

Ismail Kadare  
Invitation to the studio  
[*Ftesë në studio*].  
Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1990. 328 pages

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Albanian spring. Chronicle, letters, reflections  
[*Printemps albanais. Chronique, lettres, réflexions*].  
Michel Métais, transl.  
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 321 pages

Ismail Kadare  
From one December to the next. Chronicle, correspondence, reflections  
[*Nga një dhjetor në tjetrin. Kronikë, këmbim letrash, persiatje*]  
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 262 pages

Eastern Europe breathed a sigh of relief when Joseph Stalin died in 1953. In Albania, incredible as it may now seem in retrospect - even to Albanians themselves - orthodox Stalinism survived unscathed and unabated for a further thirty-seven years, bequeathing the country with a Sub-Saharan economy, little intellectual leadership and a culture in ruins.

For the first time in their lives, Albanian writers now have freedom of expression, and many are not entirely certain how to deal with it. It is no wonder that political journalism has become the immediate outlet of artistic creativity in this age of national calamity. Despite his no doubt sincere wish to be nothing but a writer, Ismail Kadare, too, has turned to politics to offer a personal literary digestion of the dramatic political upheaval which finally took place in Albania in 1990-1991.

*Ftesë në studio* (Invitation to the studio) was Kadare's last publication in Tiranë before his departure in the autumn of 1990. It contains a selection of thirty-two poems by the author who has otherwise neglected this genre in recent years; verse translations from the Greek, Chinese, French, Romanian and Russian; and most importantly, a series of reflections on literature and the arts, and current events. As Tiranë literature went, *Ftesë në studio* was extraordinarily candid at the time of publication and broke many a taboo. It is a subjective account which the author also takes advantage of to settle some old scores with rival writers such as B. Xh. (Bilal Xhaferi, who managed to flee to the United States) and K. R. (Kapllan Resuli), K. T. (Kasëm Trebeshina) and A. P. (Arshi Pipa), all of whom spent long years in prison camps. One wonders at times at the depth of Kadare's Gjirokastrian vindictiveness. Trebeshina he calls a "mediocre writer but with boundless ambition" and Pipa "diabolical; to his misfortune mediocre; a denunciator; an absolute spy; an old hyena; a new Salieri; for whom the name Arshi Pipic, when the final consonant is removed, would be a more accurate description of the short unpleasant noise he makes in this life."

*Printemps albanais* (Engl. transl. *Albanian spring*) follows where *Ftesë në studio* left off. At the end of October 1990, a mere two months before the final collapse of the dictatorship, Ismail Kadare applied for political asylum in Paris. Here, the literary 'prince of the nation' completed a personal chronicle of events covering the transitional period from December 1989 to December 1990. Published in Paris in February 1991 together with the Albanian-language version entitled *Nga një dhjetor në tjetrin* (From one December to the next), it is the first serious work of its genre in Albanian literature. Kadare begins,

*"These are the notes of a writer and, although the events in question have nothing to do with literature, they should be read from this perspective only. Seen otherwise, they could give a false impression, like a pair of glasses found by chance which rarely fit the eyes of the person who finds them."*

The decisive twelve months in question were marked in particular by the initial panic caused among the 'red aristocracy' by the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu in December 1989 and by the wave of emigration via the German, Italian and French Embassies in July 1990, the straw that finally broke the camel's back. Kadare also publishes his correspondence with President Ramiz Alia in May 1990 as his contribution to the Albanian spring which followed a great winter. The second part of the book contains reflections on the tenacious Stalinist regime in Albania and on the nature of dictatorship in general.

Though his merit in raising the level of Albanian literature is incontestable, many observers at home and abroad, among whom is Ardian Klosi, one of Tiranë's many critical voices, have been questioning whether the former court poet of the regime and pet writer of Enver Hoxha was actually the closet dissident he would have one believe he was. It would, however, be too facile for foreign critics to endeavour to pass judgment on anyone who survived the horror and brutality of the Hoxha regime. The spectre of Václav Havel need not torment Ismail Kadare. Albania was never Czechoslovakia where remnants of civilization lingered throughout the decades of dictatorship.

The tone of *Printemps albanais* is at times whiney and at times acrimonious. Again it is not devoid of the 'below the belt' polemics and petty vendettas noted in *Ftesë në studio*. It is, at any rate, fascinating reading for anyone interested in modern Albania and this, in the final analysis, is all that counts.

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