

A Note on the Author

Writers cannot determine the response their work will receive. Gëzim I. Alpion is no exception, but his work is exceptional in its ability to, by turns, fascinate, provoke, bewilder, and educate its readers. This is partly attributable to the diverse mix of genres and perspectives brought together in a collection like *Foreigner Complex* – which ranges from journalistic feature pieces to dramatised historical fantasy – but is perhaps more fully explained, for an English readership, by the radical misalignment between Gëzim Alpion's experience and perceptions of cultural identity and those of most people born and brought up in a monoglot, post-imperial nation. Of course, the very notion of an 'English' readership is a reductive construction – a fact which Gëzim Alpion's writing, particularly his play *Vouchers* (published in 2001), powerfully exposes. At a time when the predominant intellectual paradigm emphasises the hybridity of the fragmentary 'self', Gëzim Alpion presents, often through violent and tragic events, what I nonetheless take to be a fundamentally optimistic view of how the individual can achieve self-understanding, how a productive dialectic can be achieved between the need to belong and the limiting effects of labels or boundaries, and, politically, of the possibilities of democracy. But Gëzim Alpion's interest in the 'foreigner complex' is pragmatic rather than patriotic or ideological. And his pragmatism is born of experience.

Gëzim Alpion was born in Peshkopi, in the picturesque North East of Albania, in 1962. He left his native town at the age of 14 and moved to Tirana to begin 6 years of study in English, first at the Asim Vokshi Language School and then at the University of Tirana. Gëzim has since expressed the feeling that he never left Albania and his home town. The breathtaking, magic, epic landscapes of Dibra have travelled with him in his happy childhood memories. After two years of the degree course, in 1985, scholarships from the Albanian and Egyptian governments made it possible for him to travel to the University of Cairo, graduating with a BA in English Language and Literature in 1989. He progressed to postgraduate study, taking MA courses before, in 1991, beginning a research studentship.

Although Gëzim marvelled at the Pyramids of Giza, he also felt that he had already 'seen' them before. As a child he had looked every day at the pyramid-like mountains surrounding Peshkopi. To this day, he feels lucky to have been born in a place that fed his imagination so vividly, through its spectacular natural environment and the richness of its local cultural traditions and folklore.

The focus of Gëzim Alpion's academic interest as a postgraduate at the University of Cairo was 'the image of the artist as a child' in the works of D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, James Baldwin and Joyce Cary. After two years of his research studentship at Cairo, he moved to Durham University where his Masters dissertation was upgraded to doctoral level and

developed into a study of Lawrence’s novels – ‘the image of the artist as a young man’. He was awarded his PhD in 1997, and in the focus of his thesis – how key literary figures have represented the development of the artistic self – can be seen an academic reflection of the imaginative themes he has pursued in his journalism and creative writing.

As he moved from the role of student to that of lecturer, Gëzim Alpion came into contact with a wider range of institutions which both broadened his understanding of English society and heightened his awareness of cultural barriers and misperceptions.

Since 1997, he has taught at Durham University, the University of Huddersfield, Sheffield Hallam University, Newman College of Higher Education in Birmingham, and the University of Birmingham. His teaching has included Arabic and, within English Studies, Shakespeare, Romanticism, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, Modernism, American literature, post-colonial literature, film studies, creative writing, contemporary poetry, the novels of the 1990s, and more recently, the history of English language. In 2000 he became an Honorary Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham.

In his writing, Gëzim Alpion tackles the ‘foreigner complex’ with a passion and indignation which gain power and insight from its basis in personal experience. As an Albanian-British academic and writer working hard to build a career in a Britain where tabloid representations are everywhere, the source of his indignation may seem obvious. But such simplistic correspondences do not explain the longstanding and sophisticated perspectives developed in Gëzim Alpion’s work. As David Edgar has noted, *Vouchers* differs from other recent political drama addressing the issue of asylum not only in that it is written by someone from one of the countries from which people have come to Britain seeking asylum, but also, and more importantly, in focusing on the conflicting experiences and perceptions (and ultimately physical conflict) of two expatriates. *Vouchers* is a provocative, even shocking play. At a time of great uncertainty about how sensitive questions of culture and ethnicity can and should be represented, the play tackles challenging issues with an unusual directness. The same is true of *Foreigner Complex*, although for the reader who lacks direct knowledge of the political history of Egypt getting one’s bearings is quite a challenge. It is, however, a very productive challenge. Although the pieces were originally written for a more specific readership, some of whose reactions are recorded in Nicolas Pelham’s ‘Preface’, their revision and collection into a single volume for a more general audience results in a fascinating text which (by combining historical narrative, quirky observation, overt polemic, and fantasy) undermines its own apparent didacticism to produce, paradoxically, a strong sense of commitment to the possibility of progress.

I have suggested that simple correspondences between the life and writing of Gëzim Alpion are misleading. But in finding a fundamental optimism in texts which frequently deal with violence, exploitation and tragedy it may be that what is being found is a kind of correlative of the positive outlook of a man whose own formative years were happy and

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secure, whose academic achievements have been considerable, whose perseverance has eventually brought results, and who regards his family as the greatest achievement in his life.

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