into the air, a-soaring,
 On her golden wings descended,
 As a pigeon plummets to a
 Threshing field for grain, she **sped fast**
 (*take out "speeded"*)
 265 To the courtyard of Curr Ula,
 Curr lay dead beside the chimney,
 In the courtyard **sprawled** (*take out "lay"*) his sister.
 As a mother, when at night
 Her children at the hearth are dozing,
 270 Hugs them in her arms and bears them,
 (*add comma*)
 Cuddled, (*add comma*) off to bed for
 sleeping,
 So the zana fondled Tringa,
In her warm embrace, (*take out "Took her in her arms"*) caressing,
 Petted, coaxed her head **with care and**

(*take out “so gently,”*)
 275 In her snow-white arms she held her,
 Being rocked to sleep, you’d think her.
 To her breast the Earthly Beauty
 Clasped the **corpse, a-flying** (*take out*
“body” and “soaring”) upwards
 To the heavens, through the shooting,
 280 Through the cannonballs and bullets,
 Flew to Vizitor, that mountain,
 Where she gently laid the body.
 On that mountain pass, a **pasture**
 (*take out “meadow”*)
 Stretched beside a pine-tree forest,
 285 Stone-throw wide did **span** (*take*
out “stretch”) **that** (*take out “the”*)
 meadow,
 Full of verdure and young flowers.
 In the middle of the meadow
 There arose a lofty boulder,
 At its foot an icy spring flowed,
 290 Cold spring water **coursed** (*take out*
“flowed”) enough
 To keep a millstone turning, milling.
 There the *oras* and the *zanas*,
 All assembled, took refreshment
 In the moonlight bathing, and did
 295 Join **their hands** (*take out “in hand”*) to
 form a ring-dance.
 There they danced and there made
 merry,
 There **waxed joyful** (*take out “made*
merry”) with their singing,

We took great care to keep the text interlinear — one line of English for one line of Albanian. The German translation by Maximilian Lambertz, made in the late 1930s, sometimes employed up to seven lines of German to clarify and translate one line of Albanian. The Italian prose translation, published by Ignazio Parrino, is interlinear but lacks the true epic flavor.

This is a monumental epic poem dedicated to the Albanian people. It is a lyrical song of the soil, a song of blood and of battle, a song

of idyllic green meadows and gracefully wise zanas, and we felt that it deserved to be told in the spirit of its originator — with all of the emotional impact and full-bodied sense of adventure and love that Fishta possessed. It’s truly a classic, but at the same time we feel that it comes alive for the reader in today’s rich and colorful English language. I find it inspirational and thrilling — especially when read aloud.

Gjergj Fishta reveled in the centuries-old, oral epic tradition of the northern Albanian highlanders. He lived in the Shkodra region and had opportunities to hear “the singers of tales” performing for hours on their one-stringed lahutas. He befriended one in particular — Marash Uci, who fought in the battle of the Rrzhanica Bridge, and the old man’s stories enflamed Fishta’s imagination to even greater heights. In my opinion, Fishta would have become a warrior himself had he not chosen to be a priest! He had a keen sense of history, and he gloried in the descriptions of heroic battle scenes and of tribal warriors fighting to preserve their honor and to protect their homeland. He wanted his readership to be aware of the special laws and cultural customs of the highlands as embodied in the Code of Lekë Dukagjini, known as the “Kanun.” In *The Highland Lute*, he vividly and eloquently described the social system, the patriarchal structure, the concept of the besa or keeping one’s word, the tradition of hospitality toward guests, and the etiquette of blood feuding. The highlanders had kept their culture intact in spite of five centuries of Ottoman rule, and he saw them as models of flamboyance and bravery. They were still living, literally and figuratively, in a medieval fortress setting that he knew would eventually be changed through European influence. He was deeply committed to the freedom and independence of his country and had lived through a time of many border skirmishes, plots, schemes, and military intrigues concerning the Turks and Slavs (Montenegrins), which forced

retaliation by the Albanians — in particular, his own proud and rugged mountain people. Fishta captured the living, breathing, vibrant verse rendered by real people who once loved, lusted, conquered, galloped, raided, mourned, sang, danced, feasted, plotted, wooed, hungered, suffered, won, coveted, shouted, slept, rejoiced, married, plundered, moaned, and fell in battle.

Even though the first edition of *The Highland Lute* was published 100 years ago, it has universal significance. I am a teacher of English to new Canadians. As you may know, Canada is a multicultural country that respects diversity of language, ethnicity, and religion. In this context, I would tell my students that the Albanian lands had been attacked and overrun by various ethnic groups over the centuries. The people had always tried to defend themselves against invaders, with varying degrees of success. Somehow the northern Albanian tribes managed to keep their culture and sense of individuality, even during the long reign of the Ottoman Empire. Like Fishta, they were optimistic. They had a strong, confident spirit. I think that Fishta was inspired by their sense of honor, justice, and fearlessness. He was a

proud patriot and saw Albania as an endangered nation that wanted to take its place beside the other autonomous nations of Europe.

