

Besnik Mustafaj.

*Petite saga carcérale*. Elizabeth Chabuel, tr.

Arles. Actes Sud. 1994. 214 pages. 118 FRF. ISBN 2-7427-0236-9.

Although recognized in Albania for a decade now as an emerging writer of note, Besnik Mustafaj has only made his appearance on the international scene since the tardy arrival of democracy in his country. Three of his prose works have since appeared in French translations: the novel *Un été sans retour*, Arles 1992 (Summer of no return) [see WLT 67:2, p. 419-420], a collection of perspicuous political essays entitled *Entre crimes et mirages, L'Albanie*, Arles 1992 (Albania, between crimes and mirages) and, a year later, *Les cigales de la canicule*, Arles 1993 (The cicadas of the dog-days). The latter novel focuses on the havoc which rabid collectivization wreaked upon the identity of the Albanian peasantry during the communist period.

The overwhelming tragedy of Albania's recent past still weighs heavily upon the soul of Besnik Mustafaj, as it must upon any sincere writer who survived. Mustafaj has noted, "Although I was never in prison myself, its shadow followed me everywhere, as it did all Albanians. It is not easy for us, even in a democracy, to throw off the darkness which enveloped us."

*Petite saga carcérale* (Little prison saga), Mustafaj's third novel in translation, is a triptych on the theme of prison in the broadest sense. It is not simply physical incarceration or any particular political system that Mustafaj contemplates, but the consequences of imprisonment for society at large. In the first tale, set at the turn of the century in the northern Albanian mountains, young Omer Tzatza envisions his imprisoned father Oso as a rebel leader and hero. When the lad and his mother finally manage to visit the prisoner, they encounter a wretched and dishevelled old man whining and lamenting his fate. Omer's world is shattered. In the second tale, set in the communist dictatorship, we encounter the imprisoned Luli who has received permission to spend a night with his wife Linda. Secretly he realizes that jail has blunted all of his feelings and that intimacy, emotional or physical, is an unattainable goal.

Although Mustafaj's theme is incarceration, the actual prisons are secondary to the narrative, and are rarely described. As the author, now his country's ambassador to France, himself stressed, "My novel does not deal with any particular prison, but with political imprisonment as a system. In Albania, for almost a century, we fostered a national tradition of political imprisonment. Indeed it is the only institution in the country which survived intact, being handed down from one regime to the next, from monarchy to fascism and from fascism to communism... I have always been fascinated by the continuity of imprisonment and have endeavoured to investigate how each generation has experienced it. I have come to realize that the eternal spectre of imprisonment, as a threat to the individual, has not encouraged any valor and defiance, but has rather laid the foundations for a school of submissiveness in which all of my characters are but victims."

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