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**THE OUTSIDER'S GLIMPSE: THE SLOW RETURN OR THE VERY  
BEGINNING OF ROMANTICISM IN ALBANIA****SPOJRZENIE OBCEGO: POWOLNY POWRÓT LUB POCZĄTEK  
ROMANTYZMU W ALBANI**

**Słowa kluczowe:** romantyzm, literatura albańska, wygnanie albańskie, spojrzenie, Orientalizm

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For an accurate account of Romanticism in Albania, or the lack thereof, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary, one including not only Albanian literature, historical accounts, and news articles but the latest modes of digital communication, such as social media images and posts. This variety and range of research is necessary due to the specific nature of Albanian literature, an oeuvre that is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, amputated or disrupted. Perhaps one of the main reasons is that “the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Albania from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century”<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the “earliest books, from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, were mostly religious and didactic in character”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, for five centuries, including the period when Western European countries were undergoing the Romantic movement, in addition to not being exposed to the West, Albania was entirely absent from the global literary and art scene. It is a wonder that Albanian literature has survived. Indeed, the image of Albania has been shaped historically from outside of the country, by the most famous national poets, who never lived in Albania, western travelers during

<sup>1</sup> P.R. Prifti, “Albanian Literature,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Jul 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Albanian-literature>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

Romanticism, such as Lord Byron and Edward Lear, and western institutions of culture, such as the *New York Times*, a trend which has been resumed and continued by the local and international travel and photography blogs. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the locals continue to perpetuate a perspective that has been created by the west as, throughout history, Albanians have naturally absorbed an image of the country that has been produced by outsiders. The manner in which the outsider's perspective has, perhaps too liberally, shaped the local's romanticism of Albania recalls Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said suggests that the free dissemination of information on Eastern countries by the West denotes a power that has been unjustly seized: "To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for «us» to deny autonomy to «it» – the Oriental country – since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it"<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, this outsider's perspective, however, may have spurred the rise of Romanticism in Albania, three centuries after the Romantic Movement initially expanded in Western Europe.

Initially, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the survival of Albanian literature was safeguarded from outside the country's borders by *Arbëresh* writers, artists and poets who had migrated from Albania to Italy centuries earlier. Chief among them was Jeronim de Rada (1814–1903), generally considered the greatest Albanian Romantic poet and one who "marked contemporaneity with European developments"<sup>4</sup> with his long poem *Këngët e Milosaos* (*The Songs of Milosao*) in 1836. Although 1836 is nearly a century after the beginning of the European Romantic movement, de Rada is the Albanian poet that most approaches the Romantic Movement in temporal terms. Indeed, Romanticism in Albania developed belatedly "in the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century"<sup>5</sup>. Thus, content- and style-wise, de Rada's poetry is not entirely similar to the western Romantics. However, de Rada's poem reveals elements of a "return to feeling, to folk traditions"<sup>6</sup>, a characteristic of Romantic poetry. Indeed, de Rada drew inspiration from Albanian folk songs in the writing of his poem, which sets a love story against a rural backdrop. His poem *Milosao* touches on such themes as social class, patriotism, and poverty while incorporating vivid descriptions of the surrounding rugged beauty. The natural elements are intertwined with the rural folks' fates, the former often influencing the latter, the two becoming one and the same: "Duro zemër duro / Sa duroi mali me borë (Endure heart endure/As the mountain endured the snow)"<sup>7</sup>. The poem, however, does touch on the poverty of the Albanian village. While autobiographical in the poet's evident longing for his distant home, both temporally and geographically, the poem lacks the individual focus of the Romantics

<sup>3</sup> E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> V. Dibra, "Albanian and English Literature in Light of Comparative Reports," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2, no. 4 (2013) [https://nanopdf.com/download/albanian-and-english-literature-in-light-of-comparative-reports\\_pdf](https://nanopdf.com/download/albanian-and-english-literature-in-light-of-comparative-reports_pdf), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Bajjola Shatro, *Between(s) and Beyond(s) in Contemporary Albanian literature* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307601329\\_Between\\_and\\_eyonds\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_Albanian\\_Literature](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307601329_Between_and_eyonds_in_Contemporary_Albanian_Literature), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> H. Bloom & L. Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> J. de Rada, *Këngët e Milosaos*, Tiranë: Argeta, 2002, p. 46.

as well as the “revival of the instinctual life”<sup>8</sup>, one the most significant aspects of Romantic poetry. Thus, it is his evocation of the pastoral which most represents the Romantic aspect of his poem as the direct self-exploration, usually found in Romantic poets, is absent. Albanian Romantic poetry did not explore the “self-consciousness” of the poet, which, is a defining characteristic of Romanticism, a movement which depended “upon a fuller sublimation of the instinctual life” and the eventual “yielding up of the instinctual life to a fully self-conscious creative mind”<sup>9</sup>, Albania’s poetry centered on patriotism, the poet’s nostalgia for his home, – often incidentally not the poet’s birthplace, – the often unearthly beauty of the Albanian landscape, and, the poor conditions of the Albanian villages<sup>10</sup>. It was the latter that prevented Albanians from finding “romanticism” in the poems of de Rada.