Why did he write this epic poem? He wanted to stress a sense of collective identity. A knowledge of history, preserved through our literature, makes us able to share our ideas and beliefs while learning from and empathizing with the ideas and beliefs of others in the world community. We come to know many heroes and villains. Reading about what people did long ago in faraway lands enriches our perspective and gives us models and choices, both good and bad, of how we might live. This sense of common experience goes back to the beginnings of civilization and crosses all cultural barriers. Being aware of our similarities and our differences helps us to know ourselves and to be tolerant of others. We discover our heritage, our roots (where we came from), and how our own language and culture developed through the centuries. Hopefully, we can learn many lessons from the past and not repeat the mistakes of our ancestors. We can eventually learn to live together. In all these ways, Fishta's *Lahuta e Malcís* is timeless. ❖

BOOK REVIEWS

Marku, Rudolf. *Allahland.*

Ron Berisha, Reviewer



While we're still recovering from this bewildering title, the author informs us, by means of a quote from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, that we are about to embark on a journey to a place called Illyria, where the story will take place. For those unfamiliar with this ethno-geographical expression, Illyria is an ancient region on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea covering parts of Croatia, Montenegro, and Albania. In Shakespeare's play, however, it is an imaginary place, a fantasy land that the bard also mentions in *Henry VI, Part II*, noting its reputation for pirates. "This is Illyria, lady," says the Captain to Viola. The land, after the stormy voyage at sea, would normally be a place of rest and peace. "And what should I do in Illyria?" asks Viola; well, dear reader, hold tight: you are in for a hell of a ride.

The preface transports us to a country called *Zululand*, to the dusty basement of a university located in the region of Domosdova — probably the most unlikely place in Albania to have a university — where the scientist Viola Paskualina finds an old and untitled manuscript, which she hands to the man in charge of the archives, who quickly asserts that the manuscript is the second part of the book "*Zululand*," written by the renowned Albanian writer Faik Konica sometime in the nineteen twenties. To perplex the poor reader even more, quotations from Hemingway and Umberto Eco are also included in the introduction, which put forth theories that Kilimanjaro might actually be the place where the manuscript was first found, and the *Zululand* can be a place where even

Masonry and Semantics can fit together.... One can imagine what the seventeen short chapters that follow this introduction are going to be like!

The plot is in fact fairly simple: Dulce Lina, a lively and fun-loving young lady, is told by the President of the "Happy Islands of Sazan Karambo" that she will be the new ambassador to *Zululand*. She is so deliriously happy at the news that, without much ado, she throws herself underneath the table at the president's crotch and engages in oral sex with him. Why is she so happy? At the prospect of helping in civilizing and democratizing an exceptionally primitive country like *Zululand*? Yes, but not just that; she is clearly turned on by the enterprise. Her sexual fantasy is to be a nurse, being violently screwed by a humble, primitive, well-endowed patient in token of gratitude for having saved his life and mended his wounds. Even as she flies over *Zululand*, the unashamedly phallic mountain peaks (of which this country has loads) turn her on to such an extent that she finds it impossible to hide her arousal. When she reaches the main airport (called *GypsyPasha*) of "the most honourable and respected" country of *Zululand*, this vivacious woman meets a man called Mr. Smoke, who is the current ambassador, well at home in *Zululand*, well-informed about its people and ancient customs. His embassy has a full 300 employees (including the gardeners), all transported from the Sazan Karambo Islands. Together, they have set out to "save" *Zululand*. Later, somewhere in the middle of nowhere in *Zululand*, the bubbly new ambassador-ess encounters three burping old drunkards who prophesize that she will actually become the princess of *Zululand* at some point, by marrying a strong and brave and well-endowed *Zululander*, as it befits a woman of her status, stature, and attractiveness.

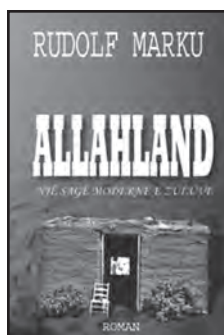
With its obviously ironic style and the extravagant pastiche characters seemingly

plucked from well-known literary masterpieces like *Don Quixote*, it is perfectly legitimate to think that we are dealing with a parody of a moral tale, echoing Voltaire's *Candide* or *Zadig*. But this book has a somewhat different agenda; it tells a particular story, something that has already happened, in time and space, in a way that what is real and what is fiction, what is dream and what is reality are mingled and dissolved in a natural way.

