

Ismail Kadare
Aeschylus or the eternal loser
[*Eschyle ou l'éternel perdant*].
Alexandre Zotos, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1988. 128 pages

For centuries, indeed millennia, the Mediterranean, marginally Balkan Greeks and the Balkan, marginally Mediterranean Albanians have regarded one another with a good deal of mistrust and skepticism. The Greeks have often been fearful of their wild and politically unpredictable northern neighbours of predominately Moslem origin and turned their backs on what they regarded as a cultural wasteland beyond the Hellenic pale. The Albanians, for their part, have always had qualms about Greek chauvinism and cultural imperialism fostered primarily by the Orthodox church which, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, did its utmost to stifle all signs of independent cultural activity in southern Albania. Despite this long period of stagnation and hostility, Greco-Albanian relations have improved substantially over the last five years and led to renewed ties, as if with an old and forgotten acquaintance. The 'de jure' state of war between them was terminated recently with reciprocal visits by political leaders from the two countries, territorial claims have been put aside and a new border crossing was opened. Trade and cultural relations have begun to flourish and the two peoples are rediscovering one another for what they have always been: neighbours. Even Enver Hoxha stressed this in one of his last works, a book on relations with Greece entitled *Dy popuj miq* (Two friendly peoples).

It is nonetheless somewhat of a pleasant surprise that Ismail Kadare too, known up to now for his novels of Albanian history, short stories and poetry, should turn his attention southward and present us with *Eschyle ou l'éternel perdant* (Aeschylus or the eternal loser), an extensive and well-researched essay on the ancient Greek dramatist (c. 525-456 B.C.).

What has attracted Kadare to the father of tragedy whom he calls an eternal loser, a hybrid being, half bathed in light and half enveloped in eternal shade? Of the 80 plays Aeschylus wrote, only 7 have survived the centuries, for one reason or another. This fact alone offers enough scope for imagination and speculation. How is one to approach Aeschylus who is but a shadow of himself? What would the literary world be like with all his plays and is a world conceivable at all without him? Kadare revives the past masterfully and, on the basis of the little material available, delineates a plausible personality for the founder of classical tragedy.

Some of the pathos of ancient Greece indeed becomes more comprehensible, more obvious, when seen through neighbouring Albanian eyes. The exotic opulence of the royal court of Xerxes, as portrayed in *The Persians*, reminds one of Albania's long experience at the hands of the Sultans and the Sublime Porte a millennium later. The tragedy of the house of Atreus in the *Oresteia*, the torment of individual family members passed on from one generation to the next, finds its notable reflection in the Albanian 'besa', absolute fidelity to one's sworn duty and one's destiny, a custom which entangled generations in the northern Albanian Alps in bloody vendetta and wiped out whole populations. And does the Homeric epic not find its last scion in the heroic and epic poetry of the Albanians and southern Slavs?

Many are the parallels between such seemingly diverse countries and ages, but more intriguing are the parallels in this meeting of minds between the Greek tragedian and the Illyrian bard himself. Kadare writes,

"As with every great writer, Aeschylus was conscious of the fact that, with respect to officials who, whatever their rank may be, represented power, he was a prince, not only of art, but of all his nation. As such, he ranked higher than any statesman, and the destiny

of Greece weighed perhaps more heavily upon his shoulders than upon all the mechanisms of the Greek State."

Eschyle ou l'éternel perdant (Alb. *Eskili, ky humbës i madh*) is not Kadare's only contribution to his country's rediscovery of Greece. He has translated the *Oresteia* into Albanian and was the major contributor to a recent anthology of modern Greek poetry (*Antologji e poezisë greke*, Tiranë 1986) for which he translated folk songs and popular verse from the Akritas cycle onwards, as well as the poetry of Kostis Palamas, Constantine Cavafy, Miltiades Malakasis, Lambro Porphyras, Kostas Ouranis, George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis. The result is, however, not always what one would expect from a writer of Kadare's stature. Constantine Cavafy would turn over in his Alexandrian grave on hearing the key line missing from his 'Waiting for the Barbarians': "And now, what will become of us without the barbarians? Those people were a kind of solution". Kadare's version for some reason omits the last sentence.

Even worse is his puzzling addition of a line Cavafy never wrote and which appears in no other translation of the latter's classic poem 'Ithaca'. Equating the voyage to Ithaca with the course of experience, aging and life itself, the Greek poet concludes: "Wise as you have become, with such experience, you will come to understand what these Ithacas mean." Kadare's translation concludes, "Wise as you have become, with such experience, you will come to understand what these Ithacas mean, you will come to understand what the Fatherland means."

One wonders what obscure nationalist forces have led Kadare to such a radically new interpretation of the 'old man of the city'. Could it be that even he, the prince of his nation in Aeschylusian terms, has had to bow to the pressure of some narrow-minded party dogmatist, to "officials who represent power?"

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