

# 'Go Back to Homer's Verse': *Iliads* of revolution and *Odysseys* of exile in Albanian Poetry

Adam J. Goldwyn\*

*During the Albanian independence movement (1887–1913), Albanian nationalists sought to forge a new European identity to contrast with their former Ottoman one. The Homeric epics, as canonical Western texts that also reflected an East–West (metaphorically, in this case, Ottoman–European) conflict, thus became a locus for constructing this new national identity. As part of this Europeanizing nationalist project, Naim Frashëri published the first translation of the Iliad into Albanian, while Gjergj Fishta published The Highland Lute, an epic which cast Albanian revolutionaries as Homeric heroes. The Homeric epics retained this association with revolution, and were thus reconfigured in subsequent generations by dissident poets under Communist dictatorships in Albania and Kosovo (then Yugoslavia). The exiled poet Bardhyl Londo compared Albania to Ithaca, thus making him a wandering Odysseus and the dictator Enver Hoxha and his circle the suitors wasting the country. At the same time, the political prisoner Visar Zhiti compared himself to Homer, poor and oppressed. Valentina Saraçini's 'Antimythic' poems, by contrast, offer a twenty-first century vision better suited to a post-revolutionary democratic Albania: Saraçini suggests that to overcome Albania's violent past, Albanians must also abandon the martial ideology that celebrated fratricidal murderers as revolutionary national heroes.*

In 1887, a group of Albanian intellectuals and political leaders sought to capitalize on the wave of nationalist sentiment sweeping Europe and the increasingly sclerotic Ottoman Empire's inability to maintain its centuries-long control over its Balkan territories. In plotting their independence movement, the members of the early nationalist movement realized that before they could achieve political independence, they had to have ideological independence as well, that is, they had to cultivate an Albanian national identity that could unite Albanians living in the Balkans as well as those in the large diaspora communities spread across the Mediterranean from Istanbul, Beirut, and Alexandria, to Athens and Rome. Though this transformation was primarily enacted on the political level with the establishment of European political practices and institutions, cultural production also played a significant role, and though by no means the only, or even major, locus for Albanian revolutionary writing, the Homeric epics and myths about the Trojan War, as both

\*Correspondence: Department of English, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND, USA 58108. adam.goldwyn@ndsu.edu

canonical Western texts and as narratives of East–West (inevitably read as Ottoman–European) conflict, helped shaped this new ideology.

During the period of the Albanian national awakening, the Rilindja Kombëtare, from the first important gathering of independence-minded nationalists at the League of Prizren<sup>1</sup> in 1887 to the Albanian declaration of independence in 1913, the Homeric epics furthered the revolutionary cause by shaping an anti-Ottoman and pro-European national identity in two ways. First, the association with the canonical texts of western European identity helped convince Albanians that they were not natural subjects of the Ottoman Empire, but were rather an occupied western European nation. Second, they gave Albanians a new mythology, based in the western tradition, whose wars and heroes could be reimagined as models of the Albanians themselves. Because of their significance to the early nationalists, the Homeric epics became, in the Albanian imaginary, an important locus for revolutionary aspirations in the ensuing century. In subsequent generations, poets returned to the Homeric epics when calling for revolutions of their own: first against the Albanian Communists who ruled the country from 1944–91, and then again in the struggle against the Serbian nationalists during the Kosovo War of 1999. The reception of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Albania and Kosovo demonstrates the continuing resonance of the Trojan War as a literary *topos* for shaping Albanian revolutionary ideology.

### The Trojan war and the Albanian national awakening (1878–1913)<sup>2</sup>

The first translation of the *Iliad* into Albanian was produced in 1896 by Naim Frashëri, now considered the national poet of Albania.<sup>3</sup> Naim was the middle of three brothers, all of whom became influential leaders of the early independence movement.<sup>4</sup> In the early 1860s, Naim enrolled in Zosimaia School, one of the best

1 For a history of the events leading up to the League of Prizren, its roots and legacy, see the opening chapters of Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer (2002), Skendi (1953) and Blumi (2011). The political demands of the League are discussed in Gawrych (2006: 47) and Elsie (1995: 228). For a more recent perspective on the activities of the league in Kosovo, see Malcolm (1999: 217–38).

2 Elsie (1995: 209–340) contains an in-depth analysis of the relationship of literature and nationalism during the period.

3 *Ibid.*, 236. For Homer's influence on Frashëri's work more generally, see Dhima (2013).

4 For brief biographies of the Frashëri brothers and a history of their involvement in the independence movement, as well as their work as diplomats, parliamentarians, and civil servants for the Ottoman Empire, see Elsie (1995: 226–48), esp. 229–41 for Naim. Before joining the Albanian revolutionary nationalist movement, the brothers were thus deeply involved in Ottoman politics and, as polyglot authors, literature. Naim, for instance, published works in Turkish, Greek, Persian, and Albanian. The most significant of these for the purposes of the present article is his translation into Turkish of the first book of the *Iliad* in 1886, ten years before the translation into Albanian. Such timing is consistent with the views of Blumi (2011: 84–86) and Goldwyn (2016) that the early Albanian

Greek language schools in the Ottoman Empire, where he was immersed both in Classical Greek and Latin literature and in the radical nationalist politics (Greek and Albanian) for which the school was famous.<sup>5</sup> Naim’s translation of the *Iliad* can be seen, therefore, not as simply a philological project, but one intimately tied up with the nationalist movement: having an *Iliad* in one’s own language served as a marker of cultural aspiration towards a European national identity. In Albania, the poem had added resonance as an epic about a loose alliance of Balkan warriors fighting against an army made up of people from what were, during Naim’s lifetime, Ottoman controlled lands.<sup>6</sup> The example of the modern Greeks, who had themselves fought a revolution against the Ottomans earlier in the century and were still engaged in territorial conflict, must have weighed in Naim’s decision to produce the translation. In cultivating the association between Albanians and Achaeans, moreover, Naim was staking a claim to Albania’s inclusion in Europe based on a shared literary canon, with the *Iliad* featuring prominently, while also fostering the genealogical connection to Trojan refugees that had played such a large part in the legitimizing of European power since Virgil. The Albanians, for instance, also referred to themselves by their ancient names, Dardanians and Illyrians, named after Dardanos the king of Troy and ancestor of Priam and Aeneas, or Illyrius, the son of the Cyclops Polyphemos.<sup>7</sup>

Naim Frashëri’s *Iliad* inspired Gjergj Fishta (who had also translated Book 5 of the *Iliad*) to write the *Highland Lute* (either *Lahuta e Malsisë* or *Lahuta e Malcís*), an epic which he hoped would do for Albania what he thought Homer’s epic had done for Greece: unify a loosely affiliated groups of people into a single nation.<sup>8</sup> The *Highland Lute* was published in pieces between 1902 and 1909, a crucial decade in Albanian history: Albania formally declared independence in 1912, and the *Highland Lute* thus served as a prestigious work meant to announce the maturity and independence of the Albanian nation through a virtuoso display of Albanian letters.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore no coincidence that Fishta came to be referred to as ‘the Albanian

nationalists, even after the League of Prizren, remained loyal to the Ottomans, hoping to realize the goals of the *Tanizmat* period for more autonomy within the Empire. It was only after it became clear that this was not a viable course that they turned to independence.

5 Ismail Qemali, who declared Albanian independence in 1913 and was the country’s first prime minister, attended the school just before the Frashëris.

6 As part of this project, Naim also published Bucolics and Georgics [Baqeti e Bujqesia] in imitation of Virgil; Naim’s poems, however, give a nationalist twist to the ancient genre by contrasting the miseries of life in Istanbul with the wonders of the Albanian countryside, for which see Elsie (1995: 231–32).

7 Appian *Rom. Hist.* 10. 2.

8 For Fishta’s life and work, see the introduction to Fishta (2005) and Elsie (1995: 386–420).

9 It is a widely accepted truism in Albania, though I have been unable to verify it, that *The Highland Lute* contains more unique words than Shakespeare’s oeuvre.

Homer’;<sup>10</sup> he understood (as had Virgil two millennia before), that while having an *Iliad* translated into one’s own language was an important cultural marker, having an original work in one’s own language which had an epic scope on par with those of the Homeric epics was even more so.