At the end of the day, what does it matter what is real? Marku plays with the absurd. The phrase "all hell broke loose" seemed to have been made to describe the events. The prisons were open. Many wore masks and began to rob each other in the streets. This was bloody theater, Greek theater with masks, and of the highest caliber; catharsis was to come only after blood filled the streets up to the ankles...

For Marku, the only way to tell the real story, the only way to try and make some sense of that fantastically nauseating pandemonium, is to transform it, chopping it to pieces, throwing it into a Never-land, re-forming and recreating it, sprinkling it with some Albanian mythology, biological politics, interspersing bits of news, exposing and mocking the real story, fiercely without holding back in black humor and satirical jabs, creating thus a Jurassic Park or Luna Park scenery that reminds you of Fellini's *Citta delle Donne*, a circus-like chain of mind-boggling events that culminate in the Happy End marriage of Dulce Lina with *Zululand's* President SalamBoza (Salami-Yogurt) and her coronation...

Marku uses a number of references from world literature. The newspaper bits that are copied from the Albanian newspapers and pasted between chapters have a function in Marku's *Allahland* similar to those by John Dos Passos in *The Forty-second Parallel* (1930). These newspaper cuts alone, very simply,



foretell the absurd reality "In the city of Librazhd a cockerel has laid an egg! This, according to the elderly, is a 'bad omen', which warns that the end of the world is nigh...."

Other characters in the novel are Mr. Smoke, the thick-skinned diplomat who knows how things work in a country like Albania. The character is slightly more visible than Dulce Lina.

He seems to be middle-aged, carbuncular, with a bold stare and a look of assurance. He is the old-school ambassador in charge of the 300 employees (a number stressed in the book more than once). He is the well-trained soldier and a political carnivore at the same time, who in all circumstances is able to keep his head above the troubled waters of reality. Soldier Svejka (taken from Jaroslav Hasek's novel *The Good Soldier Svejka*) is there to add to the absurdity of the comedy. Understand, this is not a character novel; none of these characters are analysed in depth; they are dressed in the colorful local clothes of *Zululand*. Another character, Marroku (The Fool), recalls a reference to King Lear's Fool. "What people don't know" says Marroku the Fool, "is that the fatal division of *geographical thoughts* deserves a good war, between those on 'this side' of the river and those on 'that side.'" The portrayal of these characters stands in stark contrast to the conventional techniques of narration.

Double-talk is also at play in this novel: The Palace of Receptions is called The Palace of the Backstabbing; the Society of the Victims of Communism is the Society of Torturers, who actually complain that they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, not just from the tortures that they themselves inflicted on innocent people, but because they have been persecuted by being made to feel guilty far too often by their victims. The national poet is called Mr. Warrior Jatagan (Turkish sword).

The Lady with Grey Hair is the widow

of Albania's communist oriental-bolshevist tyrant. Even the uproarious name chosen for the chronicler (another character of the book), is not done randomly either: Ptoleme Çelebi Qitapi is one third Greek and the rest Turkish, but it doesn't stop here; Çelebi was the name of the famous Ottoman chronicler who documented oriental-style the glorious oriental-style times of his empire. The felt distinction between the real events of today and the history is blurred like the conventional distinction between what is real and what is fiction.

A publishing house in Albania rejected the book with the pretext that the novel "gives Albania a bad image." But can you accuse Voltaire of giving France a bad image? Yet, in *Allahland* the vision is at times dark and depressing, but it's also viciously funny and entertaining.

And what about the title, *Allahland*? *Allah-Allah!* is an expression frequently used in Albania; it is taken from the Turks and it means, more or less "God help us!," or "Dear God!," or "What a mess!" Why *Zululand* then? Because Faik Konica, the most sophisticated Albanian author, called it such. Back in Konica's day and in Evelyn Waugh's days of *Scoop* (remember Ishmaelia), it was somehow more acceptable to use such cultural, racial, and geographical references; today jaws could be tightened and eyebrows knitted for the political incorrectness. But this is Zululand, Ismaelia, an imaginary place.

