

Ismail Kadare

*Qui a ramen  Doruntine?* Jusuf Vrioni, transl.

Paris. Fayard. 1986. 175 pages

Once again Ismail Kadare plunges into Albania's legendary past, legendary in the purest sense. The story of Constantine and his sister Doruntine, alternatively known as Garentine, is one of the best-known in Albanian folklore - simple, yet as we see, with many possibilities:

An old woman had nine sons and one daughter. Eight of the sons had already died by the time the daughter was to marry a distant suitor. Because the aging mother was apprehensive about giving her consent to the marriage and thereby losing her daughter too, perhaps forever, the only surviving son, young Constantine, made a solemn pledge (*besa* in Albanian) to his mother to bring his sister back whenever the mother should express the desire to see her. Time passed, but of the surviving members of the bereft lineage, it was Constantine who died first. The old woman, now alone, regretted her decision, longed for her daughter, and cursed the dead Constantine for having broken his *besa*. Thereupon, Constantine, faithful beyond the grave to his pledge, rose from the tomb, mounted his horse, and set off in the night to find his sister, whom he returned to the arms of their dying mother.

Such is the Balkan legend which Kadare has skilfully transformed into the period thriller 'Doruntine' or 'Who brought Doruntine Back?' The action revolves around Captain Stres, a minor official in mediaeval Albania who is responsible for sorting out the facts of the case and preparing a report: the daughter's unexpected arrival from distant Bohemia on a misty October night, the sudden death of mother and daughter, persistent rumours of an incestuous relationship - a desire so strong as to overcome death itself - the gravestone ajar, devious attempts by Church and State, and finally, a suspect. But who did bring Doruntine back? Those who enjoyed Umberto Eco's *Name of the rose* will not be disappointed by the atmosphere of mediaeval intrigue which Kadare offers.

Jusuf Vrioni's translation of yet another of Ismail Kadare's voyages into the myths and mists of his country's past is eminently palatable when compared to many translations from Tiran , which often have the effect of discouraging interested foreign readers once and for all from delving into the pleasures of Albanian literature. It is to be hoped that not only Ismail Kadare, but also other contemporary Albanian novelists and poets will soon find their deserved place on English-language bookshelves. For the time being, aside from Kadare's *The general of the dead army*, Western readers will have to content themselves with French translations.

First published in: World Literature Today 60.2 (spring 1987)