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# Albanian Literature in English Translation: a Short Survey

ROBERT ELSIE

THOUGH Albania has long since taken its place among the sovereign nations of Europe and enjoys rich cultural traditions, Albanian literature *per se* remains *terra incognita* to a great extent for the outside world. This is to the detriment of the Albanian people on the one hand, whose vital contribution to European culture is worthy of being made known internationally, and, on the other, of the foreign reader who may wish to delve into the hearts and minds of the Albanians, but for linguistic reasons is unable to do so.

Essential in the international diffusion of Albanian literature are translations into English which up to now have been lacking both in quantity and quality. While much Albanian literature has been translated into French, and many major and minor works are available in Italian, German and Russian, English-language versions have been sadly missing on bookshelves. At this juncture it may be appropriate to take a brief look at existing English-language publications of Albanian literature.

An early 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 against the Turkes for the Faith of Christ* (William Ponsenly, London, 1596), a translation by one Z. J. Gentleman from a French version of a Latin work entitled *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi, Epirotarum Princeps* (Rome, c. 1508–10). This ‘History of Scanderbeg’ was written by the Albanian historian Marinus Barletius Scodrensis (c. 1450–c. 1512), known in Albanian as Marin Barleti, who after experiencing the Turkish occupation of his native Shkodër at first hand, settled in Padua where he became rector of the parish church of St Stephan. 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. Though 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.

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Albanian folk literature has been published in three now rare volumes: *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 is translated from French and German; *Albanian Wonder Tales* (Lovat Dickenson, London, 1936) by Post Wheeler with ten fairy tales; and *Këndime Englisht-Shqip or Albanian-English reader* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1931) by the noted English Albanologist and Orientalist Margaret M. Hasluck (1885–1948). A new volume of Albanian folk tales is to be published shortly in New Delhi.

English translations of written Albanian literature are a relatively recent phenomenon. The first translations began to appear in Tirana in the 1960s. Of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Albanian literature in translation one may mention the little volume *The Last Lay of Bala* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1967) by the Italo-Albanian (Arbëresh) poet and man of letters Gavril Dara Junior (1826–85). This rhymed English version of the lengthy romantic ballad *Kënka e sprasme e Balës* (Catanzaro, 1906), translated by Ali Cungu, 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) of the classic Rilindja poet and ideologist Naim Frashëri (1846–1900). An uncensored version of Ali Cungu's translation of Frashëri's *Bagëti e bujqësija* (Bucharest, 1886) was published by the translator's brother, Mahmoud Tsungu, in New York under the title *Frashëri's Song of Albania* (Exposition Press, 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, former lecturer in Albanian at Columbia University, as the *Pledge of Honor, an Albanian Tragedy* (S. F. Vanni Publishers, New York, 1945).

The works of the pre-revolutionary poet Migjeni (1911–38), pseudonym of Millosh Gjergj Nikolla, were translated into English, again by Ali Cungu, in the volume *Migjeni, Selected Albanian Songs and Sketches* (Tirana, 1962). Here, too, excessive attention to rhyme and rhythm have substantially diminished the dramatic force and caustic cynicism of Migjeni's verse of growing social awareness. A new translation of Migjeni's slender volume of poetry is in preparation for publication in Tirana. Another writer who marks the transition between pre-war literature and post-war Socialist Realism is Nonda Bulka (1906–72) whose *Sketches and Short Stories* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1984) cover the years 1932 to 1972.

A small number of classics of Albanian Socialist Realist literature are now available in English. Some of the early translations, while idiomatic, are sadly outdated, though they suffice for the most part to convey a general idea of the questionable Albanian prose of the period. Shevqet Musaraj (1914–86) from the Vlorë region is the author of the two-volume

novel *Before the Dawn* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1981–82), a translation of *Para agimit* (Tirana, 1965–66), chronicling the last years of the Zog dictatorship and the growth of the resistance movement during the war. *The Awakening* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1980) by Sterjo Spasse (1914–89), a translation of *Zgjimi* (Tirana, 1974), is set in an Albanian town in the last days of Ottoman rule. The novel *Këneta* (Tirana, 1959) by Fatmir Gjata (1922–89) from Korçë has been translated by William Bland as *The Marsh* and published as a serial in *Albanian Life*, the meagre journal of the British ‘Albanian Society’.