Written in trochaic octameter, the meter of heroic Albanian oral folk poetry,<sup>11</sup> and divided into thirty canti, the *Highland Lute* echoes the *Iliad* in ways formal and thematic. Written in the northern Gheg dialect used in Fishta’s native city of Shkodër, the *Highland Lute* also intervenes indirectly in debates about how to develop and codify a standardized modern Albanian across the various regional dialects and alphabets used in the linguistically diverse regions of modern-day Albania and Kosovo and in the large diaspora communities, where Latin, Greek, Farsi, and Arabic scripts were used depending on the education and geographical situation of the writer. Indeed, Fishta chaired the Congress of Monastir of 1908, which established the use of Latin characters in standard modern Albanian (Albania and Kosovo still celebrate ‘Alphabet Day’ on November 22 to commemorate the Congress). With the spread of near-universal literacy under the Communist regime and its strict controls on language usage, this standard persisted throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.<sup>12</sup> Fishta’s extensive vocabulary thus also serves as a proof-of-concept for the language reforms he championed while writing the *Highland Lute*.

Like Homer, Fishta tells the story of an often squabbling but always brave and patriotic alliance of aristocratic heroes in a long war against the Ottoman Turks and their allies. Unlike the *Iliad*, however, the *Highland Lute* tells a story still alive in the memories of Fishta’s contemporaries: the Albanian independence movement of the late nineteenth century, including the seminal event of the Albanian national movement, the foundation of the League of Prizren in 1879, which is the subject matter of Canto 9. Though Homeric elements abound throughout the poem, this canto exemplifies the ways Fishta grafts Homeric epic and Albanian history, thus elevating the Albanian independence struggle to Homeric proportions and creating a new set of western-oriented heroes for the national epic. Unlike the *Iliad*, however, the *Highland Lute* is not about the successful siege and conquest of a foreign enemy’s capital city; rather, it is a poem about a revolutionary independence movement.

10 The publication history of the work can be found in Fishta (2005: vii). For Fishta as the Albanian Homer, see Fishta (2005: xv) and Elsie (1995: 386). For his translation of the *Iliad* and the suggestion of the influence of ancient epic on his work, see Elsie (1995: 411).

11 Elsie (1995: 411).

12 Perhaps as a result, literary archaisms are extremely rare; in the cited lines considered in this article, there are only two: ‘zhaurimë’ in Zhiti’s poem (see footnote 73) refers to the noise of an object falling down or to a loud, continuous, deafening noise like that of hitting waves. ‘Kahmot’ in Podrimja’s poem (see footnote 67) does not appear in dictionaries, but its nearest word is ‘kahere’ meaning ‘since a while ago’. As the meaning of ‘mot’ is ‘year’, ‘kahmot’ may refer to ‘since a year/ some years ago’.

Thus, Fishta’s poem marks the start of the *Iliad* as a poem of revolution in the Albanian literary tradition.

Canto 9 opens with easily identifiable Homeric rhetoric: ‘Dawn’s first rays did strike Cukali’,<sup>13</sup> he writes, invoking the Homeric formula of ‘rosy-fingered Dawn’, though adapting it to make it specifically Albanian: Dawn rises over Cukali, a mountain to the west of Prizren, where the heroes are gathered. Fishta then imitates the Homeric invocation of the Muse, again adapting it to an Albanian context: ‘Let us sing, O mountain zana | with a Highland Lute, we’ll tell of | How the elders of Albania | Down in Prizren came together | To deliberate’.<sup>14</sup> Fishta opts not for the epic muse of the Greek tradition, but the *zana*, a type of mythical mountain fairy who appears frequently in the Albanian oral epic tradition, and emphasizes that the song is sung accompanied by the highland lute, the eponymous folk instrument of Albanian oral epic, thus establishing the synthesis of Homeric and Albanian traditions. These lines also set up the main subject of the canto: a war council among the allied commanders, another stock scene from Homeric epic. The opening lines of the canto, then, narrate a scene from Albanian history according to the generic and stylistic conventions of Homeric epic.

As in the *Iliad*, in which Homer often features scenes in which the gods sit on Olympus watching human affairs unfold far below, the debate at the League of Prizren is viewed from the perspective of mythical creatures drawn from the Albanian tradition. Looking down on Prizren from Mount Cukali, the *ora*, another mythical creature of the oral tradition of the Albanian highlands, says she can see the gathered heroes but, since they are so far below, does not recognize them; the *zana* replies:

But I’m getting the impression  
The Achaeans are alive now,  
Those who distant Troy did ravage,  
And the hero who’s their chairman,  
Who is leading their assembly,  
Seems to be a type of *drangue*,<sup>15</sup>  
He who looks like Agamemnon,  
And the other, closer to us,  
With his long drooping whiskers,  
Dangling down upon his shoulders,  
He who declaims loudly, shouting,  
Looks to me like Diomedes.<sup>16</sup>

13 9.1: ‘Shkrepi dielli buzës s’Cukalit’. All citations from the Highland Lute in Albanian are from Fishta 2000. All English is cited from Elsie’s translation (Fishta 2010). This is a line-by-line translation, so the line numbers match in both editions.

14 9.2-6: ‘Eja e t’kdojm, oj Zâna e malit, | Eja e ‘kdojm më Lahutë t’Malcís, | Si atà Krenët e Shqyptaris |Në prizrend na janë bashkue | Per me folë’.

15 Another mythical Albanian winged hero who fights against Albania’s enemies, often used as an epithet for Albanian heroes in the epic.

16 9.121-132: ‘Veç, mbas giaset, kish’ me thânë, | Se ata Akejt na kênkan njallun |

The *zana* thus takes on the role of Helen in the teichoscopia, identifying the Homeric heroes to Priam as they stand upon the wall looking out upon the Greek army gathered in the plain below.

But Fishta is not satisfied with a simple comparison of Albanian heroes with Achaean ones. Upon hearing the *zana*'s description, the *ora* disagrees:

Those down there are no Achaeans,  
Not Achaeans or Dardanians,  
Neither giants nor Cyclopes,  
But the leaders of Albania

[...]

That one there, that type of *drangue*  
Who resembles Agamemnon,  
He's no other, dearest maiden,  
Than the hero Ali Pasha

[...]

And the other one, closer to us,  
With his two long whiskers wilting  
That now brush against his neighbours,  
No, he isn't Diomedes,  
But the bayraktar of Shkreli.<sup>17</sup>

The *ora* rejects the Homeric vision, suggesting that there is no need for comparison to Homeric heroes to make those of Albania great; indeed, the comparison to Homeric heroes diminishes the stature of the Albanian ones. This passage is then followed by a long catalogue and description of the assembled heroes. The *Highland Lute* elevates the leaders of the Albanian independence movement to Homeric stature; through direct comparison, moreover, he suggests that they are even greater. Fishta thus creates a new set of epic heroes for Albania based on a Homeric model. This choice of heroes, moreover, reflects the political context in which Fishta was writing and the political purpose he hoped his work would serve: during a period of revolutionary aspirations, Fishta holds up revolutionaries as the heroic ideal.

Indeed, the first speaker at the debate, none other than Naim's brother Abdyl Frashëri, expounds on the length and glory of Albanian history: 'Long before the

Qi t' largë Trojen paten kallun: | Pse edh' aj trimi n' krye te vendit, | Qi po dán në log t' kuvendit | Porsi t' isht' një rod drangonit, | Fort m' i giaka Agamemnonit; | Si p'r at tjetrin, pak pertej, | Me atà dy mustakë te mdhej, | Krah e m'krah qi i paska lshue, | E qi folka si tu ulrue, | Kish' me thànë se àsht Diomedi'.