Whereas *Twelfth Night* is a comedy about mistaken identity, *Allahland* is about identity crisis, a tragi-comedy of errors. It is the *Apocalypse Now* for the Balkans, the *Heart of Darkness* without the main hero, Marlowe, where Kurtz is metamorphosed and multiplied by ten, twenty, a hundred times. This Kurtz (or Kurtzes) is ridiculous more than tragic, or tragically ridiculous in his modern primitivism, and he wears a turban. The end of the world is indeed nigh, and it won't arrive "with a bang"

nor "with a whimper" but through an EGG. Yes, the end of the world is going to happen through an egg, laid by a cockerel. So, welcome to *Allahland*, reader; be you naïve or experienced, attentive or distracted, well-informed or badly informed, left or right wing, a Westerner or a Easterner, a Zulu/Somali or a Zulu/Mozambique, ...you are in for a spectacular read! ❖

Lleshanaku, Luljeta. *Fresco: Selected Poetry of Luljeta Lleshanaku.* Translation by **Henry Israeli, Joanna Goodman, Ukzenel Buçpapa, Noci Deda, Alban Kupi, Albana Lleshanaku, Lluka Qafoku, Shpresa Qatipi, Qazim Sheme, Daniel Weissbort, and the author.** Edited and with an Afterword by Henry Israeli. Introduction by Peter Constantine. New Directions. 2002. 96 pp. Paper \$12.95. ISBN-13: 978-0811215114.

Peter Golub, Reviewer

Because this review comes six years after the publication of *Fresco*, I have had the opportunity to read several reviews written on this small but dense volume. When reading these, I noticed a common tendency to constantly bring up the "Stalinist" regime in which Lleshanaku grew up. This may be in part the result of Peter Constantine's repeated use of the word on the first page of his introduction: "All this poetry that came out of the hope, fear, hunger, and despair of Albania's desperate post-Stalinist 1990s" or on the same page "There has been an upsurge in Albanian literature following the collapse in 1990 of the harsh Stalinist dictatorship." This bleak picture of the poet's milieu in the introduction is coupled with Henry Israeli's afterword in which he writes: "I was drawn to the intense yearning in her images, not a longing for an idealistic past, but for a future that could never be, as it would forever be

burdened by a troublesome history.” Thus, the introduction and the afterword create a frame of political oppression and despair, which the subsequent reviews of the volume pick up.

The problem with such a frame is that it is historically misleading, potentially misrepresents Lleshanaku’s own *meta*-political poetry, and most importantly, does not do the poems themselves justice.

What does the word Stalinist achieve? Or rather, what kind of message is sent to the reader when Albania is referred to as a Stalinist dictatorship? One possible message is one of political and literary suppression — that the political dissident and the writer are one, that they are both victims of a ruthless system, against which they both fight a hopeless war, their futures “forever burdened by a troublesome history.” Besides rudely fusing politics and art, this picture also suggests that there is no literary tradition in such an environment outside of the political one. A poet is either with the regime or against it; or perhaps there is the rare third option of being an apolitical poet, but this implies that the poet purposefully chooses to reject politics.

Of course, Albania, like Russia (the country to actually have a Stalinist regime), has a poetic tradition that does not easily fit into this dichotomization. In a 2009 interview published in *World Literature Today*, Lleshanaku herself says, “Let’s remember that Albanian poetry of the 1960s and 70s, even the socialist-realist works, was heavily influenced by the Russian avant-garde, by acmeism and especially futurism: Akhmatova, Brodsky, Pasternak, Blok, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva — almost all dissidents.” Some of these writers and traditions do have political aspects to them. However, none of these were originally born of a political revolution, but an aesthetic one. And the greatness of these authors comes from the keenness of their perception and the power of the craft. Later in the same interview,

Lleshanaku says:

“It is not my tendency to avoid the political element in my poetry. But I had the chance, and the misfortune at the same time, to live in two different political systems. This helps me understand the people are the same and politics is only a cover for human vices and virtues. If you want to interpret history, just go beyond it and analyze the human being in every context, and try to understand the rules of human society from the first day forward. I tend to penetrate deeper, beyond the historical, political, religious strata that artificially make us seem very different from one another.”

The work in this volume does in fact pass through the political and historical surface, and when the translator succeeds in making a good English poem from the original Albanian, the result is clear, unpretentious, and powerful, like the silence in a snow-covered forest.

Fresco opens with the poem “Memory,” which embodies several of Lleshanaku’s principal themes.

MEMORY

There is no prophecy, only memory.
What happens tomorrow
has happened a thousand years ago
the same way, to the same end —
and does my ancient memory
say that your false memory
is the history of a light-hearted bird
transformed into a crow atop a marble
mountain?

The same woman will be there
on the path to reincarnation
her cage of black hair
her generous and bitter heart
like an amphora full of serpents.

There is no prophecy, things happen
as they have before —
death finds you in the same bed
lonely and without sorrow, shadowless
as trees with night.

There is no destiny, only the laws of
biology;
fish splash in water
pine trees breathe on mountains.