Albania saw the birth of Romanticism after two decades, in the poems of the greatest national poet, Naim Frashëri. Similar to de Rada, Naim Frashëri<sup>11</sup> was also influenced by the European Romantic poets<sup>12</sup> and is considered to be the quintessential Albanian Romantic poet due to his style of verse. In temporal terms, Frashëri wrote approximately a century after the European Romantics. Unlike de Rada, Frashëri was born in Albania. With the exception of a short return to his native village of Frashëri, however, he lived the majority of his life in exile. He lived in Greece, Austria, and Turkey where he was educated in Eastern and Western culture and literature and, as such, was influenced by both. Indeed, Naim Frashëri may embody the best representation of the Albanian nostalgic émigré: eternally longing for home while romanticizing its extreme poverty from a distance. In the poem *Bagëti e bujqësi (Herds and Pastures)* written in 1886, a poem whose passionate tone and highly Romantic language separates it from previous Albanian poetry, he writes:

Kur dëgjon zëthin e s’ëmës qysh e le qengji kopenë, / When he hears his  
mother’s voice, how the lamb runs from the herd  
Blegërin dy a tri herë edhe ikën e m, err dhenë, / he starts bleating twice or  
thrice and runs wildly towards her  
Edhe në i p refshin udhën njëzet a tridhjetë vetë, / and should twenty thirty  
herds cross his road to thwart his passing  
E ta trëmbin, ajy s’kthehet, po shkon në mes si shigjetë./ he won’t turn even  
when frightened, like and arrow he’ll keep running

<sup>8</sup> H. Bloom & L. Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Romanticism in Albania was more profoundly nationalistic, as it led to and merged with the subsequent Romantic Nationalism or Renaissance literary movement, involving the two most prominent poets in Albanian Literature, Naim Frashëri and Ndre Mjeda.

<sup>11</sup> Naim Frashëri (1846–1900) is considered one of the greatest Albanian poets. Though writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Frashëri is considered a Romantic poet in Albania and is the link between the Albanian Romantics and the post-Romantic movement the Renaissance, seldom described as Romantic Nationalism.

<sup>12</sup> V. Dibra, *Albanian and English Literature*, p. 82: “Jeronim de Rada mentions Shakespeare, Naim Frashëri, mentions Milton, and Ndre Mjeda, mentions the Irish poet, Charles Wolf. The only English poet that is mentioned by nearly all of our romanticists and the only English poet that is often mentioned, almost as much as Homer, is Byron.”

Ashtu dhe zëmëra ime më le këtu tek jam mua, / How like him my heart rushes, leaves me here and soars away  
 Vjen me vrap e me dëshirë aty ndër viset e tua. / and at once dashes forward towards you and your vast lands.<sup>13</sup>

Some typical aspects of Romantic poetry, absent in de Rada, are the desire to escape the city, the idealization of and reliance on nature, and the introduction of the poet's own condition. Frashëri becomes the first Albanian poet to introduce an "I," one of the most significant elements of Romanticism, when he directly addresses his "mind:"

Mendje! merr fushat e malet, jashtë, jashtë nga qyteti, / Mind! Run to the fields and mountains, out, out from the city  
 Nga brengat, nga thashethemet, ngarrëmuja, ngarrëmeti. / From all sorrows, from the gossip, from the chaos and hypocrisy  
 Tek këndon thëllëza me gas edhe zogu me dëshirë, / To that place where the partridge sings with joy and the bird so longingly<sup>14</sup>

More than patriotic or nostalgic verse, Frashëri's poem reveal an exiled man who seeks refuge in nature and yearns to leave the industrialized city. Frashëri, however, was an exceptionally privileged Albanian poet, as he largely resided in western European capitals. At the time of his writing, in Albania, industrial cities were inexistent. Thus, this Romantic perspective, while expressed in the verse of an Albanian poet, is not entirely Albanian in that it is not born of a poet from within the county. It resembles an outsider's perspective, one who has only glimpsed Albania. As contemporary French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman suggests, it is the glimpse, rather than careful observation, which allows beauty to appear. "To glimpse is to see only in passing," he notes, a way of "seeing a little less well, not as well as when the thing to be seen has become an object of observation."<sup>15</sup> The opening verses of Frashëri's poem – "O malet' e Shqipërisë e ju o lisat' e gjatë! (Oh, mountains of Albania, and oh you trees of towering height!) / Fushat e gjëra me lule, q'u kam ndër mënt dit' e natë! (Vast meadows of flowers that are with me day and night!)"<sup>16</sup> – are romantic precisely because the poet views the country from a distance. The image of Albania is idealized, veiled in nostalgia. These verses are, to this day, the most powerful claim Albanians have to the romanticism of their own land and a kind of patriotism that is mostly unknown to the general population that lives inside the country's borders. It seems that only an exile could write these verses: "Ti Shqipëri, më jep nderë, më jep emrin shqipëtar, (You Albania, make me proud, give me the Albanian name) / Zëmrën ti ma gatove plot me dëshirë dhe me zjarr (My heart was fed by you with such

<sup>13</sup> N. Frashëri, *Bagëti e bujqësi*, 1886, [https://sq.wikibooks.org/wiki/Bagëti\\_e\\_Bujqësi](https://sq.wikibooks.org/wiki/Bagëti_e_Bujqësi). My translation.