17 9.135-38, 149-52, 157-61: 'Se atà Akej, besa, nuk janë, | S' janë Akej as s' janë Dardàj, | As vigaj, as katalláj; | Por janë Krenët e Shqyptaris, | [...] | Porsi t' isht' një rod drangonit | E qi i giaka Agamemnonit, | Aj nuk àsht mori lum vasha, | Tjeterkush veç se Ali Pasha, | [...] | E një tjetri, mà pertej, | Me ata dy mustakë te mdhej | Me i prekë m' shoq qi ka brì vedi, | Aj nuk àsht, jo, Dijomedi, | Por àsht Bajraktari i Shkrelit'.

grey-skinned she-wolf | Left the Capitoline forests | to Take Romulus to suckle, | After Troy had been demolished’,<sup>18</sup> he says, ‘Our forefathers, the Pelasgians, | grazed their herds on fields and meadows’.<sup>19</sup> The Albanians thus precede the more famed civilizations of Troy, ancient Greece, and Rome: ‘From the Caucasus to Dover’s | Cliff’s in Albion perfidious, | Nowhere is an older people | Than the famed race of Albanians’.<sup>20</sup> As a nationalist speaker, Fishta’s Frashëri asserts the Europeanness of Albania; indeed, he suggests that Albania is the oldest civilization in Europe, indeed, the founder of European civilization: ‘Here were done great deeds for Europe, | Ancient feats which forged their start here’,<sup>21</sup> he says, stressing Albania’s importance to the Continent, ‘Here among our cliffs and mountains, | Zeus was first to tame the planet | And, with augurs from Dodona, | Freed mankind of savage instincts’.<sup>22</sup> Frashëri draws upon the Homeric epics to identify his people with the Pelasgians, who, in the catalogue of ships, are said to reside in the Thracian plain (*Il.* 2.840-43) that now comprises modern day Albania and Northern Greece (which the Albanians call Çameria and which, in Frashëri and Fishta’s time before the national boundaries were fixed, they hoped to claim as part of the new nation). Frashëri’s association of the Albanians with the oracle of Dodona is a reference to *Iliad* 16.233-35, and the allusion is meant to prove that not only did the Albanians fight alongside the Greeks, they were the older culture. Albania, in his telling, is thus imagined as the oldest civilization in Europe. Civilization itself, he suggests, spread from Albania (via the oracle at Dodona) to the rest of Europe. According to Frashëri, Albania is not just a part of Europe, it is Europe’s centre and originator. Having established Albania’s claim to a national identity based on its ancient ties to Europe, Frashëri closes his speech with a rousing call to revolution in order to free themselves from their non-European oppressors: the Ottomans and the Slavs.

Fishta and Naim Frashëri, therefore, represent two literary approaches to the nationalist attempt to anchor the values of a new anti-Ottoman pro-European national identity: Frashëri through importing the canonical tale of westerners from the Balkans fighting easterners from Turkey; Fishta by allusively re-casting the current struggle as analogous to, even greater than, the ancient one.<sup>23</sup> Fishta thus continues Naim’s project of using the *Iliad* to further the Albanian claim to a

18 9.250: ‘Enë breshtet t’ Kapitolit | Dalë nuk kisht’e murrhtë ulkoja, | Per me i dhanun sisë Romólit, | Mbasí shâmë kje per dhé Troja’.

19 9.259-60: ‘Të Parët t’ onë, Pelazgt e motit | Gjân e gjallë kullotshin planit’.

20 9.268-71: ‘Prej kaukazit m’ Shkam t’ Doverit, | Kû rri Albjona e pjekë gjenjeshtra, | Fis mâ t’ vjeter kund nuk kál | Se ásht ky fisi n’ zâ i Shqyptarit’.

21 9.272: ‘Ne mes t’cillit punët e mdhá | Per Europë xûnë t’enden s’parit’.

22 9.273-77: ‘Per Europë xûnë t’enden s’parit. | Po, m’ kto male e karpa t’ ona | S’ parit Zeusi njerzít i rysi, | E me augure te Dodona | Egersín aj u a permysi’.

23 Klančar sums up the ‘essential difference between them: Fishta’s themes are imbued with a regionalist . . . spirit, while Frasherri has given himself the task of translating the spirit of the Albanian people, without distinction as to province or tribe’ (1942: 22).

European national identity. He develops it further, however, adapting the *Iliad* to the revolutionary context of early twentieth-century Albania. He thus initiates a central aspect of the reception of the Trojan War and the Homeric epics in Albanian, cultivating an ideology in which the epic hero is the nationalist revolutionary.

### **Albanian *Iliads* and *Odysseys* under Communism (1945–91)**

When the Albanian Communists under Enver Hoxha wrested the country back from the Germans at the end of World War II,<sup>24</sup> they began a programme of censorship to control the construction of ideology and national identity. Particularly strict controls were placed on artistic production, and, throughout the Communist era, purges of artists were frequent.<sup>25</sup> In this context, censorship of Homer and writing about the Trojan War severed the affiliation with broader European culture, history, aesthetics, and identity that writers like Naim Frashëri had sought to cultivate and removed the Trojan War as a locus for idealizing heroism based on armed revolution against the government, which had been the principal aim of Fishta's Homeric appropriation.

Indeed, one of the first works to be banned was the *Highland Lute*. In his introduction to the poem, Elsie quotes the judgment of the 'official Tirana "History of

24 The ideological association of Homer and Albania was not exclusively an internal Albanian project: the vacuum created by the collapsing of Ottoman power created openings for other foreign powers to lay claim to Albania and, across the Adriatic, Fascist Italy under Benito Mussolini sought to resurrect its own Homeric ghosts to further its nationalist and expansionist ideology. In 1924, a year after taking power as Prime Minister, Mussolini sent Luigi Ugolini, a young fascist and archaeologist to southern Albania in order to find Roman cities which would justify historical Italian claims to the land and thus, to renewed occupation. Ugolini did something better: inspired by Schliemann's 'discovery' of Troy a half-century earlier, he claimed that he had unearthed the Little Troy of *Aeneid* 3 at the town of Butrint, Virgil's Buthrotum. In pictures and reports, such as one on what he called the Porta Scaea, the Scaean Gate, Ugolini was instrumental in helping Mussolini sell the Italians on the idea of Albania as historically part of the Roman Empire, thus offering a historical justification for the subsequent conquest of Albania in 1939. Strategically, the conquest of Albania provided Italy with complete control over the Adriatic and a beachhead for further expansion in the Balkans; ideologically, the conquest of Butrint and other ancient Roman sites, such as Apollonia, the ancient city where the young Gaius Octavius, the future Augustus, was studying when he learned of the assassination of Julius Caesar, also had important symbolic value. Given Mussolini's self-mythologizing as the new Aeneas and Augustus, a new founder reconstituting a new Roman Empire, the conquest of these sites helped anchor Italian nationalist ideology, claims which were only relinquished with the fall of Mussolini and the fascists at the end of World War II. For more on the relationship between the Trojan War and Italy's designs on Albania, see Gilkes (2006: 33–54).

25 Elsie offers a detailed history of Albanian literature under Communism in Elsie (1995: 515–614) for a first person account of the show trials and punishments, see Pipa (1991: 21).

Albanian Literature” of 1983, which condemns the writer in whose work ‘the interests of the church and of religion rose above those of the nation and the people’ and accuses him of ‘rais[ing] a hymn to patriarchalism and feudalism, to religious obscurantism and clericalism’.<sup>26</sup> Fishta is also accused of ‘propagat[ing] anti-Slavic feelings and mak[ing] the struggle against the Ottoman occupants secondary’.<sup>27</sup> His religion also had a geopolitical component, as a report from 1950 notes: ‘The literary activity of the Catholic priest Gjergj Fishta reflects the role played by the Catholic clergy in preparing for Italian aggression against Albania’.<sup>28</sup> A Catholic priest writing anti-Slavic literature was thus doubly problematic in the late 1940s when Albania’s two principal allies were the Slavic Communist Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, even though these had been the very markers of his patriotism during the period when he wrote the poem. Even after Hoxha broke off relations with his two patron nations for their perceived liberal reforms, the ban remained strictly enforced until the collapse of the regime.<sup>29</sup> The poem lived on in the Albanian imagination, however, such that Robert Elsie reports that in 1991, ‘[d]uring the first public recital of Fishta’s works in Albania in forty-five years, the actor at one point hesitated in his lines, and was immediately and spontaneously assisted by members of the audience – who still knew many parts of *The Highland Lute* by heart’.<sup>30</sup> Elsie recounts this story as a touching moment of Albanian perseverance and resistance during fifty years of Communism, but it also shows the enduring importance of Homer and the ideology of revolutionary heroism that Fishta found in the Trojan War.

