

Ismail Kadare.

Poèmes, 1957-1997. Version française établie par Claude Durand et l'auteur avec la collaboration de Mira Meksi, Edmond Tupja et Jusuf Vroni. Préface de Alain Bosquet. Paris. Fayard. 1997. 153 pp. ISBN 2-213-59938-6. 130 FRF.

The international reception of Ismail Kadare's works over the last thirty years has been mixed. In the Albanian and French-speaking worlds, he is and remains *the* Albanian prose writer par excellence and has enjoyed wide acclamation. The English, German, Italian and Spanish-speaking publics have been more reserved, though this is understandable because of the paucity of readable translations until recently (literary translators from the Albanian are a rare breed indeed). But with a wide variety of works, such as *Chronicle in Stone* (New York 1987), *Broken April* (New York 1990), *The Concert* (New York 1994), *Albanian Spring* (London 1994), *The Palace of Dreams* (London 1996), *The File on H* (London 1997) and *The Three-Arched Bridge* (New York 1997), having been published over the last decade, English-speaking readers have begun to take note of Ismail Kadare, even though they are doing so at a period which is comparatively late in the Albanian author's literary career.

It may come as somewhat of a surprise to the Western reader to learn that the Albanian prose writer par excellence made his mark on Albanian literature, in the early years at least, not as a novelist but as a poet. Together with Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) and Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931), Kadare formed the trio of talented young poets who in 1961, perhaps unwittingly, caused a minor revolution in early Stalinist letters and set modern Albanian verse on its course, steering past the looming icebergs of staid political conformity and meaningless panegyrics. It was thus entirely as a poet that he first won over the hearts of the Albanian reader.

Since the launching of his career as an international, or should one simply say French writer, poetry has, perhaps understandably, fallen by the wayside in Kadare's literary activities. For this, one can postulate two reasons: firstly, poets rarely succeed in foreign translations and secondly, though it is the *élan vital* of Albanian letters, poetry is by no means a mainstream preoccupation in the Western world. Accordingly, Fayard's initial attempt to interest the public in Kadare's verse, in the volume *Poèmes, 1958-1988* (Paris 1989), did not prove a great success. Kadare was simply too well known as a best-selling novelist for his readers to bother indulging in the esoteric pleasures of his verse, and this, in a not always felicitous translation.

Now, a decade later, a second attempt is being made with the volume *Poèmes, 1957-1997*. The present selection of 79 poems from the years between 1958 (not 1957) and 1997 is basically a second edition of the 1989 version, with the same discreet cover and the same introduction by Alain Bosquet. As opposed to the earlier edition, however, the poems are presented this time in chronological order and, in order to justify a new edition, 18 new poems have been added, mostly from the years 1981 to 1991.

The new poems accompany Kadare through a decisive decade, both for himself as a writer now in exile and for the Albanians as a people. Since the collapse of the isolationist dictatorship in 1989-1990, the once proud 'sons of the eagle' have begun wandering as unwanted refugees through "winter in a united Europe," migrating rather "comme une couvée de jeunes hiboux dispersés." A number of poems, which the author tells us were written under the dictatorship but not published at the time, contain political allusions not unlike the ones we find in his prose works. 'La tombe,' written in 1986, testifies to Kadare's tacit refusal to submit to the collective folly which befell his people for half a century: "Dehors on dresse la pyramide de la honte. / Attristé, je referme les fenêtres / Sur les hurlements, les clameurs, les ovations, / Afin que ni le bruit, ni la poussière de l'époque ne pénètrent" (p. 126). The

construction of the pyramid-shaped Museum of Enver Hoxha in Tirana was also used as a theme for his allegorical novel *The Pyramid* (see WLT 67.3, 1993, p. 648). Other poems would seem to require more detailed explanatory notes to be fully appreciated by a foreign public.

Throughout the work, both in the old and new poems, hovers a sense of loneliness, a pale token of Kadare's solitary struggle with himself and with the world around him. He is most convincing in moments of quiet despair, staring at the rain as it beats against a windowpane or pondering in the waiting room of a gloomy airport.

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