Of contemporary prose in Albania one may mention the novel *The Face-up* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1980), a translation of *Përballimi* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1975) by Teodor Laço (1936– ) from the village of Dardhë near Korçë, who in the 1970s established a reputation as a major prose writer. This propagandistic novel is set in the difficult years of 1948–49. Some of Laço’s short stories have also been translated into English by Ronald Taylor in *A Lyrical Tale in Winter* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1988). *The Last Days of a Prime Minister* (Albanian Society, Ilford, 1985) is the translation, again by William Bland, of *Ankthi i ditëve të fundit* (Tirana, 1983) by Skifter Këlliçi (1938– ) from Tirana, an attempt at an historical novel, portraying the fall of ‘Monsieur Koço’, the last pre-war Prime Minister of Albania under the dictatorship of King Zog. Twelve short stories by Korçë-born Nasi Lera (1944– ), Secretary of the Union of Writers and Artists since 1986, have been translated into English by Vasil Gjymshana in the volume *Selected Stories* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1986). The children’s novel *Beni Walks on His Own* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1983), translation of *Beni ecën vetë* (Tirana, 1976) by Kiço Blushi (1943– ), highlights the conflict between a growing boy and his overly protective parents. Another short novel for children is *Ciko and Benny* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1988) by Naum Prifti (1932– ), translated by his brother Peter Prifti of the University of California, San Diego. Also by the same translator is a 102-page collection of Naum Prifti’s humorous short stories and sketches entitled *The Wolf’s Hide* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1988).

The only play to have been translated into English since Sami Frashëri’s above-mentioned *Pledge of Honor, an Albanian Tragedy* is *The Fisherman’s Family* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1980) by Sulejman Pitarka from Dibër. This sentimental drama of little literary sophistication, originally entitled *Familja e peshkatarit* (Tirana, 1955), centres on young Petrit, the son of the fisherman Jonuz Bruga, who risks his own life to save a wounded comrade in hiding from the Italian Fascists during the Second World War.

Of poetry, one may mention *The Call of the Owl* (Prishtina, 1989), a translation of *Kënga e hutinit* (Rilindja, Prishtina, 1986) by Azem Shkreli (1938– ), one of the leading contemporary poets of Kosovo. The

seventy poems in this edition published by the Kosovo Association of Literary Translators were rendered into English by the Brighton-born translator John Hodgson, presently living in Vienna.

Two volumes of the worst of modern poetry from Albania have appeared in English translation: *Communist* (San Francisco, 1984) by Agim Gjakova (1935– ), translated by Jack Hirschman of the Union of Left Writers, and *Mother Albania* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1985) by Dritëro Agolli (1931– ) from the Devoll region, now president of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists. The latter work, in the translation of Vasil Gjymshana, is one of the many foreign-language versions of the officially much lauded *Nënë Shqipëri* (Tirana, 1974). Agolli has exercised a strong influence on the course of contemporary literature not only as a poet but also as a prose writer. Here too, the weakest of his works were chosen for translation in Tirana. His novel *Komisari Memo* (Tirana, 1970), translated as *The Bronze Bust* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1975), contains a prototype for the enlightened partisan hero in the figure of Memo Kovaçi. His second novel *Njeriu me top* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1975), translated as *The Man with the Gun* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1983), takes up the obligatory partisan theme from a slightly more differentiated angle. Sixteen of Agolli's short stories have also been published in English in *Short Stories* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1985).

The most widely translated and globally recognized Albanian author, indeed the only one to have gained an international reputation, is Ismail Kadare (1936– ) from Gjirokastër. Many of his novels, short stories and verse collections have been highly successful, in particular in French translations, and, after much delay, English translations have begun to appear over the last few years. The novel for which Kadare is still best known is *The General of the Dead Army* (W. H. Allen, London, 1971; Grossman, New York, 1972; 8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1983; New Amsterdam Books, New York, 1990), a translation from the French by Derek Coltman of the original *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (Tirana, 1963). Kadare's second novel *The Wedding* (Tirana, 1968; Gamma, New York, 1972, 1974, 1982), a translation by the above-mentioned Ali Cungu of *Dasma* (Tirana, 1968), took up the theme of women's liberation in Albania at a time when Enver Hoxha's two major social campaigns were in full swing: the abolition of religion and the emancipation of women among a population of predominantly Moslem origin. Despite its four editions, *The Wedding* is perhaps the worst of all Kadare's works. In *The Castle* (8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1974; Gamma, New York, 1980), a weak translation by Pavli Qesku of *Këshjtjella* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1970), Kadare displays his eminent skills as an historical novelist. The book takes us back to the fifteenth century, the age of the Albanian national hero Scanderbeg, and, in minute, carefully composed detail, depicts the siege of a medieval