The poet who most closely follows Fishta in the tradition of using the Homeric epics as poems of revolution and dissent is Visar Zhiti. In 2000, Zhiti published ‘My Father’s Poem’ [‘Poema e Babait’], which describes the persecution he and his family suffered for publishing poetry that was deemed ideologically dangerous:

Yellowing pages  
From the last World War,  
Gnawed on, like desperation.

It is my father’s poem, his poor ‘Iliad’,  
Published in many a newspaper at the time  
And turned into a play. . . performed  
At the Kosova cinema in Tirana. . . Two old people,  
They told me, met at that play

26 Fishta (2005: xv).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., xvi.

29 Elsie suggests that even though the anti-Slavic feelings were no longer operative, an official position once taken ‘could not be renounced without a scandal’ (Elsie 1995: 419).

30 Fishta (2005: xvi).

And got married (and they're not called Helen  
Or Paris). Engaged under the occupation. . .<sup>31</sup>

Zhiti calls the poem his father's 'poor "Iliad"', and locates the publication of the play during World War II, when Albania was occupied, first by Italy and then by Germany. Despite the Communist's attempt to ban the play, one copy survived, Zhiti writes later in the poem, when one of his friends who worked at the paper factory 'plunged his hands into the blades of the cutting machine, | Into the mouth of the minotaur, and surreptitiously | Extracted my father's poem'.<sup>32</sup> Though Zhiti implies that his father's poem was recovered in its entirety, he only reports two lines: 'Forget not Çameria and hapless Kosova | They dream of freedom, became a dream themselves.'<sup>33</sup> During World War II and its immediate aftermath, when his father's poem was likely written, Albanian nationalists sought to bring Çameria (then, as now, part of Greece) and Kosovo (then under the Kingdom of Serbs and, after World War II, Yugoslavia) back under Albanian sovereignty. His father's *Iliad*, written with patriotic zeal to encourage the re-conquest of these lands, became, after the war, a reminder of the government's failure to do so, and this, though the poet never says so explicitly, was likely the reason it was banned. Like the *Highland Lute*, the poem's historical context shaped its reception: after the war, the poem was no longer considered patriotic or nationalist. Zhiti describes how the poem itself was lost: 'the partisans | ordered that the poem be burned, | Should it be found. A hostile leaflet. Against the teachings'.<sup>34</sup> As a result of the censure of the Albanian Communist government which took power after World War II, his father 'died blind, like a begging Homer'<sup>35</sup> and his mother, in an oblique reference to Penelope 'stopped sewing under the dictatorship'.<sup>36</sup>

'Me in handcuffs', he writes, in trailing lines which visually reproduce the effect described, 'they dragged off behind a black car within the walls of the New Illyria'.<sup>37</sup> Though the description of his father's and mother's fates may be meant metaphorically, Zhiti's description of his own was meant quite literally. Zhiti had the

31 Zhiti (2005: 188): 'Fletë të verdha | nga të luftës më të fundit botërore | të brejtura si dëshpërimi. | Është poema e tim eti, "Iliada" e tij e mjerë. | Pasi u botua në shumë gazeta të kohës | e u dramatizua. . . dhe në kinemanë "Kosova" | u shfaq në Tiranë. . . Dy pleq, | më kanë treguar, u njohën te kjo dramë | dhe u martuan. (Dhe nuk i quajnë as Helenë, | as Parid.) Nuse mes pushtuesve..?'

32 Ibid., 188: 'duke futur duart mes thikave dhe presave | të makinerive | si në gojë minotaurësh, e nxori fshehurazi | poemën e tim eti'.

33 Ibid., 190: 'Kujto Çamërinë, Kosovën e shkretë, | Ëndërruan lirinë, u bënë ëndërr vetë'.

34 Ibid., 188: 'Por partizanët | kishin urdhër ta digjnin, | nëse e gjenin poemën. Si antitrakt. Si antidoktrinë'.

35 Ibid., 190: 'I verbër u shua im atë, si Homer lypës'

36 Ibid., 190: dhe nëna ime s'qëndisi më në diktaturë.

37 Ibid., 190: Mua të pranguar me tërhoqën zvarrë pas një veture të zezëbrenda mureve të Ilirisë së Re.

misfortune of publishing his volume just after the Fourth Plenary Session of the Communist Party in Albania in 1973, a meeting of party officials that resulted in what Robert Elsie called ‘a virtual reign of terror against Albanian writers and intellectuals, comparable in spirit at least to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s’.<sup>38</sup> After seven years under investigation, the ‘expert opinion’ on Zhiti’s work came in. Made public after the dictatorship’s fall in 1990, the report was compiled by two unidentified censors, who condemn Zhiti as follows: ‘This writer has been persevering consciously in support of a type of poetry foreign to our society, of a type of poetry charged with erroneous political concepts, decadent, so called “left-wing” ideas and overt influence from modernistic reactionary verse’.<sup>39</sup>

As if these faults weren’t enough, the report continues: ‘In all the alternatives he has submitted, he always presented the same type of verse, the same concept of poetry, which proves that he has consciously taken the wrong political and artistic course’.<sup>40</sup> They write that these dissident ideas are ‘something he expresses openly in his poem “Homer”’: “My *Iliad* is read everywhere, he said (Homer) | your *Iliad* is not finished yet and he departed. . .” Homer’s *Iliad* describes the destruction of ancient Troy at the hands of the Greeks. With such an *Iliad*, the author of these lines is seeking our destruction’.<sup>41</sup> The censors were right to recognize the strain of political dissent in the poem: when Zhiti wrote these lines, he was tapping into the powerful vein of revolutionary symbolism that the poem held in the Albanian literary imagination. As a result of these lines, Zhiti was held from November 1979 to April 1980 in solitary confinement, then served seven years of hard labour in the copper mines of Spaç and the mountainous Qafe-Bari labour camp, a favoured punishment for dissident artists. He was then allowed to transfer to a brick factory in his hometown of Lushnje until his release in 1987.<sup>42</sup> Zhiti’s imprisonment shows why so few artists wrote about the Trojan War or made reference to the Homeric epics between 1944, when Hoxha came to power, and 1985, when he died.

The only significant exception is Ismail Kadare. Of the vanishingly small number of Albanians allowed to travel to allied countries like China and the Soviet Union, an even smaller number were allowed to travel outside the Communist bloc, Kadare among them. Though his work was also frequently censored, he still had more artistic freedom than any other writer, protected somewhat by his status as Albania’s only writer of international reputation and his not infrequent concessions to writing Socialist Realist propaganda literature in praise of Hoxha. Unlike other Albanian

38 Elsie (1996: 8). Elsie further notes that ‘[e]very volume of poetry went through the hands of ten to fifteen politically vigilant reviewers before publication, every drama at least thirty’ (1996:22). For an outline of the Fourth Plenary Session and its effect on other prominent artists, see Elsie (1995: 523–25).

39 Zhiti (2005: 298).

40 Ibid., 298.

41 Ibid., 300.

42 Elsie (1995: 605).

authors, Kadare's work in translation has a wide circulation and has been the subject of significant scholarly interest outside Albania.<sup>43</sup> As in Albanian poetry, Kadare engages the dissident implications of the Trojan War in several works, such as his novels *The General of the Dead Army* [*Gjenerali i Ushtrisë së Vdekur*] (1963), *The Monster* [*Përbindëshi*] (1965), and *The File on H.* [*Dosja H*] (1981), the novella *Agamemnon's Daughter* [*Vajza e Agamemnonit*] (composed in the mid-80s and published in 2000)<sup>44</sup> and the essay 'Aeschylus, the Eternal Loser' [*Eskili, ky Humbës i Madh*] (1990). Some of these, such as *The General of the Dead Army*, contain only passing references to Homer; in his depiction of burial rites, Kadare equates Albanian soldiers with those from the Trojan War, implying that Albania is a graveyard for lost heroes.<sup>45</sup> *The Monster*, by contrast, has a much deeper engagement with the Trojan War. Barbara Graziosi notes that the Trojan Horse — the eponymous monster — 'never enters the city: it remains outside it as a threatening presence through time, eventually becoming a tank at the gates of a modern city. It is tempting to see in this image the threat and claustrophobia of Albanian life under the communist regime, but the Homeric roots of the plot also suggest a timeless, universal framework: nothing changes, no matter when or where you live'.<sup>46</sup> Graziosi is certainly right to identify the novel as a critique of the Communist regime; indeed, because it could be interpreted as unambiguous political allegory, the regime censored it and, as a result, it was not published again until after the fall of the dictatorship.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps as a result of his experience with *The Monster*, Kadare's next work dealing with Homeric themes, *The File on H.*, was on its surface a satirical novel that made light of Milman Parry and Albert Lord's journeys to Yugoslavia in search of contemporary oral epic poets. The light nature of the work and its seemingly apolitical bent has nevertheless been interpreted by modern scholars as a means of engaging serious questions about the role of ideological interpretations of the past and of folklore in shaping modern identity.<sup>48</sup>

43 For which, see Eissen and Gély (2011) and Morgan (2010a) for overviews of Kadare's oeuvre. Of particular interest with regard to Kadare's engagement of the Trojan War and Greek mythology in the former work are the chapters on Kadare's metaphorical use of the Zeus (149–160) and Prometheus (259–274) myths and the influence of the Classical tradition (275–292). The latter monograph contains sections devoted to each of the major works, including those listed here. For *The General of the Dead Army*, see 63–80; for *The Monster*, see 81–92; for *Aeschylus or the Great Loser*, see 283–292.

