

Ismail Kadare
Epoch of writings
[*Koha e shkrimeve*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1986. 408 pages

Several completely different epochs of Albania's 'haunted history' are unravelled in Kadare's *Koha e shkrimeve* (Epoch of writings), a collection of two shorter novels, eight short stories and three sketches of his recent travels.

The first novel *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (The wedding procession turned to ice) evokes the explosive events of the Albanian uprising in the southern Yugoslav province of Kosovo in March/April 1981. The Albanian demand for republic status within the Yugoslav federation met with severe reprisals and the imposition of martial law by the Serbian authorities in Belgrade. Tension between the Albanians and Serbs, who have shared the plains of Kosovo for centuries, reached yet another tragic zenith that year; two peoples pitted against one another instead of united in a marriage of harmonious co-existence. It is to such a union, rendered impossible by circumstance, that the title of the novel alludes. According to legend, the 'oras', spirits of Albanian mythology, would turn a wedding procession to ice before it reached the bride's home in order to impede what was simply not to be.

Kadare's allegory hovers over an unpleasant reality. We follow two days in the life of Teuta Shkreli, surgeon at a Prishtinë hospital during the bloody events, who finds herself caught up in a web of intrigue and incrimination. Who was responsible for the extra beds being set up in the ward the night *before* the uprising? Who removed the list of patients' names from the hospital files? Who was providing medical care to enemies of the State? And were Serbians being sterilized by Albanian doctors, or vice versa? Teuta, aware of impending repression, senses that her allegiance to her people and to her profession outweighs her passive loyalty to the State.

Kadare is openly tendentious in this novel, in particular in his description of drunken Serbian ruffians longing for the good old days of Rankovic, the head of the Yugoslav security police, who was responsible for the systematic persecution of the Albanian population until his dismissal in July 1966. But one could not expect an Albanian writer of Kadare's stature to remain indifferent to an Aeschylusian tragedy which has taken place so recently and to which the final act has yet to be written.

Viti i mbrapshtë (The bad year) takes us back to 1914, a dark page not only in the annals of European history, but a chaotic and decisive year in the struggle of the fledgling Albanian State for survival. What evils did the comet crossing the Albanian skies portend? It was anarchy that reigned and not the German Prince Wilhelm zu Wied, the choice of the European powers, who after much delay, disembarked at the port of Durrës (Durazzo) in March 1914 to accept the crown in his unknown little kingdom. His government under Turhan Pasha, composed for the most part of rivalling feudal landowners, controlled however only a small part of the country and the proposed international control commission was unable to cope with the multitude of conflicting interests, not simply among the Albanians themselves, but also among the French, British and Dutch 'military advisors' and the ever expanding neighbouring States. In the midst of such chaos, rumours spread like wildfire. Was Prince Wilhelm to have himself circumcised as a gesture of good will towards the majority Moslem community, or had he perhaps been circumcised in secret already? Who knew but his wife, and perhaps the lovely Sara Stringa whose parties and receptions were the focus of social life for the rather skimmed crème de la crème of Albania's newly improvised capital? As the warlords continued their struggle for power in the mountains, and Montenegrin, Serbian and Greek forces descended upon the country, the

resident diplomatic corps was busy trying to interpret the possible significance of a plate of baklava presented to the British mission by the Turkish consul. After six months of inglorious rule, the well-meaning Prince was to set sail from Durrës, leaving a regency council to cope with the country's affairs, and the mysterious comet gradually sank below the horizon.

Of the short stories, *Sjellësi i fatkeqësisë* (The bearer of ill-tidings) once again takes up the theme of the individual ironically entangled in the machinery of overriding interests of State as Haxhi Mileti, a travelling salesman in the Ottoman Empire, purveys his veils to the outlying Balkan provinces.

Appendixed are sketches of Kadare's recent travels to his home town of Gjirokastrë, to neighbouring Greece and to Paris where he records his impressions of meetings with actors Marcello Mastroianni and Michel Piccoli among others.

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