Albanian fortress, symbolic of Albania itself, by the Turks during one of their numerous punitive expeditions to subdue the country. The allusion to political events of the 1960s seen by many critics was not unintentional. In 1961, Enver Hoxha had stubbornly broken ties with the Soviet Union, and after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia Albania felt the very real possibility of a Soviet incursion to bring the country back into the fold. No Albanian reader at any rate could be unaware of the possible analogy between the Sublime Porte and the Kremlin. A new translation has been planned. Kadare's native town of Gjirokastrë with its lofty fortress manors of stone looming from the mountainside over narrow cobblestone alleys is the focus of attention of *Chronicle in Stone* (Serpent's Tail, London, 1987; Meredith, New York, 1987), translated by Arshi Pipa from the original *Kronikë në gur* (Tirana, 1971). In *Doruntine* (New Amsterdam Books, New York, 1988; Al Saqi, London, 1988), a translation from the French by Jon Rothschild of the original *Kush e solli Doruntinën?*, published in the collection *Gjakftohtësia* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1980), Kadare plunges once again into Albania's legendary past, legendary in the purest sense. The story of Constantine and his sister Doruntine, alternatively known as Garentine, one of the best known in Albanian folklore, is veiled by Kadare in an atmosphere of medieval intrigue reminiscent of Umberto Eco's highly successful novel *The Name of the Rose*. *Broken April* (New Amsterdam Books, New York, 1990), a translation by John Hodgson of *Prilli i thyer* which was also published in the collection *Gjakftohtësia* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1980) is a 216-page novel evoking the bloody institution of vendetta in the wild northern mountain regions of pre-war Albania. Translations have been made of *Ura me tri harqe* (The Three-Arched Bridge) and of *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice), a gripping tale of the 1981 uprising in Kosovo, and contracts have also been issued for the English-language versions of *Muzgu i perëndive të stepës* (Twilight of the Gods of the Steppes) and *Koncert në fund të dimrit* (Concert at the End of Winter). International interest in Kadare is growing rapidly year by year and it is to be hoped that further translations will be available before long.

Such are the major English translations to date. There are in addition a number of English-language anthologies which provide a broader view of contemporary Albanian literature in Albania and Kosovo with excerpts from the works of a large number of writers. The earliest of these is the 450-page *Contemporary Albanian Prose* (Tirana, 1963) with short stories by Ali Abdihojha, Sotir Andoni, Arsinoi Bino, Razi Brahimi, Nonda Bulka, Qamil Buxheli, Kin Dushi, Fatmir Gjata, Thoma Kacorri, Petro Marko, Shevqet Musaraj, Naum Prifti, Zihni Sako, Dalan Shaplllo, Dhimitër Shuteriqi, Sterjo Spasse, Dhimitër Xhuvani, Jakov Xoxa and Moisi Zaloshnja. Numerous short excerpts

of Albanian prose and poetry are to be found in Stuart Mann's now outdated literary history *Albanian Literature, an Outline of Prose, Poetry and Drama* (Quaritch, London, 1955) and in Arshi Pipa's three-volume literary study *Trilogia Albanica* (Trofenik, Munich, 1978). A short and not entirely representative selection of Albanian verse has been printed by the 'Albanian Society' in the brochure *Albanian Poems* (Ilford, c. 1979) with works by Dritëro Agolli, Vehbi Bala, Nonda Bulka, Faslli Canaj, Aleks Çaçi, Andon Zako Çajupi, Faik Deda, Nexhat Deveja, Naim Frashëri, Petrit Hajdini, Ismail Kadare, Lekë Matrënga, Migjeni, Valentina Mosko, Mexhit Prençi, Viktor Qurku, Zihni Sako, Llazar Siliqi, Qemal Stafa, Veli Stafa, Musa Vyshka and Rezear Xhaxhiu. Verse by Migjeni, Lasgush Poradeci, Arshi Pipa, Martin Camaj and Ismail Kadare has also appeared in the American anthology *Contemporary Albanian Poetry* (Dragotti, Naples, c. 1985), translated by the late Bardhyl Pogoni of Western Kentucky University. Three Albanian poets: Martin Camaj, Rrahman Dedaj and Adem Gajtani also appeared in the anthology *Voices from Across the Water* (Johnston Green, Portree, 1985) translated by Ewald Osers. *Albanian Life*, the above-mentioned tiny journal of the 'Albanian Society', published by William Bland, also contains short selections of Albanian poets and prose writers from time to time.

