

Rexhep Qosja
Death comes with such eyes
[*La mort me vient de ces yeux-là*].
Christian Gut, transl.
Paris. Gallimard. 1994. 321 pages

It has now been exactly twenty years since the first publication of Rexhep Qosja's *Vdekja më vjen prej syve të tillë* (Death comes with such eyes), perhaps the most powerful and engaging prose work to come out of Kosovo since the rise of Albanian literature there. The novel, or as the author more aptly calls it "thirteen tales which could become a novel", was written in the years following the Brioni Plenum of July 1966, which put an end to the reign of Yugoslav vice-president Aleksandar Rankovic (1909-1983) and which allowed the two to three million Albanians in Yugoslavia to breathe somewhat more freely.

'Death comes with such eyes' is the fictive tale of school teacher and writer Xhezair Gjika who is caught up in a frightening web of political intrigue and betrayal. It is also a literary digestion of the sombre Rankovic era. Gjika's is the fate of the intellectual in a totalitarian state, to be hunted down, interrogated and tortured by the secret police. His treacherous crimes consist of his 'non-conformist' writing and a dream he mistakenly told to a friend.

Writer Rexhep Qosja (b. 1936) is one of the most eminent and prolific literary critics in the Balkans. An academician and former director of the Albanological Institute in Prishtinë, Qosja is author of anthologies and numerous scholarly monographs, including a three-volume history of Albanian literature in the romantic period. His recent 500-page monograph *Populli i ndaluar*, Prishtinë 1990 (The proscribed nation), chronicles Kosovo's hopes and anguish in a disintegrating Yugoslavia. Now somewhat of a father figure of the nation, Qosja advocates peaceful but more active opposition to Serbian colonial rule than the passive resistance propagated by President Ibrahim Rugova and the present Kosovo government in exile.

The French translation of this novel by Christian Gut, complete with a preface by Ismail Kadare, is the first western translation of a major work of Kosovo Albanian prose and, as such, is extremely welcome. The author was unable to travel to Paris for presentation of his book, nor is he allowed to leave Kosovo at all. After his trip to Tiranë last year, the Belgrade government confiscated Qosja's passport, as they do to all Kosovo Albanians who venture to leave 'Yugoslavia' without the Serbian exit visa for which they alone are obliged to apply.

In March 1994, Professor Qosja was present at and injured during one of the ultimate acts of barbarity in the conscious annihilation of Kosovo Albanian culture. The Belgrade authorities, after closing down radio, television and higher education for the Albanian majority, had served notice, quite coincidentally, that they also needed the modern structure housing the venerable Albanological Institute in Prishtinë. Researchers and staff at the Institute had been working magnanimously for the last three years, deprived not only of their salaries, but also of heating and light. On 8 March, a Serbian paramilitary unit, forcing its way into the building, beat up and expelled the occupants, among whom was Rexhep Qosja, under the very eyes of the (Serbian) police. Arbitrary arrests and torture continue in Kosovo in an ongoing saga.

In view of the resumption of mass repression in Kosovo, now even more intense and systematic than in the Rankovic era, Rexhep Qosja's 'Death comes with such eyes' has taken on the very dimensions of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

First published in: World Literature Today 69.1 (winter 1995)