44 For 'the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father [as] Ismail Kadare's paradigm for the effect in the early 1980s of the dehumanizing regime in Communist Albania, and the difficulties involved in describing what it was like to experience them', see Hall (2009:28), esp. 28–30.

45 For which, see Weitzman (2011).

46 Graziosi (2007:133).

47 Elsie (1995:543).

48 The Homeric aspects of the texts are discussed in Graziosi (2007), and its ideological and dissident implications in Eissen and Gély (2011: 293–310) and White (2004: 23–54).

Kadare’s critical essay ‘Aeschylus, the Eternal Loser’ addresses his involvement with translating modern Greek poets as well as engaging with ancient Greek literature.<sup>49</sup> Kadare compares himself to Aeschylus, but does so in a way that accounts for the Albanian’s own political circumstances: like the ancient poet, of whose eighty plays only seven survive, so too is Kadare aware that much of his writing, like *The Monster*, would be lost, though to censors rather than to time.<sup>50</sup>

Homeric references begin to appear more prominently in the poetry of the turbulent period following Hoxha’s death in 1985 but before the fall of the regime in 1991. This period of transition from communism to democracy saw a softening of the police state and its censors, and Homeric poems advocating revolution again begin to appear. In 1989, for instance, the poet Fatos Arapi published ‘I Dislike Achilles’ [‘Unë nuk e dua Akilin’].<sup>51</sup> Arapi had been a prominent poet under Communism, and had become adept at the intricate layering of meanings to avoid censors, a skill very much evident in this poem. Ostensibly about Hector’s hatred of Achilles, the conflict between the two antagonists becomes a metaphor for Albania under Communism. Achilles is Hoxha and the Communists: ‘looming, threatening, majestic and fatal’<sup>52</sup> and Arapi writes that ‘I myself am Hector’.<sup>53</sup> He thus presents himself as victim of the omnipresent and omnipotent police state. Expanding from

49 For which, see Goldwyn (2012), esp. 252 for his translation of Cavafy’s ‘Ithaca’, and Elsie (1995: 66), originally published in *World Literature Today*, 63, no 3, (1988), p. 519.

50 Elsie (2005: 557–58) addresses other parallels that Kadare saw between his and Aeschylus’s lives.

A more detailed analysis of the work and of Kadare’s engagement with ancient Greek civilization generally is found in Morgan (2010b). Morgan rightly notes the essay’s appearance during the crucial transition year of 1985, and writes that Kadare sought to emphasize that ‘Albania is a Balkan and European entity, linked at its origins with ancient Greece and unrelated to the Ottoman, Soviet and Slavic civilisations which subsequently threatened it’ (96). Morgan’s reading focuses on the allegorical relationship between Zeus as Enver Hoxha and his oppression of the free- and forward-thinking Prometheus (99).

Kadare shares this mythological appropriation with Visar Zhiti: Janice Mathie-Heck’s introduction to the English translation of Zhiti’s work is entitled ‘The Plight of Prometheus: Thoughts on the poetry of Visar Zhiti’ (Zhiti 2005: xi). In his own self-mythologizing, Zhiti was a Prometheus chained by Zeus (Enver Hoxha) in the poem ‘The Little Things’ (‘Gjëra e Vogla’). But Mathie-Heck also suggests that Zhiti saw the Prometheus as applying to all Kosovar Albanians: in ‘Grand Hotel’ (‘Grand Hotel’), she argues that ‘the fair chains of Prometheus rattle on. The Kosovar Albanians are still tormented and bound, like Prometheus, and Zhiti feels himself thus. This hotel is the ‘local Olympia’ where the powerful gods wreak their vengeance and displeasure upon their mortal subjects (Zhiti 2005: xx).

51 The political implications of the poem are also addressed in Goldwyn (2012).

52 Elsie and Mathie-Heck (2008: 175); Arapi (1989: 57): ‘Si një kërcënim gjëmues, i madhërishëm e fatal’.

53 Ibid., 175; Ibid.,: 57: ‘vetë jam Hektor’.

him as Hector, ‘the pallid agony of Troy’<sup>54</sup> evokes the sufferings of the entire nation. Just as Hector’s death represents the destruction of Troy, so does Arapi’s oppression represent that of Albania. Arapi specifically mentions that he was stabbed ‘at the Scaean Gates’,<sup>55</sup> a reference to the place where Hector was killed in the *Iliad*, but also a coded reference to Albania, evoking the so-called Scaean Gates at Butrint which were so crucial to Albania’s Roman identification during the inter-war period.<sup>56</sup>

This first half of the poem, therefore, contains a description of the death and destruction visited upon Albania and its people by the Communist government. In the final four lines, however, Arapi offers a vision of a new future drawn from a Trojan past: ‘To budding mankind’,<sup>57</sup> he writes, a reference to the optimistic times in which the poem was written, ‘I leave three sanguine words: | Fatherland. . . Freedom. . . and from numbed lips, Andromache’.<sup>58</sup> Fittingly, the word *Elsie* translates as ‘sanguine’ [‘përgjakura’] connotes both the blood of Albania’s violent past under Communism and the optimism of the future, a future defined by patriotism, freedom and fidelity.

In addition to the revolutionary aspects of the *Iliad*, poets during this period also began to draw on the *Odyssey*. Rather than advocating revolution, poems drawing on this source gave Albanian dissidents a heroic model of exile and endurance. The *Odyssey*, with its optimistic faith in the capacity to return home and take one’s rightful place after a long time abroad, came to represent the possibility of returning to post-Hoxha Albania. The most famous example of this tradition is Bardhy Londo’s ‘How Can I Calm the Sea’ [Si ta Qetesoj Detin], a maritime metaphor which evokes both Odysseus as the sailor and the political turmoil of the latter half of the 1980s.<sup>59</sup> The volume features several poems in which Londo, who had sought exile in Greece during the last years of Hoxha’s rule, re-imagines himself as Odysseus. In ‘Only Ithaca remains’ [‘Vetëm Itaka Mbetet’], for instance, Londo writes that he finds himself in the same position as Odysseus, separated from him only by time: ‘The ships have changed. They are no longer like those of Ulysses. | The love affairs have changed. They are no longer like those of Menelaus. | The women are different. They are no longer like Helen’.<sup>60</sup> And yet, as the title suggests,

54 *Ibid.*, 175; *Ibid.*, 57: ‘Nëpër agoninë e bardhë të Trojës’.

55 *Ibid.*, 175; *Ibid.*, 57: ‘Kur para dyerve Skeé’.

56 For which, see note 24, above.

57 *Elsie* and Mathie-Heck (2008: 175); Arapi (1989: 57): ‘Njerëzimit të gjelbër’.

58 *Ibid.*, 175; *Ibid.*, 57: ‘Unë i lë tri fjalë të përgjakura: Atdhé . . . Liri . . . më ftohet nder buzë: Andromakë . . .’.

59 *Elsie* (1996: 73–75) contains *Elsie*’s review of the volume (originally published in *World Literature Today*, 64, no 1, [1990], pp. 174–75). *Elsie*’s review, while mentioning the tradition of Albanian writers casting themselves as Odysseus, makes no reference to the political undertones of this tradition.