In Yugoslavia, there are almost as many Albanian speakers as in Albania itself, which now has a population of over three million. Albanian literature there can no longer be considered a marginal phenomenon, the product of an obscure national minority down in one corner of the country. Albanian now indeed constitutes the second most widely-spoken language in the Yugoslav federation (after Serbo-Croat), and the Albanian minority, despite the enormous political problems inherent in adjustment, recognition and equality, is slowly beginning to make its impact felt on Yugoslav culture and European letters. The liberal period from around 1968 to 1981 marked an age of unprecedented literary and cultural development in Kosovo (Alb. Kosova), the centre of the Albanian population. Kosovo was granted the status of an autonomous region under the Yugoslav constitution of 1974 and Albanians began for the first time to feel that they might come to enjoy equal rights with the Slavic founders of the Yugoslav State. Since 1981, and in particular since 1989, repression by the Serbian authorities has once again reached the alarming proportions it had attained under Ranković. After the abolition by force of the government of the province, the banning in the summer of 1990 of the Albanian-language daily newspaper *Rilindja* and of Albanian-language radio and television broadcasting, and the firing of virtually all Albanians in management or executive positions, the very future of Albanian culture and literature in Kosovo would seem at stake.

Though literary prose in Albanian is relatively recent in Kosovo, and drama has long been weak, poetry has always enjoyed a solid tradition both in Kosovo and in Albania. Publishing statistics reflect this penchant for verse: in Tirana about 40 per cent of literary publications over the past few years have been poetry, and in Prishtina (Alb. Prishtinë), capital of Kosovo, up to 80 per cent, something quite unimaginable in the rational West. Acutely aware of the necessity in the present political crisis of overcoming the isolation, both within Yugoslavia and in Europe, in which the budding literature of Kosovo is languishing, the Kosovo Association of Literary Translators has now published a number of translations of modern verse from this predominantly Albanian-speaking region. In addition to the above-mentioned volume of Azem Shkreli, the poetry of Kosovo has been published in English in two anthologies: *The Sad Branch / Dega e pikëlluar* (Rilindja, Prishtina, 1979) with two poems each by twenty leading contemporary Kosovo poets: Esad Mekuli, Enver Gjerqeku, Abdylaziz Islami, Din Mehmeti, Ali Musaj, Besim Bokshi, Adem Gajtani, Muhamed Kërveshi, Fahredin Gunga, Qerim Ujkani, Azem Shkreli, Rrahman Dedaj, Mirko Gashi, Ali Podrimja, Musa Ramadani, Ibrahim Kadriu, Beqir Musliu, Eqrem Basha, Nexhat Halimi and Sabri Hamiti; and *Roads Lead only One Way, a Survey of Modern Poetry from Kosova* (Rilindja, Prishtina, 1988), translated by John Hodgson, with 139 poems written originally in one of the three official languages of Kosovo: Albanian, Serbo-Croat and Turkish. Represented in this anthology are the contemporary Albanian poets Esad Mekuli, Enver Gjerqeku, Azem Shkreli, Rrahman Dedaj, Fahredin Gunga, Ali Podrimja and Eqrem Basha. In contrast to *The Sad Branch*, this collection enables the perspicacious reader to grasp at least something of the particular style and flavour of each writer.

