

Ismail Kadare
The weight of the cross
[*Pesha e kryqit*].
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 213 pages

Ismail Kadare
Invitation to the writer's studio, followed by The weight of the cross
[*Invitation à l'atelier de l'écrivain suivi de le poids de la croix*]. Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1991. 558 pages

In no other city of Albania has the fight for survival been harder than in rocky Gjirokaštër near the Greek border. If Korçë in the southeast was blessed with a relative degree of prosperity (in Albanian terms) and Shkodër in the north knew how to survive the buffets of fate with a certain Mediterranean levity and nonchalance, Gjirokaštër epitomized the struggle and severity of being. This struggle is ingrained in the Gjirokaštërian mentality. Its people are go-getters, competitive and successful and perhaps, as their detractors note, somewhat less generous and hospitable than elsewhere, not as *bujar*, as the Albanians would say.

Gjirokaštër on the mountainside under the glaring southern sun has given birth to two figures of note who, though vastly different in their activities and talents, have set indelible marks on twentieth-century Albania: Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) and writer Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), born a mere two hundred meters from one another in houses, as Kadare tells us, linked by a street called *Sokaku i të Marrëve* (Alley of the Insane).

Pesha e kryqit (The weight of the cross) is Kadare's second work published in Parisian exile. It was originally conceived of as an appendix to *Ftesë në studio* (Invitation to the studio) and, no doubt for this reason, the two works are published together in the French-language edition here. These two volumes plus *Nga një dhjetor në tjetrin* (From one December to the next / *Printemps albanais*, Engl. transl. *Albanian spring*) constitute, at any rate, a sort of politico-literary trilogy. Although *Pesha e kryqit* is no less spiteful and acrimonious than the earlier two works, it does, at the same time, reveal many other facets of Kadare's personality, in particular his personal anguish and suffering during the dire years of living hell for Albanian intellectuals. It is the autobiography of a novelist under Stalinism who managed to publish his works but was never really certain what reaction the demi-gods of the Politburo, and in particular the Omnipotent himself, would take. Though it was *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (The general of the dead army) which brought Kadare international fame, he tells us quite convincingly that it was *Dimri i madh* (The great winter) which ensured his physical survival. Enver Hoxha appreciated the portrait made of him in 'The great winter' and did not wish to jeopardize it. Kadare's liquidation would have been incompatible with the survival of the novel, a friend of the writer notes. Some of Kadare's other works never saw the light of day at all and are only being discovered now.

Albanians look up to Ismail Kadare as the literary 'prince of the nation' in the hope that he can give written expression to the trauma which they endured for almost half a century and which will linger on with them for many years to come. Indeed Kadare has succeeded in casting light on the inconceivably grim realities of 'people's power', though in a highly personal and subjective manner.

What the critical reader will miss in this work is a loftier vision of things. This is what separates *Pesha e kryqit* from the classics of eastern European liberation literature. The world of Kadare remains focussed entirely on the personal dichotomy he creates between his 'friends' and

his 'sworn enemies'. Nowhere does he make reference to the wounded soul of the nation, to the weight of the cross borne by his people during forty-six years of mute horror or even to the much more concrete agony of many of his fellow writers and artists. He is at all moments too obsessed - and one can't blame him - with his own survival. Only time will tell if Kadare can extricate himself from his personal trauma and use his eloquent voice and talent to express what still must be said.

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