60 *Elsie* (1993: 175); Londo (1988: 86): ‘Kanë ndërruar anijet. S’janë më si të Odiseut. | Kanë ndërruar dashuritë. S’janë më si te Manelaut. | Gratë ndryshe janë. S’i ngajnë më

the situation is not so different: Londo, like Odysseus, is far away and unable to return home, even as his home is overrun by bad rulers: both the suitors in the case of Odysseus, and the Communist government in the case of Londo, are illegitimate rulers who are impoverishing the nation through their own gluttony and misrule.

Londo makes a similar point in ‘Ithaca’: ‘Ithaca slumbers under the September sky. | The olive trees are like women waiting their tardy husbands. | I am filled with a longing for my home far away, | for my wife in Tirana who will not sleep tonight’.<sup>61</sup> Londo the exile, imagines himself as Odysseus, his wife as Penelope, and Tirana as Ithaca. Londo never explicitly mentions the Communist government nor the political situation in Albania, instead emphasizing the analogous relationship between his life and Odysseus. Given the stakes, however, this is understandable: as the case of Zhiti and innumerable other artists showed, the consequences of running afoul of the censors were severe. By focusing on only one half of the metaphor, the comparison of the poet to Odysseus, Londo can indict the Communists as no better than the suitors, exploiting the land and its people and wasting the natural resources of its rightful rulers, without having to make any statement that could be potentially incriminating in the view of the censors.<sup>62</sup>

Zhiti refers to this tradition in his poem ‘In Homer’s Sea’ [‘Në Detin e Homerit’] from 1993. Albania held its first democratic elections in 1991, and the country’s liberalization resulted in significant immigration from Albanians who had fled or been exiled under Communism. Zhiti draws on the literary tradition of comparing themselves to Odysseus:

I often go down  
to the shore  
and cast my shoes into the sea.  
I don’t know what happens,  
But my shoes  
Grow and grow in size  
And turn into ships,  
To return many a Ulysses home.  
Barefoot I advance to meet

Helenës’. For an analysis of this poem and its reliance on the idealized Ithaca of Cavafy, see Goldwyn (2012: 267).

61 Ibid., 171; Ibid., 82: ‘Itaka fle nën qiellin e shtatorit.

| Ullinjë si gra që presin burrat e vonuar ngjajnë.

| Mua më merr malli për shtëpinë larg,|

për një grua që s’do te mbyllë sytë këtë natë në Tiranë’.

62 In Yugoslavia, the Kosovar Albanian poet Din Mehmeti had used the Odyssean myth for similar purposes. His ‘Olympia’ [‘Olimpi’], written in Athens in 1976 and published in Prishtina in 1978, features the poet wandering around Athens, asking ‘Homer, where is Penelope?’ (Elsie 1993: 65) (Mehmeti (1978): ‘Homer ku është Penelopa’), that is, his home and the people he left there when he went into exile.

And embrace them.<sup>63</sup>

Zhiti no longer needs shoes: for those like him who had never left, the journey is over, he is at home now in a free and democratic Albania, what is needed now are boats to bring home Albanians like Londo, who, like Odysseus, went abroad and had long and difficult journeys home.

### The Trojan war and the Kosovar independence movement (1971–99)

By the early 1990s, Albania had established liberal western political and economic institutions. Zhiti's 'My Father's Iliad', however, was published in 1999. Though recounting his own oppression under the Hoxha regime, the poem is not principally a meditation on the poet's past; as importantly, the *Iliad*, always a revolutionary poem in the Albanian imagination, becomes here a call for revolution in Kosovo. Zhiti uses it as a battle cry for the present situation across Albania's northern border, where the Serbs under Slobodan Milosevic were waging a brutal war against the revolutionary nationalists of the Kosovo Liberation Army, a war which was brought to an end by the intervention of a military force under the command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention the same year the poem was published. Thus, Kosovo was newly resurgent in the Albanian imagination; this is why, of all the lines of his father's poem, Zhiti chose only to quote the one containing a reference to the Kosovar struggle for independence: 'Forget not Çameria and hapless Kosova | They dream of freedom, became a dream themselves', had profound contemporary resonance.<sup>64</sup> Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, sharing the same pre-war literary history as Albanians in Albania, were equally aware of the symbolic power of the Trojan War, and Zhiti's poem thus not only draws on Albanian literary history writ large but also on its particular use in Kosovo.

The literary history of the Trojan War by ethnic Albanian writers in Yugoslavian Kosovo can best be seen through the works of Ali Podrimja, the great poet of Kosovar revolutionary aspirations.<sup>65</sup>

63 Zhiti (2005: 65). Shkoj shpesh | buzë detit | dhe hedh këpucët në ujë. | Nuk e di si ndodh, | Po ja që këpucët e mia | zmadhohen e zmadhohen | e bëhen anije | për të kthyer Uliksat | nëpër shtëpëra. | I zbathur u dal përpara | që të përqafohemi.

64 Zhiti (2005: 190): 'Kujto Çamërinë, Kosovën e shkretë, | Ëndërruan lirinë, u bënë ëndërr vetë'.

65 His revolutionary bonafides are evident even from his youth: his first volume of poetry, *The Calls [Thirrje]*, was published in 1961, when the poet was 19. The volume advocated revolution against Yugoslavia and the creation of an independent Kosovo. Because of this volume, Podrimja was expelled from high school and was saved from imprisonment only when Esad Mekuli, another Kosovar Albanian poet, intervened on his behalf. A line from one of his poems, 'Kosovo is my blood; no apologies', became the loyalty oath for Kosovo Liberation Army, the ethnic Albanian guerilla soldiers who fought the Serbs during the Kosovo War. In an interview in 2012, a year before his death, he said that this was his proudest moment, and that his whole poetic career had been given to the cause of

In 1971, Podrimja published a cycle of poems entitled ‘The Trojan Horse’ [‘Kali i Trojes’] in his 1971 volume *Torso* [*Torzo*].<sup>66</sup> One poem from this cycle, ‘Go Back to Homer’s Verse’ [‘Kthehu në Vargun e Homerit’] stands out for its use of the Trojan War as a call to revolution:

Go back to Homer’s verse  
 Go back from whence you came  
 This is not your time go back  
 Free the people from themselves  
 And free shadows from disguises  
 And free escapes from sleeplessness  
 And free silence from fever  
 And rain this is not your time  
 Go back to Homer’s verse  
 Troy has fallen and long it’s been  
 Since the people have sung the Marseillaise.<sup>67</sup>

In light of both Podrimja’s history of poetic engagement with revolutionary Albanian politics in Kosovo and the association of Albanian revolutionary politics with the Trojan War, Podrimja’s cry for revolution, wrapped in Homeric language, becomes clear. ‘Go back to Homer’s verse’, he tells his readers, that is, read Homer’s verse again for the models of revolutionaries, soldiers, and heroes it provides. ‘This is not your time, go back’, he says, telling them that they deserve more than life under Yugoslavian rule: they deserve to live as did the Homeric heroes of the past. ‘Free the people from themselves’, he continues, urging not just political freedom for Albanians from Yugoslavia, but a psychological freedom: freedom from their current state of submissiveness to embrace their true identity as epic heroes. After exhorting his readers to free other more abstract ideas, he repeats the opening line, again encouraging his audience to read Homer again: ‘Troy has fallen’, he writes, making the association between the city conquered by the Greeks and Kosovo, which has fallen to the Serbs, ‘and long it’s been since the people have sung the Marseillaise’. With the poem’s last word, Podrimja invokes the most famous European song of revolution against foreign oppression and, in the context of

Kosovar national self-determination. He also, however, said that poets, especially Albanian poets under Communism in Yugoslavia, had to be particularly careful of the secret police, a lesson his youthful encounter with them no doubt taught him Goldwyn and Hoxha (2012: 30).

66 When asked about this cycle and the significance of Trojan War writing in Kosovo, Podrimja elided a direct answer (Goldwyn and Hoxha 2012: 31–2).