With the first three lines, Lleshanaku replaces the allure of superstition and prophecy with memory and induction, in the sixth and seventh lines she associates history with “false memory,” and by the nineteenth line “only the laws of biology” remain. But of course, biology does not erase superstition and history. The crow still sits “atop a marble mountain” and the same woman is still on the path to reincarnation. The presence of history still echoes in the second and third lines: “What happens tomorrow/ has happened a thousand years ago” — the laws of biology are far older than a measly thousand years; it is human history that is counted in thousands of years. Thus, there is this tension in the poem between the plain truth of nature “fish splash in water/ pine trees breathe on mountains” and the way this plain truth is filtered through the human imagination:

The same woman will be there
on the path to reincarnation
her cage of black hair
her generous and bitter heart
like an amphora full of serpents

The insistence at the beginning of the second stanza that “There is no prophecy, things happen as they have before” embodies this tension. The reader has already been told at the beginning of the poem that there is no prophecy, that things just happen, but it is one thing to say this, and quite another to believe it. The poet, like

the reader, can abstractly conceive of a world without destiny or prophecy, but when it comes to believing this, it is a real effort to accept the physical world without the airbag of the human imagination. Of course, to plainly accept the physical world one must accept death plainly, without the prophecy of an afterlife, and many of Lleshanaku’s poems take up the subject of death. “We never talk about death mother/ like married people who never speak of sex.”

The tension between Lleshanaku’s urge to present the simple plain facts of the world and the workings of her kaleidoscopic imagination gives her tight, well-crafted poems the quality of being both brusque and palliative, and in general *Fresco* is an incredibly porous and varied volume. It is abrasive and dulcet, containing surreal imagery and terse objectivist description. It is a book that contains the lines:

I watched a man shoveling snow
and heard rocks struck
and saw an acacia tree
branches covered in ice
swaying majestically, conspicuously,
like a nine-year-old on a swing,
with green bangs
and white stockings.

and

Over the icy magma of your gray curiosity
I stride barefooted so I can feel every change
and it hurts.
I feel a wilted palm sprout between my
shoulder blades
like certain lightening between sheepfolds.
I feel a cold eye, a shrew’s burrow under
water,
a fear that remains a chain of mute
consonants.
It blows across us yet there is no wind.

A heart nailed to a door is a red lantern

illuminating only those who leave.
What emanates from inside is our demise —
grass spreading over the rib cage
of an old metal-frame chest.

The poem above also demonstrates one of Lleshanaku's most powerful modes: her ability to include a variety of impulses into one poem and her insistence on truth work to create unflinching yet poignant love poems. In fact, on the back of the book, Allen Grossman directly writes, "She is a love poet." And indeed her talents seem particularly suitable for a love lyric that is audacious in both its hope and candor.

After reading *Fresco*, I am convinced that Lleshanaku has a permanent place in English letters. The appeal of Lleshanaku's poetry to translators is shown in the number of translators included in this little volume. No fewer than nine translators came together to create the sixty-seven pages of poetry in the book. These translations show that she is an excellent candidate for future translations, and in fact a second book of her poetry is scheduled to come out soon.

To return to my initial point at the beginning of this review, these translations stand on their own as excellent poems in the English language; they do not feel stilted, and they carry the voice of a truly talented poet. Therefore, I hope that future reviewers and critics will focus more on Lleshanaku's poetry and not fall to the temptation of simply framing her in Albania's atrocious history. The richness of this first book of translated poems is enough to win the admiration of a diverse audience, and I highly recommend it, and the volume to come. ❖

Buçpapaj, Mujë.

Fitorja e Padukshme: Poezi/
The Invisible Victory: Poems.
Bilingual Edition. Translation
by **Ukë Zenel Buçpapaj.**
Introduction by Laura Bowers.
2007. 167 pp. Paper \$10.00.
ISBN 0-9728521-7-4.



Laura Bowers, Reviewer

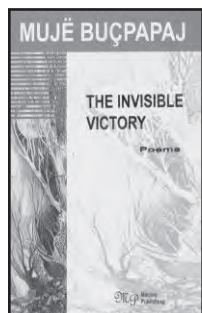
... *The river's memory*
Hiding in the smell of leaves ...

If you know what it feels like to be home, Mujë Buçpapaj's *The Invisible Victory* will break your heart. It is a beautiful, intimate portrait of a people and a landscape torn by war — and of the scars that remain. Buçpapaj becomes the haunting voice of multitudes, both living and dead, who experienced the war in Kosovo, and he focuses on the connection between the men, women, and children and their homeland. The poems that constitute *The Invisible Victory* are the jagged, glittering fragments of the poet's heart lying raw and scattered between nations. The human spirit is what unifies the poems — the longing for home as it once was and for people who are now lost — and the utter sadness in knowing it is only a memory. The brokenness reflects the hearts of the poet's brothers and sisters — of friends, families, enemies, and what is human in each of us. All suffered together; they were and are unified in their pain, and pain and brokenness are part of what unifies *The Invisible Victory*.