<sup>14</sup> N. Frashëri, *Bagëti e bujqësi*.

<sup>15</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *Glimpses*, European Graduate School EGS, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, 2015, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60GdzcKKdwE>.

<sup>16</sup> N. Frashëri, *Bagëti e bujqësi*.

fire and desire).<sup>17</sup> In the case of a country like Albania, patriotism or love of one's country is inspired in and by distance, from the privileged perspective of a glimprer, rather than an observer, the latter largely representing the local population. Indeed, the desire to be in distant lands, where one becomes a glimprer, is Romantic in nature. Such romanticism springs from distance, whether in temporal or spatial terms, as Said confirms: "For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away."<sup>18</sup>

The process of romanticism is similar for the Western traveler to the East, in that temporal and spatial distance are inherent in the former, innately residing within the traveler. It is through this distant lens that he confronts and forms his image of the foreign, "Oriental" land. The following passage, written by British Romantic artist, author, and poet Edward Lear in his journals while on his 1848 stay in the village of Dukat, reveals both the outsider's romantic lens and glimpse:

The huge sides of the mountain are wrapped in pine forests, and the bare snowy peaks above stood forth in the utmost magnificence. The groups of trees are most beautiful and resemble feathery cedars; indeed the whole Pass throughout is a noble scene of mountain beauty<sup>19</sup>.

Lear further adds that Tepelena, in actuality a poor village, is a place "whose ruined palace and walls and silver-toned mosque give a strange air of dreamy romance to this scene, one of the most sublime and simple in Albania"<sup>20</sup>. Though not Albanian, Edward Lear resembles most Albanian Romantic poets, as the latter are "glimpsers" of Albania, as well. The outsider's glimpse, highlighting the country's beauty more than its poverty, was available to local Albanians only in this manner, as these views from outside. Unlike the tourist or displaced poet, for the local, the beauty of the fields is "the cadaver under the eye of the anatomist or the butterfly pinned under glass"<sup>21</sup>, as Didi-Huberman suggests, something to be examined rather than admired, something that no longer lives. In Albania, farmers were traditionally seen as men living in poverty rather than privileged individuals. Rather than bucolic beauty, what Albanians see in the country's vast fields is most likely a lack of progress. Spectacular nature and fresh food markets are found around the corner, the lack of distance diminishing the individual's ability to romanticize them. Traditionally, these have been underappreciated and unnoticed by the local population while outsiders have historically swept in to salvage, as it were, and, at times, glorify the country's assets.

The only Albanian poet who treated the country's poor conditions truthfully in his poetry was Albania's first modern poet Migjeni (Millosh Gjergj Nikolla). In contrast to the patriotic-romantic legacy the exiled poet Frashëri had left behind, Migjeni's

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*, 1978, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> R. Elsie, *Albania in the Painting of Edward Lear*, 1848.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *Glimpses*, 2015.

revolutionary *Vargjet e Lira (Free Verse)*, composed between 1933 and 1935, revealed Albania's reality as recounted from deep within the village, from a highly educated and erudite young man. Migjeni was a privileged Albanian, born in Shkodra, the most culturally-developed city in Albania. He completed his studies in Montenegro and, was thus, exposed to much of the world's literature, unavailable to Albanians at the time. In his introduction to Migjeni's *Free Verse*, Robert Elsie summarizes the profound significance Migjeni's appearance had on Albanian literature and the subsequent image of the country:

Albanian literature was late in evolving. Indeed, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that a national literature consolidated in this Balkan nation struggling for freedom from a decaying Ottoman Empire. The spirit of romantic nationalism characteristic of nineteenth-century Albanian literature lingered on in the country even after it achieved independence in 1912. Indeed, the genre survived unscathed up until the 1930s, at a time when the rest of Europe had forgotten its existence. It was a young teacher from the northern Albanian town of Shkodra who finally cast the lofty traditions of national culture aside and altered the course of Albanian literature. With Migjeni, contemporary Albanian poetry begins its course<sup>22</sup>.

Migjeni was the first poet to portray Albania as it could be observed only from a very close distance, lending the image of the country the realism it had historically lacked. Migjeni's poetry chronicled the poor condition in the country not only to expose the truth but to challenge the tradition of lofty, patriotic tales, sung from distant shores, and to bring Albanian poetry both to the present moment and to earth. Elsie explains that while "previous generations of poets had sung the beauties of the Albanian mountains and the sacred traditions of the nation," Migjeni "now opened his eyes to the harsh realities of life, to the appalling level of misery, disease and poverty he discovered all around him."<sup>23</sup> His long *Poema e mjerimit (Poem of poverty)* depicts the consequences of Albanians' destitute existence throughout the centuries:

Kafshatë që s' kapërdihet âsht, or vlla, mjerimi, / Poverty, brothers, is a mouthful that's hard to swallow,  
Kafshatë që të mbetë në fyt edhe të zë trishtim / A bite that sticks in your throat and leaves you in sorrow,  
Kur shef ftyra të zbeta edhe sy të jeshilta / When you watch the pale faces and rheumy eyes  
Që të shikojnë si hije dhe shtrijnë duert' e mpîta / Observing you like ghosts and holding out thin hands;

[...]

