

About the Author

Gëzim I. Alpion is a dramatist, novelist, essayist and academic whose themes range far and wide: from the cultural distinctiveness of societies throughout all continents to the turmoil of individuals caught up in conflicts they cannot control (and barely understand). His work embraces informed polemics and considered reflection alike, and displays an acute respect for the power (and volatility) of the written word.

Born in Peshkopi, Albania, in 1962, he was one of four children; along with his siblings, he received unstinting encouragement from his parents, especially in the matter of studying. This created practical difficulties: between them, his father (a professional driver) and mother (a nursery nurse) had to struggle to support him, his brother and his two sisters in their academic ventures. These problems were overcome, however, enforcing his sense that family life - like his entire childhood - was happy and trouble-free. After eight years' schooling in Peshkopi, he enrolled at the Asim Vokshi Language School in Tirana, moving on to his BA in English Studies at the city's university. At the end of his second year there, an opportunity presented itself for English studies at the University of Cairo, funding for which came in the form of scholarships from the Albanian and Egyptian governments. Obtaining his BA from that University in 1989, he remained in Cairo, undertaking MA courses until 1991 and then moving on to a research studentship until 1993, during which time his areas of academic interest included the works of Lawrence, Joyce, Baldwin and Joyce Cary. He commenced his dissertation on these writers - focusing on 'The image of the Artist as a Child' - but, in September 1993, a chance presented itself to develop and complete this work in the English Department of Durham University, England. In March 1994 - in a development which itself suggests an element of the *bildungsroman* - his MA work was upgraded to doctoral level and was gradually transformed into a study of Lawrence's novels, focusing particularly on 'The Image of the Artist as a Young Man.' The degree of PhD in English Studies was conferred upon him in December 1997.

An integral part of his academic studies, the picaresque played an equally important role in his subsequent employment. Between 1997 and 2001, he has lectured in Arabic at Durham, and in English Studies at the Universities of Huddersfield and Sheffield Hallam, as well as at the University of Birmingham (Westhill) and at Newman College of Higher Education, Birmingham. Currently a lecturer at the University of Birmingham and Newman - in areas as diverse as Shakespeare, Romanticism, the Nineteenth-Century Novel, Modernism, American Literature, Film Studies and Creative Writing - he proves to be an alert, inquiring thinker and a model of scholarly probity. This view is further confirmed by his election, in 2000, to the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham.

Gëzim I. Alpion has written essays and articles on matters Albanian, Egyptian, British and (in 'The Computer Chronicle') even virtual. A keen observer of cultural mores (and eccentricities)

he has meditated upon issues as diverse as the Genesis of Miss Universe, the colourful history of Egyptian Coffee-Shops, Albania's fraught passage through the twentieth century and Britain's involvement in the Kosovan conflict. Nor do the present and recent past alone captivate his attention: in such stories as 'The Shelling of the Sphinx' (*On Magazine*, 11.4-5, 1997) he dramatizes the clash of two disparate titans from remoter times, the Sphinx and Napoleon; while in 'Foreigner Complex' (*Middle East Times*, July-August 1993), he offers a nine-part exploration of Egypt's varied fortunes, from being 'one of the foremost granaries of the Roman Empire,' through the eras of King Farouk and General Nasser and on to the present day, in which the country battles - as so many do - to maintain its identity in the face of the West's technological incursions.

As an Albanian, Gëzim I. Alpion has long been exercised by - and sorrowful at - his country's repeated but problematic attempts to understand and implement true democracy. In his article 'Albania's Sorry Century' he observes that 'Albanians have yet to learn that in democracy political rivals are opponents, not enemies.' This view becomes a major theme in *Vouchers*, but there are others. As the play deals with the complex and sensitive issue of asylum seekers in Britain, it focuses upon the line which officialdom must tread in such matters - between maintaining detachment on the one hand, and sensing the invitation to take sides on the other. And, with an issue such as this, certain voices do not merely invite - they command. The situation in which the play's officials find themselves is, at times, reminiscent of that experienced by Forster's Collector in *A Passage to India*, after the supposed incident involving Dr Aziz and Adela Quested in the Marabar Caves: 'He had constantly to remind himself that, in the eyes of the law, Aziz was not yet guilty, and the effort fatigued him.' Set against this is the exchange between the two main protagonists: the imprisoned Kosovar Albanian Leka, who has a sharp, almost feral awareness of his position and its political ramifications; and Agim, the Albanian academic domiciled in Britain, who is brought in as translator and intermediary. The characters circle each other, symbolising two different mindsets: Leka inevitably understands the full reality of the asylum seeker's position, while Agim voices the blinkered (and, at times, almost tabloid-like) attitude of those who see asylum-seekers - like other marginalised groups - as scarcely human, deserving of scorn at best, anger at worst. What gives their exchanges extra poignancy, of course, is that they are (technically) compatriots - but their vastly different experiences make it seem, at times, as though they hail from opposite ends of the galaxy.

The play's central metaphor is the voucher itself. As a symbol of marginalisation, it is profoundly eloquent. Interpreted broadly, a voucher can represent social unity, a collective experience of the same situation - for example, the general use (and abuse) of ration books in wartime. But a voucher can also divide, obliging its bearers to distinguish themselves from those around them, whose use of their native currency allows them to proclaim themselves, albeit unthinkingly, as members of the majority, people at ease with the small transactions of everyday

life - in short, people in their homeland. In the most humdrum of situations - at the supermarket checkout, in a designated shop - the production of a voucher instantly marks the individual from the mass, the excluded from the included, the lone voice from the *vox populi*.

Vouchers contributes forcefully and persuasively to the debate on asylum - and, more generally, to that other debate: about the responsibilities of human to human, and the ways in which this can so often dissolve in a haze of fear and ignorance. But that is not to say that the play is wilfully one-sided. Gëzim I. Alpion's vision is far wider than that; and, beneath the obvious concerns of the play, he tells us crucial truths about how we view those with different histories to ours, and how wrong assumptions and misinformation can sour our words to them - even before we open our mouths to speak.

Dr Michael W. Thomas, June 2001.