The book begins with suffering and ends with its prospect, a final poem consisting of prophesy and history interwoven. The most prominent emotion in the book is the poet's sadness, and his is the sadness of nations. The most intimate emotion, however, is the poet's sheer determination to preserve the freedom of expression for the good of all nations. In

writing the book, he lives that passion, and the “invisible victory” becomes the defeat of any fear that might impede proclamation of the truth. Showing his love for his homeland and his gift for brilliant, vivid imagery and metaphor, Buçpapaj interweaves concepts of home and those who remember home and, in doing so, touches what is human in us all.

Inherent in the poems is a longing for a lost past that has not begun to fade from the reaches of memory but that rather is separated only by a thin, yet immovable curtain of time. Buçpapaj examines the substance of time through the poetic medium as though hopeful that he will find some loophole through which he might rescue all that was lost to him. Ironically, the



collection begins with the image of the sunset in “The Invisible Victory” — the beginning of the end — and it ends with a poem titled “This Is Just the Beginning,” which opens with an image of the devil’s son reigning on a throne of fire and closes with a sad and

frightening prospect: the harvest has come and death waits. The final stanza reads: “Farewell / You people remaining / At the beginning.” It seems to be saying that all the hellish experience documented in the book is only a precursor to what is to come. Interestingly, both “The Invisible Victory” and “This Is Just the Beginning” are written in the past tense. The collection is interspersed with brief, imagistic poems much like stills from the action of mind and memory. They force the reader to stop, take a step back, and to gaze in awe at what simply is, while realizing that any single moment is timeless.

Buçpapaj occasionally speaks in the first person, gradually bringing his own loss and grief to the surface of the work. In the title

poem, which also opens the collection, the poet makes himself known as an integral part of his world and its circumstances:

I was also
Under the cracked skin
Of the sun’s
Rusty clothes
Measuring the color
Of corn fields (from “The Invisible Victory”)

The sun is setting, and there is an ominous implication in the fact that the poem is written in the past tense: “Life / Wasn’t enough for Man / To do good.” The poet speaks from beyond this time, and his tone is brimming with a nearly breathless melancholy; in it, we hear the mournful echo as the sun disappears: *too late, it’s too late, too late.*

Initially, the first-person persona seems somewhat distant from events, albeit saddened by what he has witnessed. It is not long, however, before the narrator’s references to himself become intimate and raw, thus making the personal more universal:

O God
It seems to me
Instead of my Homeland
I have left a field
Of men
Devoid of sight
Behind the plane’s door (from “Dirty Fantasy”)

It is when Buçpapaj makes himself most visible in his poems that I can also hear the voices of an entire nation of people. “A Letter to my Mother” is the longest and one of the strongest poems in the collection. Buçpapaj lives right on the surface of this poem, and it contains some of the most touching passages in the book. Buçpapaj’s very tears have pooled in the midst of its lines:

Dear Mother

I spent a black winter
In the womb of curse
Where death finds
Man in solitude
With roads wrapped round his head
[. . .]
And because of the heavy field
I left one of my legs
And my youngest daughter's tears
In dust

Buçpapaj's words are filled with a fiery sadness. He is bold and unapologetic in his grief. In "The Night Over Kosova," he tells of the hate-sparked fires that destroyed homes, hearts, and such beauty. Buçpapaj mourns in tears and flame, and through him, his nation finds a voice.

Buçpapaj's poems are generally short, usually less than a page, and they tend to end suddenly, with strong, yet understated aphorisms, the effect of which is startling — much like the effect of the war's losses on the people. This is no accident. It also pulls the reader's attention to the poignant conclusion of each poem. Characteristically short lines work well with this technique; the devices reflect each other in form and in effect. Short lines, at times, have the effect of making the speaker sound as though he is gasping for breath, as though wounded or exhausted (as he is in "A Letter to My Mother"). The short, enjambed lines combined with virtually nonexistent punctuation can also accelerate the reading of the poem, and this effect, combined with the often sudden conclusions, leaves us somewhat dizzy — like running off the edge of the earth into space — at which point we realize what Buçpapaj had in mind all along: to yank the solid foundation from beneath us in order to make us feel what he and so many others felt at the great losses they suffered. With the poems' conclusions, and often within the poems as well, one finds oneself soaring off the edge of the earth in defiance of

gravity, and this changes one's conception of "necessary" footing, just as the great losses due to war must have affected those who suffered it.