Mjerimi ka vulën e vet të shëmtueme, / Poverty carries its own vile imprint,  
Âsht e neveritshme, e keqe, e turpshme, / It is hideous, repulsive, disgusting

<sup>22</sup> R. Elsie, "Introduction". In: *Migjeni Free Verse*, Peja 2001, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

Balli që e ká, syt që e shprehin, / The brow that bears it, the eyes that express it,  
Buzët që më kot mundohen ta mfshehin – / The lips that try in vain to hide it<sup>24</sup>

Migjeni touches on the monstrous element of the destitute environment at the time, a kind of poverty of body and spirit, inherited from one generation to the next, which renders humans inhuman:

Mjerimi gjithashtu lén dhe në trashigim/ Poverty leaves a heritage as well,  
– Jo veç nepër banka dhe në gjâ të patundshme, / Not cash in the bank or  
property you can sell,  
Por eshtnat e shtrembta e në gjoks ndoj dhimbë, / But distorted bones and  
pains in the chest,  
Mund që të lén kujtim ditën e dikurshme / Perhaps leaves the memory of  
a by-gone day  
Kur pullaz' i shtëpis u shemb edhe rá / When the roof of the house fell into  
pieces  
Nga kalbsin' e kohës, nga pesha e qiellit, / By the decay of time, and the we-  
ight of the sky<sup>25</sup>.

Migjeni introduces his perspective on the consequent loss of identity in such conditions: “Edhe shuhet ûja, dhe fashitet etja (And in unbridled lust the thirst is quenched), / N’epshin kapërthyes, kur mbytet vetvetja<sup>26</sup>. (The craving stilled, and self-consciousness lost.)”<sup>27</sup>. Migjeni’s premature death from tuberculosis in 1938, at the age of twenty-seven, brought an unfortunate halt to both a realistic perspective of the county and to the rise of a modern poetry in Albania. It was not only Migjeni’s death that attributed to this loss but also the beginning of Communism in the country, following the second World War. Migjeni’s literature was “soon to be nipped in the bud. Indeed, the very year of the publication of ‘Free Verse’ saw the victory of Stalinism in Albania and the proclamation of the People’s Republic”, explains Elsie<sup>28</sup>. Because of the verses’ un-romantic content, the poet’s modernist style as well as the dominating voice of the individual present in Migjeni’s poetry, the latter was considered unpatriotic and objectionable and silenced throughout the Communist period in the country. This caused yet another long period of regress in Albanian literature.

During the Communist period, as part of the state’s agenda, the village was brought to the forefront in order to be glorified, despite its poor conditions. The privileged citizens of Albania’s capital were sent to villages as a way of equally distributing the nation’s population and its human resources but also to support the construction of the new Socialist hero: “in particolare viene esaltata la figura eroica dell’uomo albanese che perde le caratteristiche del guerriero per assumere quella del lavoratore.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Migjeni, *Migjeni Free Verse*, trans. R. Elsie, Peja 2001, p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> A more accurate translation of these verses is “when the self is drowned” or “stifled.”

<sup>27</sup> Migjeni, *Migjeni Free Verse*, pp. 36–39.

<sup>28</sup> R. Elsie, *Introduction*, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> L. Toppan, “Gëzim Hajdari (1957–), il poeta dell’esilio.” *Altritaliani.net*, 2009, [https://altritaliani.net/wp-content/uploads/pdf\\_Conf\\_Laura\\_su\\_Hajdari\\_per\\_Paris.pdf](https://altritaliani.net/wp-content/uploads/pdf_Conf_Laura_su_Hajdari_per_Paris.pdf), p. 1.

Literature was reserved only for a privileged few and discouraged for most, while people were encouraged to become workers. For those who had only recently begun living in a developing city, the transfer to the villages represented a severe kind of punishment, a much too premature return to the rural life they had happily relinquished. As such, in many ways, the Communist period was the last act in the removal of any traces of genuine romanticism that may have organically grown among Albanian poets. Love for the countryside was instilled by a dictatorship and the population's "positive" response was mainly due to fear and the country's extreme isolation as well as a result of the significant propaganda of the time, the latter meant to instill an unwavering sense of patriotism among the population. Albanian poets suffered to find liberty of expression during the Communist period in the country. Following the citizens' dislocation in villages, which included the poets, the first sign of the socialist regime's descent into a dictatorship, and the imminent literary catastrophe, occurred in 1961, with the country's official rupture with the Soviet Union: "nel '61 la rottura dei rapporti politici con l'Unione Sovietica dà avvio ad un acceso dibattito in campo letterario tra coloro che desiderano mantenere la tradizione letteraria socialista e coloro che auspicano ad un rinnovamento stilistico e tematico. Partigiani di questa seconda via sono gli scrittori Ismail Kadare, Dritëro Agolli e Fatos Arapi: viene adottato il verso libero, legato alla spontaneità del discorso orale"<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, it is the Albanian poetry written during Communism that most clearly reveals the interrupted rise of romanticism in the country, something which was neither truly inherited nor passed on to the next generation of poets. In his poem "Përse mendohen këto male" (What are these mountains thinking about), written in 1964, Ismail Kadare, Albania's most prominent contemporary writer and poet, explains the distinctly unromantic condition and position of an Albanian poet living in Albania at the time as compared to the romanticism of exiles, survivors, glimpsers, those who positioned themselves well in the world and were sufficiently privileged to see beauty in ruins:

And there were poets  
 Poised on hand carved furniture  
 From your forests  
 Who, inspired by you,  
 Wrote of varnished furniture  
 And of nightingales  
 ...