From the above survey of publications it becomes obvious that although efforts have been made by many writers, translators and publishers in Albania, Kosovo and abroad, Albanian literature is still not well known in the outside world. Most chapters of Albanian literature still remain to be discovered at any rate. The works of early (sixteenth- and seventeenth-century) Albanian authors such as Gjon Buzuku (*fl.* 1555), Lekë Matrënga [Luca Matranga] (1567–1619), Frang Bardhi [Franciscus Blanchus] (1606–43), Pjetër Budi (1566–1622) and Pjetër Bogdani [Petrus Bogdanus] (*c.* 1630–89) are considered primarily to be of historical and linguistic interest, although the latter two are of definite literary significance in the Counter-Reformation. Albanian ‘Aljamiado’ literature in the Oriental tradition, that is, the poetry of the *Bejtexhinj*, is still largely unknown even to Albanians themselves. The strong contribution made to Albanian literature by Italo-Albanian writers from Jeronim de Rada (1814–1903) and Zef Serembe (1844–1901) to the contemporary Arbëresh poets of

Calabria and Sicily has not yet received the attention of the international reading public to any satisfactory degree, although numerous Italian translations exist. The nineteenth-century 'Rilindja' literature of romantic nationalism which even today is of primary significance to foreigners for an understanding of the Albanian mentality is not available in English translation, and nor are the many fine classical poets of the early twentieth century, such as Ndre Mjeda (1866–1937), Andon Zako Çajupi (1866–1930), Asdreni (1872–1947), Lasgush Poradeci (1899–1987), and the now banished writers of the pre-war Catholic tradition, in particular Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940), once lauded as the Albanian 'national poet'.

No foreign reader can gain even the most basic overview of the historical development of Albanian letters and of present literary production in Albania and Kosovo on the basis of works currently available in English translations. While readers of French, and to a lesser extent of Italian, German and Russian may still have a certain advantage, they too have only sporadic access to Albanian literature. The relative abundance of translations into French and the comparatively superior quality thereof derive from the long cultural relations which Albanians have enjoyed with France and French civilization. At the turn of the century, Faik Konica's (1875–1942) influential periodical *Albania* was published in Brussels and later in London, and Enver Hoxha (1908–85), who exercised a strong influence on all spheres of Albanian life, lived for several years in France and Belgium. Since then, a great number of Albanian and Kosovar scholars have studied in France so that the French language has been able to maintain its position in Albania as the principal vehicle of scholarship and official international communication, and, to an extent, of diplomacy. The literary quarterly of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists, *Les Lettres Albanaises*, has been published since 1978 in French only. These factors, compounded no doubt by the extremely difficult course of Albania's political relations with the two major English-speaking nations, the United States and the United Kingdom, which resulted in an unfortunate standstill in cultural exchange, have led to a definite priority for literary translations into French rather than into English.

In recent years, literary translations from the Albanian have perhaps rightly focused on contemporary writing, the cultural expression of the people of Albania and Kosovo of today. Interest in contemporary Albanian literature in English translation has, however, been hampered to a considerable extent by a lack of linguistic finesse on the part of the translators and by the dense political filter imposed on all aspects of public life in Tirana. The early translations into English published in Tirana were of necessity made by Albanians who had a very limited access to the English-speaking world. Most of these untrained,

although no doubt talented, translators had never been permitted to travel abroad and learn English thoroughly. As a result, their translations in very many cases were so disconcerting and idiomatically outdated that they led to the unfortunate consequence of discouraging people from reading Albanian literature at all. This stage of development, which has had a long-term detrimental effect on the diffusion of Albanian culture abroad, has been overcome to a certain extent, but much remains to be done. While most current translations are palatable in style, and endeavour to convey the original in a readable contemporary language, they are still often far from literary sophistication. One can in addition not overlook the fact that contemporary literature in Albania (though not in Kosovo) has been dominated for the last forty years by the Marxist political message and by an often heavy-handed concentration on certain themes such as the partisan heroism of the 'National Liberation War' and the building of socialism and socialist awareness. Most of the works chosen for translation in Tirana reflect this proclivity, which, to say the least, has not always been to the taste of the broad masses of the Western reading public.

For the first time, however, in the history of Albanian literature, there are, now, in addition to poetry (at which the Albanians have always been masters), a number of fine prose works which could be read abroad with great interest. Ismail Kadare is a case in point. His works have proved extremely popular in French-speaking countries, a success due in large part to the talents of the translator Jusuf Vrioni, while in other regions of the globe he still remains to be discovered. The spectrum of contemporary Albanian literature is much wider than the availability of existing works in translation would indicate, and it is to be hoped that good translations will soon reflect this diversity.