What charms me most about this book is the way Buçpapaj employs such fresh, stunning images within his metaphor. I have selected only three of the numerous examples from the book. They speak for themselves:

Dusk
Had fallen from the trees
Down on school children's bags

The sound of the hearth's ashes
Rolling round the world (from "Kosovë 1999")

The Big Marsh
Still eating land from under
The ribs of the dead (from "The Field of Tplani")

Having the color of North Winds
The river was the wind's portrait
Standing over trees (From "The Wind's Portrait")

Buçpapaj employs everything he loves and everything he hates in order to paint a precise portrait of his broken heart. The pages overflow with sunsets, mountains, birds, books, and corn fields. But we also see abandoned ruins, exodus engulfed in darkness, the muddy, frozen hands of children, and the dead beneath a tangle of burnt, labyrinthine roads of a ravaged land. The dead remind us that, despite the season of renewal, some of the most valuable losses will never be regained. As the poet writes in "Total Disillusion," "Homeland has abandoned / His own home."

The poems are haunted, as the poet's heart is haunted — riddled with ghosts of the lost and an atmosphere of appalled, exhausted silence. In the shivers of the poet's heart, we see the dead:

Those already weeping
In graves
Are at the bottom of the meadow
Beaten by winds
And afraid of cows (from “Ghastly Silence”)

O abandoned trains
Take me to the dead
Weeping under the rain
We have to reconcile them (from “The
Southern Trains”)

Despite the fact that the book ends with the
prospect of destruction, I do not sense a fear of
that destruction. Rather, there is victory in the
written word and its freeing power:

Here rests our dream
That forbidden freedom had collapsed
[. . .]
We’ll go to the ruins to unbury
FREEDOM
And feed on IT our papers written
Amidst mud
On the day we defeated fear (from “The
Square”)

“Fear had conquered the world,” the poet
says in “Black Fear.” Perhaps, then, the invisible
victory is in overcoming fear and thus freeing
the spirit of mankind to profess the truth —
which is precisely what Buçpapaj does in
writing *The Invisible Victory*.

Hope hasn’t abandoned me
In this ward of horror
Light a wooden fire
Over this desolate world
Say prayers for me in Albanian
For I am alive and
I don’t want to lose (from “A Letter to my
Mother”)

In poems such as “The Wind’s Statue,” we
find another irony: the violence was aimed at the
poet, as he stands for all who require freedom
of expression. Yet the voices of the people
survived in him, while the people themselves
were murdered. The victory is evident in the fact
that, despite their deaths, they were not silenced,
and that is because one survivor with a voice
and a gift was not afraid. Many more after me
will sing praises of Mujë Buçpapaj’s great work.
The Invisible Victory is a gorgeous, timeless
victory. ❖

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID BELLOS (D. Phil, Oxford U.) is Professor of French and Comparative Literature and Director of the Program in Translation and Intercultural Communication at Princeton University. He has published three works in the field of Balzac studies (*Balzac Criticism in France, 1850-1900*, Oxford, 1976; a critical study of *La Cousine Bette*, London, 1981; and an introduction to *Old Goriot*, Cambridge, 1987), as well as many articles on the history of fiction and the book market in 19th-century France. He has translated the works of Georges Perec and written *Georges Perec. A Life in Words*, Boston, 1993. Professor Bellos was awarded the first Man Booker International Translator's Prize in 2005 for his translations of the novels by the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare.

RON BERISHA (whose real name is Florian Gruda) was born in Shkodra, Albania. He received his BA in French Studies and Cinema from Birkbeck College University of London. His work has appeared in many publications, including *Dielli*, *London Student* and *Koha Jonë*. He has published several short stories, and is the author of the unpublished novel *Memoirs from a Dodgy District*. At the moment Berisha is working on a screenplay based on a true story that occurred during the time of the so-called 'Cultural Revolution' in Albania. He has resided in London since 1997.

LAURA BOWERS received her BA from the University of Texas at Dallas, in 2006. She is a poet and prose writer. Her introduction to Mujë Buçpapaj's book of poems *The Invisible Victory* has been translated and published in several Albanian publications including *Gazeta Tema* and *RD*.

PETER CONSTANTINE was born to an Austrian mother and a British father of Turkish and Greek descent. He grew up in Athens, Greece before moving to the United States in 1983. He has translated works from the French, Italian,

Albanian, and German, including Voltaire's *Candide*; *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*; *The Essential Writings of Machiavelli*; and Ismail Kadare's *Elegy for Kosovo*. For his translation from the German of Benjamin Lebert's *The Bird is a Raven* he received the Helen & Kurt Wolff Translation Prize in 2007. He has also written a study of Japanese Street Slang, *Japanese Slang: Uncensored*.

