

Ismail Kadare
The concert
[*Koncert në fund të dimrit*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1988. 704 pages

Since 1963, Ismail Kadare has established a firm reputation as the master of the Albanian novel. His first work, and perhaps still his best known, *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (The general of the dead army) dealt with the immediate post-war years, during which we follow an Italian general in the company of a priest to Albania to exhume and repatriate the remains of his fallen soldiers. Kadare's second great novel of modern Albanian history, *Dimri i madh* (The great winter), focussed on events leading to the dramatic break of relations between tiny Albania and the mighty Soviet Union in 1961, the divorce between the elephant and the mouse.

This year, Kadare offers us a new epic of recent Albanian history in *Koncert në fund të dimrit* (Concert at the end of winter, Engl. *The concert*), the symbolic title of which alone leads us to assume a continuity with *Dimri i madh*. And so it is. Just as *Dimri i madh* observed and studied the rupture of relations with the Soviet Union in all its ramifications, *Koncert në fund të dimrit* constitutes a monumental review of Albania's equally dramatic break with Mao Tse Tung's China in 1978. Kadare indeed began the 700-page novel at the time of the rupture of the Sino-Albanian alliance and only completed it in 1988.

Relations between China and Albania had begun to sour with China's gradual opening to the West in the seventies. Its historic invitation to President Nixon to visit the Middle Kingdom was more or less the last straw. Enver Hoxha and the Albanian Party of Labour ceased viewing their only ally as a bastion of Marxism-Leninism and decried 'revisionism' once again. The political scenario was virtually the same as it had been for the rupture with the Soviet Union: an ideological divergence of views, power politics, a strong-willed Enver Hoxha and the final departure of Chinese specialists from their only stronghold in the Mediterranean. The basic fabric of *Koncert në fund të dimrit* and narrative techniques employed in it also show strong parallels to *Dimri i madh*. Indeed, Kadare's epic version of events of but a decade ago, revives many of the familiar characters from *Dimri i madh*: Besnik Struga, Skënder Bermema and Marku, all seventeen years older and wiser. The novel is of course not lacking in polemics and unfortunately not devoid of anti-Chinese overtones either. Passages which criticize Mao Tse-Tung, the Cultural Revolution, the persecution of intellectuals in China and Chinese attitudes to Albania occasionally lapse into a Fu Manchu cliché of the 'inscrutable' Chinese character - so different from the European!

Kadare loves and generously employs symbols. The little lemon tree delivered to Silva Dibra's door at the start of the novel begins to bear fruit at the conclusion.

"Silva looked at the little tree in compassion. The whole world resounded with the din of meetings, plots, orchestras and fears, whereas the lemon tree, ignored as it was out on a corner of the balcony, was looking after what it had been raised for as a seedling: the production of its own fruit... Lost in thought, Silva smiled. Perhaps the world seemed incomprehensible to the lemon tree, too, if it had a conscience at all. As she closed the door to the balcony, for some reason she recalled the words of old Mrs Hasije: 'The Chinese? There were no Chinese here. We only saw them in our dreams'."

The Albanians are avid readers of Ismail Kadare. Virtually all literary critics in Albania and in Kosovo put him at least several notches above every other Albanian prose writer. The

present work in a first edition of 20,000 copies was sold out in Tiranë bookstores within hours of its appearance on the market at the beginning of September 1988. In Yugoslavia, on the other hand, Kadare is a 'persona non grata' for political reasons, in particular, no doubt, for the publication of his novel *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (The wedding procession turned to ice). It goes without saying that none of his works is available in Kosovo or in the other Albanian-speaking regions of the troubled Yugoslav federation at the moment, much to the distress of Albanian readers there.

First published in: World Literature Today 63.2 (spring 1989)