They forgot  
 that in your forests,  
 From whence the furniture came,  
 There were many wolves  
 And few nightingales<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> L. Toppan, *Gëzim Hajdari*, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> I. Kadare, *What are these mountains thinking about*. In: *An Elusive Eagle Soars: Anthology of Modern Albanian Poetry*, trans. R. Elsie, London 1993, pp. 89–90.



A less fervent reaction, perhaps, than that of Migjeni to the false romanticism of Albania, Kadare, nevertheless ensures that he confirms the historical propaganda with his own seal of disapproval. Dritëro Agolli, a poet whose poems were mostly written during Communism, addresses the forced romanticism of the countryside encouraged by the regime while also apologizing to future poets for his generation's lack of romanticism, in his poem of 1971, "Dy fjalë poetëve që vijnë" (A Couple of Words for Poets to Come):

Ne s'kemi patur aq kohë të shkruanim për dashurinë./ We had no time to write of love.  
 Megjithëse kemi qenë dashnorë të marrë./ Though we were impetuous lovers.  
 Vendi kërkonte këngë për lirinë./ The country needed songs of freedom.  
 Vendi kërkonte këngë për bukën që piqej në arë./ The country needed songs of grain ripening in the fields.  
 Vendi kërkonte nga ne poetët e shkretë/ The country demanded of us poor poets  
 Të drejtonim kurset kundër analfabetizmit./ That we teach courses to fight illiteracy  
 Të ngrinin diga në lumenjtë./ That we build dams on the rivers  
 Të ndiznim maleve llambën e socializmit./ That we light the flame of socialism in the mountains  
 ...  
 Ne para jush do ngrihemi të ashpër si asketë./ Compared to you we will look like simple monks  
 Të ngarkuar me kallëza gruri dhe hekura të rëndë./ Laden with grain and heavy iron chains<sup>32</sup>.

Here, Agolli emphasizes a romanticism, subjectivity or sensitivity, of which the poets living in Albania have been historically robbed. This lack of romanticism, a common phenomenon in Albania throughout the years, was merely unearthed as the voice of Albanian poets from within the country became increasingly heard and as they began to write from the perspective of the self: "Could we not at least have written a couple of love poems / Could we not have stammered "Oh my beloved!" / Do not believe we were heartless!"<sup>33</sup>. Agolli concludes his poem. It was this perspective, finally coming from within the country, that clarified the ever-present impossibility of romanticism in Albania. Agolli, along with other poets of the period, inherited the duality of a profound, romantic patriotism along with a sober view of the country's poor conditions. In the 1980s, during the very beginnings of the end of the Communist era in Albania, the local poet's description of the country began revealing additional antiromantic notes:

<sup>32</sup> D. Agolli, *A Couple of Words to Poets to Come*. In: *An Elusive Eagle Soars: Anthology of Modern Albanian Poetry*, trans. R. Elsie, London 1993, p. 55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

Në fshatin tim prej vitesh s'kisha qënë / I hadn't seen my village in years  
 Dhe malli më kish djegur e zhuritur / Its absence had consumed me  
 Atje më dukej hëna tjetër hënë / The moon there seemed another moon  
 Siç thosh dikur Naimi mendjendritur. / As the enlightened Naim once said<sup>34</sup>.

Here, Agolli references Naim Frashëri, in itself the quintessential romantic and patriotic act. Following Naim's footsteps, Agolli also implies that though, or perhaps because, his current position makes the return impossible, the poet is defenseless against home's singular pull. In addition to confirming the inextricable attachment to birthplace, Agolli also reveals the distant glimpse as the necessary ingredient of romanticism. While he resides in the country's capital, his glance is directed toward a romanticized village.

With the fall of Communism in 1991, Albania came out of a long period of complete isolation and opened its borders to local and international travelers. Along with the return of the outsider's glimpse, appeared the first traces of a possible return to Romanticism which, beginning with the 2000s, came mainly from international sources. Specifically, Albania's gradual ascent from an isolated, unknown country to an exotic touristic destination is chronicled by the *New York Times*, the same institution that is partly responsible for creating it. Albania's silence, while the Western media outlets were shaping its identity, recalls Said's "relation between Western writing (and its consequences) and Oriental silence" as "the result of and the sign of the West's great cultural strength, its will to power over the Orient"<sup>35</sup>. The *New York Times*, with its dedicated image-shaping campaign created a demand for Albania, an international sentiment of romanticism, which came to affect the locals, as well. Perhaps not entirely accountable, *The New York Times* is partly responsible for planting the seed of the beginnings of contemporary Romanticism in Albania, almost three centuries following European Romanticism. The American newspaper has trailed the development of Albania throughout the past twenty-five years and, as such, has been crucial in the establishment of the perspective, through which Albania is currently viewed by foreign tourists, Albanian émigrés and, most importantly, Albanian locals themselves. Said sees Orientalism "as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient;"<sup>36</sup> thus, by making Albanians begin to see Albania through the lens of the *New York Times*, they offer the country and its population the opportunity of being legitimized by the West. A survey of the *New York Times* reveals articles, from the period 2004–2006, which attempt to introduce, de-mythicize, and elucidate Albania for its new audience. Like the Orient, Albania's "foreignness can be translated, its meanings decoded, its hostility tamed."<sup>37</sup> The titles of the articles range from "Albania's Unexpected Rewards" (2004) and "Albania's Capital Gets a New Coat" (2005) to "In Albania, a Capital Full of Contradictions" (2006). Their focus is either on the peculiar