67 Goldwyn and Hoxha (2012: *Ibid.*, 31); Podrimja (1971: np): ‘Kthehu në vargun e Homerit | kthehu atje prej nga erdhe, | koha jote s’ështëë kjo, kthehu, | liroje njerëzit prej vetvetës | e hijeve, liroji prej maskave | e ikjeve, liroji prej pagjumësisë | e hestjeve, liroji prej etheve | e shirave. Koha jote s’ështëë kjo! | Kthehu në vargun e Homerit! | |Troja ra e Marsejezën | Kahmot s’e këndojnë njerëzit’.

Yugoslavian history, a song of Communist revolution. It has been too long, Podrimja suggests, since the Albanians have revolted against their occupiers.

Podrimja's reference to the 'Marseillaise', however, is more than just a vague reference to an iconic revolutionary song; the song has a particular place in the history of Albanian revolutionary poetics. It was first translated into Albanian in the late 1870s by Thimi Mitko. Around the same time as the revolutionary song was restored as France's national anthem Mitko was advocating that his own 'Marsejesa', modeled after the Marseillaise, be used as the official anthem of the League of Prizren,<sup>68</sup> 'Go back to Homer's verse', then, as the title of the poem and its repeated refrain, has multiple meanings: on the one hand, it is a call to armed revolution, encouraging its readers to emulate the ancient Homeric heroes and fight. On the other hand, it invokes the earlier generation of heroic Albanians: the nationalists of the late nineteenth century, who themselves began the association between the Trojan War and Albanian revolution. Just as Gjergj Fishta had used Homer's verse to compare the revolutionaries at the League of Prizren to Homeric heroes, so too does Podrimja use Homer's verse encourage his contemporaries to be like Homeric heroes ancient and modern: ancient Achaean warriors and modern Albanian nationalists of the independence movement, the last generation of Albanians to sing the Marseillaise. Homer's status as a revolutionary poet in the Albanian imagination is thus reaffirmed: 'Homer's verse' — the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* — becomes the 'Marseillaise'.

Just as Zhiti was picking up on the tradition of the Homeric poems as calls to revolution in the 'Homer' poem which got him arrested in 1973, so too does he draw upon it while writing about Albanian independence in Kosovo. 'My Father's Poem', then, is a work that addresses the particular political context of its moment. Indeed, the volume in which it was published, 'Si Shkohet ne Kosove' ['Where is the road to Kosovo'], an obvious reference to the volume's subject matter, uses Homeric motifs in several poems as a means of summoning the Albanian revolutionary spirit to support the cause of Albanian self-rule in Kosovo.

Other poems in the collection use Homeric metaphors to further the volume's revolutionary aspirations. In 'This (Un)Usual Day' ['Kjo Ditë e (Jahste) Zakonshme'], Zhiti describes a walk he took with his friend, the Kosovar political activist and playwright Ajri Begu, in Prishtina, the capital of Kosovo. Zhiti is off to buy his wife a present, while Begu wants to buy a coat for Flora Brovina, another activist and poet, though she was much more famous as a paediatrician running health clinics in Kosovo in the lead up to the 1999 war. On 20 April 1999, a month after NATO bombing began, Brovina was kidnapped from her home in the middle of the night by Serbian paramilitary forces; because she was not a military combatant and was widely known internationally for her humanitarian work with children, her kidnapping caused international outrage. She was held in prison for a year and a half after a show trial accusing her of terrorism, a subject also discussed in the poem. She

68 For which, see Treptow (1992: 94) and Sugarman (1999: 426).

thus became an important symbol for Albanian and international soldiers justifying the war: ‘She healed wounds. She’s a physician’,<sup>69</sup> Begu says in the poem, ‘How could she have led a war from her window like Helen of Troy?’.<sup>70</sup> The comparison is apt since, in some ways, Brovina was like Helen of Troy: a female prisoner who became one of the war’s most visible symbols. Newly independent and free, Zhiti’s indifference to the plight of Kosovo represents Albania’s writ large: Zhiti’s focus on bourgeois values like buying new coats is only interrupted by Begu’s moral voice reminding him of the devastation being visited upon their fellow Albanians in Kosovo.

In another poem from the same volume, ‘A Visit to the Radio and Television Station’ [‘Vizitë në Radiotelevizion’], Zhiti writes how ‘they’, meaning the Albanian government under Communism, ‘once sentenced me like Laocoon | Because I had listened to Radio Prishtina’, that is, he had violated the censors’ prohibition on listening to outside sources of news and, like Laocoon, he had been punished for telling the truth even though it went against the official government’s position.<sup>71</sup> ‘Now’, he continues, ‘they hold a microphone in front of me | (not the head of a snake) and ask me to speak. | I can do nothing but fondle it’.<sup>72</sup> As a young poet, he was punished for speaking; this time, however, when he is allowed to speak, he is so overcome that words fail him and he can only remain silent: ‘Outside a throb of anguish | May have been heard, | And everyone will have understood me’.<sup>73</sup> Zhiti compares himself again to Laocoön, though this time not to the literary Laocoön who warned the Trojans against letting the horse into the walls of Troy, but to the famous statue, famed for its silent evocation of anguished pain. The silent Zhiti in front of the microphone here appears like the statue: silent and in pain, with coiled wires around him, urging his countrymen to understand that though they, that is, Albanians in Albania, have the semblance of peace, the war is not over: Kosovo is still under siege.

### **Homer after the revolutions: the Trojan war in twenty-first century Albania and Kosovo (since 1999)**

The end of the Kosovo War and international recognition of Kosovo’s independence ushered in a decade and a half of relative peace, security, freedom, and increasing prosperity in Albania and Kosovo, and unprecedented integration into the larger world. The new political, economic, and cultural circumstances brought with them a need for a new sense of national identity, new myths, new aesthetics, and new

69 Zhiti (2005: 202): ‘kuroi plagë. Mjeke është’.

70 Ibid., 202: ‘S’mund ta kundronte | luftën si Helena e Trojës nga dritaret’.

71 Ibid., 209: ‘Më kanë dënuar dikur si Laokontin, | sepse dëgjoja Radio Prishtinën’.

72 Ibid., 209: ‘Tani më zgjasin mikrofonin | (s’është kokë gjarpri) dhe më luten të flas. | Unë veç e ledhatoj i mallëngjyer’.

73 Ibid., 209: ‘Jashtë ndoshta do jetë dëgjuar | një zhaurimë ankthi | dhe do më kenë kuptuar të gjithë’.

ideologies. Many Albanians in Albania and Kosovo looked forward to a world beyond the war and strife of the past. The poet who has most poignantly engaged with the Homeric myths in the twenty-first century is Valentina Saraçini. Saraçini was born in Macedonia, then Yugoslavia, in 1962, and has lived in Prishtina for many years. Her first volume of poetry after the end of the Kosovo War, *Dreaming Escape* [*Vjedhnajë Ëndërrimi*], was published in 2002. The meaning of the volume's title becomes clear after reading the first cycle of poems, entitled 'Antimythic'. The first poem, 'War of Silence' ['Luftë e Heshtjes'] begins 'You are not the children of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices | You are not the twins Ephialtes and Otis'.<sup>74</sup> In the opening lines of the poem, Saraçini invokes two sets of ancient Greek twins who fought each other to death, a metaphor for the region's history: Albanians against Albanians in Albania under Communism and during the civil war of the late 1990s, and Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. The age of fratricidal war is over, she suggests, as is the possibility of the kind of heroism it offers: 'You cannot declare war on the gods | You cannot hold the mountains in your arms | Cannot move them | Cannot crush them'.<sup>75</sup> As importantly, gone along with these things is the possibility of a certain kind of heroic death: 'Now one dies any old how', she concludes.<sup>76</sup> Saraçini is dreaming of an escape from Albania's and Kosovo's violent pasts, an escape from revolutionary times, since revolutions, as a kind of civil war, are to her wars between twins.

Gone along with that, however, is the old ideology of revolution. Albanians, she suggests, can no longer have heroic deaths. They must find another way to live meaningful lives and die meaningful deaths.

