

Shaip Beqiri

The challenge of genius: Kadare, exile, Kosovo

[*Sfida e gjeniut: Kadare. ekzili. Kosova*].

Prishtinë. Gjon Buzuku. 1991. 491 pages

The modest and mild-mannered Abdullah Zeneli (b. 1952) cuts an unlikely figure as a pioneer and saviour of the nation. After two years of repression and terror in Kosovo in which over 100,000 people have now been fired from their jobs for the sin of being Albanian, in which the university and many Albanian schools have been shut down, and in which writers, editors and publishers, following months without their salaries, have been forced out of their offices at the state-owned Rilindja Press building in Prishtinë, home of virtually all Albanian-language publications in Yugoslavia, a cultural genocide would seem only a matter of time. To add to the tragedy in Kosovo, publishing in Albania itself has ground to a halt, too, where after forty-six years of Stalinism, lethargy instead of euphoria has set in. In both countries, the introduction of a market economy is proving to be a sluggish and painful process. In early 1991, however, Abdullah Zeneli founded the Gjon Buzuku Press, the first ever private Albanian publishing company which has, against all odds, been operating successfully. Having made a provocative start with the republication in Kosovo of the forbidden novel *Gjarpijt e gjakut* (The snakes of vendetta), written by long-time dissident and human rights activist Adem Demaçi, and now with the short stories of the equally proscribed Martin Camaj, pioneer Zeneli has more than once had Serbian automatic rifles at the back of his neck and has been taken off by the secret police for interrogation.

*Sfida e gjeniut: Kadare, ekzili, Kosova* (The challenge of genius: Kadare, exile, Kosovo), a new monograph on Ismail Kadare by active writer and journalist Shaip Beqiri (b. 1954), would seem, at first glance, less controversial in comparison. Kadare's works were outlawed in Kosovo for a few years for his candid criticism of Serbian human rights violations and, in particular, for his short novel 'The wedding procession turned to ice' (*Krushqit janë të ngrirë*) about the 1981 uprising in Prishtinë, but many of his books have been republished recently without any problems. One of the ironies of fate and small gains from the total state of siege is that the communist authorities in Belgrade, now on the defensive and too preoccupied with their Croatian neighbours, no longer have the time or the technical capacity to read through every Albanian publication, to listen to the words of every song sung in the cafés of Prishtinë and Prizren, to repress every nascent sign of Albanian nationalism and throw all the transgressive editors, publishers, singers and musicians into jail.

It will therefore be to the utter delight of the Albanian reading public in Kosovo (left unwarned by the cover, title page and introduction of the book) to find a full-length reprint of the above-mentioned explosively political novel tucked away in the second half of the book. Shaip Beqiri and Abdullah Zeneli have obviously pulled off a coup.

'The challenge of genius' offers an extensive compilation of material on Kadare, with a strong focus on Kosovo. The book includes the writer's articles on the Kosovo question, interviews given by him from 1971 to 1991, declarations, essays and reports on his decision to seek political asylum in France in October 1990, and articles of literary criticism by Kosovo authors on his individual works, as well as a few poems. As such, it does not contain anything particularly new on Kadare, or on Kosovo for that matter, with the exception of the publication here of the above-mentioned novel.

In my review of 'The wedding procession turned to ice' (autumn 1987), I criticised its author at the time for being "openly tendentious in this novel, in particular in his description of

drunken Serbian ruffians longing for the good old days of Rankovic." I would like to take this opportunity to withdraw this point of criticism, made in my naivety as to the basic goodness of human nature.

First published in: World Literature Today 66.3 (summer 1992)