<sup>34</sup> Sh. Çuçka, *Dritëro Agolli – simbol epoke*, "Europa" 2014, October 10, <http://europa.com.al/index.php/2014/10/10/dritero-agolli-simbol-epoke/>. My translation.

<sup>35</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 103.

yet fascinating aspects of Albania's capital city or the country's ancient civilization. These articles, responsible for introducing "wild" Albania to the West, deliberately circumvent the topic of landscape and infrastructure. When mentioning landscape and infrastructure, the articles cite the country's dangerous roads – "asphalt perched above ravines or the sea without any barrier whatsoever"<sup>38</sup> – but add that these same "heart-stopping roads open up spectacular mountain scenery and historic sites in the interior"<sup>39</sup>. In other words, the articles attempt to take away the notion of "wilder-ness" associated with Albania by instead confirming its civilization and beauty. Most articles describe Tirana as a Westerner would imagine Havana, raw and poor yet still cosmopolitan and wild: "A cocktail at Flex could feel like the height of cosmopolitan cool — until you had to contend with adorable but depressing street kids who would kiss your arm in hopes of a 50-lek coin"<sup>40</sup>. Here, Albania is once again viewed as Said's Orient: "The Orient is watched, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached,"<sup>41</sup> always glimpsing rather than truly observing. "The Orient," Said continues, "becomes a living tableau of queerness."<sup>42</sup> It is precisely this queerness that is carefully preserved while being translated.

Most significantly, what these articles reveal is the lack of romanticism from the local Albanian population: "Western beers are preferred over Tirana Pils (even though the latter is delicious and cheaper). Italian food is more available than native Albanian dishes"<sup>43</sup>. Clearly, while the *New York Times* works towards the demystification of the "barbarian" country, Albanians themselves remain unaware of its gifts. Yet, Said confirms that it is not important that the "Oriental" country understands itself. As long as the Western source succeeds in establishing the clear distinctions between "us" and "them," the process of Orientalism flows naturally. "Imaginative geography of the «our land-barbarian land» variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for «us» to set up these boundaries in our own minds; «they» become «they» accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from «ours,»"<sup>44</sup> writes Said on this phenomenon. Said also remarks on the widespread mentality that without the Orientalist's help and support, the Orient simply cannot be accepted into Western society. Sacy, writes Said, "always made it plain why the «Orient» on its own could not survive a European's taste, intelligence, or patience. Sacy defended the utility and interest of such things as Arabic poetry, but what he was really saying was that Arabic poetry had to be properly transformed by the Orientalist before it could begin to be appreciated."<sup>45</sup> It is this

<sup>38</sup> W. Schroeder, *Albania's Unexpected Rewards*, May 2, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Matt Gross, *In Albania, a Capital Full of Contradictions*, July 9, 2006 .

<sup>41</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism...*, p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> W. Schroeder, *Albania's Unexpected Rewards*, May 2, 2004.

<sup>44</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism...*, p. 54.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

same transformation that the *New York Times* afforded Albania with their continuous image-building campaign.

Articles from the period of 2011–2014, further testify to the continuation of this campaign, which, during these years, exhibits a clear Romantic spin. “On the Albanian Riviera, a Frugal Paradise” (2011) is an article that can only be described as Romantic in its content: “Just past the tiny village of Ilias, on the two-lane highway that weaves through the Ceraunian Mountains, a sign pointing down a narrow road indicated a monastery about two kilometers on”<sup>46</sup> begins the long tale of discovering this beautiful land. The article continues with rich descriptions of the “inaccessible” and “exclusive” land, its “idyllic pebbly beach” and the “deep blue Ionian sea”<sup>47</sup>. Similarly, in 2011, the internationally-influential travel website *Lonely Planet* followed its decision to make Albania its top destination<sup>48</sup> with a similarly romanticized description of the country<sup>49</sup>. In 2013, the *New York Times* continued by introducing the trendy hiking aspect of Albania in “Hiking Beyond Borders in the Balkans.” While outdoor and hiking travel agencies had emerged in Albania starting from the 2000’s<sup>50</sup>, they were solely known to an exclusive group of the local population. Following this article, foreign and local outdoor tourism in Albania flourished. The journalist writes of an atmosphere that has him convinced he “has traveled back in time”<sup>51</sup>. This article also reveals the absorption of the West’s view of Albania by Albanians and, with it, traces of the beginning of the return to Romanticism in the country. Echoing the words of Naim Frashëri and the *New York Times* articles, Kela Qendro, an Albanian woman working for a small tourism company tells the journalist, “If you want luxury, sorry, go to Paris or New York. You come here to see the real stuff. The shepherd. The old woman picking pomegranates. You go up to villagers and they will invite you inside their home for the joy of meeting you”<sup>52</sup>. Though this may reflect reality, it is the westernized interpretation that is most striking here. Prior to the West’s campaign of promoting Albania, no Albanian would have phrased such descriptions thusly and the tinges of pride, found in this statement, would be entirely absent. Qendro’s words reveal only the romantic side of poverty, exposing a borrowed perspective as well as a borrowed language. The Orient, according to Said, is not “as it is, but the Orient as it has been Orientalized”<sup>53</sup>. The West’s romantic Albania began to have more concrete