ROBERT ELSIE (born in 1950 in Vancouver, Canada) is an expert in Albanian culture and affairs. He studied at the University of British Columbia, the Free University of Berlin, the École Pratique des Hautes Études, the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in Ireland, and at the University of Bonn, where he finished his doctorate in Philosophy in 1978 at the Linguistics Institute. He made several trips to Albania over the years. From 1982 to 1987, he worked for the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bonn. Since that time he has worked as a freelance conference interpreter, primarily for Albanian and German. Robert Elsie is the author of numerous books and articles on various aspects of Albanian culture and affairs. He lives in the Eifel Mountains in Germany.

ANDIS GJONI, who provided the cover art for this special issue of Albanian literature, is a scenic designer, a "figlio d'arte" born in Albania from artist parents: his father, a composer and conductor, and his mother, a pianist. He is the creator of successful sets for *West Side Story* (2004), *The Miser* by Moliere (2001), *Miss Julie* by Strindberg (1998), and *The Maids* by Jean Genet (1996).

JANICE MATHIE-HECK (b. 1950, Jasper, Canada) is a teacher, poet, translator, editor and literary critic, who now lives in Calgary, Alberta. Her articles and poems have appeared in *The Gauntlet*, *Freefall*, *Le Chinook*, *Filling Station*, and *Illyria*. She has collaborated with Robert Elsie in translating and editing Albanian literature, including the recent volumes *Songs of the Frontier Warriors: Albanian Epic Verse*

(Wauconda, Illinois, 2004) and Gjergj Fishta's *The Highland Lute: the Albanian National Epic* (London 2005)

ISMAIL KADARE (b.1936) studied History and Philology at the University of Tirana, and literature at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow. His first novel, *The General of the Dead Army* (1963), established him as one of the most talented writers of contemporary Albanian literature. He has published over 90 books. In October 1990, Kadare escaped Albania for political reasons and applied for political asylum in France, where he now resides. His works have been translated into thirty different languages worldwide, including the following titles translated into English: *The Wedding* (1968), *The Castle* (1970), *Chronicle in Stone* (1971), *The Great Winter* (1977), *The Three-Arched Bridge* (1978), *Broken April* (1978), *On the Lay of the Knights* (1979), *The Autobiography of the People in Verse* (1980), *Doruntine* (1980), *The Palace of Dreams* (1981), *The Concert* (1988), *Albanian Spring* (1991), *The Pyramid* (1991), *Elegy for Kosovo* (2000), *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost* (2002), *The File on H.* (2002), *The Successor* (2006).

GJEKE MARINAJ, the guest editor of this special issue on Albanian literature, has published several books of poetry and prose and was the recipient of "The Golden Pen" journalism award in 2003 and "Pjeter Abnori" prize for literature in 2008. He has recently finished translating a collection of Perc Zogaj's poetry to be published in the near future. He received his M.A. from The University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), and is currently working toward his Ph.D. in literary and translation studies at UTD.

ELIDOR MEHILLI is a PhD candidate in history at Princeton University, where he is writing a dissertation on the material culture and everyday visions of socialism during the Cold War, especially as experienced on the "edge" of the "second world"—Hoxha's Albania.

WAYNE MILLER is the author of two collection of poems, *Only the Senses Sleep* (New Issues, 2006), and *The Book of Props* (Milkweed, forthcoming in 2009). He is the translator of Moikom Zeqo's *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* (BOA Editions, 2007), and co-editor with Kevin Prufer of *New European Poets* (Graywolf, 2008). Miller teaches at the University of Central Missouri, where he co-edits *Pleiades: A Journal of New Writing*.

PETER MORGAN teaches European Studies at the University of Western Australia and is currently completing a study of Ismail Kadare. He is the author of *The Critical Idyll: Traditional Values and the French Revolution in Goethe's Hermann und Dorothea*, and has written widely on German and European literature from the eighteenth century through contemporary times, in particular on aspects of ethnic and national identity. Morgan has also been named a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt and the Camargo Foundations.

PETER PRIFTI received his B.A. from Penn State University, and an M.A. degree from the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of several books, including *Socialist Albania Since 1944* (1978), *Confrontation in Kosova: The Albanian-Serb Struggle, 1969-1999* (1999), and *Unfinished Portrait of a Country* (2005). He has translated several books from Albanian into English, on subjects including literature, history, politics, and ethnology.

FREDERICK TURNER was educated at the University of Oxford (1962-67), where he obtained the degrees of B.A., M.A., and B.Litt. in English Language and Literature. He is presently Founders Professor of Arts and Humanities at The University of Texas at Dallas. He has collaborated with Zsuzsanna Ozsvath on the translation of Radnoti, *Foamy Sky: The Major Poems of Miklos Radnoti*. Turner is presently at work with Zsuzsanna Ozsváth on a collection of translations of poems by the Hungarian poet Attila Jozsef.

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The
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Fables**
of Jean de
La Fontaine

TRANSLATED BY

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INTRODUCTION BY *John Hollander*

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