This structure also informs the second of the volume's poems: 'One Does not Die of Fear' ['Nga Frika Nuk Vdiset']. As with 'War of Silence', this poem too begins by denying claims to the heroism of ancient Greek mythology and rejecting the fratricidal wars to which the Homeric epics gave ideological support: 'You imagine yourself great | You are not Tydeus | You do not kill your brother unwittingly do not flee | From the homeland you do not have'.<sup>77</sup> When Saraçini imagines ancient Greek myth, she does not see the revolutionary heroism of Gjergj Fishta, Visar Zhiti or Ali Podrimja; instead, she sees a store of mythology in which brothers kill brothers. Unlike Fishta, when she looks at Albanian history, she does not see it populated by Diomedes and Agamemnon, but their fathers: Tydeus and Atreus, cannibals and fratricides. She makes this clear in the next line of the poem: 'And you there are not

74 Saraçini (2008: 8): 'Ju nuk jeni fëmijët e Edipit | Eteokli e Poliniku | Efialti dhe Oti binjakë nuk jeni'.

75 Ibid., 8: 'Nuk mund t'u shpallni luftë perëndive | Ju malet s'i mbani dot në krah | S'mund t'i zhvendosni | I zhbëni ato'.

76 Ibid., 8: 'Tashti vdiset kudo sido'.

77 Ibid., 10: 'Ti hiqesh i madh | Nuk je Tideu | S'e vret pa dashje villain s'ikën | Nga atdheu që nuk e ke'.

Cronus who | Swallows his own children’,<sup>78</sup> that is, who commits filicide, ‘Nor are you Rhea who saved Zeus the sun | to overthrow Cronus’,<sup>79</sup> that is, a patricide. In the next poem, ‘You are not Gods’ [‘Ju Nuk Jeni Perëndi’], she takes aim at the heart of Greek mythology and the tradition of Albanian use of Homer: ‘Every day everywhere’, she writes, summing up her attitude to Greek mythology, ‘You pay homage to death. | [. . .] | But you are not gods | of you Homer writes nothing’.<sup>80</sup>

At the dawn of the Albanian national awakening in the late nineteenth century, Homer, the Trojan War and ancient Greek mythology helped teach Albanians think of themselves as independent Europeans as opposed to subject Ottomans, how to write epic poetry, how to give their revolution epic stature. A later generation, under the cloud of Communism in Albania and Kosovo, again seized on their predecessors’ reception of Homeric epics as poems of revolution, finding in them both a language of dissent and a literary *topos* onto which they could obliquely project their revolutionary aspirations. Albanians in Albania who viewed themselves as Trojans under siege and Albanians abroad who viewed themselves as exiled Odysseuses found in the heroes of the Trojan War heroic models whose deeds they could emulate. Saraçini’s poetry, therefore, represents both a continuity of Albanian literary history, that is, to paraphrase Podrimja, she goes back to Homer’s verse, though unlike her predecessors, not to call for revolution, but to entirely reject the revolutionary ideology with which Homer had been associated. Her interpretation of Homer thus marks her work as radically different: gone are the ideals of warrior heroism that summoned a century of Albanians to revolution. Instead, these are replaced with a view of Greek myth as cautionary tale: Homeric ideals bring death and destruction to brothers, children, parents, and nations. Albania and Kosovo, she suggests, are caught in a cycle of cannibalistic and familicidal civil war which can only end when the revolutionary ideology which had sustained them under occupation is replaced with something more suitable for a self-governing people. Saraçini’s ‘Antimythic’ poems, with their second person address and constantly repeated negation ‘you are not’ followed by the name of a mythological figure usually interpreted as a hero, demand nothing less than a wholesale rejection of a century and a half’s worth of revolutionary ideology paired with an admiration for the Homeric epics and the Classical tradition.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jacqueline Klooster and Baukje van den Berg, who organized the “Homer and the Good Ruler” conference in May of 2015 at the University of Ghent at which this paper was first presented. I would also like to thank Antonela

78 Ibid., 10: ‘Ti tjetri s’je Kroni që | Gëlltit fëmijët e vet’.

79 Ibid., 10: ‘S’je as Rea që shpëtoi Zeusin të birin | Të përmbysë Kronin’.

80 Ibid., 12: ‘Çdo ditë kudo | Homazhe i bëni vdekjes | [. . .] | Ju ama s’jeni perëndi | Për ju nuk shkruan Homeri’.

Pero and James Nikopoulos, whose comments on early drafts were particularly helpful.

## References

- Appian, *Appian's Roman History*, tr. H. White, 4 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1912).
- F. Arapi, *Duke dalë prej ëndrrës* (Tiranë: Naim Frashëri, 1989).
- I. Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800–1912* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2011).
- E. Dhima, 'Homer's Influence on Naim Frashëri's Poem "History of Skanderbeg"', *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 4(4) (2013), pp. 235–38.
- A. Eissen and V. Gély (eds), *Lectures d'Ismail Kadaré* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2011).
- R. Elsie, *An Elusive Eagle Soars: Anthology of Modern Albanian Poetry* (London: Forest Books, 1993).
- , *History of Albanian Literature*, 2 vols, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
- , *Studies in Modern Albanian Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- R. Elsie and J. Mathie-Heck, *Lightning from the Depths: An Anthology of Albanian Poetry* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2008).
- G. Fishta, *The Highland Lute*, tr. R. Elise and J. Mathie-Heck, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).
- , *Lahuta e Malcis* (Tirana: Toena, 2000).
- G. Gawrych, *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874–1913* (New York: I.B. Tauris and Co., 2006).
- A. Goldwyn, 'Translations and Adaptations of C.P. Cavafy in Albanian', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 30 (2012), pp. 247–76.
- , 'Modernism, Nationalism, Albanianism: Geographic Poetry and Poetic Geography in the Albanian and Kosovar Independence Movements', in A. Goldwyn and R. Silverman (eds), *Mediterranean Modernism: Aesthetic Innovation and Intercultural Exchange* (New York: 2016 [forthcoming] Palgrave MacMillan, n.p.).
- A. Goldwyn and R. Hoxha, 'Finally, Ali Podrimja Spoke: A Conversation', *World Literature Today* 86(3) (2012), pp. 28–32.
- B. Graziosi, 'Homer in Albania: Oral Epic and the Geography of Literature', in E. Greenwood and B. Graziosi (eds), *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 120–42.
- O. Gilkes, 'The Trojans in Epirus: Archaeology, Myth and Identity in Inter-War Albania', in M. Galary and C. Watkinson (eds), *Archaeology Under Dictatorship* (New York: Springer, 2006), pp. 33–54.
- E. Hall, 'Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Subjectivity in Recent Fiction', *Classical Receptions Journal* 1(1) (2009), pp. 23–42.
- A. Klančar, 'Modern Albanian Literature', *Books Abroad* 16(1) (1942), pp. 20–23.
- B. Londo, *Si ta qetësoj detin* (Naim Frashëri: Tiranë, 1988).
- N. Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).
- D. Mehmeti, *Poezi* (Rilindja: Prishtina, 1978).
- P. Morgan, *The Writer and the Dictatorship 1957–1990* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010a).
- , 'The Wrong Side of History: Albania's Greco-Illyrian Heritage in Ismail Kadare's *Aeschylus or the Great Loser*', *Modern Greek Studies* 14 (2010b), pp. 92–111.
- A. Pipa, *Contemporary Albanian Literature* (New York: East European Monographs, 1991).
- A. Podrimja, *Torzo* (Rilindje: Prishtina, 1971).
- V. Saraçini (tr.), *Dreaming Escape*, tr. E. Weitzman (Brooklyn: Ugly Ducking Press, 2008).
- L. Schwandner-Sievers and B. Fischer (eds), *Albanian Identities: Myth and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
- S. Skendi, 'Beginnings of Albanian Nationalist and Autonomous Trends: The Albanian League', *American Slavic and East European Review* 12(2) (1953), pp. 219–32.
- J. Sugarman, 'Imagining the Homeland: Poetry, Songs, and the Discourses of Albanian Nationalism', *Ethnomusicology* 43(3) (1999), pp. 419–58.

- K. Treptow, *From Zalmoxis to Jan Palach: Studies in East European History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
- E. Weitzman, ‘Specters of Narrative: Ismail Kadare’s *The General of the Dead Army*’, *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 41(2) (2011), pp. 282–309.
- A. White, ‘Kosovo, Ethnic Identity, and “Border Crossings” in *The File on H* and Other Novels by Ismail Kadare’, in P. Wagstaff (ed.), *Border Crossings: Mapping Identities in Modern Europe* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 23–54.
- V. Zhiti, *The Condemned Apple: Selected Poetry*, tr. R. Elsie (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2005).