<sup>46</sup> S. Kugel, *On the Albanian Riviera, a Frugal Paradise*, July 10, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> *Lonely Planet’s Top Countries for 2011*, Lonely Planet, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> “Picture a place where rulers have names like King Zog, Enver Hoxha and Bamir Topi. Set the scene with coastal cliffs, snow-capped mountains and jungle-wrapped ruins. Cast some female ‘sworn virgins’ to fill the roles of men who have been lost in ancient blood feuds. Let the spoken dialects be known as Tosk and Gheg. Make it that daily life is governed by a code of conduct with 1262 instructions including 38 on hospitality towards guests. It may seem like you’ve just conjured a medieval fantasy novel rather than an up-and-coming travel destination, but this is Albania in all its epic, eclectic glory.”

<sup>50</sup> Outdoor Albania and Auron Expeditions are a few of the oldest companies, opening as early as 1992 but only gaining popularity in a large scale in the last decade.

<sup>51</sup> T. Neville, *Hiking Beyond Borders in the Balkans*, March 29, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism...*, p. 104.

consequences, as well. "A lot of locals are moving back to the area, which is very encouraging," confirmed a British research fellow on the rural areas of the country. The year 2013 saw a surge of international travel blogs describing travels in Albania in strictly Romantic terms with one particular article aptly entitled "Albania in Byron's footsteps," confirming Albania as one of the selected countries of modern Romanticism. Echoing Frashëri's perspective on the natural beauty of the land, the journalist writes:

In the north you can wander for days between villages under towering limestone peaks. Some of the longest beaches of the Adriatic twinkle along its ragged coast. Sylvan trails climb to cool lakes under the gaze of vultures and wolves, and almost no one hikes on them for the simple reason that most people have no idea they exist. So while man's constructs have done their best to ruin Albania, the country's untamed nature still inspires plenty of awe. If that sounds a bit Romantic, then perhaps we were on the right trail after all.

Finally, in 2014, the *New York Times* placed the Southern Albanian Coast 4<sup>th</sup> in a list of places to visit in 2014<sup>54</sup>. The article was shared by thousands of Albanians as well as the national media. Following this event, hundreds of international blogs<sup>55</sup> emerged, followed by a noticeable growth of images of the Albanian landscape posted not only by foreigners but by Albanians, as well. And while some of the recent blogs claim that "Albanians would refuse to believe their country could be a tourist destination"<sup>56</sup>, this may be mainly due to what Albanians still assume the West thinks of the country rather than the locals' lack of appreciation for their country. Once the West legitimized Albania's beauty and provided a status worthy of romanticism, the locals' photographs of rural landscapes flooded social media, revealing traces of a borrowed "glimpse." On photographic images, Didi-Huberman suggests that they may be "the vehicle of something like a non-knowledge. But non-knowledge is not to knowledge what total darkness would be to full light. Non-knowledge is imagined, thought and written. It thus becomes something other than the nothing of simple ignorance or obscurity." Similarly, the images of Albania transmitted by Albanians reveal a stage between something and nothing, between knowledge and ignorance. In this particular case, the images may reveal the stage between an original perspective and a borrowed one, the line between which remains elusive. This process, however, is the simplest consequence of Orientalism: "the paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an «Arab» of the sort put out by Hollywood is but the simplest result"<sup>57</sup> of Orientalism. In Albania's case, this appropriation of the Western viewpoint may have spurred a return of Romanticism, along with the patriotism, nostalgia, and subjectivity that are associated with the movement.

<sup>54</sup> 52 Places to Go in 2014, "The New York Times", 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Several travel blogs referencing Albania: <http://www.adventurouskate.com/whats-it-like-to-travel-in-albania/>; <https://eternalarrival.com/travel-blog/europe/albania/75-reasons-travel-albania-asap/>; <https://rediscoveralbania.wordpress.com/>; <http://yomadic.com/tourism-albania/>; <https://albanianblogger.com/2017/05/07/visit-albania-but-how/>; <http://floatingmyboat.com/albania/>.

<sup>56</sup> K. McCulley, *What's It Like to Travel in Albania?*, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism...*, p. 325.

