

Fatos Kongoli.

*L'ombre de l'autre*. Edmond Tupja, tr.

Paris. Rivages. 1998. 258 pp. ISBN 2-7436-0360-7. 129 FRF.

Readers who savoured Kongoli's first novel translated into French, *Le paumé*, 1997 (see WTL 71:4, p. 842-843), will be equally enthralled by his second, *L'ombre de l'autre*, the French translation of *Kufoma* (The corpse, Tirana 1994), which has clear affinities with its predecessor, both with respect to Kongoli's now crystallized and somewhat more elaborate narrative style, and to his innate preoccupations.

Protagonist Festim Gurabardhi is another loser, caught up in the inhumane machinery of the last decade of the Stalinist dictatorship in Albania. As an orphan in the fifties he could never understand why his parents, killed in a car crash eight months after his birth, had given him the name Festim, meaning 'feast, celebration.' What was there to celebrate? "My childhood was endless solitude in boarding-schools, refectories and dormitories which made the solitary souls in them even lonelier." He observed his playmates slit the throats of cats in the street, observed his brother Abel being arrested and taken away in a sinister black limousine, and then, as an adult employed at the state-run publishing company, he observed himself ... being observed.

The Communist dictatorship in Albania was the perfection of insanity. Few nations ever underwent the horrors that the Albanians experienced for so many decades under their red sultan, Enver Hoxha. What the country produced more than anything was paranoia and schizophrenia. Fatos Kongoli is at his best in portraying this very atmosphere, in providing a detailed autopsy of an unending nightmare. Intellectual life in Albania, or what remained of it after the countless arrests, purges and suicides, was concentrated in the Tirana publishing companies. There, under the thumb of boorish directors and under the constant observation of spies and submissive apparatchiks, the nation's traumatized writers and translators were assembled to edit the sage works of the supreme leader and other members of the politbureau. Like the characters of an ancient tragedy, they had resigned themselves to their fates and capitulated, emotionally and intellectually. In the macabre and Kafkaesque game of cats and mice which Kongoli portrays, Festim and his colleagues are destined to play both roles, that of the victim and that of the perpetrator. The metaphorical background is grey and realistic, depressing even for those who knew Albania at the time: the sombre and filthy hallways, the furtive drunkenness, sordid copulation in the director's office, and the eternal stench of the rat-infested toilets. Festim could not help but sense the unyielding glance of state prosecutor Valmir D., his one-time childhood friend, now turned 'grand inquisitor.' Valmir had been observing him for years and was now ready to make his move.

Fatos Kongoli's Albanian precursor on the Western market, Ismail Kadare, created grand visions of an Albania of haunted history and legendry. Kongoli himself has preferred a more intimate scale, focussing on the lumbering lives of individuals confronted with daily terror. Perhaps for this reason, as opposed to Kadare, he chose not to publish any major works during the dictatorship. Rather than this, he devoted his creative energies at the time to an obscure and apolitical career as a mathematician, and waited for the storm to pass. Why a mathematician? "There was no Marxist strategy for mathematics," he tells us with an ironic smile.

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