

Ismail Kadare
The H dossier
[*Dosja H*].
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1990. 232 pages

In 1953, Milman Parry and Albert Lord caught the attention of the academy world with the publication of their *Serbo-Croatian heroic songs* which demonstrated that the Homeric tradition of epic verse was still alive and well in the Balkans. Their Sandjak bard Salih Ugljanin (b. 1866) was quite capable of reciting hours of Serbo-Croatian and Albanian epic verse on heroic deeds of times past.

The origins of epic verse in the Balkans are rather mysterious and controversial. To the outside observer, it is of little consequence whether the Albanian *këngë kreshnikesh* took their inspiration from the better known Serbo-Croatian *junačke pjesme* or vice versa, but for scholars from the Balkans, many of whom still delight in the nationalist 'I got there first!' syndrome, the historical origins of all cultural phenomena can be of explosive political significance. The heartland of the epic bards seems to have been the mountainous terrain of Bosnia, the Sandjak of Novi Pazar, Montenegro and northern Albania, although most of the Albanian epic fragments are situated curiously enough in Jutbinë (Udbina), 50 km. northeast of Zadar in Croatia.

Another question which has been raised is that of a possible link between this Balkan heroic verse and the venerable epics of the ancient Greeks. Has the Homeric epic found its last scion in the heroic and epic poetry still sung by the Albanians and southern Slavs? It is a hypothesis which has particularly fascinated Albanian writer Ismail Kadare.

In the novel *Dosja H* (The H dossier), two fictive Irish-American scholars, Max Roth and Willy Norton, set off for the isolated mountains of pre-war northern Albania, tape recorder in hand, in search of the homeland of the epic. The two folklorists are intent on investigating the possibility of a direct link between Homeric verse and the heroic songs declaimed by the aloof Albanian mountaineers on their one-string 'lahutas'. The fieldtrip is somewhat of a puzzle to the Albanian authorities, in particular to the sub-prefect of the region who, just to be on the safe side, seconds a bumbling secret agent in the figure of Dullë Baxhaja, to observe and report on their activities and movements. The sub-prefect's wife Daisy, reminiscent of Diana Vorpsi in *Broken April*, is equally fascinated by the presence of the two male scholars. Suspicion is soon to arise among the native population that the intruders from abroad are indeed spies. Their quarters at the 'Buffalo Bone Inn' are eventually ransacked and the recording equipment which had captured their voices, destroyed. End of mission to Albania.

Dosja H, already available in the masterful French translation of Jusuf Vrioni as *Le Dossier H* (Paris 1989), as well as in Swedish and Greek, is a delightful satire on two innocent foreigners endeavouring to fathom the Albanian soul and, in particular, on the foibles of Albanian life at which foreign visitors often marvel: the Balkan love of rumours and gossip, administrative incompetence, and a childish fear or suspicion on the part of the authorities of everything foreign. By placing his tale in the 1930s once again, Kadare is able to take a safe sideswipe at his country's isolationist proclivities and at the bungling interference of the security apparatus in all spheres of contemporary life.

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