In conclusion, Albania has been under Ottoman rule for five centuries, occupied for almost the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and isolated under the strictest Communism in Europe for the subsequent half. As such, Albanians are a population of a conflicted identity, particularly susceptible to influential international cultures. As mentioned above, two of the most prominent figures of Albanian Romanticism and Renaissance are only technically Albanian and greatly influenced from other cultures. Nowadays, a similar process is occurring wherein the culture of outside glimpsers is instilling Romanticism in the local Albanian population, who would not be otherwise inclined to romanticize their countryside. Indeed, until only decades ago, the majority of the local population saw the city as the escape from the primitive countryside and wilderness. Currently, however, the decades-long coverage and image-shaping by international media coupled with the rapid industrial development that the country is experiencing, has contributed to a noteworthy transformation in the mentality of the country. A return of patriotism, of appreciation and gratitude for one's country, along with the very personal experiencing of the bucolic havens it offers are some of these symptoms of the belated Romanticism in Albania. Perhaps, as they have done historically, the Albanian population is absorbing and reinforcing the image offered them from the West. Social media chronicles of Albanians exploring their own land are the most ubiquitous form of what may be termed as "borrowed" Romanticism. By adopting this outsider's perspective, Albanians have become glimpsers and can, thus, capture the beauty of their own land, echoing the Romanticism of Naim Frashëri. Yet, it can also be argued that there never was a Romantic movement in Albania and that this current appreciation of the country, its landscape and nature, represents the very first stages of the rise of Romanticism, centuries following that of Europe. Indeed, the country began experiencing industrialism and urban sprawl only in the last decades, creating the necessary pre-cursor to Romanticism, an environment that may naturally lead one to leave the city, be in nature, and focus on the condition of the self. It remains to be seen whether this Romanticism will be reflected in local art and literature. These early stages should, perhaps, come to a natural maturation and reflect the population's increasingly authentic perspective.

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## Streszczenie

Wersety albańskiego poety narodowego Naima Frashëri *Stada i pastwiska* zostały napisane w 1886 r. Bohaterami są emigranci tęskniący za swoją ziemią: *O, góry Albanii, wy wysokie drzewa / Łąki szerokie pełne kwiatów / Jesteś ze mną dzień i noc*. Ten opis odcisnął się w pamięci każdego Albańczyka XXI wieku, chociaż został napisany pod koniec XIX wieku. Frashëri jest uważany za poetę romantycznego w Albanii, ale jego poezja odzwierciedla elementy europejskiego romantyzmu. Jednak to, czy romantyzm kiedykolwiek dotarł do Albanii, pozostaje wątpliwe. Od czasu dziewiętnastowiecznego wiersza Frashëriego poezja albańska odzwierciedla perspektywę spojrzenia ludności, która utraciła zdolność widzenia lub doceniania otaczającej ją idyllicznej wsi. Wygląda na to, że romantyzm rodzi się z dystansu czasowego i geograficznego. Frashëri, emigrant przez większość swojego życia, był doskonale przygotowany do zobaczenia piękna Albanii. Współczesny francuski filozof, Georges Didi-Huberman, nazywa to nostalgiczne, odległe spojrzenie *spojrzeniem, które zamiast uważnej obserwacji pozwala na pojawienie się piękna. Rzut oka to widzenie tylko przełotne*, a spojrzenie nostalgiczne to sposób *zobaczenia nie tak dobrze, jak wtedy, gdy to, co ma być obserwowane, staje się przedmiotem obserwacji*. Albańska poezja z okresu komunizmu, choć powściągliwie tworzona przez poetów z powodu cenzury przez rząd, ukazywała kraj, który stanowił przedmiot rozbioru, a nie pragnienia. Jednak w dzisiejszych czasach, gdy Albania jest kształtowana, projektowana i podawana miejscowym przez dyskurs międzynarodowych mediów, takich jak „The New York Times”, miejscowi znów przyjmują perspektywę outsiderów, która umożliwia dostrzeżenie i tym samym uchwycenie piękna ich własnej

ziemi, co pozwala powrócić zapomnianemu romantyzmowi lub nawet umożliwia powstanie romantyzmu, którego nigdy nie było.

### Summary

The verses of the Albanian national poet Naim Frashëri's poem *Herds and Pastures*, written in 1886, are ones of an émigré longing for his land: *O, mountains of Albania, you trees of towering height / Meadows broad full of flowers / You're with me day and night*. Yet, they are imprinted in the memory of every Albanian of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Frashëri is considered a Romantic poet in Albania, his poetry echoing elements of the European Romanticism. However, whether Romanticism ever reached Albania remains questionable. However, since Frashëri's 19<sup>th</sup> century poem, Albanian poetry reflects a population that have lost its ability to see or value the idyllic countryside surrounding it. Romanticism, it seems, can be born of temporal and geographical distance. Frashëri, an émigré for most of his life, was perfectly positioned to see the beauty of Albania. Contemporary French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman refers to this nostalgic, distant gaze as "the glimpse," which, rather than careful observation, allows beauty to appear. "To glimpse is to see only in passing, he suggests, a way of seeing a little less well, not as well as when the thing to be seen has become an object of observation." Albanian poetry from the Communist period, though both carefully written by the poets and censored by the government, reveals a country that was beginning to be the object of dissection, rather than an object of longing. In contemporary times, however, with an Albania that is shaped, packaged and served to locals by international media like "The New York Times", locals are once again adopting the necessary outsider's perspective, finally beginning to glimpse and, thus, capture the beauty of their own land, allowing a forgotten romanticism to make its slow return to the country or the rise of the Romanticism that never was.

### Biography

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